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[A New Era for the Old Town](#)



*The drive to modernise historic districts of Tbilisi has caused deep concerns among preservationists. This article is from my regular column in [*The Moscow Times*](#):*

Dirt-encrusted, decrepit, and wasted by neglect, the exquisitely-stylised [Art Nouveau buildings of the Georgian capital](#) have long been desperate for some tender loving care. There are some remarkable examples of early twentieth century architecture in Tbilisi, built when the city was a thriving mercantile metropolis in the latter years of the Russian Tsarist empire, but left to rot during the Soviet period and the chaos which followed independence in the early 1990s.

The economic crisis which followed Georgia's war with Russia in August 2008 halted a credit-fuelled property boom and left many construction sites idle. But despite this, the Georgian authorities are starting to restore some of the decorative elegance of the Art Nouveau quarter as part of their continuing attempts to transform dilapidated districts of the capital.

"This project means we will be proud to live in one of Europe's most beautiful and special cities," President Mikheil Saakashvili declared when launching the latest phase of the scheme. "This area most resembles Paris, and we will make it look like Paris."

Georgia's ever-enthusiastic leader has previously made ambitious pledges to turn the run-down port city of Poti into a Black Sea version of Dubai, and to create a "new Barcelona" in the tourist resort of Batumi. Accusations of hyperbole aside, not everyone has applauded his modernising zeal. Some architectural experts have been [dismayed by the glass-fronted blocks](#) which the authorities have allowed developers to construct amid the splendours of Tbilisi's unique but decaying old town.

Preservationists also worry that restoration work could be rushed through, giving the city an instant but superficial makeover, while adding inauthentic additional levels to some buildings for the sake of profit.

“Real restoration needs time, it is impossible to do it quickly, and because of this we have so much damage to architectural monuments in Georgia,” argues Nestan Tatarashvili, the head of the Art Nouveau Preservation Group – and she isn’t alone. [A Facebook campaign group](#) set up by Tatarashvili to preserve a particularly remarkable Art Nouveau cinema, the Apollo, has already attracted around 2,500 supporters. “The Apollo is a monument of national importance, so it must be restored perfectly,” Tatarashvili says.

Another expert, who asked to remain anonymous, accused the authorities of having “no taste, no style and no architectural feeling”, although she also admitted that a lot of the reconstruction work will have a positive impact. Meanwhile, Georgia’s self-assured president insists that he will continue to transform the landscape of his capital, whatever the critics say. As he warned his detractors recently: “We will not give anyone the opportunity to stop what we are doing.”

(Photo from the [Save Art Nouveau in Tbilisi](#) site.)

POSTED BY MATTHEW COLLIN AT [10:20 AM](#)