

LOSS OF HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURAL SETTINGS IN THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

Brambilla Marco G /USA

The subject of this presentation is the rapid destruction of architectural settings in the Republic of Armenia and some mitigating solutions to prevent further loss of historic and cultural fabric.

This is occurring at four levels:

1. in the rural and more isolated areas,
2. within the immediate vicinity of major landmarks in the city center
3. within the cityscape and the very identity of the city in Yerevan
4. within the natural open space and landscaping that is an integral part of the city's character

Some of the reasons for these dramatic changes are not unusual and are encountered in other places. Some of them are very specific to the former Soviet Socialist Republics, due to their centralized legislation and political ideology, while others are unique to Armenia proper.

I will elaborate upon these issues shortly but before continuing with the examples of this **transition**, allow me to put the historical monuments of Armenia in the proper context.

Although Armenia today is a relatively small country, having a population of about three million people, it represents a history spanning some three thousand years.

In the first century BC it was one of the largest empires of the time.

In the early 4th century (303 AD), already half the size of its moment of glory, it adopted Christianity and thus became the first Christian state.

Situated at the crossroads of the East and West, Armenia has historically been at the mercy of the larger powers surrounding it. For much of its history, Armenia has been a vassal state of the Persian Empire, the Arab world, Ottoman Turkey, the Byzantine Empire, and Soviet Russia.

In the middle Ages, a group of Armenian noblemen emigrated to what is now southeastern Turkey, a region

known as Cilicia. The so-called Kingdom of Cilicia was founded in 1078, and survived until 1375, one of the few states in history to exist divided across two distinct and distant land masses, and while simultaneously having two sovereign rulers

With the First Crusade, the Armenians in Cilicia gained allies among the Frankish crusaders en route to the Holy Lands of the East. Situated with access to the warm-water ports of the southern Mediterranean, Cilicia was of strategic importance, and the tentative alliance with the crusaders allowed the Armenians some local power, eventually leading to the emergence of the Roupenid principality. With the invasion of the Mameluks in the late 14th century, and the fall of Sis in 1375, the Kingdom of Lesser Armenia ceased to exist. Thereafter, Armenia was relegated to a pawn in international power plays between the dominant, neighboring states, its fate decided by a changing assortment of exogenous, hegemonic powers.

Before WW1, Armenia was essentially divided into Eastern Armenia, a vilayet within Turkey, and Western Armenia, which first belonged to Persia and then was taken over by the Russian Empire after the treaty of Turkmenchai.

After centuries of subjugation by larger powers, the independent Republic of Armenia was established in 1918, surviving only two years before annexation to the nascent Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia declared its independence.

In spite of its relatively small population of 3 million people, Armenia possesses a diverse wealth of architectural monuments and cultural heritage.

Armenia's architectural landmarks span thousands of years, from the early ages of the civilization to significant structures built in the early 20th century. Most important amongst these are the distinct medieval churches characteristic of Armenia, defensive structures, bridges, and public buildings, as well as lesser known residential structures situated throughout the country.

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With independence in 1991 began the immense task of restructuring and reshaping the country. In recent years, a stable political atmosphere, foreign and domestic investments, and a generally favorable economic milieu have contributed to steady economic growth in Armenia, resulting in numerous construction activities, particularly within larger, metropolitan areas.

At the same time, however, these efforts have contributed to the destruction of valuable historic icons within the urban environment, deleteriously impacting the architectural settings of many important landmarks, natural resources and green space, as well as the very spirit of the city itself.

The problem spans two distinct categories.

The first group occurs in the countryside, in smaller towns, and in outlying areas, which have seen severe alteration to natural settings. Typically characterized by unrelated additions to historic buildings, these new constructions adjacent or attached to these landmarks are often architecturally incompatible or out of proportion. Additionally, these efforts contribute to the related problems of deforestation, and irreparable damage to the existing, natural surroundings and terrain.

A similar set of problems exists within the second group, concentrated primarily in the capital city of Yerevan. Here, during the last 10 years, a number of significant buildings have been destroyed, while continuing construction has manipulated and is altering the setting of almost all other structures.

These recent developments stand in stark contrast to the traditional emphasis on harmonious integration of structures and their immediate surroundings essential to Armenian architecture. Although Armenia's architecture represents a broad variety of regional styles, reflecting a span of numerous centuries, the alignment of structures with their natural environment has remained a constant component throughout.

This natural harmony and compatibility – either within the natural landscape itself, or within the built environment of a given city, has continued with various degrees of sensitivity until the late 80's.

In the twentieth century, however, this historical emphasis has been subjugated by a diverse and ever-changing set of state needs. For example, from the 1920s through the late 1980s, architecture and urban planning in Armenia followed

a strict, state-mandated doctrine, calling for a large number of low-quality housing developments to accommodate its urban population. Armenia's independence, however, witnessed the genesis of a new Armenian architectural image on an intellectual level. No longer dominated by larger and more powerful exogenous powers, the imperative for a new architectural ethos in Yerevan that embodies its role as the capital of a dynamic and independent country is pronounced.

So a new city must be created.

An integral component of this effort is the *Master Plan* prepared by Tamanian and approved in 1930, still a key element in the visual and urban plan of Yerevan today. Proposing a circular metropolitan area surrounded by a ring of natural open space for a population of 150,000, Tamanian's plan recalls the town planning experience of the Renaissance period, calling for two key elements:

1. a clear line of sight, defined by street walls, lending a totally new image to the city, and,
2. a dramatic visual element at the end of this perspective approach.

Interestingly, Tamanian's design significantly underestimated actual population growth – within a period of only 50 years, the population swelled to over three million people within Yerevan itself.

Inevitably a certain number of historic urban buildings are lost in this scheme. One is reminded of the destruction of magnificent roman structures in Rome of the 16th century, to make space or to supply building materials for the new renaissance churches and palaces.

At the same time, however, the Tamanian plan is mindful of the historic nature of the city, reflecting an understanding of scale, massing, and architectural elements.

The swift pace of change and development since 1991 has contributed to numerous and abrupt disruptions of this vision. Where once little was allowed, today under the guise of democracy, everything is supposedly permitted. Transforming almost overnight from a dependent Communist country to an independent, autonomous state, social and economic structures have been subjected to a similarly rapid renovation that has afforded little opportunity for reflection and reconsideration.

The situation was further complicated by the following:

1. The dire economic situation brought about by the devastating earthquake of 1988, and aggravated by the

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subsequent conflict in Nagorno Karabagh.

2. The subjugation of historic urban development to more pressing needs during the period of transition from a centrally-organized Soviet Republic to an independent state, struggling with democracy and under pressure from the West for rapid reforms and privatization.
3. Widespread relocation due to less than ideal living conditions in many historical, residential structures and their adjacent buildings, impacting the urban character of the city center not only by the loss of physical structures, but also by the loss of its very inhabitants.
4. Since 2002, the stabilization of the political and economic situation in Armenia, spurred by increasing interaction with the Armenian Diaspora, has promoted massive new construction projects in the city center, resulting in increased property values.
5. Ambiguous legislation that devolves final decision-making process to the individual interpretation of city officials or politicians, subject to immense pressure from various political entities, makes existing regulations regarding historic monuments and their settings difficult to enforce. Likewise, there exists a lack of an effective, simple bureaucracy to facilitate building processes.
6. Lack of comprehensive zoning and development guidelines for new construction especially as it relates to adjacent or nearby historic monuments.
7. The absence of a centralized, responsible, and proactive historic preservation entity – while a number of government offices regulate isolated aspects of historic preservation, archaeological sites, and urban planning; there is no central and independent body that can address these related issues holistically. The resultant bureaucratic maze allows concern for historic elements to be sidestepped with relative ease.
8. A general lack of awareness about the historic settings and its value within the larger population as well as within many governing bodies, together with the lack of such civic advocacy groups, creates an atmosphere of apathy and disinterest.

The capital city of Yerevan lends itself to numerous examples of these pathologies, being by far the largest and most important urban center in Armenia, and thus most attractive for development. This status is somewhat dubious, however, as it renders the city most vulnerable to intervention.

Within Yerevan, the impact on the settings of historic sites

and monuments can be divided into three key areas:

1. The rapid alteration of architectural settings within the historic context of the city in the vicinity of significant historic landmarks.
2. The destruction of the city's urban image, witnessing dramatic alteration of its global urban setting and historical context.
3. The impact of new construction on green spaces and natural landscaping that has transformed the city's historic identity.

To illustrate further, let us consider some specific examples.

The city of Yerevan, in spite of its historic background, had been a relatively small scale township until the early 20th century. As a result, not many historic monuments survive from the early years of its history.

Several alterations of architectural settings occurred during the 1930s and 1940s, which while representing at least an attempt at quality construction, are nonetheless an intrusion on the historic landmarks.

The first example concerns one of the oldest structures within the city. Built in the 13th century, the chapel of Catholicos was constructed as part of a larger basilica type church complex. The complex was demolished in the 1930s, yet this delightful chapel was surprisingly saved from total destruction. Subsequently, however, new construction projects have infringed on the integrity of its architectural settings.

Likewise, new construction has impacted the historic setting of the church of St. Sargis, a larger building mostly dating from the 17th century. Here, while the building proper was not altered, encroachments into its historic surroundings have altered the structure's overall character.

Recent years have witnessed an alarming increase to this problem. Consider for example the Opera – a national historic monument and a significant landmark in the city of Yerevan. Set within a well-designed, majestic square, it was once surrounded by a belt of green space, parks, and nature trees. One of the urban planning landmarks of the Tamanian Master Plan, it was a visual highlight of the city. Recent years have seen tremendous pressure to carve out spaces from the piazza, as well as the green buffer zone, resulting in the destruction of considerable public space, particularly parks and landscaping. Where mature trees once stood, a dozen or more large restaurants and cafes have

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been erected in their stead, ultimately changing the perception of this major, registered historic building forever.

The situation is not entirely bleak, however. There exists in Yerevan today a strong mandate to maintain the integrity of the most important public open space – the Republic place – encircled and defined by structures built in the 1930s. Comprising a series of government buildings around the plaza, this complex is currently protected, prohibiting the construction of new buildings that would infringe on the existing space. Chief amongst these regulations is the requirement that no new construction be taller than the existing structures, and that such developments not be visible from the Republic place.

A second category of destruction to natural urban settings exists in Yerevan, related not to individual, isolated monuments, but rather to the host of urban elements that nonetheless contribute to the city's overall image. The spirit of a city is in fact not defined by its individual, major landmarks, but by numerous factors, large and small. It is its general natural setting, its color, its surroundings, its very individuality, the interaction of various urban components. In short what makes the magic of a great city.

To illustrate:

Of the original buildings in Old Yerevan, few have survived, and only a handful of enclaves are still testimony to the historic aspect of the city. Due to massive development projects, almost all of these are either being destroyed or relocated with uncertain prospects for the future.

Yerevan, in the master plan of Tamanian, was designed as the capital of the new, independent state. As such, the city was designed with majestic pedestrian areas, large sidewalks, and many embellishments to its urban elements, such as statues, public art, and water elements.

However, in contrast with this vision, the influence of speculative business enterprises has pared sidewalks to the bare minimum, allowing for the construction of private business, primarily restaurants, pubs, and coffee shops. The resultant encroachment has been so dramatic as to literally obliterate the perception, presence, and function of public art and water element within the city.

Furthermore a key component in Tamanian's plan was the circular green space around the city. Once a magnificent oasis of open space and public art, it is now being legally or

illegally destroyed to make space for mediocre, often offensive business enterprises.

3. Similar to the changes happening on an urban and architectural level, brutal intervention and alteration has impacted the natural landscape and open spaces that define the city proper.

For example, one of the most characteristic, unique, and special features of the city is the gorge that runs through the city. For centuries a key landmark of the city and an essential element of its urban image, this natural beauty invites comparison to the Tiber in Rome, or the Arno in Florence. Today, the gorge is being destroyed not only by pollution and the illegal discharge of sewage and wastewater, but also by commercialization, and the construction of legal and illegal structures that defile the natural beauty of this unique resource.

Simultaneously, there also have been a few success stories. For example, the new "Yerevan" hotel complex is housed within an historic building that was restored. Although the interior is completely changed, its exterior reflects the historic image of the city, while the piazza and water element in front still maintain the aura of a quality public space.

Another public space – this one in front of the Cascade monument, was cleared from abusive construction and is today a pleasantly landscaped urban area.

The problems affecting architectural settings in Armenia are not necessarily exclusive to the country – certainly, similar problems can be identified in many other parts of the world. However, because notions of preservation differ from place to place, likewise will the solutions to the problems reflect the different social, political, and legislative nature of the culture from which they originate.

A few practical measures have are being suggested at this stage.

1. The establishment of a new National Cultural Heritage Center that would coordinate all activities related to historic, national treasures
2. The preparation of a legally binding master plan, and the implementation of a zoning plan that would clearly identify the guidelines for any future development. Practical experience in almost all historic cities throughout the world has come to the conclusion that urban ensembles and architectural settings cannot be preserved solely by existing

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preservation regulations. As such, it is essential to implement city planning requirements that would regulate clearly and unequivocally all new construction activity.

3. The creation of an interim, independent historic monuments council that would consider all projects affecting historic buildings and their settings and possess final decision-making authority.
4. Increased interaction with and intervention by international organizations like Icomos with government agencies to emphasize the importance of safeguarding historic buildings within their natural settings. Such association would, at the same time, increase the level of awareness and expertise as concerns historic preservation on the local level.
5. Improve public awareness through education, with an eye toward creating a broader base of support for the protection of historic buildings both within the population at large, as well as within the governing institutions. This model has played an essential role in most successful preservation efforts, placing a portion of the burden of managing the accumulated architectural heritage on the citizens.
6. Eliminate ambiguous legislation that gives license to broad individual interpretation or devolves decision-making authority to individuals.
7. Identify and protect the settings determined to be definitive architectural monuments, and create legal and financial incentives to promote reasonable benefit from the property owners of historic monuments. An example is tax free status and government subsidy for all improvements and maintenance work.

To be clear, preservation is a choice. Within the context of an historic country, all urban development and change can be implemented with an eye toward integrating with the past, or hastening its ultimate destruction. It is essential that countries such as Armenia be provided an alternative.

Win-win scenarios are possible that simultaneously ensure economic well-being and allow new urban developments without compromising valuable historic and cultural environments. It is the duty of the specialized professional world, and that of related international institutions to facilitate the consideration and implementation of alternative solutions.

Abstract

The Republic of Armenia, a historic but small country is extremely rich with a large patrimony of historical and cultural monuments.

The political changes, massive privatization, redistribution of wealth and a growing economy are affecting rapidly the cultural and historical settings of its immense cultural heritage.

This is evident on two levels.

First, in the City center ,Yerevan, where massive development, land speculation and abusive construction have already damaged the elegant settings which defined the image of this 2500 year old City.

Second, the subtle landscaping, sceneries and settings all around the historic churches, castles and sites in the countryside are being destroyed by changes in the demographics and the economic structure.

The author is proposing an immediate intervention to address these issues as follows:

1. New approach to urban design, town planning and zoning ordinances to allow the natural economic and urban growth, without destroying irrevocably the settings of the cultural.
2. New legal framework to allow the authorities to address effectively the issue of the preservation of settings in conjunction with historic monuments and sites.
3. Awareness and education. While singular monuments are considered “historic” their settings are not defined and thus more subject to abuse.
4. Incentives. New regulation shall not be perceived as punitive. It is important to demonstrate that while historical and cultural contexts can be preserved, the community and the individual can benefit from these policies.

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Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4

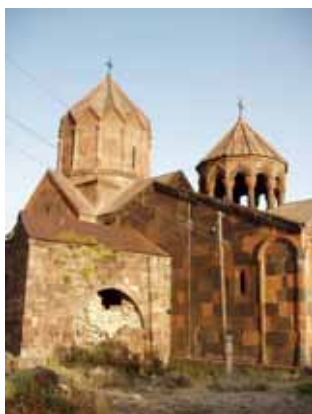


Fig.5



Fig.6

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Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9

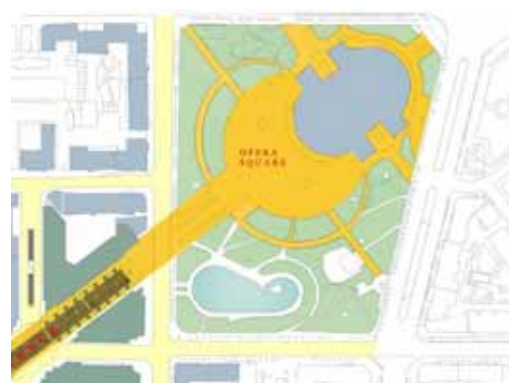


Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12

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Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15



Fig.16



Fig.17



Fig.18

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Fig.19



Fig.20



Fig.21



Fig.22



Fig.23



Fig.24

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Fig.25



Fig.26



Fig.27

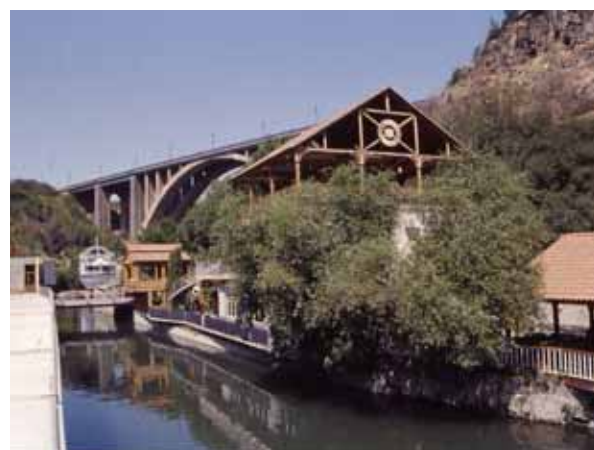


Fig.28



Fig.29



Fig.30