

Remaking History

Text / Harry McKinley



While it's not large in the geographical sense, Georgia's history is a saga of cultural riches and political turbulence. Flanked by the Caucasus Mountains and sandwiched between Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, it has one foot in Asia and the other resolutely in Europe; a nation once part of the Silk Road, where EU flags now fly from public buildings. The birthplace of Stalin, for just shy of 70 years Georgia was part of the Soviet Union — and even then, a favoured holiday destination thanks to its diverse landscape and vibrant cuisine. But since the collapse of the union in 1991 and its bona fide independence, Georgia has been carving its own path to modernity, and today its capital Tbilisi is a compelling tapestry of influences. Here, ancient monasteries sit cheek by jowl with imposing Brutalist buildings and ultra-contemporary visions of glass and steel. Recent years, in particular, have seen a wave of momentum sweep the city; a new generation is leading the way in reshaping Tbilisi through design, and an appreciation for the once-disdained is blossoming.

This spirit of change and renewal is perhaps most neatly encapsulated in Fabrika, a former Soviet textile factory turned aesthetically charged hostel and social hub. Opened in 2016 and designed by Multiverse Architecture (MUA), it was the first project of its kind in the city, mixing austere but stylish accommodation with restaurants, bars and shops. A sense of progressive youthfulness abounds, but more importantly, Fabrika doesn't shy away from its Soviet past — it reframes it.

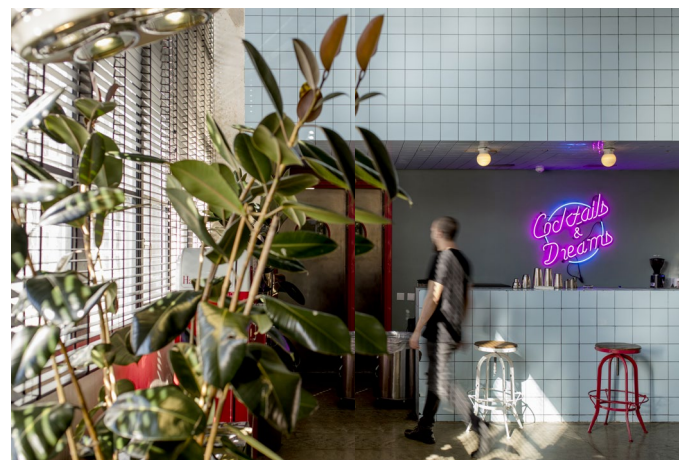
'We wanted to create a space where locals and visitors could socialise, as there wasn't anywhere like that in Tbilisi,' explains Gogiko Sakvarelidze, co-principal at MUA. 'However, we didn't want to render over the building's history or to create something that was faux-Western European. During the Soviet era, design was limited, and everyone had the same chairs or the same tiles. We thought about how we could apply that sense of homogeny, as well as the look and feel of the period, in a way that would allow people to see it through new eyes.' The result sees original concrete walls — crumbling and half-painted — adorned



with classic photography, mid-century chairs atop patterned Georgian rugs, and industrial steel-framed beds softened by colour-blocked curtains in guest rooms. The Soviet inspiration is obvious, but curated for a generation raised on Wes Anderson.

Notably, the project has not only proved to be a draw for local and international bright young things, it's also breathed new life into a neighbourhood that was once in painful decay. Slick cafes, makers' studios and bohemian bars have all sprouted in the vicinity, now celebrated for its buoyant street art scene and creative resident community. Sakvarelidze took a gamble that 'if we build it, they will come', and indeed they did, and then some.

You might say Fabrika, operated by the Adjara Group, was the successful catalyst of a flourishing hospitality movement; across the Mtkvari river, many of the same adaptive principles have been applied at Stamba Hotel — albeit for the luxury sector. Once a Soviet publishing house close to the city's main drag, Stamba is now a swish retreat that boasts a vast dining space, library, casino and fashion concept store. Opened in 2018 and part of the Design Hotels™ group, it currently features 42 guest rooms, which will rise to 150 when fully complete. As with Fabrika, Stamba's designers — from Adjara Arch Group — opted to capitalise on the Brutalist building's chequered legacy and to weave a tale of transition. A rusted metal conveyor belt, which once ferried propaganda pages, flows through the five-storey atrium lobby. There are more than 80,000 books throughout the hotel, lining walls, scattered on coffee tables and spilling from alcoves. Many were banned under Soviet rule, supposedly epitomising a decadence that, today, Stamba unashamedly embraces.



It's a testament to Tbilisi's evolution that a building once one of the most inaccessible and inscrutable in the city is now home to a social ecosystem.

In terms of design-led hospitality in repurposed spaces, Fabrika and Stamba are not alone in setting the bar. Recent years have seen the opening of the likes of Museum Hotel Orbeliani, an elegant boutique hotel that was once the private home of the Orbelianis, one of Georgia's noble families (and after which its street is also named), as well as Rooms Hotel Tbilisi, which was the country's first member of Design Hotels™. The latter is so well-regarded that there's rumoured to be a New York location in the works.

Together these paint a picture of a city in ascendance, and understandably so. Tbilisi's urban patchwork is almost unique in its variety, but the city is still on the cusp of making its presence felt globally. On a balmy weekend day, one can walk to the former Archaeological Museum — a dramatic Soviet construction that looms over the city from its hilltop perch — and find not a single fellow visitor. The

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The Georgian capital of Tbilisi has a colourful cultural and political history, but a new generation is reframing this history through design and making it a destination for both explorers and aesthetes

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Fabrika was the first social and creative hub of its kind in the city, with cafes and bars, studios, shops, a co-working space, large courtyard and hostel, the whole designed to reflect the building and the city's Soviet past, but revamped with a contemporary industrial feel

Images by Giorgi Mamasakhlisi



same is true of Tbilisi's iconic skybridge, an architectural marvel connecting three Brutalist housing blocks in the Saburtalo district.

In part to address the seeming decline of Tbilisi's less-appreciated landmarks, as well as to create a critical discourse on the city's development, the first Tbilisi Architecture Biennial was held in 2018. Under the theme Buildings Are Not Enough, the programme explored the reinvented patterns of city dwellers. 'In terms of formerly ignored structures, reuse isn't something we invented,' explains Otar Nemsadze, one of the biennale's four co-founders, 'but in Tbilisi we see its positive effects.'

The exciting thing, of course, is that Tbilisi is very much a city in flux — abundant in culture, history and design, but still on the right side of undiscovered. More remarkable to see, perhaps, is how it will change when the creative seeds being planted are in full bloom. But as MUA's Sakvarelidze says, 'New Georgian design is hard to define, because it's not just about making, but remaking.'



In keeping with the theme of restored and storied spaces, the decidedly more luxe Stamba Hotel has made its home in what was once a Soviet publishing house, and is a considered melange of Brutalist bones, Art Deco references and contemporary touches
Images by Robbie Lawrence