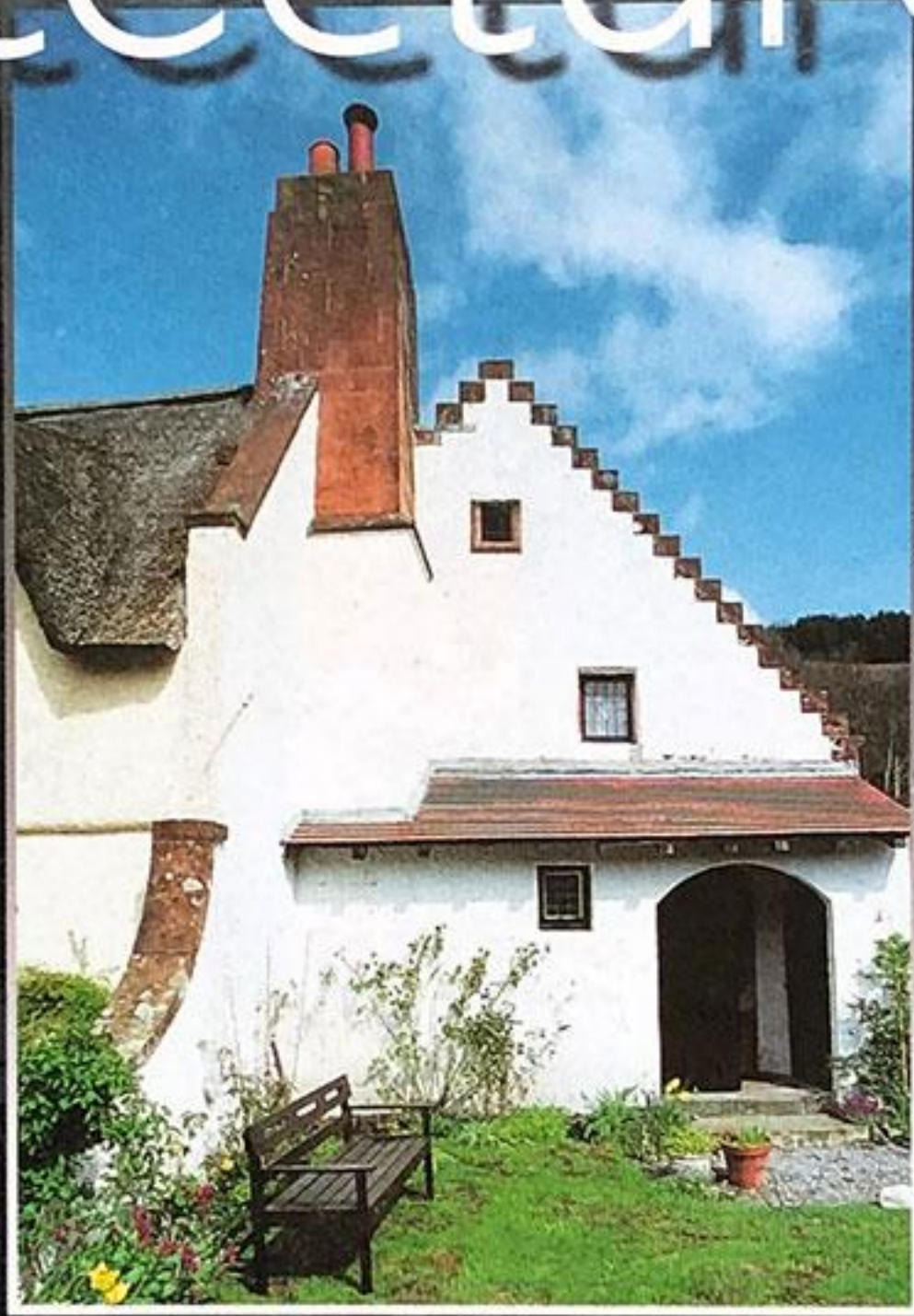


Architecture



1900

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DONHEAD

Tbilisi's turn-of-the-century architecture:

the co-existence of European and traditional values

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Georgia is a small country located between the Black and Caspian Seas on the southern side of the Caucasus. Because of its complicated geographical situation and testing historical conditions, Georgia has always fought for independence and self-definition, but as much as possible the Georgian people countered destruction with active construction.

Georgia is a border between Europe and Asia. It has a very ancient culture as well as a significant architectural heritage. There is an assemblage of Christian and Moslem traditions, a coexistence of European and Asian culture, but it is true that Georgia, although surrounded mainly by Moslem countries, was tilted towards its Christian neighbours. Therefore it is clear why Georgia preferred Russian slavery rather than to be incorporated into the Moslem countries. From the early nineteenth century on, Russia strongly dominated Georgia politically as well as culturally.

Within Georgia older national traditions of art and construction were still alive, in spite of constant critical situations since the sixteenth century. During this period Georgia constantly faced annihilation as a nation but the local architectural experience, which expressed the Georgians' character and way of life, stood up to the culture of the Russian Empire.

Georgia's rich architectural heritage retains traces of the most powerful ancient empires: Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Turkish, Persian. Yet it retains its own peculiarity and originality, its own independent place amongst the world's cultural heritage. This aspect of architecture is well known to international scholars. The architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has not yet, however, been as extensively studied as earlier periods.

Since 1801, when Georgia became a part of the Russian Empire, the economy was in a good state and rapid progress was made in almost every sphere of cultural life, but this vast creative process was stopped by the Soviet Revolution.

I believe that the turn-of-the-century period is the most important in the history of Georgian architecture; it was a time when people, tired of Moslem expansion, adhered to European culture despite the fact that Russia was not really Europe and traditions, the results of long-term peace, was breaking under compulsion from the new Communist regime.

The capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, because of its pivotal geographical location, was a key market town of the nineteenth century and the main transit place of the Caucasus region. Here intersected important commercial routes of Asia and Europe. In 1846 the residence of the Russian Czar's tutor was established in Tbilisi, which became the political centre for the south-western part of the Empire. Tbilisi quickly grew larger and in such fields as science, technical and industrial developments, construction developed along with its expansion.

Beyond the traditional houses, caravan-sarais, bathhouses of the age of feudalism, construction of buildings which had been unknown before started in Tbilisi. Such buildings were barracks, business houses, schools, workshops, banks, theatres, factories and hospitals. It was compulsory for every building to be implemented according to a standard design, which was natural in the era of Russian Classicism.

If we consider Georgia's political and economical state at this period, it will be easy to see differences: unlike Europe, where every artistic and architectural style was based on essential reasons and theoretical principles, Georgia did not have these opportunities. But, in spite of the imposed methods, in many cases Russian projects were not implemented. On the contrary, a very interesting and significant development in the history of Georgian architecture occurred: urban houses in Tbilisi (as well as in other Georgian towns such as Kutaisi and Batumi) organically combined the features of the new building culture with the typical feature of the earlier traditional architecture, the balcony of wooden materials. Not only façades, but also planning, was strongly connected with local conditions and retained traditional features for a long time. If the building of public architecture was unable to exhibit traditional marks, the dwelling house wholly adopted the new forms and presented itself as a statement of Georgian national character and way of life.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, for reasons not necessarily apparent, building in different styles was started in Georgia. The façades became more ornamental. The most popular motives were those of Gothic and Early Renaissance decorative motifs. At the same time Georgian houses were skilfully designed, incorporating new materials and forms without losing their originality. Later it became necessary to build bigger houses than ever before. Dwellings and public buildings gradually came to resemble each other in expression and scale. After about 1880, construction was permeated by eclecticism, which eliminated balconies from façades, but nevertheless some compromises happened – the wooden balconies were changed into metal ones.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was very popular to use the Art Nouveau style in construction (it was known as Modern in Georgia, through

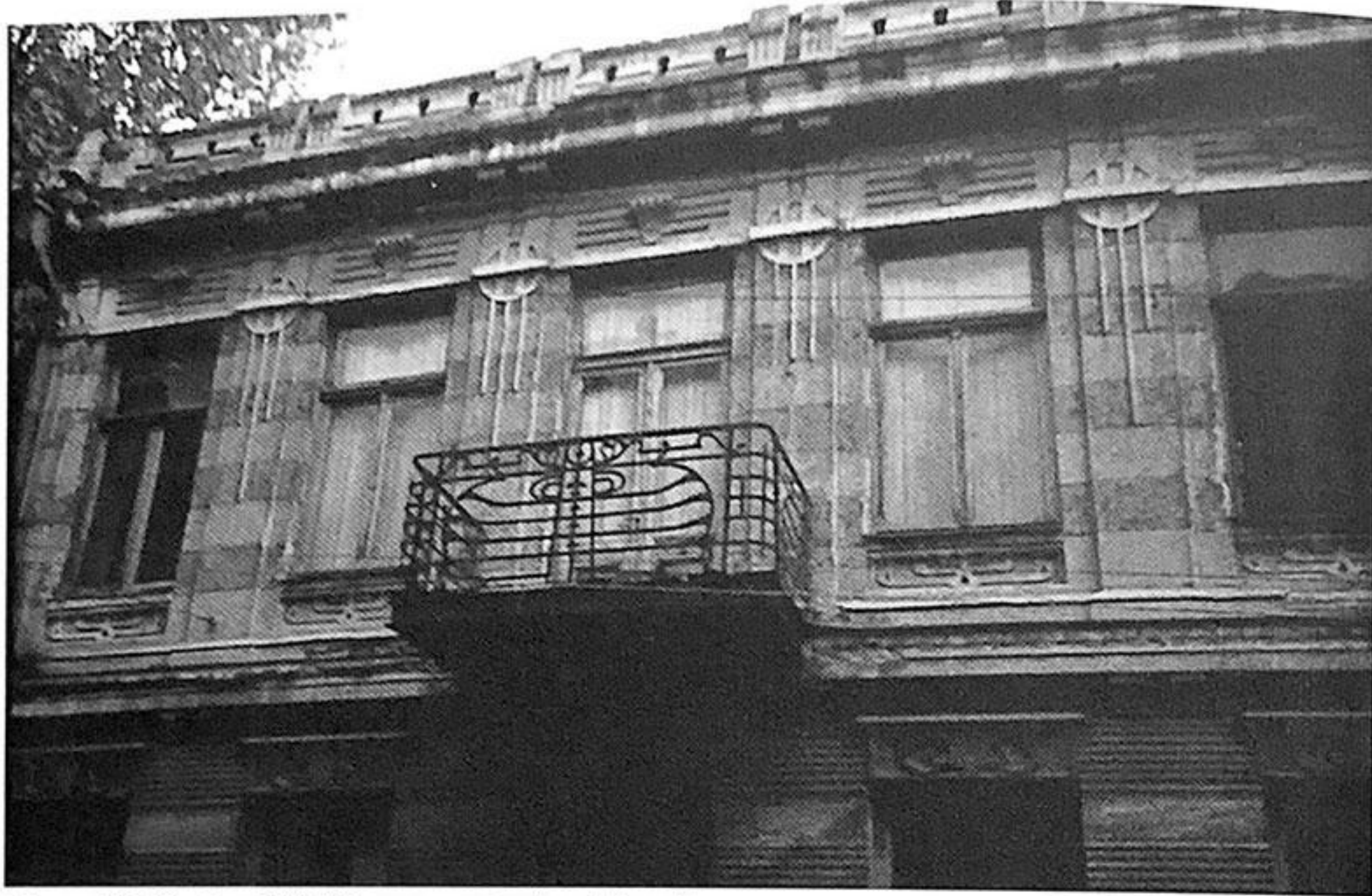


Figure 31.1 Rustaveli St.37, rear or courtyard façade.

Russian influence). Georgia did not have any theoretical basis or any professional design studios or other associations for developing the Art Nouveau style, but it had many talented architects with a European education, and there were also the citizens with an ancient cultural tradition, good taste, new and useful ideas and a mass of information about contemporary European construction.

During this period the social life of Georgia was very rich and complex. Many literary masterpieces were created, the publishing presses worked very actively, and the theatre, professional music, painting and sculpture were pervaded by ideas of national liberation.

The Art Nouveau style became very popular at this time. This was caused by its original phenomenon, which was completely different from Russian classicism and eclecticism. In Art Nouveau it was possible to operate and display fully free creation not only on the façades but also in the planning: the international and the traditional were able to coexist.

Georgian society was impressed by this new direction in architecture. This was the most popular style used in constructing the majority of private houses, banks, hospitals, stores and schools. Planning was fundamentally changed in Georgia as well as in Europe. One of its aims was to enable the various functions of the new buildings to be more adroit and comfortable in using all relevant technical progress adapted to the way of life. Skilful asymmetrical positioning of the buildings was made towards the line of the streets to strengthen the visual effect, and the buildings at cross-roads were also very skilfully designed.

Art Nouveau style architecture is not a mechanical repetition of decoration in Tbilisi. There are worthy examples of this style with their original decorative schemes intact, including furniture, mosaic, sculpture, stained glass panels, as well

as fireplaces and other interior elements of highly artistic conception. There are several examples of buildings where, under a typically eclectic façade, an Art Nouveau style interior exists.

It is well known that Art Nouveau has a completely international character, but the buildings of this style in Georgia have a certain originality, which expresses national forms and local traditions: for example in the rear or courtyard façades decorated with wooden balconies – the main sign of Georgian urban architecture – and it should be mentioned that we have such cases in the architecture of eclecticism as well.

This original synthesis of European-styled street façades and courtyard façades with balconies, often made with wooden materials using ornamental motives of Art Nouveau style, is one of the main original signs of this period in the architecture of Georgia. Several buildings in this style are in good condition. Most of those have retained their original function up to today. Some of the buildings have changed their function, but because of the importance of their present use they look very good. It is very noticeable with bigger as well as smaller houses.

Unfortunately, many buildings were damaged during the Soviet Period or became the victims of major repairs or natural calamities. We have lost mosaics as well as stained glass from many houses. Sometimes there are clear traces of alteration. The designs for some of these houses are in the central archives of Georgia, but it is necessary to seek the designs for others in the archives of St. Petersburg.



Figure 31.2 Vashlovani St.6, view from the street.

It is no secret that under the Soviet Union the opinion was that Art Nouveau was a phenomenon of bourgeois culture but, after the 1970s, many objective works began to be published. However, the architecture of the countries annexed to the Soviet Empire was always left unnoticed and unstudied.

Many such buildings are not listed for protection, whether in Tbilisi or in other smaller towns of Georgia. I believe this period of architectural history which has not been properly studied in Georgia is important from a scholarly point of view, and has an aesthetic value as well. It must be researched thoroughly because of the large amount of significant samples of Art Nouveau architecture in Georgia.

It is almost unknown in Europe that not only Tbilisi, but also Baku (the capital of Aserbaijan), has magnificent architecture and architectural decoration from this period.

My aim, to inform you about one of the most interesting aspects of the history of Georgian architecture, is done. I will continue work on this subject and will always be happy if my information can help to improve knowledge of Georgia's architectural heritage.