Extreme Make-over in the South Caucasus

The reconstruction of post-Soviet Karabakh

Malkit Shoshan, Christian Ernsten

‘The old is dying, the new is struggling to be born, and in the interregnum, there arise many morbid symptoms.’ A. Gramsci

In Kurban Said’s novel Ali and Nino, Karabakh, the highlands of the South Caucasus, figured as the paradisiacal setting for a beautiful romance in the early 20th century. In the lush green forests of this mountainous area, Ali and Nino lay in each other’s arms and made love for the first time. For a moment, the couple escaped from the regional political tensions between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. More recently, though, Karabakh has become the territory of a rather different set of desires. From the late 1980s onwards this province in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan became a place of nationalist mobilization, religious and ethnic violence, forced removals, border changes and the destruction of homes and cultural heritage. Today, the image of Karabakh is that of a historical theme park, a timeless zone redirected according to the spirit of a new local geography of power. Megalomaniac architectural designs stand next to zones of utter urban destruction.

Nagorno-Karabakh, an area of 4,400 square kilometers covering the hill tops and valleys of the South Caucasus mountains, is an unrecognized state in the republic of Azerbaijan. Nowadays, the only way to reach Karabakh is by a 6-hour drive from the Armenian capital of Yerevan, passing through the Meghry region and the Lachin corridor. The curling road winding up towards the capital city of Stepanakert leads through the gorgeous scenery of Karabakh. Yet, the region’s natural beauty is studded with sites of destruction, with demolished villages and houses. The remnants of these violent episodes in Karabakh’s contemporary history are still visibly present. To be able to read the layering of this landscape, it is necessary to understand the stories of its recent past.

In 1988, after the start of perestroika in the Soviet Union, the conflict between Azeris and Armenians in Karabakh gradually escalated. Before a ceasefire was imposed in 1994, some 600,000 Azeri people had been displaced. The devastation of old Karabakh is very visible. Broken walls, wrecked columns, roofless-homes, empty streets, neglected fruit gardens, abandoned schools, the shell of an opera building, the façade of a vacant city hall. Pieces of furniture lie randomly about on the side of the road, or elsewhere on piles of sand, plastic bags, stones and garbage – it is an atoll of destruction. The landscape of this pseudo-nation is a painful reminder of war and the questionable character of the Karabakh-Armenian victory.

Since 1994 the Karabakh-Armenians have strengthened the borders of their new nation, but they have also reconstructed Nagorno-Karabakh internally. Below we introduce a reading of the reconstruction of Karabakh’s landscape since the start of the conflict.

Churches

In contrast to the sites of destruction, a new kind of imaginary landscape can be observed: places are stripped of specific histories and re-packaged to meet new cultural tastes. In Shushi, formerly a diverse, multicultural capital, most cultural buildings and institutions were destroyed during the war. Only two glossy Armenian cathedrals have been reconstructed. According to locals, God spared these religious buildings. Yet, the plaster is fresh and the rubble of recent construction still visible. The reconstruction of cultural heritage appears to be happening in a one-dimensional way. Instead of presenting the complexity of Shushi’s heritage, the political leadership seems to be focused on managing historical discourses. Clearly, their efforts are not directed to creating places designed to facilitate discussion, but instead are motivated by an urge for historical disconnection.

Titanic

Much of the Karabakh’s new design also represents a cynical annihilation of history. On the roadway to the reconstructed Gandzasar Monastery, a giant replica of the Titanic has been erected. An investor intended to strengthen local morale with a restaurant in the shape of the legendary ocean liner. An artificial river and a cat-walk to present local beauty queens make up the balance of this bizarre spectacle. Inside the ship, under the dining tables, the village’s local history is conserved via a puppet show in small glass cabinets. Yet, every association between the landscape and its recent past seems to have been extracted and replaced by the romantic theme of a global blockbuster.

Tanks

Another prevalent element in Karabakh’s new landscape is the tank. The celebration of this military object has to be understood in the context of the dominant narrative of the new nation. This narrative counts heroic stories of Karabakh-Armenian fortitude in war. Whereas the Azeri tanks are burned and rusty, the Armenian vehicles are polished, sometimes still functional.
Throughout the country, places associated with acts of extraordinary bravery are decorated with tanks. As a result they have become public places, where teenagers and young couples hang out in the evening. Yet, the tank also symbolizes the prevalence of conflict in Karabakh society. The heroic narrative is accompanied by a high degree of militarization of society and its cultural roots.

Lottery homes
The Lottery, an Armenian Diaspora company, is a fourth force in Karabakh's reconstruction. The company has sponsored a new residential area in Shushi. According to their plan, the new area is being built on the ruins of a mixed-use area. Along the main road of the quarter, remnants of walls, isolated arches and an old school are clearly visible, giving the new villas back yards full of urban skeletons. The Lottery wishes to promote Shushi as a livable environment and attempts to brush away its ghost town image. The new situation, however, is an immediate reminder of recent forced removals.

Playground
The same phenomena can be seen in newly created public spaces. Local politicians have made a gesture to the inhabitants of Shushi by creating a playground. The appointed site for its construction is a destroyed housing area. The designers have encapsulated the memory of the former function of the place by making remnants of the walls of the former homes part of the new design. The park includes a full-scale drawing of the floor plan of these old homes at a 1:1 scale. The playground produces a complex set of associations – one wonders whether it is a place for celebrating the present or for remembering past destruction.

Swatch
Finally, the restyled Republic Square in the heart of Stepanakert has lost its old Soviet character. The square is now defined by a new House of Parliament, a new High Court, the new Central Bank and a new hotel. These buildings, which are all under construction at the moment, affirm Karabakh-Armenian national fervor and have completely eclipsed the tolerance prevalent in Soviet times. Interestingly, the majority of these national buildings have been sponsored by Frank Müller, the owner of the Swiss company Swatch. His intervention strengthens current Karabakh-Armenian rule in the area without addressing its controversial origins.

In response to this extreme makeover of Karabakh, which has deliberately neglected the fate of former Karabakhians who where displaced from Azerbaijan more than ten years ago, the necessity of alternative solutions cannot be stressed enough. The symmetry between the reconstruction in Karabakh and the human devastation of the refugee camps is a harsh feature of its new landscape. The full complexity of the image of Karabakh's transformation is one of hope, fear, sorrow, as well as anger, nostalgia and amnesia and their subsequent morbid symptoms. Due to recent reconstruction, specific elements of Karabakh's history have been deliberately marginalized. The perception of the area is of a timeless zone in which romanticization dominates critical reflection. Alternative ways of planning spaces and telling histories are needed if the experiences of displacement are to be included. If they are, the reconstruction of post-Soviet Karabakh will be complemented by spaces where differences and debate are tolerated.

2. In 1988 the local assembly (dominated by Armenians) in Stepanakert passed a resolution calling for unification with Armenia. Violence against local Azeris was reported on Soviet television, which triggered massacres of Armenians in the Karabakh-Azerbaijani city of Sumgait. Azerbaijani-Soviet troops besieged Stepanakert in 1991 and occupied most of Karabakh. In 1993 Armenian ‘freedom fighters’ counter-attacked and by 1994 they had seized almost the entire territory. A Russian-brokered ceasefire was imposed in May 1994.
3. This Armenian cathedral, constructed in the 13th century, survived the civil war of the 1990s and has become a pivotal element in Armenian war memory.
New churches. The Titanic. The tank.

Lottery homes in Shushi.

Playground Shushi. The Republic Square in Stepanakert. Photo impressions from Shushi.