

Source: National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi



BARBARA ENGEL
IA KUPATADZE
NIKOLAS ROGGE
NANO ZAZANASHVILI

2. CONTEXT OF VAZHA-PSHAVELA BLOCK VI



BARBARA ENGEL, NIKOLAS ROGGE

INTRODUCTION

The public spaces discussed in this book provide insights into the distinctive features of the open space structures of large housing estates in Eastern Europe in general, and specifically into the open spaces in Block VI of the Vazha-Pshavela microdistrict in the Sarbutalo district of Tbilisi. A coherent examination of these spaces and their attributes, as well as the issues they face and questions regarding their further development, requires a profound understanding of the larger historical, spatial, functional, and social context. Understanding the planning and development period and the history of ideas is just as necessary as recognizing today's needs and considering future changes and necessary adjustments.

Modern settlements have given rise to a unique form of urban development. This is characterized by an urban layout in which buildings often stand alone in a flowing open space, as if on a green field. Residential buildings are grouped together in microdistricts much like superblocks. Facilities related to residential life, such as kindergartens, schools, sports complexes, and supermarkets are located at the edges of these groups or in between them, close to the main roads. Historically, the interior of the microdistricts was dedicated to neighborhood living. Since their creation over fifty years ago, these settlements have undergone numerous transformations through planning and the efforts of their residents. Privatization and uncontrolled development have, in some cases, led to the construction of many new buildings. As a result, the open spaces have lost much of their original qualities. Often littered and neglected, with unclear usage and ownership status, these spaces are at risk of falling victim to investment pressure, especially in communities facing a housing shortage. Unlike residents of large housing estates in other countries, Georgian residents have remodeled and extended their houses in remarkable and unique ways in response to the housing shortage. They have appropriated and redesigned open spaces and their apartments—often without planning. While the quality of the results will not be evaluated in detail here, the transformations provide important insight into the shortcomings of the current planning process and indicate where improvements must begin.

This publication is based on the premise that sustainable transformation can only occur with a deep appreciation for these spaces and not in contradiction to their original intent. A deep understanding of the historical background, as well as the current demands and circumstances, is an important prerequi-

site. A careful examination of Vazha-Pshavela Block VI reveals that the city's urban transformation problems can be easily traced back to the challenges it has faced since the collapse of the Soviet Union—challenges that continue to affect Tbilisi's development today. The unstable political situation, combined with rapid mass privatization that shifted public housing into private ownership, altered the urban fabric. This problem was later exacerbated by unregulated construction processes, interventions, and modifications. Today, the urban fabric, which was once rigidly structured based on Soviet spatial planning doctrines, has devolved into a chaotic urban space with numerous problems.

This chapter describes the historical development and the current state of the Vazha-Pshavela Block VI neighborhood, highlighting the challenges it faces in transforming its urban public and green spaces along with the potentials it offers. The chapter links back to initial design decisions and illustrates the deviations and improvements made by the microdistrict's inhabitants, as well as the design changes initiated and implemented by the city and the district.

NANO ZAZANASHVILI

2.1 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Today, Saburtalo is one of the central districts of Tbilisi. The trajectory of its urban development serves as a reflection of the broader socioeconomic and political transformations that have shaped Georgia over time. This section examines the key phases in the evolution of Saburtalo's urban development from the late nineteenth century through the 1990s. Particular attention is given to the planning and construction processes of the Vazha-Pshavela residential microdistricts, with a focused analysis of the urban characteristics of Block VI.

Formation of the Saburtalo District

When observing the historical growth of Tbilisi, it becomes evident that, until the early twentieth century, the city developed along the Mtkvari River. By the late nineteenth century, the city's boundary on the right bank of the river had nearly reached what is now Heroes' Square. The military road leading to Russia, which later became the foundation for Merab Kostava Street, began from roughly this point. The growth pattern of Tbilisi shifted during the first half of the twentieth century, with development gradually extending westward along the Vere River and further into the Vake and Saburtalo areas.

In the late nineteenth century, Saburtalo was a settlement on the periphery of the city, inhabited by a low-income, ethnically diverse population. Saburtalo was incorporated into the city in 1917.¹ Maps of Tbilisi from this period already show development to the west of the military road, along the area now defined by Viktor Dolidze Street and between Pekini Avenue and Zhuli Shartava Street. By the 1920s, these residential areas had expanded further. The draining of swampy lands that had been a breeding ground for malaria for years also contributed to this growth.²

1 Teimuraz Beridze, ძველი თბილისის გარეუბნების ისტორია [History of the suburbs of Old Tbilisi] (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1977), pp. 67–68.

2 Nino Asatiani, Грузинское Советское Градостроительство 1920-1930-х Годов [Georgian Soviet urban development of the 1920s–1930s], Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1989, p. 16; and საბურთალოს ჭაობების ამოშრობა [Draining the Saburtalo swamps], *Komunisti*, no. 170 (July 1925), p. 4.



Figure 1: Plan of Tbilisi (1924), with the Saburtalo district framed in blue
 Source: Ioseb Grishashvili Tbilisi History Museum of the Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi

Broader urban development initiatives in Saburtalo began after the establishment of the Soviet regime in Georgia. In the second half of the 1920s, discussions began on the systematic development of the Saburtalo residential area. At the same time, plans were made to improve connections between the central railway station and the city center. These plans included the construction of Station Street, Heroes' Square, Kostava Street, and a new bridge over the Mtkvari River.³

By the 1930s, these ideas materialized, and Heroes' Square and its surrounding areas became central to Tbilisi's Soviet reconstruction efforts. Between 1932 and 1935, the contemporary Queen Tamar Bridge, designed by engineer Slovinsky and architect Nikoloz Severov, was built to link the riverbanks and the central railway station.⁴ The development of Heroes' Square and the first part of Kostava Street represented significant steps in improving urban

3 Nodar Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture] (Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1971), pp. 30–31.

4 Ibid, p. 139.

connections. During this period, steps were also taken to create recreational spaces. For instance, a zoological park was established in the Vere Gorge, near the former Vere Gardens and close to Heroes' Square.



Figure 2: General view of the zoological park and the road to Saburtalo (Heroes' Square area) in 1938
Source: Vladimir Stoliarov, 1938, National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi

Notable examples of residential development include the so-called Specialists' Houses, designed by architects Aleksandre Nikolaishvili and Mikheil Shavishvili, built on the outskirts of Saburtalo between 1932 and 1935.⁵ This was one of the first examples of residential block development in Soviet Tbilisi. These three residential buildings, constructed in the early Soviet modernist style, still stand at the intersection of Jiuli Shartava and Ana Kalandadze Streets.⁶ A development plan for the surrounding area was also intended to be created during this period.⁷ The 1934 map of Tbilisi shows outlines of intended future developments, indicating plans for systematic expansion. However, these efforts were not part of a unified, well-conceived plan and were often carried out sporadically.

5 At that time, the northern boundary of the neighborhood reached approximately up to the intersection of today's Vazha-Pshavela and Pekini Avenues.

6 Levan Kalandarishvili, "Constructivism in Georgia," in Palavandishvili and Kurtishvili (eds.), *Building Socialist Georgia* (Tbilisi: CEZANNE Printing House, 2022), p. 48; Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture], pp. 60–62.

7 Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture], pp. 137–138.

At the beginning of the 1930s, Soviet urban planning underwent a significant turn. The socioeconomic policies implemented during the first Five-Year Plan — including rapid industrialization and forced collectivization — had a profound impact on Soviet cities. These changes were especially evident in Moscow. Due to the rapid migration of the rural population to urban areas, Moscow expanded chaotically and was no longer able to meet the housing and communal needs of its growing population. To address these urban challenges, the resolution “On the Urban Economy of Moscow and on the Development of the Urban Economy of the USSR” was adopted on July 15, 1931. This resolution laid the groundwork for the planned development of Soviet cities. During the 1930s, general plans were devised and adopted for Moscow and other Soviet cities.⁸

In response to this policy, Tbilisi’s first general plan was developed in 1934. This plan aimed to address issues related to the city’s development and transformation, aligning with the Soviet Union’s new socioeconomic and political directions. The plan also sought to keep pace with the city’s rapid population growth. Between 1922 and 1926, Tbilisi’s population increased by 60,000, growing at an annual rate of 5.8 percent, which was one of the highest rates in the Soviet Union.⁹ By 1932, Tbilisi had a population of 370,000. The general plan projected that this number would rise to 725,000 within 25 to 30 years.¹⁰

Saburtalo, along with other parts of the city, was identified as a key area for housing the growing population. The plan foresaw development of the entire east–west corridor, including the areas around present-day Aleksandre Kazbegi and Vazha-Pshavela Avenues. However, it took several decades to realize this vision.¹¹ Until the 1950s, development remained concentrated around Khiliani Street and the area between Kostava and Pekini Avenues; other parts were only partially developed.¹²

⁸ “Beschluss ‘Über die Moskauer städtische Wirtschaft und die Entwicklung der städtischen Wirtschaft in der UdSSR,’” 100(O) Schlüsseldokumente (website), accessed April 6, 2025, https://www.100Odokumente.de/Dokumente/Beschluss_%E2%80%9E%C3%9Cber_die_Moskauer_st%C3%A4dtische_Wirtschaft_und_die_Entwicklung_der_st%C3%A4dtischen_Wirtschaft_in_der_UdSSR%E2%80%9C?setlang=de.

⁹ Giorgi Mgeladze, თბილისის დემოგრაფიული განვითარების ეტაპები [Periods of demographic development of Tbilisi], in Salukvadze, Van Assche, Shavishvili (eds.), თბილისი ცვლილებების ხანაში (ურბანული სივრცისა და ქალაქგეგმარების სოციალურ-პოლიტიკური განზომილება) [Tbilisi in times of change (sociocultural dimensions of urban space and urban planning)] (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Publishing House, 2010), p. 25.

¹⁰ D. Tutberidze (ed.), За Социалистическую Реконструкцию Тифлиса (К Обсуждению Проекта Планировки Города) [For the Socialist reconstruction of Tiflis (Towards the discussion of the city planning project)] (Tiflis: Izdatelski Sektor Tifsoвета, 1934), pp. 32–33.

¹¹ The Second General Plan of Tbilisi, developed in 1955, did not make any significant changes in this regard.

¹² This is evidenced by the analysis of cartographic and satellite materials from that period.



Figure 3: General Plan for Tbilisi, 1934
Source: National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi

The General Plan for Tbilisi also established urban planning conditions for the disposition of residential blocks. However, during the era of Socialist Realism, these requirements were largely disregarded. Construction focused on individual residential buildings along major avenues, often neglecting the creation of recreational spaces and service facilities at the neighborhood level. The housing shortage remained a persistent challenge, as the speed of construction could not keep up with the growing population.

According to the general plan, there was a critical shortage of green spaces in Tbilisi in the early 1930s. The city had only 3.1 square meters of green space per person, which was significantly below the levels in other Soviet cities. For example, Baku had 4.4 square meters per capita, Rostov-on-Don had 26.3, Saratov had 16, and Moscow had 19.¹³ Efforts were made in subsequent years to improve the city's ecological conditions through mass planting on slopes

¹³ Tutberidze, За Социалистическую Реконструкцию Тифлиса [For the Socialist reconstruction of Tiflis], p. 17.

and the creation of large urban parks in various districts. However, aside from the zoological park, no other large parks were established in Saburtalo.¹⁴ As will be seen below, this challenge persisted in the following decades. Starting in the 1940s, the siting of university campuses and scientific institutions in Saburtalo shaped the district's subsequent functions and demographic characteristics.¹⁵

Development and Construction of the Vazha-Pshavela Microdistricts

It is well known that transformative changes in housing construction and architectural policies occurred in the Soviet Union during the 1950s, following a leadership change in the Communist Party and the rise of Nikita Khrushchev. Saburtalo's intensive growth also began during this period.

Several resolutions issued during the 1950s laid the legal grounds for the new construction policies. In 1955, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the USSR Council of Ministers adopted the resolution "On Eliminating Excesses in Design and Construction." This decree criticized the uneconomical practices of the design and construction of residential and public buildings in previous years. It aimed to accelerate the construction process by adopting standard designs and industrial construction methods.¹⁶ Another significant legal act was the 1957 resolution "On the Development of Housing Construction in the USSR," also passed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the USSR Council of Ministers. This decree aimed to eliminate the Soviet Union's housing crisis within ten to twelve years. To achieve this, Soviet republics were required to prepare plans for siting residential buildings on vacant

¹⁴ During the Soviet period, a relatively small park (today known as Vaso Godziashvili Park) was established on what is now Al. Kazbegi Avenue. Additionally, a riding arena was built in Saburtalo for equestrian sports shows. After Georgia gained independence, the area was transferred into private ownership. Gradually, equestrian sports activities came to a complete halt, and the local population began using the open space for recreational purposes. Currently, a park is being constructed on the site of the former racetrack; however, in the greenest part of the arena property, the construction of massive, multistory buildings is planned.

¹⁵ Vakhtang Jaoshvili (ed.), თბილისი (ეკონომიკურ-გეოგრაფიული გამოკვლევა) [Tbilisi (Economic-geographical survey)] (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1989), pp. 131–132, 357–358.

¹⁶ Постановлению ЦК КПСС и Совета Министров СССР от 4 ноября 1955 г. N 1871, "Об Устранении Излишеств в Проектировании и Строительстве" [Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Council of Ministers of the USSR from 4 November 1955, No. 1871, "On the Elimination of Redundancies in Design and Construction"], accessed April 5, 2025, https://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_5043.htm.

urban land, and various institutions were tasked with using industrial construction methods. Increased funding was also allocated for housing construction.¹⁷

In line with this political course, the principles of planning residential areas changed significantly. Construction primarily utilized undeveloped land. Residential areas were divided into blocks, varying in size from 10 to 25 hectares. When developing the blocks, attention was given to geographical factors, and buildings were placed using a free layout. The blocks were surrounded by streets that did not intersect them. In addition to residential buildings, everyday facilities such as schools, kindergartens, and shops were incorporated.¹⁸ The most economical type of urban housing was identified as four- to five-story buildings. Reducing the height simplified the structures and eliminated the need for elevators.¹⁹ However, today this approach poses challenges in terms of accessibility.

The Vazha-Pshavela microdistricts are the first large-scale example of this type of development in Tbilisi. The project for the Saburtalo residential area was prepared in 1957 by the architects Shota Kavlashvili, Aleksandre Bakradze, David Grdzeldze, and Ilo Kavlashvili.²⁰ By this time, Aleksandre Kazbegi Avenue and Vazha-Pshavela Avenue had already been partially developed.

The plan encompassed the area west of Vazha-Pshavela Avenue, extending from the current Delisi Metro Station to the end of the avenue. Approximately 265 hectares were allocated for the construction of the new district, which was designed to house 42,000–45,000 people. In addition to residential blocks, the plan included areas for individual development. The project envisioned the creation of a district center near today's Delisi Metro Station, as well as a 45-hectare park. According to the plan, block sizes would vary between

¹⁷ Постановлению ЦК КПСС и Совета Министров СССР от 31 июля 1957 г. N 931 "О развитии жилищного строительства в СССР" [Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Council of Ministers of the USSR from 31 July 1957, No. 931, "On the Development of Housing Construction in the USSR"], accessed April 5, 2025, https://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_5213.htm.

¹⁸ Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture], p. 366; Ruben Agababian, Irakli Tsistsishvili, and G. Chigogidze, Архитектурная Практика Грузии [Architectural practice of Georgia], *Architecture USSR*, no. 7 (1960), p. 13.

¹⁹ Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture], p. 400.

²⁰ During our research, we encountered difficulties in determining the exact dates of the project's development and the start of construction. Researchers focusing on this period provide different dates. For instance, Nodar Janberidze names 1956 as the year of construction, while Tengiz Kvirkvelia cites 1955 as the date of approval for the Saburtalo district development plan. However, it is not entirely clear which specific plan he is referring to. The biographical materials of David Grdzeldze, a coauthor of the project—which are preserved in the archive of the Union of Architects of Georgia, indicate that the project was implemented between 1956 and 1958, whereas another note in the file mentions the year 1957. For this text, we rely on the archival project documentation preserved in the private archive of Shota Kavlashvili and the date specified therein.

Figure 4: Intersection of Pekin and Pavlovi (today's Al. Kazbegi) streets, 1962

Source: National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi



10 and 12 hectares. Schools and kindergartens were planned within a green area of approximately 3.5 hectares that would separate the blocks.²¹ Schools were designed to accommodate 920 students. The plan also specified that 11.8 square meters of green space should be provided per resident within the block. Block development was planned with four- to five-story buildings, while six- to eight-story buildings with ground floors dedicated to shops and public facilities were planned along the avenues.²²

However, during implementation, the plan underwent significant changes. The density of development increased, and the amount of green space decreased. The planned park was never built, and the area is now occupied by

²¹ Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture], pp. 376–377; Tengiz Kvirkvelia, Архитектура Тбилиси [Architecture of Tbilisi] (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1982), p. 77; Shota Kavlashvili, Новый Жилой Район в Тбилиси [New residential district in Tbilisi], *Architecture USSR*, no. 11 (1958), p. 27.

²² Ibid.



Figure 5: Detailed project for the planning and development of the new Saburtalo residential district. Designed by Sh. Kavlashvili, A. Bakradze, D. Grelidze, and I. Kavlashvili.

Source: Archive of Georgian Union of Architects, Tbilisi

buildings. The district center and square planned at the intersection of M. Tamarashvili and Vazha-Pshavela Avenues, as well as the development at the end of Vazha-Pshavela Avenue, were not realized according to the plan. The poor construction quality and monotonous uniformity of the development have been repeatedly criticized by the local press and professionals alike.

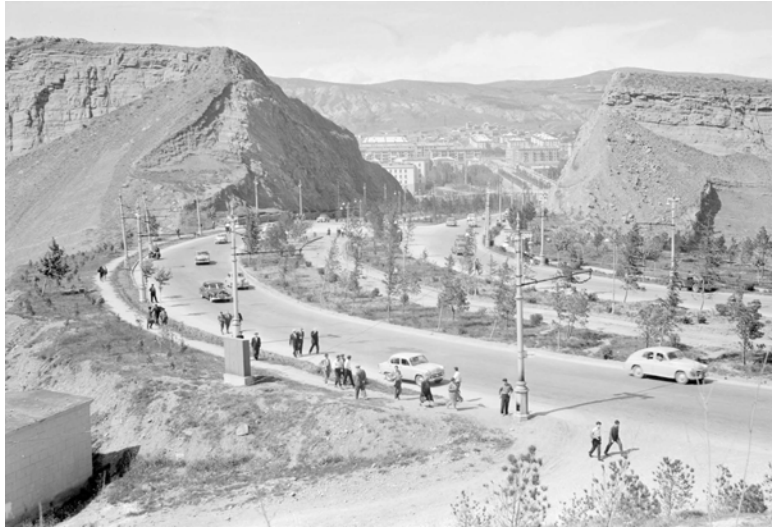
The construction of a highway in Varaziskhevi, near Heroes' Square in 1957, and of Tamarashvili Avenue in 1959, improved connectivity between the residential areas of Saburtalo and Vake.²³ The first stations of the Saburtalo Metro line were not built until much later, in 1979. Until the 2000s, Delisi subway station was the final stop on the Saburtalo line. As a result, many Vazha-Pshavela microdistricts remained outside the city's main subway transit lines. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the construction of the "Vazha-Pshavela" and "State University" stations were delayed for years due to a lack of funding.²⁴ The stations finally opened in 2000 and 2017, respectively.

²³ Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture], p. 382.

²⁴ მეტროპოლიტენი თბილისისა ["Tbilisi Metro"], in თბილისი (ენციკლოპედია) [Tbilisi (Encyclopedia)] (Tbilisi: Metsniereba), pp. 667–669.

Figure 6: New road
between Vake and
Saburtalo in 1962

Source: National Archives
of Georgia, Tbilisi



Vazha-Pshavela Block VI

Block VI, one of the seven microdistricts built in Vazha-Pshavela during this period,²⁵ is located at the southern end of Vazha-Pshavela Avenue. The block is bordered to the west by Zurab Anjaparidze Street, to the south by Petre Kavtaradze and Vagharshak Mamasakhlisovi Streets, to the east by Mikheil Shavishvili Street, and to the north by Vazha-Pshavela Avenue. To the south, the block borders a large open space and the high-rise Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University building, constructed in 1968. As previously mentioned, when the population settled here, the area was not served by the Metro, so residents relied on buses and trolleybuses for transportation.²⁶

Structurally, the block consists of two separate territorial units, divided by Petre Kavtaradze Street. These units differ topographically and in the layout of their buildings. Development followed the basic planning principles established during this period. The road network was hierarchical, with urban and

²⁵ As mentioned earlier, Vazha-Pshavela Block V, located at the end of the avenue, was not implemented according to plan.

²⁶ Otar Tkeshelashvili, თბილისი – მოკლე ცნობარი-მეგზური [Tbilisi – A Short Guide] (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1967), pp. 96–116; S. I. Svani and T. Sh. Turabelidze (eds.), თბილისის ქუჩების ცნობარი [Tbilisi street guide] (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1986), pp. 51, 143.



Figure 7: Vazha-Pshavela Block VI in 1971

Source: National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi

neighborhood streets circumscribing the block. Internal streets within the quarter were cul-de-sacs that did not cross through it. However, the internal pedestrian connections appear to be poorly organized.

Block VI's buildings were arranged in a free layout. Along Vazha-Pshavela Avenue, eight-story buildings were constructed. Two corner buildings were placed parallel to the avenue and three buildings were positioned perpendicular to it. The ground floors of these buildings were designated for shops and public facilities. In the main part of the block, five-story residential buildings were arranged diagonally to the streets and parallel to each other.

In Georgia, a standardized project for three- to five-story residential buildings (series 1G-450c) was approved in 1958 (architects: Z. Kurdiani, S. Revishvili, G. Tavdgiridze, and D. Chofikashvili). These buildings included one-, two-, and three-room apartments, and this design was predominant for housing construction throughout Georgia. In 1960, the design was modified and a standardized project for eight-story buildings was developed in addition. While the plan remained unchanged, balconies were added along the entire length of the facade, and elevators were introduced.²⁷ These projects were also used to construct residential buildings in Block VI of Vazha-Pshavela.

²⁷ Janberidze, ქართული საბჭოთა არქიტექტურა [Georgian Soviet architecture], pp. 404–406; Ruben Agababian, Irakli Tsistsishvili, and G. Chigogidze, Архитектурная Практика Грузии [Architectural practice of Georgia], *Architecture USSR*, no. 7 (1960), pp. 14–15; Natia Jokhadze, Программа комплексной реабилитации жилых домов массовой застройки первого поколения (на примере г. Тбилиси) [Comprehensive rehabilitation program for first-generation mass housing (on the example of Tbilisi)], January

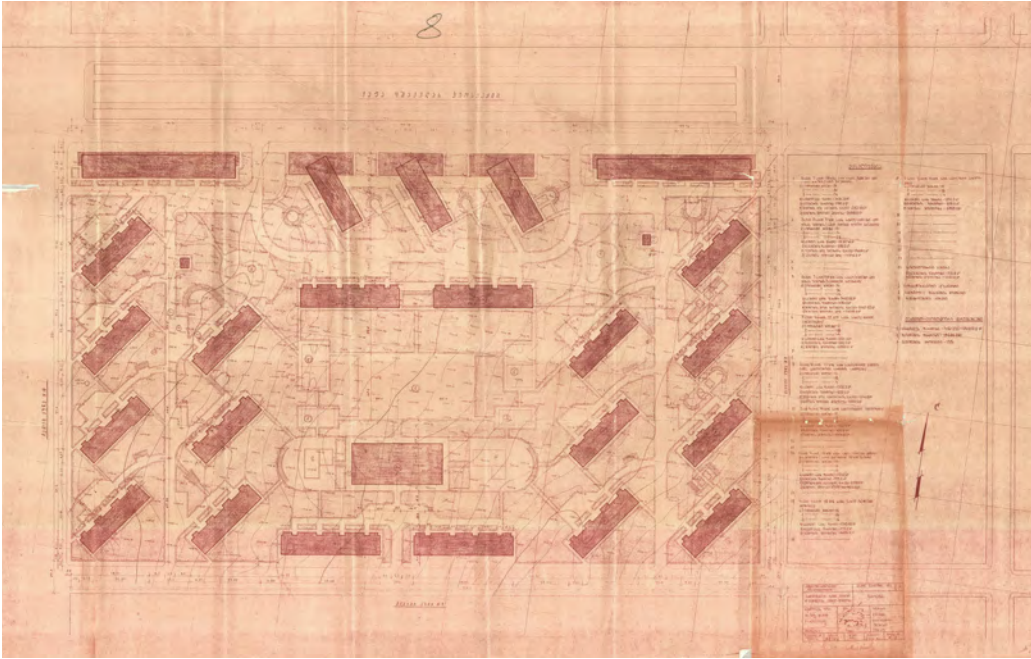


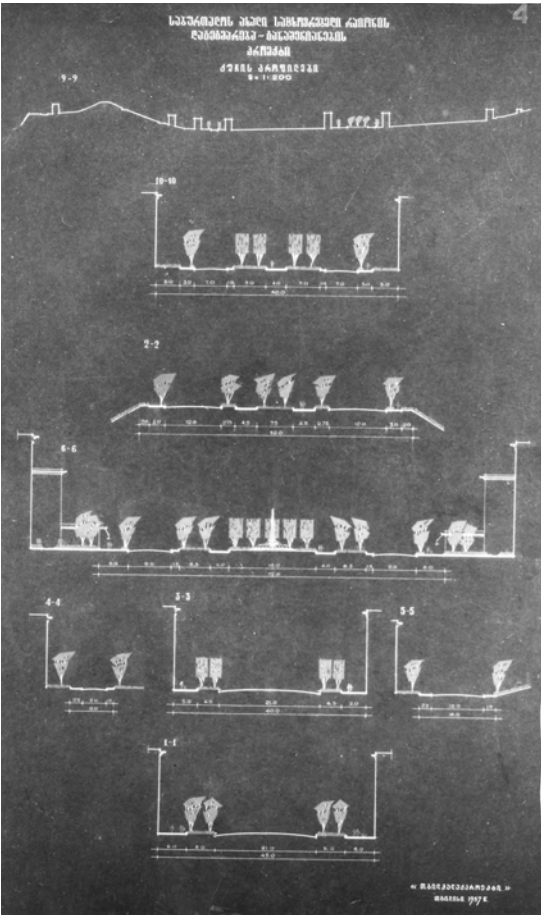
Figure 8: Master plan of Block VI. Designed in 1961 by Melkadze (chief architect), Sh. Kavlashvili, and T. Abashidze, drawn by Beklau
 Source: National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi

The block is bordered to the west and north by boulevards with lush greenery in the middle of the street. The boulevard along Vazha-Pshavela Avenue is wider than the one along Anjaparidze Street, reflecting the characteristics and hierarchical significance of the two streets. To the east of the block, school and kindergarten buildings were constructed alongside sports fields in a separate area bordered by Vazha-Pshavela Avenue and Shavishvili, Kavtaradze, and Topuria Streets. Another sports field complex was established in the center of the block, serving as a gathering and recreational area for the neighborhood over the years. The internal greenery and open spaces within the block are fragmented, likely due to the positioning of buildings, poorly planned pedestrian connections, and the architectural deficiencies of the residential buildings themselves. Archival photographs reveal that the open space to the south of the block, between the university high-rise and the neighborhood, served as

15, 2005, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Tbilisi – South Caucasus Region, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://ge.boell.org/en/2005/01/16/programma-kompleksnoy-reabilitacii-zhilyh-domov-massovoy-zastroyki-pervogo-pokoleniya-na>.

Figure 9: Street profiles, project for the planning and development of the Saburtalo residential district, 1957

Source: Shota Kavlashvili's private archive, Tbilisi



a natural peripheral zone. The initial plan had envisioned individual housing in this area, but this was never realized.

Our analysis of the available plans indicates that the layout of buildings and the functional characteristics of the block changed during its development. Initially, all buildings were planned to be aligned parallel to Vazha-Pshavela Avenue. However, by 1961, the development plan for the block showed some buildings arranged diagonally. In the implemented project, only four buildings remained parallel to the street, two of which line the avenue directly. The main internal cul-de-sac streets that run parallel to Anjaparidze and Shavishvili Streets (now Kavtaradze's Third and Fourth Alleys) were largely preserved. These axes provided vehicle access to the buildings located deep within the block. Notably, the 1961 plan envisioned shops on the ground floors of the buildings along Kavtaradze Street, in addition to those along Vazha-Pshavela



Figure 10: Rendered elevation of an eight-story residential building on Vazha-Pshavela Avenue
 Source: Shota Kavlashvili's private archive, Tbilisi

Avenue. A public facility was also planned for this area, but these ideas were not implemented. Along Kavtaradze Street, purely residential buildings were constructed. The 1957 plan also included a cinema on the plot adjacent to the avenue where the school and kindergarten were planned. This idea was also abandoned. Until the 1990s, a small square occupied this site. It appears that the internal open spaces within the block were not adequately developed either.

Figure 11: Standard design of an eight-story, two-section, 48-unit residential building, with facade oriented to the yard. Designed by Sh. Kavlashvili (chief architect) and Chachanidze. Source: National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi



Conclusion

The development of Vazha-Pshavela represents a significant continuation of Tbilisi’s westward expansion. In parallel with the development of the Vake district it met the growing demand for housing in a rapidly expanding city. This fast-paced development came at a time of political transformation and economic adversity, resulting in rigid yet inspired planning principles. However, these ideals were not consistently adhered to in practice. The following chapter will show that a number of current problems are a direct result of these circumstances and can be seen in the challenges that Block VI faces today.



Figure 12: Eight-story residential building in Saburtalo, 1950s/1960s
Source: Shota Kavlashvili's private archive, Tbilisi

IA KUPATADZE

2.2 CURRENT SITUATION — CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Due to mass construction in the 1950s and '60s, Soviet cities faced a new urban development challenge. So-called microdistricts became new units in town planning.¹ A micro-district followed a perimeter-based, “free” linear planning system, essentially functioning as a satellite town.² It consisted of demarcated housing areas strictly separated by commercial, cultural, and recreational facilities within walking distance.³ A three-level service system was in place, which meant that the services used daily, once a week, and periodically had to be located within specific distances.⁴ According to the newly established requirements, planners were empowered to disperse buildings throughout the area,⁵ allowing for greater diversity in the urban landscape while still adhering to standardized planning requirements.

The Soviet authorities established a planning system that worked effectively only under a specific political regime and for a limited time, without any consideration of future transformation processes. This top-down method resulted in a city structure without the ability to easily adapt or evolve. In Tbilisi, the conventional approach to microdistrict design and allocation disregards

1 Kazakova, Olga (2019). “Intangible Values of Mass Housing During the Soviet Era.” In: Engel, B. (ed.), *Mass Housing in the Socialist City: Heritage, Values, and Perspectives*. Berlin: DOM Publishers, p. 154.

2 Asatiani, Nino (1992a). თბილისის არქიტექტურა 1970–1980-იანი წლები [Architecture of Tbilisi 1970–1980]. *Ars Geogica* (online magazine). George Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation. Accessed November 2022. <http://www.georgianart.ge/index.php/en/component/content/article/197.html?ed=17>.

3 Crawford, Christina E. (2022). *Spatial Revolution: Architecture and Planning in the Early Soviet Union*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

4 Asatiani, Nino (1992a). თბილისის არქიტექტურა 1970–1980-იანი წლები [Architecture of Tbilisi 1970–1980]. *Ars Geogica* (online magazine). George Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation. Accessed November 2022. <http://www.georgianart.ge/index.php/en/component/content/article/197.html?ed=17>.

5 Ibid.

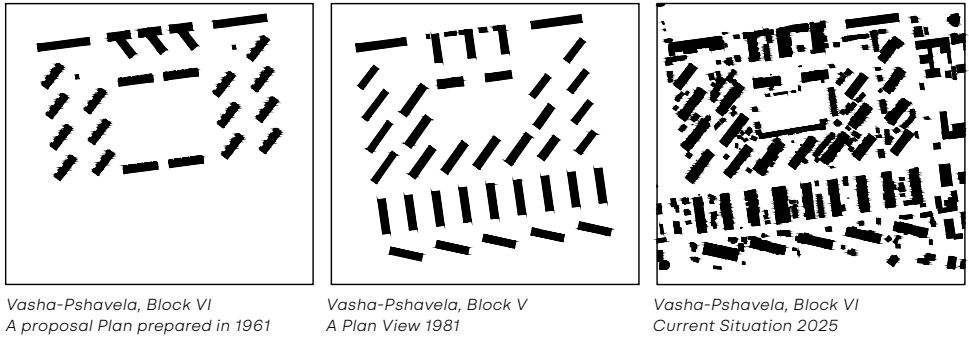


Figure 1: Vasha-Pshavela transformation diagram

Source: Ia Kupatadze, based on the proposal project prepared by “Tbilikalakproeqti” in 1961 (material received from National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi topographical map prepared in 1980s, and current situation (2025).

the city’s topography, morphology, culture, and traditions, resulting in a rigid and homogenized urban fabric.

Today, walking through Block VI, one can observe the outcomes of the Soviet system that was introduced. Even many years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, microdistricts remain isolated and fragmented, reflecting the complex and illogical organization of public and green spaces, mobility challenges within the microdistrict, and a lack of diverse functional areas. One will notice several critical factors that reflect the transformation processes acting on the urban fabric (see fig. 1). These factors include building extensions, uncontrolled parking, garages that are now abandoned or used for household storage rather than cars, and altered public and green spaces. These factors are transforming the district’s appearance and how the population uses the space.

Built Fabric—Apartment Building Extensions (ABEs)

The Soviet government introduced a legal framework for apartment building extensions (ABEs) in the late 1980s. – To increase the limited space in apartments, residents were permitted to expand their living spaces by adding to the front or back of the apartment buildings, thereby increasing the apartment sizes by 25 percent or more.⁶ In 1989, the state passed a resolution permit-

⁶ Engel, Barbara (2024). “Vazha-Pshavela Block VI in Tbilisi, Georgia: Community-Driven Spatial Transformations.” In: Engel, B. (ed.), *Echoes of Soviet Urbanism: Exploring Modernist Housing Narratives*. Berlin: DOM Publishers, p.197. Bouzarovski, Stefan, Salukvadze, Joseph, and Gentile, Michael (2011). “A Socially Resilient Urban Transition? The



Figures 2, 3: Apartment building extensions (ABEs) in Vazha-Pshavela Block VI. The photo illustrates how each family has constructed its own extension. The resulting differences point to an unregulated construction process, highlighting the lack of standardized guidelines.

Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025

Figure 4: ABEs adapted for commercial function
 Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025



ting the construction of apartment building extensions, establishing regulations for their dimensions and means of construction.⁷ However, following the collapse of the public construction system due to privatization, this practice became unregulated.⁸ The financial constraints at that time and, more signif-

Contested Landscapes of Apartment Building Extensions in Two Post-Communist Cities.” *Urban Studies* 48, no. 13 (October), pp. 2689–2714.

- 7 Bouzarovski, Stefan, Salukvadze, Joseph, and Gentile, Michael (2011). “A Socially Resilient Urban Transition? The Contested Landscapes of Apartment Building Extensions in Two Post-Communist Cities.” *Urban Studies* 48, no. 13 (October), pp. 2689–2714.
- 8 Salukvadze, Joseph, and Van Assche, Kristof (2022). “Multiple Transformations, Coordination and Public Goods: Tbilisi and the Search for Planning as a Collective Strategy.” *European Planning Studies* 31, no. 4 (May), pp. 722–723. Accessed August 12, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2065878>.

icantly, the lack of regulations governing construction methods and materials led to the uncontrolled expansion of ABEs, resulting in chaotic and inconsistent development (see figs. 2, 3).

While all of these additions have a primary structural steel frame, the infill varies at each level. Some buildings are covered with small windows, others have enclosed spaces with balconies, and a few remain untouched, showcasing unfinished terraces. This variety creates an intriguing appearance—a unique facade that is often regarded as aesthetically unattractive and raises serious safety concerns. The study indicates that most dwellings in Block VI have been modified: 66 percent have top-floor additions, 16 percent have both top and side extensions, 8 percent have only side extensions, and just 10 percent remain unchanged and fully unmodified.⁹

The average apartment size in Block VI today is 38.41 square meters. Of the 2,005 dwellings in total, 491 are occupied by two people, 467 occupied by one person, and 448 occupied by three people. While most apartments are occupied by one, two, or three individuals, there are a few cases of four or more occupants. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the average occupancy per apartment is 2.7 persons (based on statistics collected in 2014). Most residents are middle-aged (25–59 years old), followed by young adults (19–24 years old).¹⁰

Previously, green spaces at the back of buildings or public spaces in front of buildings were occupied by ABEs, resulting in a decrease in public and urban green space and altering its function. ABEs are primarily used for residential purposes, though in some cases, ground-floor extensions have been adapted for commercial use, such as offices, salons, or shops (see fig. 4). New walkways or paths leading to the new ABEs have been created. Furthermore, these extensions have reduced courtyard and green spaces, shifted the balance of public areas, and limited residents' access to recreational areas. Today, the existing footprint of these extensions covers large areas that were previously green or public spaces. Thus, the widespread addition of these structures has significantly impacted the urban landscape, affecting building proportions, safety, appearance, air quality, and exposure to natural light. The public and green spaces surrounding the buildings have also been greatly affected.

⁹ The study was conducted by master's level students at Ilia State University during the Fall 2024 semester.

¹⁰ Based on a demographic survey from March 2014.

Figure 5: Garages constructed after the 1990s were built to protect cars from theft. Today, however, they are mostly empty or abandoned spaces
 Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025



Figure 6: Residents use green spaces for parking purposes
 Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025



Figures 7, 8: Garages have been repurposed as storage spaces and are located within public green spaces

Source: Ia Kapatadze, 2025



Open Spaces

The original design of Vazha-Pshavela's Block VI included green and open spaces to enhance the sense of spaciousness. However, over time, urban needs and unplanned modifications have impacted these areas, transforming the neighborhood's overall layout. Today, the district's green and public spaces exist in various forms, reflecting a combination of planned and bottom-up design development.

Figure 9: An existing garage has been transformed into a small market where people can buy fruits, vegetables, and freshly baked Georgian bread. It is also a place where neighbors interact because most residents shop here.

Source: Gvantsa Tkemaladze, 2025



Unregulated Parking and Garages

Unregulated parking and garages have significantly altered the urban landscape of the districts, particularly impacting the transformation of Block VI's public and green spaces (see figs. 5, 6). During Soviet times, the authorities did not anticipate a large number of car owners. Thus, parking areas were not included in the master plan, and the idea of building a communal garage next to each microdistrict was never realized. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unstable political situation and increased private car ownership made it necessary to protect cars from theft. Consequently, vehicle owners began constructing makeshift structures, such as single-story, fully enclosed sheds or roofed, cage-type constructions.

The garages were mainly located in front of the residential buildings so car owners could more easily see their vehicles. Since the front areas were initially designated for public gatherings, children's playgrounds, or green spaces, the construction of garages reduced the space available for these purposes. It also created more unsafe and uncomfortable places in neighborhoods. This especially affected children, as it is now nearly impossible to use the space to play ball, hide-and-seek, or engage in other activities.

Although the need for security is less pressing today, garages still exist and cover 1.8 Hectares of the total area. Some garages are privately owned and have a designated cadastre number (12%), while most are unregistered garages. These are either built on Home Owners' Association–registered land and have a designated cadastre code under the HOA registry as well as an in-

dividual number (73.6%), or they are built on municipal land (1%).¹¹ However, their function has mostly changed. In inner courtyards, garages have become storage facilities or vacant boxes (see figs. 7, 8). Near the main avenue, their original purpose has partly shifted. Now, they are used as workshops, pantries, or commercial spaces for selling fruits, vegetables, secondhand clothes, car equipment, and so on.

In some cases, they even serve as places where bread is baked, among other commercial uses (see fig. 9). It is also important to note that some garages



Figure 10: A newly developed park by the district administration
Source: *la Kapatadze*, 2025

erected in green spaces—mainly those more akin to cage-type structures—have since been abandoned. Although vegetation has grown in these areas, the lack of proper maintenance has rendered them dirty and unsanitary.

In some instances, neighborhoods have restricted access to inner courtyard spaces exclusively to their residents. To achieve this, parking barriers have been installed to create regulated parking areas. However, this also means these spaces are often converted entirely into parking lots.¹² This occupies

¹¹ The study was conducted by master's level students at Ilia State University during the Fall 2024 semester.

¹² Gogishvili, David (2021). "Competing for Space in Tbilisi: Transforming Residential Courtyards to Parking in an Increasingly Car-Dependent City." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 65, no. 3 (October), pp. 371–397. Accessed August 12, 2025.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.1993292>

both the public space where the garage is positioned and the space in front of the garage. Consequently, public space is reduced twice.

Types of Green Spaces

The study of the territory reveals the existence of several types of green and public spaces. These include: (1) formal green areas developed and maintained by the district administration; (2) informal green spaces (both open and fenced) created and maintained by residents; (3) small green zones in front of the five-story buildings; (4) urban vegetable gardens located near wild green areas on the district's southern edge; and (5) sports fields that were originally public but are now rented to a private club. Each of these spaces has become integral to the district's character, evolving primarily through a bottom-up approach by its residents over many years.

The new public park, constructed by the Tbilisi City Hall and the Vake District Government from October 2023 to 2024, is active for most of the day (see fig. 10). During the day, children and the elderly enjoy the space, and later, teenagers come and participate in various activities. *"This is a place where every resident enjoys spending time. It is well-equipped with seating and is a place for kids to play. The only downside is the noise at night when teenagers or people from outside the neighborhood hang out,"* says the resident and head of the HOA of one of the buildings.¹³

A large boulevard median along the main avenue at the northern edge of the microdistrict covers, accounting for 8 percent of the territory. It currently serves as a recreational area for nearby residents. However, people must cross the main avenue to reach the median, which can be difficult and dangerous, particularly for the elderly and young children.

A large, public green space, which was initially designed for local residents to enjoy various sports activities, is now leased to a private soccer club (see fig. 11). Adjacent to the large stadium are a small soccer field and a basketball area. However, these small enclaves seem insufficient for a densely populated neighborhood.¹⁴ The soccer stadium disturbs residents during games. *"On game days, people come to watch their kids play. They park their cars in our neighborhood, which causes us discomfort, not to mention the increased noise and air pollution,"* said one resident in an interview conducted in the summer of 2024.

¹³ Round table discussion conducted by the Living Lab group on June 28, 2024.

¹⁴ Based on an interview with old residents, conducted by the Living Lab group on Feb. 22, 2024; on historical archive material, see chapter 2.1.

Urban gardens are situated along the southern edge of the microdistrict (see fig. 12). These spaces have been informally appropriated by local residents, who enclosed individual plots and initiated small-scale vegetable gardens. At present, the gardens function as privately maintained yet unofficially owned spaces allocated to individual households. Although public access to the plots is restricted, visitors may still walk the adjacent areas of spontaneous vegetation, walk their dogs, and experience the natural environment. Considering the high density of the surrounding built fabric, these residual green areas constitute a valuable ecological and social resource for the neighborhood.



Figure 11: A large stadium owned by a private soccer club
Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025



Figure 12: Urban gardens created and maintained by residents
Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent privatization, the municipality was unable to adequately maintain the neighborhood's public and green spaces. Consequently, either individual residents maintained these areas themselves, or they were neglected and occupied by squatters. Some HOA heads maintained the area around their building themselves (see fig. 13). Over time, some of the squatted parcels have been neglected, resulting in unstructured, dirty spaces (see fig. 14). Other spaces have been well-maintained or have been replaced by small extensions/additions and entrance areas for the ground-floor apartments. Although these areas have been poorly maintained, the property is protected from new construction or interventions.

Today, residents actively use about half of the total recreational space, which amounts to 11.28 hectares. Meanwhile, 14 percent of the microdistrict's territory 3.25 hectares consists of unused green space that is currently occupied by uncontrolled parking and garages, presenting opportunities for future development.¹⁵

Mobility

Vazha-Pshavela Block VI can be characterized as having relatively good accessibility at both the citywide and neighborhood levels. The microdistrict is bordered to the north by Vazha-Pshavela Avenue and to the west by Sandro Euli Street. In both cases two way streets are divided with the greenery in the middle forming a boulevard. To the east is Mikheil Shavishvili Street, a secondary road. Vagharshak Mamasakhlisovi Street and Petre Kavtaradze Street are also important thoroughfares. The three main streets - Vazha-Pshavela Ave., Sandro Euli St., and P.Kavtaradze street are well-equipped with a transportation system, and each has several designated bus stops. A metro station at the intersection of Vazha-Pshavela Avenue and Sandro Euli Street further enhances the microdistrict's accessibility. This arrangement allows residents to reach public transportation within a 15-minute walk and facilitates easy connections to the city center and other destinations.

Although the area is well-connected by public transportation, the microdistrict's inner structure lacks well-defined and developed pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. The absence of clear distinctions between pedestrian and vehicular spaces compromises safety and inconveniences residents. Due to the uncontrolled construction of garages, some areas have become blocked off as dead ends. This creates a feeling of insecurity and makes navigating the area difficult.

¹⁵ The study was conducted by master's level students at Ilia State University during the fall semester 2024.



Figure 13: A small green space maintained by a ground-floor resident

Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025

Figure 14: Unstructured, abandoned, fenced-in green spaces

Source: Ia Kupatadze, 2025



Future Perspectives

The urban transformation of Vazha-Pshavela Block VI reflects broader post-Soviet challenges. Unregulated modifications, increased reliance on cars and the privatization of public spaces have transformed the territory's urban fabric, significantly affecting the neighborhood's livability, safety, and environmental quality.

Preserving and restoring green and public spaces is crucial to improving the microdistrict's quality of life. For example, abandoned or unused garages could be demolished, transforming the area into a public or recreational space. Neglected areas can be converted into pocket parks that provide residents with safer, more accessible, and more functional outdoor spaces. Improving the pedestrian and cycling infrastructure could also enhance accessibility within the microdistrict.

It is also essential to safeguard the adjacent open green space. This area can be viewed as a green belt surrounding the neighborhood, fostering a peaceful, quiet, and secure environment. This space currently serves as a walking area, a recreational space, and urban gardens. The property has repeatedly been proposed as a site for high-rise construction, but the efforts of residents and activists have delayed the plans. Meanwhile, the municipality has acquired the land, but no construction is taking place. However, the area still faces risks.

Improving and regulating the parking system could free up street-level spaces for community use, pedestrian-friendly zones, and recreational areas. Introducing new regulations and strict guidelines for future modifications would ensure controlled urban transformation processes, address mobility issues, enhance safety, promote environmental sustainability, and improve aesthetic quality.

Restoring the neighborhood's urban fabric would be aided by simplifying the existing incentive program that already encourages homeowners to replace unused outdoor structures (such as garages) with community-centered infrastructure. The program currently exists, but the process is unclear. Therefore, the municipality and district must devise a straightforward solution. With a clear process in place, more residents will be eager to relinquish their garage spaces in favor of shared green and recreational areas.

Land resources in the city's central districts have decreased significantly, and in some areas, they are nearly depleted. Meanwhile, urban densification is occurring in an unplanned and chaotic manner. With limited space in the city center, developers are constantly seeking new opportunities. Vazha-Pshavela Block VI could soon become their next target. Currently, the neighborhood consists of eight-story residential buildings along the main street and five-story buildings surrounded by green spaces. This creates a quiet, self-contained community with its own character. However, this tranquility is at risk of being

replaced by dense, unregulated development. According to municipal authorities, most of the residential buildings in the area are structurally sound and do not require urgent replacement. However, only 9 out of 38 buildings have been inspected so far. One was classified as having Category II damage (some structural damage but still safe for living), while another had Category I damage.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there is a growing risk that the area will experience piecemeal densification, with existing five-story buildings being replaced by ten- to twelve-story structures. A similar situation has already occurred in Varketili's 3rd district (see fig. 15), which was developed in the 1956 according to plans



Figure 15: Varketili 3rd District, as seen in one of the first satellite images of Tbilisi, taken by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in 1965

Source: Kvamli (2021), <https://kvamli.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/e1839be18394e183a1e18390e1839be18394e1839be18390e183a1e18398e18395e18398.jpg>, 05.12.2025

¹⁶ Based on a survey conducted by the District Government and corroborated by the official letter from Tbilisi City Hall, Vake District Government, Letter #30-01240182226, January 18, 2024.

by architects M. Japaridze and N. Mikadze¹⁷ and has a similar density and arrangement. Deteriorating buildings were replaced without a comprehensive urban development plan, resulting in uncoordinated growth.

To ensure that Vazha-Pshavela Block VI develops in a sustainable and livable way, future changes must be guided by a cohesive urban vision and a detailed regulatory plan that prioritizes proper planning over chaotic expansion. Future microdistrict transformation processes should be carried out in collaboration with residents, policymakers, and urban planners. The community must initiate participatory urban planning initiatives in which residents can co-design spaces. The bottom-up approach will strengthen and enhance the community's role in urban space transformation. This will, in turn, support maintenance and development processes. The microdistrict has wonderful potential to become a rich, well-connected, and sustainable urban place that improves its residents' quality of life.

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¹⁷ Kvirkvelia, T. (1982). *Arxitektura Tbilisi* [Architecture of Tbilisi]. Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo. p.98.

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