**4-1**

# Reconfiguring a Public Place. Baku Promenade between Europe and Asia[1]

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"Baku is perhaps the only true Eurasian city on the world map, not only geographically but in its unique ability to synthesize both European and Asian architectural styles which are indicative of the mental synthesis that has taken place in cultural and social realms as well," wrote Pirouz Khanlou, a local architect in Baku in the winter of 1998.[2] This statement was part of the narrative reflecting the changing socioeconomic and political order of the cityscape, which was challenged by powerful urban fear discourse that started in Baku at the end of the 1990s. Present in everyday talks, interviews, and reports in the local media in the late 2000s, this discourse was shaped by the fear of losing Baku's peculiar identity and vanishing "real Bakintsy" replaced by rural migrants. The discourses were intermingled with nostalgic memories of Soviet Baku characterized by a specific urbanism based on cosmopolitan culture, civilized order, and security. The specific Bakuvian urbanity also found its expression in a mix of traditional Oriental residential neighborhood sociability, the materiality of socialist infrastructure, and the pre-socialist European-style built environment. The cosmopolitan character of the built environment provided a space for different forms of interaction within a multiethnic population and elevated the meaning of Russian as the lingua franca for Bakintsy, used as the dominant tool for communication, social interaction, and urban control.

Bakintsy are considered to be the opposite of rural migrants in terms of their urban manners, multiethnic background, higher level of education, and fluent command of the Russian language. This image of a unique kind of people led to social and cultural distinctions being made and to the statement, often repeated by local intellectuals and journalists, that Bakintsy are not just residents of the city, but rather that they built a kind of "unique nation", in other words, a social caste with its own behavioral code, etiquette and language. The nostalgic concept of the vanishing past and Baku's caste was reflected not only in the local media, but also in the visual and performing arts, such as in the play entitled "See you at Torgovaya Street", staged by Vadim Neverov and inaugurated in 1999 at Baku's Russian Drama Theater. In this comedy, the Bakuvians are presented as a specific social group united by a romanticized interethnic intimacy. The affective attitude to the above-mentioned urban quality was grasped in a spatial dimension in the play by emphasizing the meaning of particular places in central Baku for each Bakintsy, such as Parapet

[1] This paper is predominantly based on my other paper "A Remarkable Gift in a Postcolonial City: The Past and Present of Baku Promenade." This is a part of the publication *Urban Spaces after Socialism: Ethnographies of Public Places in Eurasian Cities* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2011) edited by Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba, and Melanie Krebs.

[2] Pirouz Khanlou, "The Metamorphosis of Architecture and Urban Development in Azerbaijan," *Azerbaijan International* 6.4 (1998), pp. 24-28.

(Fountain Square), Torgovaya Street (Nizami) with its food store "Shakhnovich".

But the past was not always as harmonious as many believed and Torgovaya Street was not equally inviting to everyone in the city. The multiethnic Baku population was regulated by the Soviet nationality policy with its institution of the registration of ethnicity in the passport.[3] Like in Russian big industrial cities, Moscow or St. Petersburg, this practice was partly rooted in a restricted Soviet migration policy known as urban *propiska*, which favored Russian-speaking highly skilled industrial and technical workers from other urban centers outside of Azerbaijan, mostly from Russia and Ukraine, over unskilled rural migrants from Azerbaijan's countryside. "While elites passed through the 'Russian sector', indicating the language of their education, the vast majority of the then dominantly rural republic was educated in Azeri".[4] The cosmopolitan space in Torgovaya Street was not a site of the masses and native practices. For many residents in Baku, social inequality in the access to goods and jobs was part of the everyday urban reality.

Based on ethnographic field work conducted in October and November of 2009, archival work, and interviews with Baku residents about their memories, I explore urban public places as an intersection of political, material, and social relations.[5] Relying on Henri Lefebre's definition that "space is permeated with social relations"[6] and Seta Low's approach[7] in exploring urban places from an anthropological point of view, focusing on social production and social construction of a place, I try to identify the different names and meanings of one public place in Baku, namely Baku Promenade. While considering the history and contemporary developments of the Baku waterfront, I discuss the changing urban design and the notion of accessibility to the public place which reflects the power structures and social inequality. Once created as a "remarkable gift" of the pre-Soviet and Soviet past and considered as the space for demonstrating "cultured leisure", it became a favorite place for rural migrants in the 1990s. Over the last decade 2001-2010 Baku Promenade faced a new era of redevelopment and the process of a state supported post-colonial gentrification. As a distinctive public place, this Baku landmark exemplifies social hierarchies and the ways in which a post-colonial built environment and post-Soviet urban social life are constantly reshaped by the continuing presence of state power and everyday metaphors created by people who use these places. The material and social life of Baku Promenade thus reflects pervasive large-scale changes in the urban post-socialist landscapes of Eurasia.

As a result of the first oil boom in the second half of the nineteenth century and the inclusion of Baku into the international oil economy, urban spaces in Baku were significantly transformed by the Russian authorities and international companies. In the middle of the nineteenth century,

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[3] See Francine Hirsch, *The Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Yuri Slezkine, »The USSR as Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism«, in: *Slavic Review* 53 (1994), 2, pp. 414–452.

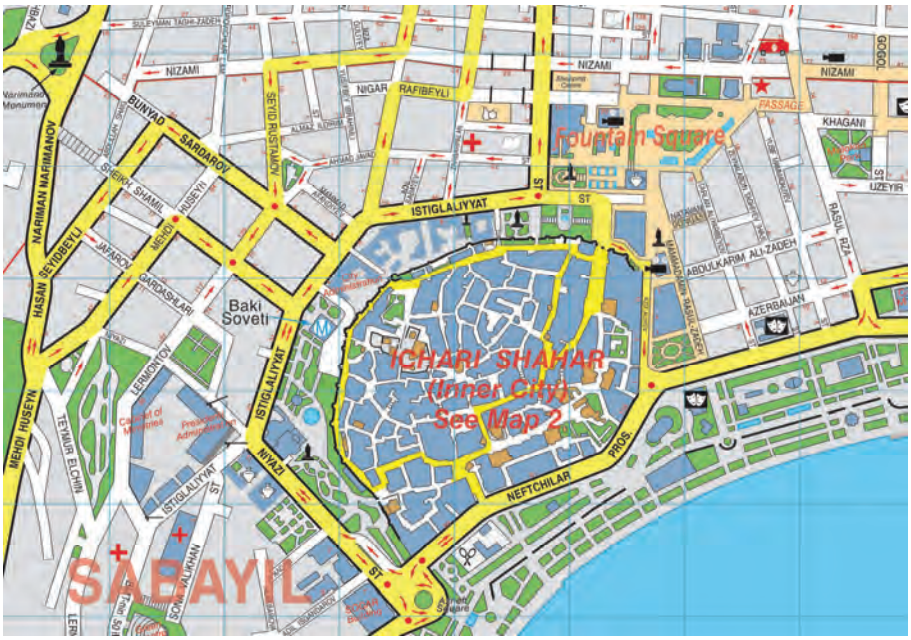
[4] Bruce Grant, "Cosmopolitan Baku," *Ethnos* 75 (2010), 2, pp. 123–147, in particular p. 135.

[5] I am grateful to Sevil Huseynova and Sergei Rumyansev (Azerbaijan State University), who supported me in collecting field data in Baku in November 2009. Both were engaged as cooperation partners in the ongoing research project "Politics of Identities in the South Caucasus" at Humboldt University Berlin, funded by the German Research Foundation.

[6] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), particularly p. 286.

[7] Setha M. Low, "Towards an Anthropological Theory of Space and Place," *Semiotica* 175 (2009), pp. 21-37.

**Figure 1** The Baku promenade map




Baku was known as a provincial town, "uezdnyi gorod Shemakhinskoi gubernii,"[8] whose built environment reflected the Moslem concept of urban structure, including the architectural dominance of the walled Shirvan-shah Palace complex close to the waterfront, which was surrounded by mosques, bathhouses, small markets and traditional neighborhoods called *mahala*. By the mid twentieth century, Baku appeared in official documents as "gubernskiy gorod," an important industrial and modernist center on the margins of the Russian Empire.[9] As a result, Russian colonial power triggered a significant assault on the traditional architecture and urban life in Baku, which was later continued and promoted by the Soviet government. The built environment of the City of Baku is remarkably distinguished by "exotic medieval Inner City and Baku's nineteenth and early twentieth century center, which fuse a variety of European (Neo-classical, German and Italian Renaissance revival, French Gothic, and Art Nouveau) with Eastern styles (Safavid, Persian, Cairo, Ottoman, and Magreb)."[10]

Today, post-Soviet Baku, with a population of approximately three million, is a vibrant urban center in Transcaucasia mostly due to the so-called second oil boom that started in the region after the signing of the "contract of the century" by the former Azerbaijan president Heydar Aliev and major international oil companies in 1994.[11] This contract resulted in an influx of Western

[8] "Uezdnyi gorod Shemakhinskoi gubernii" is the historical definition of this city and means a "town in Shemakha Province." The Russian term *uyezd* (district) was used for the administrative division in the Russian Empire. See Shamil Fatullaev, *Gradostroitlestvo Baku. XIX-nachalo XX vekov* (Leningrad: Stroiizdat, 1978)

[9] Fatullaev, *Gradostroitelstvo*, op. cit. (note 8)

[10] Khanlou, P. „The Metamorphosis", op. Cit. (note 2)

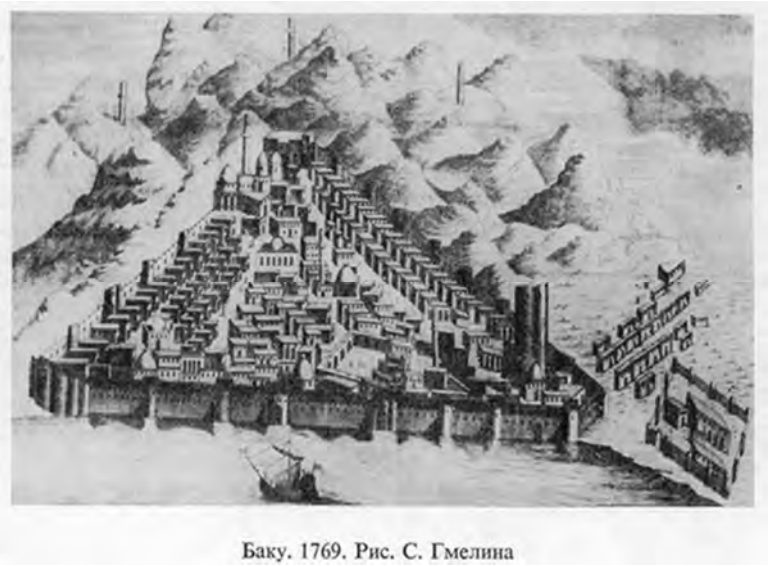
[11] The current oil boom is called the "second" in relation to the first oil boom at the end of the nineteenth century as the utility of oil reserves was identified for the economy. After the 1960s, the Soviet oil industry in Azerbaijan did

investments into the management of the oil fields. This economic change and the income from foreign investments were accompanied by a post-socialist "wild" construction boom in the city "with no master plan,"[12] the migration of rural migrants to the city, and the arrival of skilled Western expats. The emergence of new official monuments and public buildings inscribed into the cityscape a new narrative of post-colonial nationhood expressed through Azeri national heroes of the Karabakh War, such as Martyrs' Lane (Shehidler Hibaniyat) next to the former Kirov Park and the monument of the Father of the Nation, Heydar Aliev, erected opposite the National Bank.

**The development of Baku Promenade from medieval castle to socialist space**

Constructed on artificial soil, the waterfront Baku Promenade (or Bakinskya naberezhnaya) is a remarkable urban space that reflects recent economic and political changes and produces a new order of public space. Bakinskaya naberezhnaya, which claims to represent the city itself and is portrayed in guidebooks, novels, maps, urban magazines, and TV programs as *udivitelnyu dar*,[13] is a "remarkable gift" of the imperial past constructed by the Russian imperial authorities. In order to cope with the demands of both the rapid oil boom-driven industrialization and urbanization processes in the colonial city, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the thick medieval castle walls of Icheri Sheher were pulled down to make space for a harbor and transportation. The emergence of Baku Promenade as a place with public access to water for leisure and recreation can be traced back to the

**Figure 2** Medieval castle



Баку. 1769. Рис. С. Гмелина

not invest much in oil industry development, since huge oil and gas reservoirs were discovered in Western Siberia.

[12] Anar Valiev, "The Role of Business Elites in Baku," *Stadt/Bauwelt* 183 (2009), pp. 28-35, particularly p. 31.

[13] The Russian term «удивительный дар» *udivitelnyi dar* (remarkable gift) was used by the local historian and TV journalist Fuad Akhundov in describing the history and the meaning of Baku Promenade for this city in the serial TV program *Bakinskie tainy* (*Baku's Secret Stories*) produced by Fuad Akhundov and Nargiz Efendieva. See Fuad Akhundov, *Baku's Secret Stories: A Walk along Baku's Waterfront* (Baku: Obshestvennoe obyedinenie Internews, 2006). This positive attitude towards the city planning legacy of Russian imperial rule and the Soviet past is a commonplace aspect of what Bruce Grant observed in the Caucasus and which he referred to as the uncertainty and specificity of defining the Soviet past as a period of colonization. See Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russian and the Caucasus* (Ithaka: Cornell University Press), particularly p. 60.

beginning of the twentieth century, when physical extension of the paved promenade was carried out. This new space served both economic purposes and new needs, namely for leisure and for fresh moving air, now arising among the urban bourgeoisie in a highly industrialized and polluted city of oil. One can divide the history of Baku Promenade into several periods: as a harbor dominated by economic concerns in pre-socialist times (1870-1909), as a place of culture for leisure and sport under socialism (1920-1991), and as a site of deterioration and recent gentrification in the current post-socialist era. The landscape, its use, the social context, and the meanings of the waterfront have differed during each period in ways that reflect the different interests of the urban management. Thus, in its design and purposes, the sea promenade reflects three eras of Baku's large-scale developments and manifestations as a colonial, socialist, and post-socialist city.

Baku Promenade, a waterfront space with green public areas, referred to in quotidian accounts simply as the Bulvar, is the central landmark of the City of Baku. It has a prominent place in the urban landscape due to the fact that it occupies a large part of the Caspian seashore and because of its proximity to Baku's most famous historical sight, the palace of Shirvan-Shah, with its prominent Maiden Tower.[14] Around three and a half kilometers long, the Baku Promenade strip between Azneft Square and Baku Harbor is one of the largest urban open public spaces in Transcaucasia. It is considered to be a space for leisure, strolling, and viewing the seaside landscape. The territory of Baku Promenade is separated from the city center by a wide and prestigious street, Neftchilar prospekti (Oil Workers' Avenue), whose socialist name reflects the history of Baku's industrialization and its Soviet past.

In the nineteenth century, the western part of the narrow waterfront strip was used predominantly for economic purposes as a space for warehouses, stocks, and piers. The waterfront strip was enlarged in order to make space for an improved transportation system:

**Figure 3** Capitalist imperial waterfront

[14] In 2000, the palace, a large medieval Oriental residential castle construction (from the fifteenth century) was added to the UNESCO World Heritage list along with the prominent watchtower Kiz Kalasi (Maiden's Tower).

> The Promenade…replaced the old useless city wall which separated the city from the seashore and, aside from being useless, this wall was a barrier to free air circulation in the city. In 1865, the medieval castle walls on the seashore side were removed and the wall stones were sold for forty-four thousand rubles.[15]

Through the physical extension of the seashore area, the traditional residential mahala was "moved" further into the city, so that the newly created artificial waterfront territory was mainly used for economic and military purposes by the colonial administration and private industrial companies. The western part of the Bulvar was located close to the institutions of the Russian colonial administration and a small park called Gubernatorskiy sad (Governor's Garden) was the only green spot in the industrial area. This part of the city was mainly used for shipping, oil transportation, and fishing between 1880 and 1909, and it was a place frequented by working-class people. The seafront strip called Nikolaevskaya naberezhnaya did not become a place for strolling until 1921, when the Promenade's function as a source of economic livelihood declined. With the launch of the first reconstruction plan for the Promenade in 1909, the seashore began to turn ever more into an aesthetic object.[16] Further parts of the Old City (Icheri Sheher) walls were removed, the harbor was cleared of warehouses, docks, and other structures, and the city turned to face the Caspian with a wide strip of open boulevard. This shaped Baku's urban landscape according to European sensibilities and highlighted the seascape's aesthetic value.

Though this story pertains to one specific public place, this case provides a good example of the way in which the locally built environment shaped a new profile of the colonial city by creating spatially separated worlds: on the one hand, traditional, narrow, Moslem, private, irrational; on the other, modern, linear and open, Russian, public, rational. The peculiarity of this spatial separation is fundamental for the different concepts of accessibility to public places in the post-colonial city.

This is not the place to delve deeper into the discussion on the applicability of the term "post-colonial city" to post-Soviet Baku, but this term gives us a valuable lens through which to analyze the social orders, urban inequalities and cultural idenity we study. By the term "colonial city," I mean the ways in which the materiality and sociality in the cities of the Middle East, the Maghreb and India were reshaped in the nineteenth century by a radical break with local ways of indigenous urbanity[17] and the construction projects of the colonial administrations in larger and smaller cities. Colonial cities in the Middle East and elsewhere were founded on a distinction between the proper colonial citizens and elite living in planned spaces, and the masses of the urban poor and recent migrants concentrated in the traditional mahala, which were often regarded by colonial rulers as urban slums.[18] The spirit of European urban openness in its ideal form is

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[15] Fatullaev, *Gradostroitelstvo*, op. cit., particularly p. 29 (note 11). Translation is by author (TD).

[16] See Fatullaev, *Gradostroitelstvo*, op. cit. (note 8)

[17] Compare Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, 2 (1987), pp. 155-176; Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: Tauris Publishers, 2000), particularly p. 201.

[18] Compare Thomas Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik, "Introduction—Urban Charisma: On Everyday Mythologies in

considered to be different to the Muslim tradition of spatial organization of a city,[19] and this openness was reinforced in colonial cities through the construction of wide, straight streets, plazas and edifices built in a European style with a view of the seashore when possible. Regarding the built environment, its spatiality, and social context, traditional Muslim public spaces are characterized by the centrality of an inner courtyard, the spatial segregation of men and women, and closable quarters that can be locked for the night. Open squares, quays, and promenades have never been a main concern of city planners in traditional Muslim urban settlements. Thus, modern European urban environments differ from Muslim cities in the construction of large, open public squares for the demonstration of centripetal power, and of green promenades and parks as a space for public communication and recreation without gender separation, an activity beyond religious (mosque) or economic purposes.[20] In line with the traditional Muslim spatial organization of the city, urban life in traditional Baku was clearly separated from the water and the maritime landscape. In contrast, the territory for Baku Promenade was planned so as to create a modern public "meeting place" with open access to seashore views for both genders. In 1914, room was made to allow the active use of the waterfront and the water as a place for leisure. European in its architectural style (modernist Art Deco) and its external appearance, the public bathhouse complex Bakinskaya kupalnya constructed on Baku Promenade had a unique internal construction. One should recognize that a sense of the local behavioral order influenced the spatial order of this bathhouse and led to the division of the complex into two independent areas, male and female zones.[21] After all, Baku Promenade, in terms of its materiality and morality, became a zone of transition that was well incorporated into the process of the city's Europeanization.

Though the arrival of socialism in the Caucasian cities resulted in the development of a more balanced civic culture by developing the seashore as a place of relaxation and leisure for all social groups, including the indigenous population, the term "post-colonial city" is still useful in analyzing the legacy of the Soviet past in the South Caucasus. In this context, I focus on the spatial and symbolic separation between the traditional mahala and open public space, specifically differences in the designs and the clientele of built environments. At the same time, one should take into consideration the specificity of relations between the imperial center and the periphery as emphasized by Adeeb Khaled regarding Central Asian experiences during socialism.[22] In terms of

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the City," *Critique of Anthropology* 29, 1 (2009), pp. 5-26; David Crowley and Susan Reid, "Introduction," in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, edited by D. Crowley and S. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2002), pp. 1-22. Similarly, in the traditional Soviet Baku neighborhood, Icheri Sheher was seen as a survival of the pre-socialist past and as a place of working-class and "city villagers'" residences.

[19] See Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, 2 (1987), pp. 155-176.

[20] In a traditional Muslim city, public spaces are mostly limited to the market, semi-private neighborhood streets, and fountain areas.

[21] See Akhundov, *Baku's Secret Stories*, op. cit. (note 13)

[22] See Adeeb Khaled, "The Soviet Union as an Imperial Formation: A View from Central Asia," in *Imperial Formations*, edited by Ann Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter Perdue (Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press, 2007), pp. 123-151. Laura Adams has presented some interesting arguments for employing post-colonial theory in the study of Central Eurasian societies. See Laura Adams, "Can We Apply Postcolonial Theory to Central Eurasia?" *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 7, 1 (2008), pp. 2-7.

the cultural transformation of the urban landscape in the context of the ideology of "national in form, socialist in context," the Caucasian capitals are more complex than post-colonial cities in the Middle East. In these cities, one should recognize the power of indigenous architects and the incorporation of local traditions into the aesthetics of socialist urban spaces. The cultural imports and the remarkable gifts were consistently presented as authentic indigenous developments in these capital cities.[23]

**Baku Promenade as a socialist space**

A grand transformation of the city from "colonial" to "socialist" involved both change and continuity in the way public places were used. By extending the openness and accessibility of Baku Promenade, this public space acquired a new meaning that differed from that of the past. During the Soviet period, Baku as a highly industrialized oil city with a significant number of working-class people gained new status as the "outpost of socialism in the Orient."

The natural amphitheater of Baku Bay functioned as the stage for socialist state scenery, which promoted an idealized egalitarian society beyond commerce and social inequality. One should not forget that socialism in Transcaucasia was predominantly associated with the spread of modernity, enlightenment, and human progress.[24] The reconstruction of the "remarkable gift" with "European effects" was continued under Soviet rule, which regarded the Promenade as a symbol and medium for the modernization of traditional ways of life. The planning of the urban space played a socially transformative role by functioning as a bridge to emancipation from traditional gender roles and to the upbringing of a new generation, as a locus of political propaganda and technological modernism, and finally as a site for organized "cultured

**Figure 4** Soviet waterfront with Kirov monument

[23] Compare Marina Frolova-Walker, "'National in Form, Socialist in Content': Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics," *Journal of American Musicological Society* 51, 2 (1998), pp. 331-371.
[24] Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005); Bruce Grant, *The Captive*, op. cit. (note 13).

leisure."[25] Consequently, the built environment around Baku Promenade was framed by monumental socialist architecture in the form of Stalinist palaces such as the former Lenin Museum[26] and the Government House [27] as well as the gigantic figure of Kirov, erected at Nagorny Plato in 1939. The Promenade was a visible sign of the political regime of Transcaucasia and was regularly used for the demonstration of political power in the form of spectacular celebrations of collective Soviet holidays, namely May Day on May 1st and Victory Day on May 9th.

The territorial extension and redevelopment of Baku Promenade under the Soviet authorities predominantly served to demonstrate state power, socialist achievements, and new technologies. Before and after World War II, the creation of the socialist spirit of Baku Promenade was dominated by the display of Soviet military advances and the ideology of raising the new Soviet man through the construction of sports centers and other "cultured" places. Baku Promenade as a site of socialist "organized leisure" with its designed environment provided a perfect place to represent Baku as a progressive city with a heroic socialist spirit and European sensibilities.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, a major attraction of the waterfront promenade was the modernist construction of a public and professional parachute jumping site. A ninety-five-meter-high tower located in the middle of the Promenade and close to the waterfront was the symbol of Azeri modernization within the socialist Soviet nation. In the 1960s, after a few accidents had occurred at the parachute tower, the site lost its original purpose and was turned into a purely aesthetic site often referred to by city guides as "our Eifel Tower."[28] Today, the utility of Baku's "Eifel Tower" is reduced to being a public clock tower that shows the local time, air temperature, and the speed of the Caspian wind.

Initially restricted to the city's elite, the western part of Baku Promenade also became a space for the masses after the Revolution. During this time, the public access zone ended at the waterfront's eastern part around the area of the seaport station, which was erected in 1970. In this way, this public place offered egalitarian access for any city-dweller, adults as well as children. This egalitarian public access to the Promenade was expressed in the construction of different "democratic" facilities for families and children like the Puppet Theater, a summer cinema, a chess club, a recreation place for young families called "Little Venice," and traditional open-air *chaihane*s.[29] In the 1960s, Baku Promenade became a laboratory for new forms of urban planning regarding socialist leisure. The new politics in Baku construction put into practice Khrushchev's

[25] See David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity (1917-1941)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). On the spatial and architectural dimension of "cultured leisure," also see Lewis Siegelbaum, "The Shaping of Soviet Workers' Leisure: Workers' Clubs and Palaces of Culture in the 1930s," *International Labour and Working-Class History* 56 (1999), pp. 78-92.

[26] The museum edifice is built in a typical monumental Stalin Empire style with references to antique Greek temple architecture; Medzhidov was the architect of the Lenin Museum.

[27] Government House, a gigantic triumphal complex, was erected in 1952 by the Moscow architects Lev Rudnev and Viktor Munts according to the ideology of "national in form and socialist in content."

[28] My thanks go to Sevil Guseynova for this reference taken from the new city guide "Карта 5 туров" (Baku City Walking Tours), which was produced for the Ministry of Culture and presented at the National Tourist Fair in Baku on April 4th, 2009.

[29] Open-air *chaihane* is the local term for a tea house, which usually serves snacks and non-alcoholic beverages. Such tea houses offer a space predominantly for elderly male visitors to the promenade.

abandonment of the Stalinist Empire's "triumphal style." Instead of stone and marble, Soviet architects used new construction materials such as concrete blocks and metal technology.[30] In contrast to the monumentality of triumphal palaces (such as Government House), the summer cinema, and Café Pearl, erected in the 1960s by the Russian architects Shulgin and Nikonov, differed from the former in their lightness, accessibility, and visible "people-orientedness." The transparent walls, large windows, light frame structure, "democratic" entrances, and the proximity to nature (green areas and water) enabled these places and their clients to easily interact with their surroundings.

Along with its socialist ceremonial uses and its role as a site of "cultured leisure," the Bulvar was also a place for ordinary practices and urban routines by functioning as a meeting place for different types of residents. Shady trees and seaside benches offered denizens a space to express individual relations beyond socialist obligations.[31] In many interviews, a common sense of "proper behavior" was explicitly emphasized as a tool for self-regulation of social life at the Promenade, proper behavior comprising those everyday practices embodied in the simple routine of strolling down the walkway after class or with the dog, eating ice cream, or going to the cinema. The Bakuvians' favorite place, Café Pearl, an elegant constructivist and "democratic" building, was popular not only for the way its unusual open architecture was integrated into the maritime landscape, but also for being a unique gourmet place where one can order ice-cream with champagne and a rare, glamorous Soviet soft drink called "coffee-glacé."

**A space of "deterioration" and upscaling**

At the beginning of the 1990s, because of the rising sea level, some parts of the Promenade pavement were damaged but never renovated. Green areas and trees (sycamore and olive trees), no longer watered by irrigation, were partly removed or utilized during cold winters by poor citizens and migrants. Moreover, like other Baku public spaces, the Promenade became a site for small, informal, "uncivilized" shops and improvised kiosks run by poor street vendors who offered cheap everyday goods and beverages.

During the 1990s, the Promenade, the "remarkable gift" turned into an "undesirable place" and a visible site of "urban decay" in the eyes of the settled Russian speaking urban population. The arrival of Karabakh refugees and poor Azeri speaking migrants from the countryside who demonstrated "rural behavior" was blamed for what the Bakintsy perceive as the physical deterioration of the capital city. As a result, the Bulvar has acquired a new meaning in the construction of Baku's social geography. A thirty-four-year-old female Bakuvian emphasized the

[30] The shape of spaces for childhood and cultured leisure in Baku was much influenced by the centralized ideology which experienced significant transformation during Khrushchev's Thaw period. Compare Susan Reid, "Krushchev's Children Paradise: The Pioneer Palace, Moscow, 1958-1962," in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, edited by D. Crowley and S. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2002), pp. 141-180.

[31] As one interview partner emphasized, the Promenade was also used by visitors from provincial regions of Azerbaijan who had been attracted by the free access to the seashore. They usually entered the Promenade collectively and not as individual users.

new image of the Promenade in an interview with me (Baku, October 15th, 2009).

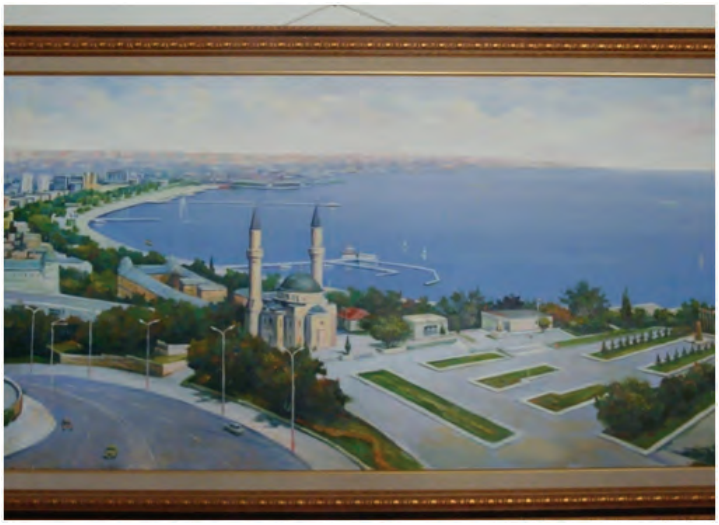
> I met a nice educated boy at a birthday party. He had good manners and was quite pleasant in communication. We exchanged telephone numbers and he called me the next day. Do you know what location he suggested for our first meeting? The Bulvar! The place where only *chushki* hang around! That was the end of our relations.

Once a socialist space for "cultured leisure," the Bulvar had acquired a reputation as a place to be avoided and was transformed into a post-socialist space of uncertainty and poverty, known to be an informal place for rural migrants and gangs of youths to congregate.

Over the last decade (2001-2011), Baku Promenade has been characterized by a new era of redevelopment and has moved in the direction of state-supported neo-liberal gentrification. In 1999, Baku Promenade was included on the list of strategic places for city redevelopment, signed by the "father" of the Azerbaijani nation, President Heydar Aliev, and in the state's coastal zone management plan, and received a new status and name—Primorsky Park (National Park).

The National Park project is less grandiose than the newly constructed embankment of the Ishim River in Astana or Boston's urban waterfront,[32] but the renovation activities are visible not only in new facilities, edifices, and design, but also in a new materiality of national stability. This visual manifestation of stability can be seen in the use of costly new materials like granite stone, cobblestone, and stone tiles instead of asphalt. The park is deliberately designed not only as a place for orderly strolling, but as a new "civilized" environment of global business and neo-liberal capital. This new accent in the representation of Baku Promenade was articulated in reference to Mayor Hajibala Abutalibov's "purifying project," initiated in 2001, whose bulldozer campaign to clear the city center of kiosks and the poor dwellings of refugees and migrants was carried out under the slogan of returning Baku to the way it appeared in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Figure 5** Post-Soviet mosque and the waterfront



[32] Viktor Buchli, "The Materiality: Astana," in *The Urban Life in post-Soviet Asia*, edited by Alexander Catherine, Viktor Buchli, and Caroline Humphrey (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 24-41; Timothy Sieber, "Public Access on the Urban Waterfront: A Question of Vision," in *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space*, edited by Robert Rotenberg and Gary McDonogh (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1993), pp. 173-194.

> The aim of the signed order *ukaz* is to complete a large project here, which intends to eliminate unofficial constructions and other structures erected here in different times and which do not fit the new image of the Bulvar.[33]

The main focus of the renovation activities is on rebuilding a visual, ceremonial, and multifunctional place attractive not only to city dwellers, but also to international business people and tourists from the West. It is here that people are expected to know what the new Azerbaijan and Baku mean. The built environment and the atmosphere of the Bulvar are intended to "center" the urban landscape and reflect the presence of a strong nation-state. Consequently, the skyline of this social space is to become Baku's new representative profile. The former socialist space for cultured leisure has been turned into a site of exclusive national representations and of neo-liberal business. The former Lenin Museum has been transformed into the National Exhibition Hall. On the site where Kirov's monument was toppled in 1994, a new mosque was erected in 2001. Though the image of a Sunni mosque, built in recognizable Turkish style, is not yet included in the symbolic repertoire of Baku's official city landmarks, it is striking that the mosque with its high minarets is actually the only religious sign in the city landscape that can be perfectly seen from many parts of the city. But Baku Promenade is not a religious place.

The improvement process of the public space found its expression in the emphasis on "national tradition" and the construction of "neo-triumphal" palaces like the International Mugham Center and the Business Center (completed in 2010). On the other hand, the application of post-modernist materials and technology allowed the planners to place a new accent on globalized urban architecture. The Mugham Center in its "national form" is intended to remind visitors of the shape of the traditional music stringed instrument—the *tar*—used by Oriental folk artists and to indicate Azerbaijan's new geopolitical orientation beyond traditional subordination to the Kremlin.[34] Based on a combination of modernist structure and an explicit accent on national form, the Mugham Center is supposed to be a new ceremonial place, a cultural symbol of post-colonial Azerbaijani national sovereignty.

Costly renovation activities started in 2007. The Bulvar, a state-financed property, is today governed directly by the Cabinet of Ministries and not by the municipal administration. The ambitious redevelopment plan includes the idea of expanding the length of the Promenade by another twenty kilometers by removing the harbor and other industrialized zones completely. As reported in the local newspaper,

> New modernized hotels and a business center are already under construction on Baku Promenade. The most optimistic news is that all industrial structures located on the construction territory will be

[33] This is an excerpt of the speech by the former president Heydar Aliev at the inauguration ceremony of the new sports stadium called Dinamo on December 28th, 1998. See http://library.aliyev-heritage.org/ru/6461115.html (last accessed on February 2nd, 2011). Translated by the author.

[34] The traditional *mugham* music of Azerbaijan was recently included in UNESCO's Oral and Intangible Heritage of the World list.

removed. This will improve the ecological situation and the environment in our Baku Bay.[35]

These redevelopment activities seem to be similar to the global trend in revitalizing urban waterfronts that is taking place in U.S. and European port cities experiencing a post-industrial transition. In these places, a significant change is occurring due to the shift from industry-dominated urban economies towards tertiary-sector economies. Port trade and manufacturing have declined in these local economies while the service and technology sectors are growing.[36]

The state's coastal management plan and real estate marketing also include the creation of private residential properties. The neo-triumphal names of these buildings, such as Port Baku Towers or Flame Towers, explicitly promote the Baku waterfront as the "finest address" due to its proximity to the city center and simultaneously the aesthetic value of its panoramic view over the water.[37] Unlike Western capitalist cities, where the suburbs are the preferred space for creating exclusive gated enclaves for upper-class and middle-class residents, in post-socialist big cities, the central part of the city is still attractive to residents. Among the new elite, it is considered to be a prestigious place for building new residences despite the deteriorated ecological situation in the central parts of the cities. This creation of a new identity for the waterfront as the "finest address" is related to the increasing privatization and redevelopment activities in the eastern "underdeveloped" part and the former industrial sections of the Baku Bay coastal zone. A new concept of the elite waterfront residence seeks to segregate the location from the rest of city life and infrastructure by offering a new type of heavily gentrified residence with little or no contact with public places, as is reflected in the language advertising these new properties.

**Figure 6** Post-modern waterfront

[35] Larisa Dzhevanshir, Novy stil Bakinskogo bulvara, *Bakinskiy rabochiy*, August 14th, 2009, p. 4. Translated by the author.
[36] See Sieber, *Public Access*, op. cit. (note 37).
[37] See http://www.pashaconstruction.com (last accessed on February 2nd, 2011).

**Baku Promenade between "center" and "periphery"**

The first step to mark the Promenade as "central" to the state's redevelopment plan, a distinct symbol among the deterioration, was to replant the promenade with newly imported trees and other decorative plants. This action is similar to the activities undertaken to rebuild the seashore during the tsarist period in 1909. In the summer of 2009, more than fifty Washington palm trees and numerous other exotic trees from South Africa, Holland, Canary Islands, and Saudi Arabia were imported to Baku and planted at great expense in the soil of the western part of Baku Promenade. The plants seem to have a purely decorative function, since palm trees do not provide enough shelter or shade during the hot Baku summers. While the trees serve as pure decoration in a "neo-triumphal" aesthetic sense, at the same time, they symbolize the way political power is shaping the Promenade. According to popular narratives circulated in Baku, the trees planted on the Promenade were chosen because the current Baku mayor prefers palm trees to other traditional species, such as sycamore trees (*chinar*). As a second step, the area has been enhanced through the construction of modern public toilets and the addition of large numbers of garbage bins—accompanied by the deployment of numerous cleaning personnel.

The visible difference between the western and eastern part of the Promenade was striking in October 2009. In contrast to the eastern part, the western part appeared renovated, fenced, and deserted. Prominent landmarks of the luxurious western part are an expensive fitness club (a hundred and twenty euros for monthly membership), a modern yacht club, and a granite fountain.

According to my observations on October 10th, 2009, on the walkway between the western section near the yacht club and a long pier (around one and a half kilometers), I counted thirty-five cleaning women dressed in uniforms and equipped with modern brooms, four garbage removal cars, ten male and female joggers (mostly Western expats), and, most strikingly, numerous civilian watchdogs. Increasing security measures, including the recruitment of sixty men as city policemen by the Ministry of Sport, were omnipresent on the Promenade, particularly on its western part. Many visitors complained about having a strong feeling of being under surveillance, as was mentioned by one of the visitors in October 2009: "You are not walking in a public park but in a state-controlled entity like a military compound." Dogs are strictly prohibited on the entire strip of Baku Promenade as is the riding of bicycles, including bicycles for kids during the daytime after nine in the morning. Furthermore, it is forbidden to crack roasted sunflower seeds, which are part of popular everyday nutrition and the cracking of which is a social activity all over the Caucasus. Filming is not allowed without permission. As one forty-eight-year-old male Bakintsy, who regularly strolls along the Bulvar, said about his feeling of the Promenade's new profile (28th November, 2009):

> There is too much control. It reminds me of Tsarist times, as I read somewhere that there was only one entrance to the park and a guard (*gorodnichiy*) stood at the entrance gate. If he did not like somebody, this person was denied entry into the park. Today, I have a similar feeling as if somebody is always observing me. In Soviet times, nobody cared about your behavior, and all visitors were peaceful.

In contrast to the western part, the eastern section of the Bulvar was more social, "accessible," and public. Behind Café Pearl, located in the middle of the walkway and marking the symbolic boundary between the "high-class west" and the "low-class east," there were amusement parks, playgrounds, and chaihanes. The smell of popcorn and vanilla ice-cream usually combined with the voices of street photographers offering to take cheap photographs of passersby at the shore. The major attraction of the eastern part was a long pier, about four hundred meters long and fifty meters wide, stretching out into the sea.

It was the pier of the Promenade that was most intensively used for multiple activities. At different times of the day in October 2009, at least a hundred and twenty people were standing, sitting, walking, doing gymnastics, sleeping, kissing, and taking photographs on the pier. In the morning, the pier was usually dominated by the presence of fishermen. In contrast to the western part, there were no green sites or trees in this area. At the far end of the pier was the disused Café Gunay, formerly the Sadko, in which a homeless person resided. Behind the café, elderly men were often found doing gymnastics. Thus, this part of the Promenade was indeed intensively used in different ways, not only for strolling and viewing, but also for particular social activities and informal economic purposes. One could observe such informal economic activity among the cleaning women. In autumn, they collected olives from the trees on the Promenade to sell on the street. The collected olives were kept in an underground storage room for cleaning utensils.

This section of the Promenade provided space for people "unprepared for urban life," for lower-class residents, so-called *Chushki*.[38] In the eyes of the Bakintsy, Chushki are always dressed in black clothes and are *u nikh sherst do plechei* (overly hairy). In this way, my interview partners signaled that these young males are the "Other," not civilized enough for a proper public walk on the Promenade. Their dress code usually consisted of fake black Puma, Nike, or Adidas sportswear, white jackets over cheap black trousers, black sunglasses "like Italian mafioso," gold chains around their necks, and black artificial leather shoes with pointed toes. This style of shoe was an important distinction from the Bakintsy, who usually wear Western sneakers. One of main features of the migrants' "uncivilized behavior" was the overt use of colored mobile phones that were constantly ringing. In many cases, the mobile phones were carried on a chain in the hands of the owner.

In the eyes of the Bakintsy and both the new elite and the authorities, the young newcomers produced different kinds of city pollution: an aesthetic pollution through their physical presence, a material pollution in the form of garbage from the cracking of sunflower seeds (*semeshki*), the dropping of seed peelings on the ground, and most of all, acoustic pollution from playing and listening to loud pop music from Turkey on their mobile phones. »*Eto ne otdykh, a mucheniee odno*« ("It is not leisure, it is just suffering") said one female visitor when complaining about the Chushki' practice of chatting up young women on the Promenade.

Thus, Baku's history and position as a Europeanized "clean" city are being contested by a

[38] This term is close to the offensive Russian term *Churki* used by Russians in Moscow or St. Petersburg to denote migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Among the Bakintsy, the territory of the Promenade was named *Chushkarstan* in response to the numbers of migrants using the space.

peripheral world, in the form of local young rural migrants and descendants of refugees. It is not surprising that the Bakintsy associate young Azeri migrants from rural places with “Asia” and backwardness. Symptomatically, the Oriental term *chushki* was coined as an extremely derogatory appellation for uncouth persons, and is still vehemently applied by the Bakintsy to newly arrived migrants from the countryside. In this paper I tried to show the ways different actors use, produce and appropriate public places. But who is threatening Baku Promenade today? There is a strong tendency to put the blame on migrants and lower-class people who “pollute” the Promenade. At the same time, the Promenade is undergoing a process of neo-liberal gentrification, within which exists a strong tendency to turn public places into gated zones for selected consumers – middle or upper-class citizens, business people and tourists. In reference to the growing presence of state agency, with its surveillance, commercialization and “purification” of public space, I argue that the Primorsky Bulvar is increasingly losing its quality of an open public place with egalitarian access. As for the third group of actors, “Europeans” or the Bakintsy, the former Soviet Russian-speaking urban elite and intelligentsia, who have diminished in number (due to emigration) and been deprived of positions of power and prestige formerly allocated to them by the Soviet state, they are in clear opposition to the new actors in Baku, both to rural migrants and the elites. The old Bakintsy hanker for the Soviet character of the Promenade and evoke an essentialist view, constantly producing romanticized associations with the Soviet past and the orderly city, thus denying the history of Baku’s external connections with rural regions. The identification of the place as a site of different social realities is inevitably an intervention not only into design and sociality, but also into the production of a new symbolic geography.

Historically, Baku as a colonial city and “city of transition” experienced a tremendous change in its physical make-up due to the industrialization, urbanization, Europeanization and secularization of its public spaces, which started during the Russian Empire and continued during socialism. The revitalization of the waterfront promenade as the showpiece of a new Eurasian capital is controlled by elite groups, the government, and commercial interests, as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. What is different about contemporary urbanism and the specific spirit of public space in Baku today is the absence of the old center located in the North and a desire to link the city status and its aesthetic to a new global geography distinct from the Soviet one. The local confrontation over efforts to make the waterfront more attractive to tourists and investors involves an active attempt to create a global image of Baku as “Dubai of the Caspian Sea”. Instead of discourses and language shaped by the positioning of the Promenade as the southern periphery of a big brother territory to the north, this South Caucasian city is increasingly engaged in centralizing Baku in the larger context of Eurasia. It is for this reason that it is useful to think of the multiplicity of images of place as being a space of constantly shifting articulations of social relations and activities.