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Weekly Cultural Magazine

Thilisi PASTIMES

What's On — Where and When

June 28 to July 7, 2002

Full Listings

Cinema

Exhibitions

Music

Theatre

Literature

PLUS:
Art Nouveau
and
the Nouveau Riche



STEEL MAGNOLIAS



In her last article, before she leaves Georgia to take up a journalism degree, **Eleanor Peers** delves into Georgian architecture, Soviet sin and crumbling nipples.

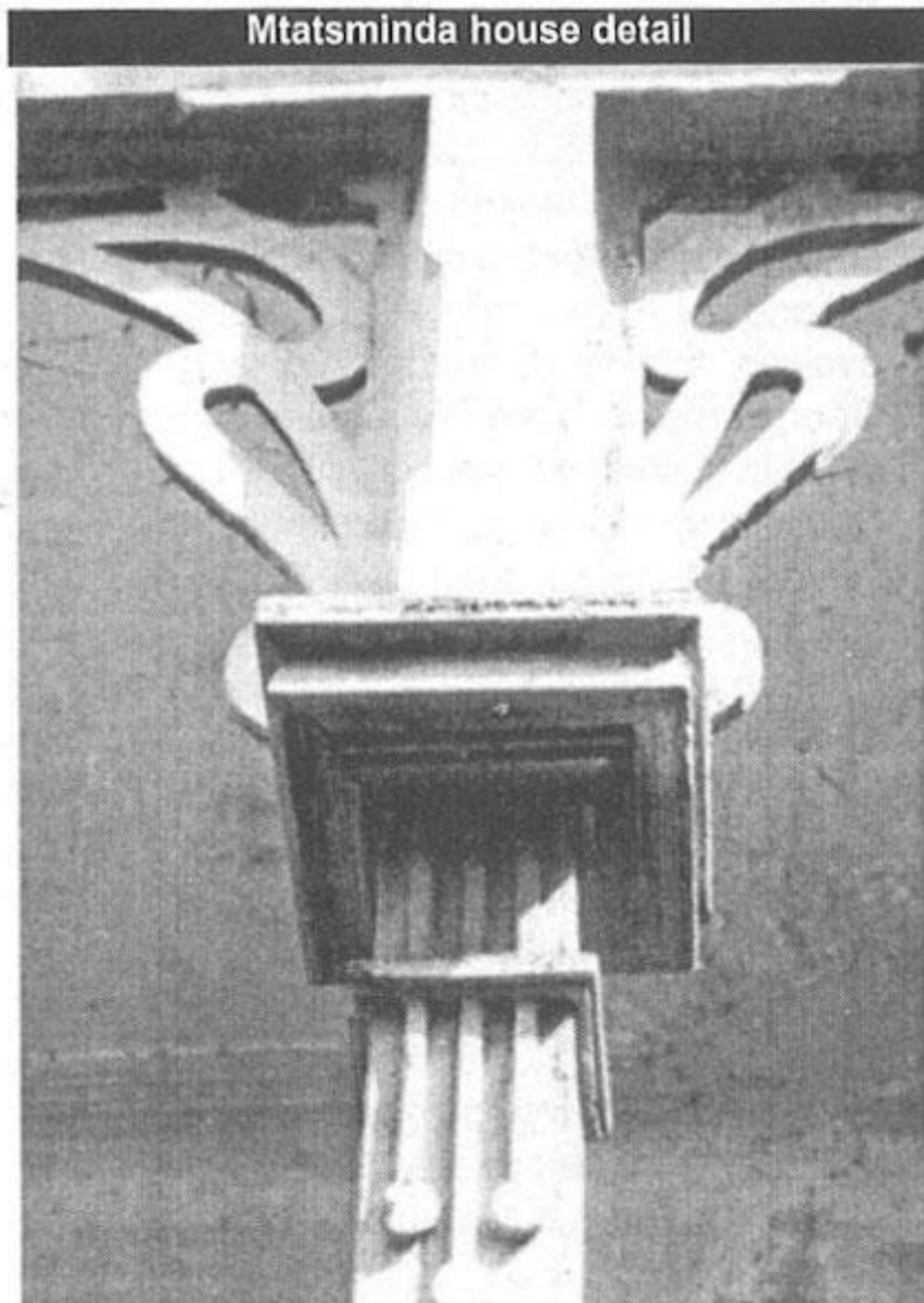
If you were told to shut your eyes and think of Tbilisi, what would immediately come to mind? Everybody's answer would be different; but I expect that most people would be surprised to hear someone come out with 'Art Nouveau'. In fact, if you look hard, you can find the most amazing squirls and curlicues, winsome goddesses and extravagant flowers, all rotting quietly away among the potholes, plaster dust and dishevelled cats. Nestan Tatarishvili, an architect/restorer and one of the organisers of the NGO 'Art Nouveau Preservation Group', shared a bottle of wine and a bowl of cherries with me the other day; since then, I have taken to wandering through Tbilisi's forests of stylised foliage like a Pre-Raphaelite maiden (on a bad-hair day).

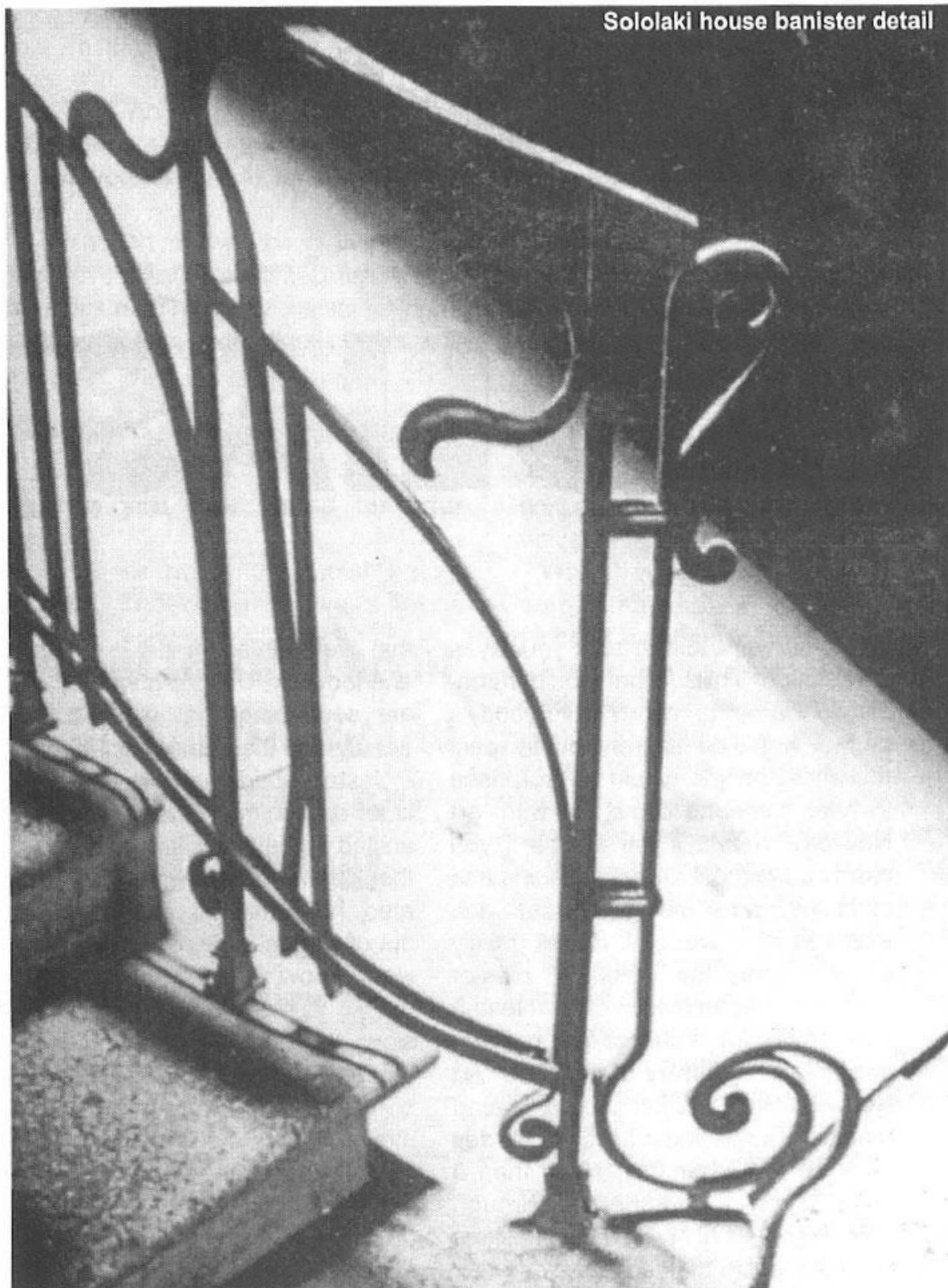
The movement that sent Art Nouveau's convoluted tendrils shooting over the Black Sea to Georgia began in England – ironically, because England was not one of the countries where Art Nouveau really 'caught on', according to Nestan. England was one of the most industrially developed countries at the end of the nineteenth century; industrialisation brought standardisation, since consumer goods started to be manufactured en masse. A reaction against this standardisation developed into the movement founded by William Morris, and propagated by figures such as John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde. They wanted a new movement in art, to correspond with the advances

that were being made in technology and industry; they also wanted to create something that would preserve beauty and the 'human spirit' (or 'soul' – Nestan used that slippery Russian word *dusha*) in an increasingly mechanised society. William Morris set up the 'Red House', a workshop that created hand-made, original artefacts, out of natural materials. Ultimately, as we all know, they failed: we got accustomed to our factory-made possessions, and architecture soared up into the glassy, modernist ether.

However, the remnants of this movement managed to slither over the channel and reappear on the continent as Art Nouveau. This was a style of architecture that didn't appeal to every European country, but which flourished wherever it could put down

Mtatsminda house detail





Sololaki house banister detail

roots; for example, in Spain, France – and Georgia. Nestan explained to me that the defining components of Art Nouveau architecture and decoration are their eclecticism, exoticism, synthesis, poetry, humour, technological sophistication (for the time) and improvisation: each piece had to be unique. It evolved into a distinct movement in Georgia, as opposed to Armenia, where all the architects specialising in Art Nouveau were foreign; Georgians themselves designed their Art Nouveau buildings, and examples can be found in smallish towns all over Georgia, such as Kutaisi. Nestan said:

"We Georgians accepted it with all our hearts. Even poor people wanted it. People simply liked it; it was their taste. It wasn't just a fashion, because it was also our character... It was a national creative process". She showed me pictures of modest two-up two-downs dominated by one enormous Art Nouveau window; traditional Georgian balconies

with swirling Art Nouveau carvings instead of arch Persian-esque fretwork; plaster Gods staring meditatively at their belly-buttons beside acres of curving glass - as she said, people simply liked it.

Georgia at that time (the beginning of the twentieth century) was having a brief boom as a colony of Tsarist Russia, before the Soviet period descended and nipped everything in the bud. It finally had access to Europe via the Black Sea after centuries of isolation; Baku, another Russian colony next door in Armenia, had become hugely rich and important because of its oil pipeline (this sounds familiar); Russia was making its first lumbering steps towards a capitalist economy. According to Nestan, Georgians had become fed up with fighting after thirteen centuries of Muslim attack - the Russian occupation came as something of a relief. She told me that the Imperial government, for all their many defects, were at least edu-

cated and cultured; compared to the Soviets, they were "angels".

Nestan stressed that architecture is the "mirror" of the epoch: it is where people's tastes, aspirations and achievements are immediately visible:

"Architecture is philosophy, art – but it also has to be pragmatic: it reflects the engineering of the period (... It is the material proof of the state of the nation." The Art Nouveau movement in Georgia was completely spontaneous and "natural", and as such, Nestan believes, it has value and must be preserved as part of Georgia's heritage, even apart from the beauty and artistry of the buildings themselves. It is a little remnant of pre-Soviet Georgia; it embodies the bubbling life and creativity of that time, like an insect preserved in amber. The contrast with an architecture that is not "natural" and "alive" can immediately be made (if you are anywhere outside old Tbilisi) by looking out of the window: the crumbling Soviet blocks, dotted all over Tbilisi's hills like acne on a pale teenage cheek, make the distinction clear. Nestan gestured at the particularly vivid examples outside my own window and said:

"An architecture can't develop if its country has no past, no tradition [like Soviet Russia]; Soviet architecture is artificial, so it can't develop. It can't be a foundation for anything in Georgia, also because it wasn't built by people, for people – it was built for animals. Things are now difficult and complicated, but at least they're open and honest, and human!"

She told me a little bit about what Georgia's moneyed 'elite' is building now. Those businessmen that have succeeded in the face of Georgia's tricky economic situation naturally lead very busy lives; they cannot be expected to have developed a refined sense of taste and style while they are hacking away at the cliff face of modern Georgian capitalism. The homes which they have built to help ease the stresses and strains of entrepreneurial life (as those who live next to them can testify) naturally reflect this. Some like to have tigers roaming around behind their vast garden walls, and a particular style of fresco has become popular; at least one individual has got various elaborate divinities spread over his dining room ceiling, with his own features depicted on their pink, heavenly faces. Nestan thinks that they should be "let to have their fun", as long as they keep it outside old Tbilisi:

"It's the art of the period - afterwards, people will study it at school in the same

way that people look at old architecture now."

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to persuade the new business elite to stay out of old Tbilisi - they are helped by a corrupt municipal government, which, Nestan says, sells off land and privatises old buildings against the law. Nestan's NGO, among others and the newspaper *Resonansi*, have recently set up a monitoring council for urban development and cultural heritage; they have documented proof that the municipal government has broken the law, and are hoping to use it to good effect. Few people in Tbilisi have even heard of Art Nouveau: during the Soviet period, it was passed over in Georgia as being a "bourgeois" style of architecture. Nestan tells me that seventy years of Soviet government have left their mark on the Georgian mentality: people have become "logical" about architecture. Instead of seeing the ancient heart of their capital city, they see dirty, tumble-down buildings (sadly, there's not much room for argument there), which should really be destroyed:

"They don't understand that it's only temporary. If they destroy the historical part, they decrease the value of the town. We must keep our place, our capital Georgian. It's very simple, and it's very painful for me that many, many people in my population don't understand this." The people who live in Art Nouveau buildings now tend to be very poor: the original, large houses were converted into masses of squalid communal flats after the Soviet revolution, and have remained in approximately the same state ever since. Nevertheless, some people have made efforts to restore their buildings themselves, after Nestan explained the situation to them.

Government interest in Russian Art Nouveau started to become apparent in the 1970's - however they completely ignored the Art Nouveau in the Soviet Republics:

"They tried to behave as if Georgia, Azerbaijan and every where else were part of Russia - as if Russia were the nation, and had all the interesting culture, literature, architecture etc." In the early Nineties, UNESCO started a project to collate all the Art Nouveau, from countries throughout the world. Russia knew this, but made no effort either to tell UNESCO about Georgian Art Nouveau, or the Georgians that the project was going on; Georgia was in the grip of the civil war at the time, and Nestan was only able to contact UNESCO in 1994, by which time the

project had finished.

Nestan has worked for the state architecture restoration department since 1983 - although, like practically

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everything else, this hardly can be said to exist anymore. Any restoration nowadays is usually funded by foreign organisations; Nestan herself is to all intents and purposes unpaid, and lives off what her sister in Germany is able to send

her. Still, she is an optimist - she and her colleagues continue the fight, and she has received support from abroad, in the shape of funding from the Soros foundation and the British Embassy. She asked me particularly to mention three people, who have been vital to her organisation: Stephen Nash, the former British ambassador, Lali Meskhi, from the embassy staff, and Judy Kay. Judy Kay is American and works for World Monument Watch - an organisation which lists endangered architectural monuments. Georgian Art Nouveau has been placed on their list, thanks to Judy, and was recently nominated as their most interesting site.

Foreign donations, however, can only be a temporary solution. "The Government has to look after its own property", Nestan said; property which, in this case, represents a (relatively recent) flowering of individual creativity and prosperity in Georgia - something that I'm sure most people would be glad to have more evidence of. ♦

