A City in Search of an Identity

The psychology of a city

Each city has a narrative that recounts its past, present, and future. Unfolding the story of Tbilisi starts with reciting the multicultural traditions. Over the centuries, groups of varied native languages, religions, and traditions coexisted here, all united with the Tbilisian culture. The city served as an interaction hub and junction point for identities. Respect for diversity was a central element of Tbilisi's identity.

This story engages with the past, longing for old Tbilisi, which is carried from one text to the next despite the passing of time. Specific images are evoked when hearing such stories: Karachokheli and Kinto, Oriental-style Caravanserais, taverns, and the streets leading to the Maidan, full of the buzzing crowds who made a living as hawkers and craftsmen.

Globalization has established cohabitation of different groups as a principle of the contemporary world; thus, respecting diversity is no longer a unique marker of a particular city. Tbilisi requires critical reflection and reimagining of its current identity and character, and how it affects the population's mental well-being, etc.

The identity and character of a city

Similar to individuals, cities too have their own identity. In the past century, the reasonableness of such a statement would be up for debate, but given the development of Urban Psychology and contemporary research, its relevance is proven. Alongside the memory of the past and cultural traditions, contemporary architecture and design, economic affairs, and the application of innovative trends are the key factors today in denoting uniqueness to a city, shaping their statements in regards to itself and determining the placement of these cities on the contemporary cultural world map. Growing an identity as a city requires having a distinctive character. This is an amalgamation of hallmarks that stimulates specific perceptions and emotions in the eyes of the population. Experimental studies conducted by Charles Landry and Chris Murray in various cities around the world showed that they stand apart with unique features, the sum of which is referred to by the authors as "city personality". For example, Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, according to the impressions of the population, is distinguished by improvisational disposition and looks back at the past. Germany's capital, Berlin, is closed off and chooses a sharp communication style. The Spanish city of Bilbao is constantly introducing new initiatives, although less self-critical. Following the same principle, Paris is considered to be a city of romance, New York – a paradise for those who never sleep, Tokyo – an innovation center, and so on.

The impact of cities on mental health

Approximately 50% of the world's population resides in cities. Urban environment is associated with boosted chances of achieving success, due to which migration from other types of settlements to cities is quite high.

As of today, there are various concepts for the optimal arrangement of the city, such as Smart City, Green City, and City of Culture. In recent years, the World Health Organization has contributed to the list with the concept of a Healthy City, which entails the making of settlements that cater to the mental and physical health of humans.

Despite the multifaceted, conceptual rethinking and accounts drawn out in the field of urban studies, American psychologists point out that "we know far more about the habitats of Mountain Gorillas than of our own". One of the reasons behind this is the lack of involvement of psychologists in the process of studying and planning cities.

The city environment contains contrasting places. Here, gathered are business organisations, entertainment and recreational zones, cultural hubs, catering facilities, residential housing, billboards with advertising banners, and more. These spaces are connected via a transportation network. Transports are often packed with passengers, while roads – with traffic. Traveling, especially during rush hour, causes a sense of shortage of time, which, **psychologists suggest, is linked to chronic anxiety and has a harsher impact on individuals than an isolated stressful event of high severity and intensity.**

In the city center, compared to the suburban area, density is high, while architecture tends to be more massive and large-scale. These areas attract residents of the city. Near them, we always encounter crowds of people, with corresponding noise, vibrancy, and raucousness.

Overpopulation of a city has a significant effect on the mental state of an individual. Research conducted in France in the 1960s showed that individuals, similar to animals, are susceptible to feeling territorial. When there is less than 10 sqm between humans in a demarcated space for a prolonged period, health issues arise.

Density and overcrowding negatively affect mental health. Therefore, it is important that there be recreational areas in each zone of the city – vast green perimeters with sky visibility, with low or entirely without barriers, where residents can rest, relax, enjoy the sense of their own territoriality, and restore the emotional balance.

Greenery is an essential factor in nurturing mental health. The presence of green areas, including decorative plants, improves air quality and reduces noise. They have the resources to capture and hold one's attention. A study done in large cities showed that in districts where there is no scarcity of greenery, residents are less likely to struggle with sleep difficulties.

Besides, green space can generate visual and imaginative stimulation, which aids relaxation, a sense of comfort, and balancing of arterial pressure. The study also revealed that people whose field of vision is daily interjected with green landscapes for long periods approach life difficulties with more ease and have high stress resistance.

An integral aspect in promoting mental health is aesthetics. Visually appealing architecture, statues, fountains, and public art are paramount components of a city's identity. In recent years, psychologists have been discussing the positive effects of murals. Vivid colors, visual storytelling, and symbolism familiar to the population revitalize imagination and stimulate critical thinking. Thus, public art in contemporary cities is one of the key instruments in facilitating the emotional processing of stressful matters.

The aesthetic elements of a city, to an extent, create a sense of belonging to the places where they are stationed. Memory reflects these elements and logs them in its units, and at times of necessity recalls them in the shape and form in which we registered and perceived them.

According to the Identity Theory, places where we spend a fair amount of our time have a deep emotional and physical impact on our lives, feelings, belonging, goals, and meaning (or lack thereof) of life.

Familiar places gain special relevance, especially post-emigration or when they become victims of demolition and are no longer found while strolling through old neighborhoods. Their disappearance from the city scene induces a sense of loss. By losing places, we lose the sense of closeness with our past – past, present, and future, all laid out together on a timeline, interrupted with someone's invisible hand, cutting out the memories that connected us to these places.

Losing old places is the most devastating when they are perceived as part of the home where one spent their childhood. The reason for this is that in our imagination, home is constantly there as a cozy and comfortable place to which we belong. This can be an old house or the place where we currently reside. Two spaces are often attached, and the disappearance of one prompts emotions similar to grief.

The identity and character of Tbilisi

Tbilisi simultaneously embraces Eastern and Western elements, which, over the centuries, have given rise to new synthesized forms. Here, one will encounter baths built in the style of Iranian architecture, theaters and opera houses built in emulation of various common European styles, painted and carved apartment lobbies, museums of mixed styles, and heavy, massive buildings characteristic of the Soviet era. Tbilisi's identity is radiant, and its personality is contrasting. Tbilisi is defined by chaos, contradictions – preserving traditions next to embracing innovations, and favoritism – giving preference to the city center over the suburbs.

You will often hear sombre phrases from the locals about old neighborhoods, Tbilisian relations, and cherished places. This memory begins with the Soviet past. This very period is associated with the mass development of the city, the transformation of uninhabited spaces into urban centers, and the emergence of settlements related to professions. The city of the 19th century gradually changed, and alongside modernist buildings of Russian and European architects, industrial facilities and "Khrushchevkas", characteristic of Soviet life, appeared. The feudal social divide was temporarily substituted with workers' domination and later with capitalist inequality.

The new time and cycle of traumatic events conditioned the city as well. The bullet marks on the government building and the surrounding area said more about the mental state of the nation than the chronicles written to express this state.

This difficult period was succeeded by a new phase of modernization, and Tbilisi gained numerous edifices, streets, and statues of postmodern architecture. However, guided by iconoclasm, the changes unfolded with a complete rejection of the old and fetishization of the new – due to rapid reforms, the city lost a cultural resource that could have been stored in a museum and become another source of tourist attraction.

This period was accompanied by discussions about the city's identity and character. Lost in nostalgia, residents complained about the demolition of the old city, while those focused on future projects celebrated the birth of a new city. However, Tbilisi, more than anything, needed a break and reassessment of its urban planning.

The unprecedented tempo of urbanization is drawing more and more people into the city; density and traffic worsen, aggression increases, and conflicts become frequent. The quantity of green areas does not meet the mental needs. Decorative plants and gardens planted between road sections are not sufficient. Squares located in central areas of the city are often overcrowded and, in due course, fail to function as places of rest and recreation.

Reflecting on the past experiences and the present situation raises two questions: How does the city affect its residents? How do residents affect it? One way to answer proposed questions is to ascertain priorities. What is important to us? - Internal state, mood, aesthetics, or living area; exterior face of buildings, safety standards, or interior embellishment; ecological state or proximity to the center; enclosure or increase in recreational zones and green spaces.

The threat of losing the proximity of the population to the city escalates daily. This is the utmost challenge for the present and the future, requiring an urgent response and creative solutions.