

Short Essays on Post-Soviet Yerevan

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The Changing Meaning of Urban Space in Yerevan

[December 03, 2007]

Recently, I had the opportunity to be present at a debate about education reform among workers at the Yerevan State University. The occasion was the introduction of the credit system, the latest stage in the reforms. The main argument was that "the Soviet education system was the best in the world and there was no reason to change it."

There are many facts that can be used to cast that argument in doubt. After all, was the education system not a factor contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union? Why do those who hold the fate of the education system in their hands - themselves products of that "best" Soviet system - not have their own ideas regarding reform and cannot produce anything but bad imitations of Western models?

Does Armenia today have the means to ensure an education of Soviet standards for free like it did then? On the other hand, education systems do not remain the same anywhere in the world, they change, and one of the biggest manifestations of change in the whole world is the advancing commercialization of education, as seen through the credit system. Today, to speak of the Soviet educational system as being ideal means ignoring many other facts, including those radical changes being introduced in the system bringing with them an invasion of information and communication technology.

It is understandable that many things remain from the Soviet Union, both superficially and deep down, even if we do not see them. (This is not just true for Armenia. Research has shown it is the case even for the "new Europeans" of the Baltic States). What is worrying is the non-mediated attitude towards the recent past, the inability to accurately assess history, the failure to introduce fine lines and a gradation between the two times. This would allow one to look at the present not as something totally new and different, but having established a relationship between these times and the past, allowing for a continuity of sorts.

Establishing trends and making decisions, making comparison and clarifying priorities in the face of globalization is only possible once the Soviet project of modernization is reassessed. That is our past, which connects us in a way to the earlier stages in global transformation. Such a dialogue with our Soviet past would also allow us to seriously think about rebuilding our Armenian identity and especially about the real possibility for Armenian identity politics.

The so-called "socialist environment", including socialist urban spaces have been emphasized by researchers as the postulate in Marxist theory that the material conditions of one's existence determine the interrelationships which form between people as well as between an individual and social consciousness. This means that by changing the material conditions or creating new ones, one can create new individuals or form new an individual and collective consciousness. This "environmental determinism" dictated the centrality of the socialization of space for creating a new society.

On the other hand, the fact that land was national property in socialist countries gave the authorities the chance to saturate spaces of all sorts with ideology - from homes and workplaces to public squares and streets.

How does the meaning of our surrounding environment change, what new significance is added, what is slowly wiped out, who is interested in those changes in meaning and who wants to preserve it, who is fighting for an alternative meaning and how... There are three

main dimensions in this process of change - the continuous Soviet and Soviet-Armenian as well as the opposing tendencies of the nationalization of space and commercialization.

During the first years of independence, a tendency to remove the unwanted traces of the Soviet past and the remnants of colonization was characteristic of the first stage in building a new state. The renaming of squares, streets, buildings and other places was an attempt to reflect the historic past of the nation - in the form of our glorious ancestors and events - on the body of the city. This was how the city's history had to change and nationalize the city itself. The removal of Soviet statues was meant to dispute the durability of the ideas that they embodied.

The end of the 1990s was characterized by the desperate commercialization of urban space - firstly by the abundance of commercial billboards and then by the formation of an entertainment and leisure industry. The rebuilding of material space in the city is continuing today in the form of the mass reconstruction in the city center. Is this the continuing nationalization of the city in the guise of modernization or a new stage in commercialization? What are the forces pushing this widespread reconstruction ahead? I am not going to attempt to answer these questions now. Let me just note that, in this process, the historical dimension of the city's landscape is being diminished, because the pre-Soviet parts of the city are disappearing. The reality of Yerevan being an old city is becoming pure rhetoric communicated in books or through guided tours and perhaps during festivals (such as Erebuni-Yerevan or the City's Festival).

The continuing work at changing the symbolism and significance associated with what was then Lenin Square and is now Republic Square hints at the difficulties that such a task entails. Removing Lenin's statue and then the pedestal was just the beginning. Putting something else in its place - a Christian cross and then a commercial billboard - was also a temporary solution. We now know that the tender for a new statue did not attract any interesting proposals. The organization of concerts and other leisure events as well as the renovation of the fountains at the square are a continuation of those attempts. But the statues of Stepan Shahumyan and Alexander Miasnikyan are also on the same level, but have remained immune, but they can only serve to transform Yerevan into a truly Armenian city with a degree of reservation.

This in itself suggests the unavoidable significance of the Soviet experience. When nationalism tries to avoid taking into account its Soviet past what results is similar to the writing etched under one of the newer statues in the city (Marshal Hovhannes Baghramyan's) - we are left to guess which country's and which army's marshal the honorable commander had been (one should note that the ability to guess will continually diminish as time passes).

Of course, Hovhannes Baghramyan is one of the few heroes decorating the streets of Armenia's capital. Yerevan's urban spaces (streets, squares and statues) bear witness more to a cultural identity, rather than a national or political one. The lack of political and national activists is tangible. But the attempt to fill this void with this through Stepan Shahumyan, Admiral Isakov and others causes other problems and hints at hidden aspects.

The reconstruction of space and review of national values of the Soviet period was most obvious with the demolishing of one of the samples of modern Armenian architecture - the Youth Palace. It seemed that that structure would always be a symbol of modern Yerevan and national progress, but it vanished, giving way to different sources of pressure. The most important reason behind this was that it signified rather than embodied modern architecture and was more a symbol rather than a residential building with simple facilities. This is yet another fact that suggests the need for dialogue with the Soviet past.

Two structures looming over the city are in my sights for future study - Mother Armenia (along with Victory Park) and the monument to 50 years of Soviet Armenia (along with the whole territory of the Cascade). Let me just note for now that these are two spaces which

have had different fates. The former remains mostly connected to the Soviet past, embodying the confused and unclear relationship of the present with that past. The latter is a result of one of the clearest interventions to westernize Yerevan where Soviet monumentalism is "peacefully cohabiting" with elements of national architecture and samples of modern Western culture.

Mother Armenia

[December 17, 2007]

For the Soviet empire the "historical victory" it registered in World War II (or the Great Patriotic War in the accepted parlance of the Soviet Union), became a powerful tool by which to breathe new life and impetus into the fading ideals of socialism.

This was to be confirmed by the grand historical mission of the nation that "saved humanity from the evils of fascism". Of the varied commemorative monuments erected to eternalize the glory of this victory, Victory Park in Yerevan is essentially the result of the unending work performed on a wide-scale during the Soviet period built with this objective in mind. Most likely it received its unofficial name of "The Monument" due to the fact a statue of Stalin was stood on this spot (on a pedestal of similar monumental scope). Years after Stalin's death and after the famous Party Congress of the time, statues of Stalin were removed all throughout the socialist camp.

In future years the ideological exploitation of the war and its cultural representation became greater in scope, transforming the war into an inexhaustible resource with which to build soviet identity. Also serving the same purpose were other various cultural monuments and commemorative complexes (including the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Eternal Flame), as well as celebrations on Victory Day. From the 1960's onwards however, the consolidation of the Soviet peoples took place not only through the continual mythologizing of the victory achieved in the war but with new pretentious innovations and victories. The space race and programs designed to assimilate virgin lands are the most notable examples of this.

At the same time these were years when waves of change in Soviet national politics and the awakening of soviet peoples and modernization of the national republics occurred. As a result, Mother Armenia appeared on the vacant pedestal once held by the leader of the peoples, located in the heart of "holy land" and in close proximity to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Thus, it was assumed that the inclusion of monuments dedicated to war victory in an expansive cultural space, where people would go for rest and leisure, would serve to exert an ideological influence upon them even reaching into aspects of everyday activities and practices. In this sense, Victory Park was a novelty not only for Yerevan. Similar parks were built in other soviet cities as well. Now, let's try to clarify what meaning can be attributed to these two monuments - Mother Armenia and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, keeping in mind that in the case of the statue of Stalin the ideological unity of the complex of monuments was comprehensible.

According to Benedict Anderson modern nationalist culture doesn't have more seductive symbols than those of the Unknown Soldier's tomb or statues. He underlines that fact that there is no precedent in history for the ritualistic public piety displayed to these monuments for the very reason that they are purposefully kept empty or that no one knows whom exactly lies buried within. Being anonymous and unknown conveys an absolute verification of the qualities attributed to a soldier of the fatherland - unwavering patriotism, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the fatherland, unconditional virtue and heroism. Every person can identify with that soldier by giving him their name and in return learning lessons

of patriotism and the principles of freedom. It is untreatable that in the case of the Soviet Union nationalism either had to be replaced with other terms or comprehended in other ways. In any event, the essential quality attributed to the Unknown Soldier's monument remains in effect which is to symbolize the continuity of the soviet people, and to link people to the ritualistic experience of a collective existence.

When viewed from a national perspective of the soviet Armenian people this monument, being an influential symbol of soviet identity, is anti-nationalist from the outset. Given this, what is it that Mother Armenia conveys? Is it in fact an embodiment of various national qualities and values? If we assume for the moment that its directive is muddled or forgotten did it at any time possess an articulated national message? I think not. This is not an instance where it would be possible, by way of an acrostic or other implicit methods, to send nationalist addresses to the Armenian people (such as -«Oh, Armenian people, your only salvation...»).

Mother Armenia was erected in a park that from end to end was intended to embody and encompass the memory of the Great Patriotic War and that symbolizes the participation of the Armenian people in the war along with the others in the soviet brotherhood of nations. As to the architectural conception of the pedestal and its decorative ornamentation, the scale of the statue and its base, the imperial gesture of threat and warning conveyed by the handheld sword, the military hardware from the era of the Great Patriotic War surrounding the statue, and the aforementioned Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, together leave little room for nationalist interpretations. On the contrary, the imperial scale of all this and the density of pure soviet ideology in this location define the national as unavoidably soviet. Nevertheless, as we see, this does not prevent Mother Armenia from being one of the most recognized symbols in Yerevan today.

The Present Condition of the Park

The reconstruction of urban space in Yerevan taking place in the post-soviet era and the baseless process of physical/spatial changes and changes in meanings have not bypassed this park. Here the essential attraction remains the vast communal spaces left over from soviet times; spaces that Armenian officials and entrepreneurs are clamoring to more «efficiently»utilize. Already a hotel called the «Golden Palace» has been operating on park grounds for the past few years (even though one would be hard-pressed to see signs of such active operation). Private homes have been built in close proximity to park grounds. The hillside at the lower end of the park has been completely razed for the roadway now being built in its place. Local officials utilize the area neighboring the statue as paid parking spaces. And the eternal flame at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has long since gone out. In the base of the statue is located the Mother Armenia Museum whose visitors are mostly foreign tourists. There's been an increase in the number of kiddy attractions in the park. The lake is still there with a small rest area surrounding it full of rides and cafes. During the early hours of the day, hundreds of people can be seen strolling through the park or performing their morning exercises.

While some attention is being paid to the park's walkways, the wooded areas are mostly garbage dumps. For the present, there s no talk of plans to rebuild the park as an place of leisure. Let us remember the incident surrounding the removal of the Unknown Soldier's monument from the center of Tallinn when relations between Russia and Estonia had soured. Nothing similar threatens to happen in Armenia but it is not because the statue is out of eyesight or “forgotten”.

We have seen that due to new construction and new methods of land utilization that the park's social space is being reduced little by little. However, all this has not impacted on the nearly absurdly large and unimaginably monumental proportions of Mother Armenia (statue and base) when measured against the scale of present-day Yerevan. The statue's physical

dimensions were in harmony with the vast stretches of the soviet empire and its continuous pretensions to expand. However, in the words of Anthony Smith regarding nationalism, this site was one of the "sacred centers" of historical pilgrimage for the Soviet people and that it displayed the uniqueness of socialist "moral geography". Its monumental proportions weren't intended to connote the vastness of the empire as much as to continuously mark the connection between the present and glorious future of Communism. Such "sacred sites" were imbued with a radiant light of the glorious future to come.

It is the disappearance of the soviet utopia, an integral component of soviet (socialist) rhetoric and discourse that strips these material monuments from any type of attraction or allure. They can no longer be perceived according to former modes of thought; their essential messages have either since lost their immediacy or are simply no longer intelligible. However, the fact that these soviet monuments no longer "speak" to us or that their meaning is questionable isn't merely a consequence of the disappearance of the field of discourse, but rather our inability to rearrange and reinterpret the post-soviet jumbled field of meanings and thus continue the work of cultural reinterpretation along new lines.

Cascade

[December 24, 2007]

This monument dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia is located on the edge of a ridge in northern Yerevan and is separated from Victory Park by Freedom Avenue.

Such a hilltop site was probably appropriate for this monumental structure; being visible from all directions and its lofty position underlining the structure's symbolic circumstance. This is even more the case since at the time this ridge top delineated the northern boundary of the city. A tall stone column serves as the axis of the statue-complex that leads to a broad landing to the south, towards the city. Steps descending from an opening in the middle of the landing transform into a broad staircase that is known today as the Cascade. This links the statue with the city center and probably was intended to make it easier for people to visit the commemorative complex above.

Next to the column, under a square roof, is an area that cuts down into the earth's surface. There is a series of faucets that line the interior of this space that do not work and probably never did work (The abundance of faucets of various sizes, possessing obvious symbolic meaning, is quite characteristic of this complex). Even though the entrances have been long since closed by way of metal gates, through the bars you can dimly see the stone placed in the center of the space with inscriptions regarding the statue's construction. The text on the stone's northern face states that the monument rises up, " as a sign of the new renaissance of the Armenian people " and that the builders sought to lay the base, " as firm as that of the base of the Armenian world and its spirit like the spirit of the Armenian people soaring to the heavens". On the other face of the stone we read, word for word, "Here, in the presence of the eternal peaks of Ararat and Aragats, the Armenian people accomplished their November revolution on November 29, 1920".

Scattered on the outside walls, are these lines of poetry in Mesrobian script alongside of national decorative motifs, " Oh fatherland, there is no dream more captivating than you, a name more sweeter than yours", " For all those whose spirit burns brightly", "...the dawn of a radiant new morning, Welcome!" In fact, construction on the complex was quite lengthy but remained unfinished due to financial, technical-engineering, and other reasons. Uncompleted construction or construction finished with a variety of deficiencies and shortcomings is particular to many modern Armenian architectural examples from that period. Apparently, this statue is devoid of any notable aesthetic values and contrary to its scale and very favorable location it has never been viewed as one of Yerevan's distinguishing monuments.

"Eternal Ararat" and "captivating dream", "new rebirth" and "radiant morning", "firm base" and "soaring spirit", can perhaps be placed within the framework of nationalist rhetoric. What's more problematic is the issue of the nationalized-privatized November revolution. Why was it necessary to make a revolution? Is a revolution a necessary prerequisite for each renaissance and in order to become a modern nation must one undergoing a revolution? Today, it is difficult to understand if the authors of those inscriptions believed in such "staged" patriotism since they attempted to exclude every type of Soviet element from a monument dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Soviet Armenia. They probably didn't observe that in the end, the otherwise ridiculous proportions of their statue and the ontological optimism radiating from the lines mentioned above are both Soviet.

In any case, what is again striking is the absolute uncertainty of the outline of the self, the absence of the desire or incapability to differentiate the national from the Soviet in any way. The legend of the national rebirth wipes out all traces of history; this time it's the Soviet (implied Soviet "other") being erased with a careless gesture of making it its own. The missing Soviet, socialist, communist and other words would have reminded one of this context, outside of which there would be no opportunity to speak of an Armenian renaissance, especially in that tone. And indeed, wouldn't a similar type of nationalism had more served to dilute the national within the Soviet, in other words to Sovietize the national?

The Changing Cascade

Years ago the Cafesjian Foundation obtained the entire tract of land of the complex. Two works of Botero are situated at either end of the complex - The Roman Warrior (near the statue) and The Cat (in the park that leads to the Cascade from the Tamanyan Statue).

Along the staircase are situated the works of a few other artists but many other works will be transferred to Yerevan only after the completion of proper exhibition facilities. Presently under construction immediately below the statue is the edifice to house the Cafesjian Museum of contemporary art. It is rumored that a large portion of Cafesjian's personal collection will also be exhibited here as well.

Many are attracted to the Cascade, with its well-manicured lawns and escalator, as an area to take a stroll. Open-air concerts and other cultural events are staged here periodically. It is expected that the exhibition halls will gradually open and that various types of cultural attractions will be made available to the public. In other words it would seem that by becoming a rest area the Cascade aims to fulfill the role that Victory Park served during the Soviet period and still does today to a certain degree. It is assumed however that the culture to be propagandized here will greatly differ from similar locations in Yerevan. Here, we are talking specifically talking about contemporary art, which is only of interest to a narrow circle in Armenia. While museums devoted to contemporary art are very popular as ideal rest areas in other cities around the world, we shouldn't confuse this with the popularity of modern art per say. Particularly in the case of the Cascade these form that thick background, the basic method for arranging the site, that has remained standing, and upon which attempts are being made to construct an area containing new values and meanings.

Of course, in terms of embodying and reproducing Soviet values, Victory Park (with its Mother Armenia statue, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Heroes' Alley, etc) has played a much more crucial role than the 50th Returning to the comparison between Victory Park and the Cascade let me underscore that the basic similarity between the two areas lies in their being burdened with Soviet ideological symbols and objects. In both cases these symbols and messages are virtually incomprehensible and undecipherable. Anniversary obelisk. The yearly May 9th celebrations, that took place with great pomp and circumstance and with their ritual repetitiveness and message, were much more meaningful to Soviet Armenians than the anniversary of the November revolution. This is despite the fact that, as we've remarked before, the latter was portrayed as a purely national event. Understandably, here

the role of Soviet propaganda was also large since the cultural depiction of the war was a powerful tool in terms of the formation of the Soviet people and Soviet identity.

Soviet scales of dimension and the desire to synthesize national symbols are also evident within the confines of the Cascade and are manifested by the profusion of ornamentation plucked from Armenian architecture and stylized by the dictates of the monument's massive proportions. As in many other places here too we are confronted with the intention to overlook the huge break between the pre-Soviet (pre-modern or traditional) and the Soviet (which is also modern in a certain sense) stages and to substitute it with manufactured national continuity. But, in the same manner the break between the Soviet and post-Soviet is neglected. Those rebuilding the Cascade are doing the same.

It is appropriate to ask exactly how the "soaring spirit" of the Armenian people relates to the Grand Time of the radiant communist future (the latter should have been the main message of the statue). Conversely, what is one to understand of Botero's grotesque warrior, the obelisk designed in the spirit of Soviet monumentalism and the symbol of eternity of the Armenian people engraved in the lower part of the column all being in close proximity to the above-mentioned inscribed words (" Oh fatherland, there is no dream more captivating than you, etc.). Clearly there's a collision here between entirely different ideas and meanings - the pre-modern national, Soviet and what's generally referred to as western. It is on the seemingly conciliatory background of the first two that the third is displayed as a glaring case of heterogeneity, as something without any meaningful connection to the context of its surroundings.

The importation of contemporary western objects d'art to the established landscape of the Cascade can be characterized as a purely mechanistic intervention. It is most likely that those responsible for such intervention had no problem understanding the cultural state of affairs. Perhaps, however, these new objects that violate the established material and symbolic arrangement, will force to call into question the surrounding area's self-obviousness and perhaps serve to stimulate the reinterpretation and elucidation of the heterogeneity they bring.

In any case, the vision of the Cascade before us today is as incomprehensible as it is attractive. The forgotten or unfamiliar meanings of the site that the objects convey serve to alienate people from the material environment, ruling out any possibility of communication with its cultural context.

The Ever Lasting Soviet Legacy

[January 07, 2008]

A majority of Armenia's population still lives in Soviet-built apartments; many have worn-out Soviet automobiles, television sets, refrigerators, washing machines, gas stoves, faucets and locks.

For many years the bits and pieces of these decaying and no longer existing machines have been found particularly next to marketplaces and at the Vernisage. Usually they are spread about on the concrete pavement and asphalt. In the mid-1990's these items took up a lot of space but over the years both their quantity and variety have diminished. This is understandable since even the possibility to freely spread these "products" about the land is lessening. These days, the prices of these units of land are increasing at much faster rates.

It might seem that the breakdown of these Soviet items, the spontaneous and unorganized exodus of their pieces, signals the final disintegration of the Soviet system, of stripping away the allure of the Soviet secret. But for me, this transformed circulation of Soviet items

in the form of bits and pieces is more a sign of the continuity of the Soviet, a sign that the Soviet continues on in new and unexpected forms.

But in fact doesn't the same thing take place in the humanities and education, in the field of the transference of knowledge, in university classes, the textbooks and literature used, in lectures. If these have been changed as well, then, as a rule, they still carry traces of Soviet ideology; they're full of fragments of Soviet language and thought, which continue to circulate perhaps in more lively and vital ways. This is clearly evident in the print and electronic media outlets. Look at how even the youngest journalists speak and write about cultural issues. It's practically the same language used in Soviet times but absent the more glaring pieces and manners of ideological rhetoric. And it's understandable that this cannot change since there still doesn't exist a new language. Is it unfortunate or rather comical, when the youngest of people employ that worn-out language, when they "discover" 30-40 year-old idioms, in an attempt to talk about modern-day cultural realities. Here, it is ignorance that's the danger. If the older generation at least knows where such language stems from, the behavior of the young people lacks such awareness. Is all this sufficient enough to make a claim for the imperceptible (but also evident) longevity as well as demand of the Soviet (Soviet-Armenian)?

When speaking about Soviet Russian popular culture, Svetlana Boym observes that, "Nostalgia is at the core of the popular culture in general that flirts with fashion and newness but in fact remains faithful to traditional forms and stories. What is recycled in popular nostalgia is a certain narrative of homecoming, of returning to origins. Popular culture is driven by longing for familiarity, for something repeatable that reminds one of the mythical stability of home. If in the 1970's and 1980's popular culture in the Soviet Union was permeated by dreams of escape, Russian popular culture of the 1990's features many stories of return. The encounter between Russia and the West often culminates with the return of the prodigal son..." (To make this quotation more understandable let me remind you that the word nostalgia is comprised of the Latin words "nostos (home) and "algia (fervent desire, longing).

In Armenia, rabis music can serve as an example of the "prodigal son" phenomenon. During the Soviet period it was despised and banished from all public spaces (electronic media outlets, concert halls) and survived in much narrower circles and spread through bootleg recordings. During the past years, however, Tata, one of the most beloved and popular singers, has offered up a blend of Soviet Armenian rabis and 'estrada' (popular) music. It's difficult to find any new western or other type of influence in his songs. Herein lays his "originality" and the secret to his huge popularity - the 'new' in the form of the returning 'old'. In addition, rabis shouldn't be confused with national music in the traditional sense or to consider it as one of its corrupted forms (remembering the word "popular"). The word rabis (defined as 'workers' art' by its Russian abbreviation) was one of the manifestations of urban culture; in other words, it was a creation of the Soviet era even if it did have national, but not necessarily Armenian, roots. It's enough to remember that rabis was never performed with national instruments but only with the clarinet, accordion and later on, the violin. Rabis music is one of the results of the modernization of society, in particular the urbanization of Yerevan, the creation of an urban working strata (in which the influx of rural inhabitants to the city played a role), and from a scholarly point of view is not at all a cultural manifestation to be despised.

In the same manner the wide popularity of all types of Russian mass culture in Armenia, including that enjoyed by Russian pop singers, old and new, is also understandable.

One can conclude that the search for the national or traditional in Armenia today isn't necessarily directed at pre-Soviet culture but more often at the Soviet-Armenian, as well as at the reestablished and reconstituted forms of the "Armenian national" culture of the Soviet era.

Urban Entertainment in "Our Village"

Armenia's mass culture of today doesn't satisfy all of society's segments. One of the reasons is economic and as such Armenia is similar to many other post-Soviet countries. As researchers of post-Soviet Russian culture have observed, the peculiarities of Russia's economy are transforming the mass culture into the sole property of the elite. Mass culture as a style of life (entertainment, clothes, etc) isn't generally accessible to many. This paradoxical relationship between the "high" and the "low" is one of the oddities of the post-Soviet landscape. Let us remember that the issue of high and low cultures was one of the pivotal problems of Soviet cultural politics. The division of culture into strata reflected the divisions in the society at large and since the aim of the Soviet system was the creation of a classless society it follows that culture had to be unified, of high standards and accessible to all. This was the major factor involved in the persecution of rabis music in Soviet Armenia - the working class (proletariat) couldn't have its own, separate culture. But it was denied and attacked because it was "low-brow", "vulgar", etc, arguments which, viewed from the perspective of today, appear quite strange.

The natural variety of preferences, the plurality of tastes, could have possibly been considered as the second reason, if such a thing existed in Armenia. In reality the accepted norm here is "not to lag behind" others; in other words, duplicate rather than diverge from. In all cases however, it is not everyone that can identify with a Eurovision Armenian participant or the star of a Latin American soap opera.

The making of a certain rural landscape into a national symbol is characteristic of many nations and especially in the case of European countries it's tied to the romantic tradition according to which the village itself is the essential place of all that is national. Here is where the nation is born and it's there where the national spirit continues to exist. I have difficulty recollecting such an underlined idolization of the village or rural life in the Armenian context. Perhaps I'm mistaken, but it seems that for centuries on end our people have pursued the urban dream, together with the desire to identify the national existence with the capital city. But this is an aside, despite being connected to the next theme of the article.

There's a restaurant called "Our Village" which is located at the beginning of Sayat-Nova Street on the basement level in one of the buildings. It's not clear who the 'our' refers to or what 'village' we're talking about. Neither is it clear who are the intended patrons of the restaurant - foreigners (as the first consumers of ethnic exotica everywhere), or local residents who go there out of some longing for the Soviet past? I am not one of the latter group and wound up at the restaurant by chance when, on the advice of a friend, I invited my overseas guest there for dinner. That was about two years ago so my impressions of the place aren't all that fresh, but I've held on to some notes I made of the occasion.

The menu included a number of national dishes and drinks and the waiters paraded around dressed in national costumes. But what struck me the most was the small group of musicians and the singer who was accompanied by the musical strains emanating from a few national instruments. The impression I got was that these musicians were former members of the Soviet Armenian Folk Instrumental Ensemble. It was their professionalism, the quality of their playing and their repertoire that led me to this conviction.

If it is possible to somehow picture the village's connection to any type of costume rehabilitated through ethnographic measures, then it's much more difficult to see the link between the village and an ensemble playing national instruments, as well as between the 'ashough' (troubadour) songs of the Soviet era and the similarly rearranged pre-soviet ashough and folk songs. An ensemble of folk instruments, even if comprised purely of national musical instruments, was a totally Soviet phenomenon, with a structure intended to resemble a symphonic orchestra, and with the aim of elevating the national and folk culture on par with that of Soviet 'middle-brow' culture. That's to say the national and ashough music of the Soviet years was in fact wholly the result of a conscious policy to modernize the culture of the Soviet nations, unlike rabis music that was an unintended and spontaneous creation of that process. During the Soviet years similar performances of these songs didn't take place in restaurants but rather in the best concert halls, on T.V. and radio.

And the purpose of all this, certain attributes of the village lifestyle, variety of dishes, national dress and Soviet Armenian music, was to exhibit Armenian cultural authenticity.

It's obvious that this "village paradise" isn't intended for villagers but more for a citizen of a certain social class and age. The night I was at the restaurant there was a man of about 40-45 years old sitting by himself at a table placed in front of the musicians. His gaze rarely strayed from them and he often sang along with the singer. It was as if the group was performing solely for his benefit. This was a nostalgic trip back to the "family home" of the Soviet years which no longer exists and perhaps never really did. In the realm of nostalgia the recreated home is unavoidably idealized, especially due to the selectivity of one's memory. And it appeared that this man was fully reliving his lost identity without reservation as well as experiencing his national belonging. Let's again turn to Svetlana Boym to help us shed some light on the matter, " Nostalgic recreations of the past acquire particular importance at a time of historical cataclysm and sometimes function as 'defense mechanisms' that help survivors cope with major historical changes."

Yerevan - Another City or the "Other" in the City

[January 14, 2008]

Yerevan has greatly changed. It's a claim you hear made by a variety of people. Opinions may differ however when the question is whether the city's changing for the better or for the worse. Additional interpretations, reservations and comparisons are also to be expected when discussing the matter.

What is certain is that many things, at least in terms of their familiar appearance, have irretrievably gone by the wayside while the complex process and short lifespan of introduced innovations further disorients those with a desire to understand and analyze something. In any case, the temptation to describe and talk about the new urban realities is evident and it's not by accident that more and more is being written about Yerevan, ranging from newspaper articles to investigative reports. Moreover, it's not only what's new and unfamiliar that's interesting, but what's old as well. In the context of the new state of affairs this raises a host of questions that need to be answered.

Modernization has often been equated with urbanization. Thus the city, as a completely new vital space and arena of new social relations, has a more than 100-year history of philosophical, sociological, cultural and other studies. When architectural edifices are included in the complex fabric of urban life it becomes possible to view architecture in the language of the urban experience, applying corresponding theoretical approaches. Semiotics is an example of this approach. The architectural structure, as like anything else, can be viewed on the level of the sign - removing the question of interpretation out of the traditional "architecture as art" point of view. The placement of urban edifices in the wide context of urban experience enriches architecture in terms of political and social dimensions, leaving it open to ever new semantic attributions and interpretations.

In this case the city can be perceived as a text that when read gives birth to new texts. As we know, descriptions of the city derived through different means (literature and the press, the cinema and photography) assist to form the city's character and become a piece of its history and memory.

Georg Simmel on Urban Life

By the beginning of the twentieth century cities with over a million in population already existed. The largest was London with 7 million. The experience of Georg Simmel was tied to Berlin of the late 19th century. He was one of the first who attempted to explain certain

unprecedented behavioral characteristics of urban dwellers. In a series published at the beginning of the 20th century ("The Metropolis and Mental Life" - 1903, "The Stranger" - 1908, "The Problem of Style" - 1908 and others), Simmel, by mostly conditioning the experience of the modern age by way of the changing relationships of proximity and distance, attempts to explain the amazing behavior of residents of very large cities. In contrast to small cities, the metropolis would create a voluntary state of anesthesia in its residents, a consciously dulled perception of urban life.

At the base of his approach is the assumption that the urban environment, with its variety of impressions and impulses, the speed with which events occur and the abundance of mutual relations, could lead people to extreme irritability and an insufferable nervous state.

A contemporary commentator observes that, "...the metropolitan rhythm of events was the cause of this agitated state, the solution or rather the strategy for coping with it lay with people seeking to create a distance between themselves and others, and, more broadly, from the rhythms of the city itself. Some kind of reserve or detachment of feeling was called for, if city life was to be ongoing." (John Allen)

Simmel explains the state of affairs of the new metropolis with the help of a group of mutually linked concepts - distance, difference, strangeness and style. Accordingly, it is possible to define urban life as "life on a distance" or "the being with the stranger", where by "stranger" we don't mean "marginal" people. The figure of the stranger helps us to obtain a great deal of experience when it comes to understanding what is meant by socially interacting with someone, which in a spatial context is close by, whilst in a social context is far removed. Here, strangeness manifests itself as the embodiment of the unavoidable for the big city difference.

As is noted, the manifestations or grades of "strangeness" exist in all types of mutual relationships and it's important to understand that in public life, "To acknowledge the presence of the remote, however, does not undermine Simmel's understanding that the tension between near and far inscribed in forms of social interaction may be lived as involved difference. If we come at it from a different angle and consider the contemporary city to be a place where all may be 'strangers' to one another, it takes little imagination to realize that there are no 'host' groups to speak of: everyone belongs, but that does not make everyone the same or alleviate social distance." (John Allen)

It is from this same viewpoint and with this quite unexpected form that style is interpreted. According to Simmel, style veils rather than exposes the personal, whilst behavior organized by a certain style, its external appearance and expression are social masks that conceal the 'ego'. " It is if the ego could no longer carry itself, or at least no longer wished to show itself and thus put on a more general, a more typical, in short, a stylized costume ... Stylized expression, form of life, taste - all these are limitations and ways of creating a distance, in which the exaggerated subjectivism of the times finds a counterweight and concealment."

The Difference in "Ourselves"

I believe that Simmel's thoughts on proximity and distance, difference (strangeness, the other) and regarding style can assist in attempting to understand the new urban state of affairs in present-day Yerevan. Of course, we cannot speak of directly applying his theoretical tools. The differences in conditions are so great that it obligates us to make a number of reservations.

When Simmel described the already formed image of the western metropolis it was a period of the maturation of modern society (which was still to find itself in a severe crisis stage). In addition to a number of other things, the long-term process of the stratification of society had reached a certain stage in the western city and resulted in an established system of social differences. It was this in particular that made the above-described perception of difference possible, the establishment of distance as relates to urban rhythms and social

constraint, as the cultivation of essential components of urban life. It is understandable that in present-day Yerevan (that also has over one million residents) such differences haven't yet been noticed and it's also not appropriate to speak of the maddening rhythms of urban life. On the other hand, as the commentators observe, the social and physical limits in the age of informational and communicative technologies, are more open for communication while the circle of personal relations and the influences on them has taken on global scales of measure.

Now let me gather together those preconditions that I believe deal with the possibility of using the language described above. Before this I will very briefly describe what was inherited from the Soviet period. There were no cities in eastern Armenia during the pre-Soviet era nor were eastern Armenians linked to any type of capitalist development. This situation essentially changed during the Soviet period. Armenia possessed a developing industry according to Soviet standards but, on the other hand, the socialist ideal of a classless society didn't allow for the stratification of society or for social differences to truly take shape. This coupled with the mono-ethnicity so endemic to Armenia, the near total absence of national minorities in Yerevan, were the preconditions that presaged only one portrayal of society from which was expunged the strange, the different and even the idea of the possibility of the different (even the 'socialist' wasn't perceived as being a threat to the 'national', but that's another topic all together).

It was on the radio that I heard an elderly woman displaced from her apartment located on the site of North Avenue (or Buzant Street) cry out, "What, am I not an Armenian?" This was clearly a call for justice, as if being Armenian still meant something, much less equality. The very expressive saying, "Aren't we also Armenian?" of the Soviet years, now since forgotten, also speaks to the importance of common ethnic belonging.

Continuing to talk about the Soviet era, another circumstance must be underlined. The process of industrialization and the disintegration of the village gave rise to other preconditions for urban life including the loss of "nativeness" the loss of connection with place (one of the important themes in Hrant Matevosyan's writings). The post-Soviet era also weakened the connection with the "homeland", it completely threw open the country's borders and introduced Armenians to the pleasures of global mobility. Today the Yerevan resident has changed due to the enriched, varied and oftentimes difficult experiences he or she now encounters, by living and working in a strange and alien environment, by a lifestyle practically unimaginable during the Soviet era.

Not only has the city's physical landscape changed and continues to change but so to has its social landscape as well. The signs of social stratification have started to appear as well. By stratification I don't mean to say "classes" (although extreme polarities in society between severely rich and severely poor are evident), but rather what manifests as status groups in the accepted parlance of sociology. Such groups differ from one another according to socially chosen principles in that given society as well as by means of distinctive lifestyles, consumer capabilities and cultural preferences.

As I've stated, the coming into being of social difference is at the minimum evident in its supreme manifestations. On the one hand, the homeless and those whose social conditions are similar, and on the other hand, expensive cars, chain stores, places of entertainment and finally, the so-called 'elite' buildings and a complete North Avenue. I use the term 'elite' conditionally. Perhaps these are signs defining a 'middle class' whose mythical and long awaited appearance has not yet occurred.

Also telling is the circumstance that this social group utilizes the location of the city center as a way to distinguish themselves, where a geographical place turns into social location. Of course the reconstruction of Yerevan's center is in the first place linked to the utilization of capital from dubious sources, the enlargement of profit derived from the centralization of the entertainment industry, the procurement of real estate and the artificial rise in its price, etc. But it's both distinguishing and ironic that North Avenue, a provincial copy of the

European urban standard setting, is becoming the embodiment of the other, the different for Yerevan, or at least one of its important signs.

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