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RADICAL SPACE IN BETWEEN DISCIPLINES
INTERNATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE**

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RADICAL SPACE IN BETWEEN DISCIPLINES

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CONTRIVANCES ON ARARATIAN STREET: AN IDEOLOGY OR AN URBAN PUBLIC SPACE

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Abstract

Northern Avenue, the main pedestrian connection and axis in Yerevan, capital of Armenia, already has over 80 years' worth of narratives imbued upon it. Bearing the name of Araratian Street when it was first proposed on the master plan of architect Alexander Tamanyan in 1924, it fits into the Soviet ideology of a socialist plan presented in the shape of a Garden City. It was proposed to link the main administrative Republic Square (Lenin square at that time) to the cultural Freedom Square where the National Opera was under construction. The street was named after Mount Ararat, an important biblical symbol for the Armenian people, towards which the city and the axis were oriented.

Although Araratian Street never was an official name, in the Late Soviet era, the name "Northern Avenue" started to be used more often in order to designate it. There was speculation that the vocabulary was changed first to reduce "nationalistic" risks, and then in order to please northern decision making city Moscow.

The idea of the construction of the Araratian Street resurfaced in the 1960's, when several competitions and proposals were put into discussion, but again none of those was put into the plan. After gaining independence, when the first economical activities started in 2000's, the Yerevan Municipality, with the support of the President of the Republic, initiated an extensive real estate development at the heart of the city. The "clean-up" of the area from remaining buildings and houses, most of them with historic value and under protection, was already in progress only a year after the proposal was initiated in 2000. Northern Avenue was inaugurated in 2007, as only half of the new buildings were ready for operation and habitation.

Seven years after first being put to use, an extensive renovation was carried out to fix construction mistakes and make the area more welcoming. A year later, it has now become obvious that this process is part of another broader development which aims to re-use the top underground parking floor as an underground mall. The mall is to be named Tashir Street and is going to be parallel to the Northern Avenue above it.

The development of the narrative of the "Avenue" oriented by national pride, Moscow and global commerce is a unique timeline of the last century of urban transformations. Although it was imposed by the political elite at both municipal and national levels, the implementation of the project has been quite different and has found resistance, in all periods of time, from the local population.

The study of the space shows some spatial design errors and uncertainties; but it remains one of the main arteries for evening walks, even though the buildings surrounding it are often void of people and the shops present products priced way above the buying capacity of the local population.

Keywords: Northern Avenue, Urban Planning, Yerevan

1 PLANNING OF YEREVAN

Yerevan, Armenia's present day capital, is located on the western side of the country, relatively close to the border with Turkey. Once part of the Persian and Russian empires, Armenia declared itself a democratic republic in 1918 and made Yerevan its capital. However, the short-lived Republic was soon integrated into the Soviet Union and only regained its independence in 1991. Thus, Yerevan, the former regional centre of a Persian and later Russian empires, is now for the second time in the last century the capital of an independent country.

During the first years of independence, in 1919, Saint-Petersburg-based Armenian architect Alexander Tamanyan was invited to Armenia to support the development of the capital of Republic of Armenia. Although he didn't manage to present his plan to the government of the independent republic, his first Master Plan of Yerevan for 150.000 inhabitants was presented and approved in 1924 by Soviet Armenia's ruling authorities.

According to Tamanyan, Yerevan was, in the early 1920's, a disorganized city and hardly had any streets that would be considered thus in the "European" sense (See Figure 1.1). On the other hand, he found the location of the city, at the meeting point of mountains and fields, an ideal location. He stated that Yerevan should follow the example of many European cities that made way in the old city for new buildings and infrastructure [1].

Although in this first plan most historic streets kept their function and orientation, some secondary streets were erased in his second Master Plan presented in 1936. This plan designed for 300,000 inhabitants was approved in a period when Stalinist repressions had already begun and a year before the architect Tamanyan passed away [2].

2 IDEA: AN UNCERTAIN IDEA OF ARARATIAN STREET

In both plans mentioned above, the north-south Araratian Street, which these days is named Northern Avenue, was seen as one of the main axes for the urban structure. It started from the lower southern train station square, crossing the south-eastern corner of the main administrative Republic Square, then called Lenin Square (See Figure 1.2). It continued to the cultural square with the People's House building surrounded with gardens (now Freedom square where the Opera Theatre and Concert Hall both designed by Tamanyan are located). Still heading north, it ended at the foot of a still-present hill, where the second master plan extended the development of the urban area by lengthening the axis to the North.

"Up till now, the presence of Ararat in the city's southern panorama is majestic and dramatically. But this gift of the nature in Tamanyan's plan found an inseparable unity and picturesque royalty of two, eternally snow-covered peaks, remaining near, it harmonious and solemn fit into the architecture of Yerevan. The core of leading composition of the city – the central ceremonial area and theatre area, with vertical dominants of two major buildings – Government House and the theatre, joint by the axis of North Avenue – was oriented on two-headed Ararat" [2].

According to some orally transmitted stories, the street was originally called "Araratian" by Tamanyan himself, although written proof of that has yet to be found. It was called Araratian to refer to Mount Ararat, a biblical symbol for the Armenian people and a powerful reminder of the country lost as a result of the Armenian Genocide and of the historical events that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Araratian Street first appears on the 1924 plan and later on the 1936 plan, and by looking closely we see that the street is narrower in the

second plan (See Figure 1.2 and 1.3). This is one of the main facts that show that even though Tamanyan conceived this axis, he was not sure that it was worth being achieved. Besides being the author of the master plan of the city, he was at that time the first President of the Monuments Preservation Committee of Soviet Armenia and one of the initiators of it. As such, his duty of preservation of historical buildings was in contradiction with his own master plan, because it had to cut the existing urban fabric of the city formed in 18th-19th centuries [3].

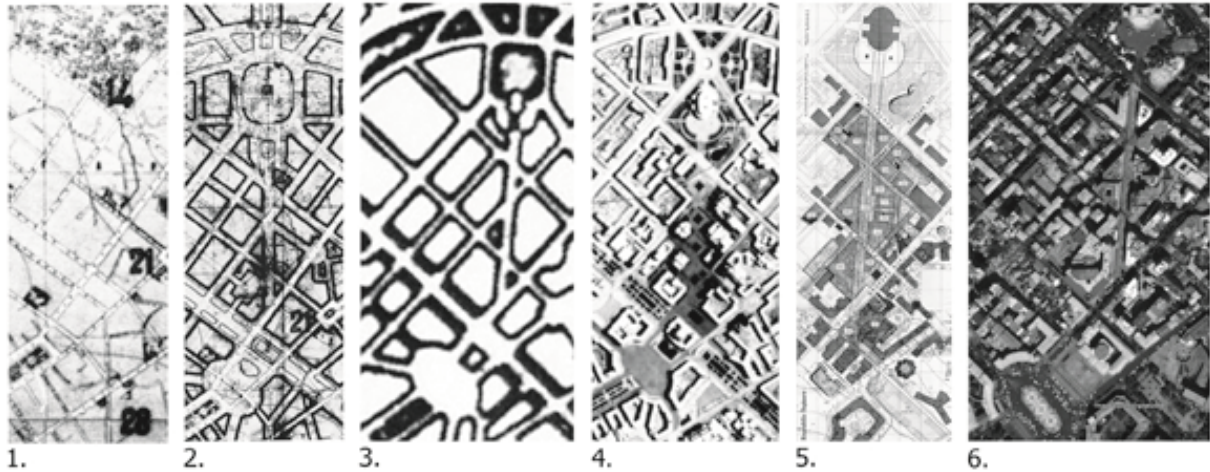


Fig 1: Evolution of Araratian Street

1. Fragment from Situation Plan of Yerevan, by Boris Mehrabyan, 1906-1911
2. Fragment from Master Plan of Yerevan 1924, by Alexander Tamanyan, Approved in 1924
3. Fragment from Master Plan of Yerevan 1936, by Alexander Tamanyan, Approved in 1936
4. Fragment from Plan of Detailed Planning for Yerevan's Centre, by Mikael Mazmanyanyan and others, 1967
5. Schematic Plan of Land Use for Northern Avenue, 2000's, Unknown Source
6. Aerial view of Northern Avenue, Google Earth, 2015

Another fact shows that Tamanyan did not prioritize the realization of Araratian Street. He often designed and built certain key buildings around Yerevan himself in order to ensure that the street which he envisioned next to these buildings would be built, also having intention to form the urban scale (height, set-back, etc.). These buildings can be considered corner stones of the fulfilment of Tamanyan's plan. This is true for the current Anatomic Department of Medical University (1927), the Veterinary Medicine and Animal Husbandry Institute (1928) and some other buildings in the student district of Yerevan (Buildings No. 1 and No. 5 of State Engineering University, National Library, etc.). During the same period, his fellow architects built several buildings serving the same purpose towards the evolution of the urban structures. During 1930's, when Tamanyan was coordinating the achievement of his plan, several intersections were shaped, in particular Nalbandyan-Tumanyan Streets (1925-1928) and Mashtots (previously Stalin, then Lenin) Avenue-Tumanyan Street (1932), both by Nikoghayos Buniatyan, or the New Government House on Mashtots Avenue designed by Buniatyan (1931) and Mark Grigoryan (1936-1939). These all show a coordinated effort to shape the urban landscape of Yerevan by buildings highlighting streets, but this strategy was never applied to Araratian Street. Tamanyan could have asked anyone to propose a building on Araratian Street, but no evidence shows that he did such proposal.

Another example of the afore mentioned is a constructivist (modernist) style department store on the corner of Abovyan and Aram streets finished in 1936 (Architects: Arsen Aharonyan, Gevork Kochar, Mikael Mazmanyanyan, Hovhannes Margaryan). This building occupies a whole

block on the current Northern Avenue, though that side of the building is void of any element linking the building to the street.

The narrowing of the planned street and the lack of buildings from the period of Tamanyan to outline the space lead us to believe that Tamanyan did not consider Araratian Street to be an important aspect of his plan.

3 IDEOLOGY: SOVIET NARRATIVES

In one of his renderings of Lenin Square, Mark Grigoryan, Chief-Architect of Yerevan from 1937-1951 and Tamanyan's student, did not include Northern Avenue (See Figure 2.1). This is a good example of the shifting paradigm in Yerevan: instead of building a public open spaces the main urban focal point, the preference went to Stalin Avenue (later Lenin, now Mashtots Avenue). Even when Alexander Tamanyan was alive in 1931, there was a competition for the previously mentioned Government building on Stalin Avenue which as it was mentioned above was designed by Buniatyan and later transformed to Hospital by Grigoryan. This highlights the controversy of the political situation that by having approved Master Plan with a clear dominancy of main administrative square with the main Government building under construction a new Government building is being built.

Some oral histories support the likely hypothesis that Araratian Street was considered a nationalistic project, emphasizing Mount Ararat's presence in the city, the symbol of longing of the Armenian people for the biblical mountain now located in Turkey's territory. Then under Stalinist repression, Stalin Avenue (now Mashtots) which was in the centre of urban developments was decorated with one of the biggest statues of Stalin, up until the 1960's, highlighting its ideological relevance.



1.

2.

Fig 2: Different Sketches of Araratian Street area

1. Bird-eye view of Lenin (Republic) Square, by Mark Grigoryan, 1950's [4].
2. Sketch of Northern Avenue, by Rafael Israelyan, 1960's [5]

For quite a long time however, the idea of Northern Avenue itself was not considered important by Soviet architects and planners during Soviet rule. When Nikita Khrushchev came into power in 1953, he undertook a radical re-examination of Stalinist urban planning principles. He brought on a campaign against everything he considered superfluous. Functional approaches took over and creative experiments of architects advocating constructivism were supported, but in combination with a policy aimed at minimising costs and intensifying the pace of construction].

At this time, and even a little before the Second World War, development of housing was a bigger concern than the realization of Tamanyan's Master Plan. Efforts for Araratian Street were set aside and bedroom neighbourhoods were created on the outskirts of Yerevan in order to accommodate rapid population growth. Urban development under Khrushchev's authority at Communist party was different, it *"possessed a clear social emphasis, including the introduction of new standards and principles governing the way in which the urban and rural environment was organised in everything from housing to the functional zoning of residential complexes, and systematic drawing up of master plans to take into account the new requirements"* [6].

In the 1960's, works on a new Master Plan of Yerevan were launched, under direct influence of Mikael Mazmanyán, a constructivist architect, who was involved in most of the neighbourhood designs of late 50's and early 60's. The Master Plan proposal also included Detailed Planning Project (PDP in Russian, Plan Detalnovo Planoravaniya) for Yerevan's centre. In the framework of this project the idea of Araratian Street was revived. Remaining photos of the model shows that the approach was modernistic, an advanced and large scale open space, cutting existing urban fabric mostly for public buildings (See Figure 1.4).

Although there were several competitions in 1970's and 80's the idea was not realized till the collapse of the Soviet Union. Architect and planner Gurgen Mousheghyan who was Chief Architect of Yerevan from 1982 to 1989 during an interview said the reason was insufficient funds for non-residential constructions. Even though in late 70's and 80's several large scale public buildings were built in and around central part of Yerevan.

4 REALISATION: "PUBLIC SPACE"

With the Armenian economy reaching certain stability, the idea of Northern Avenue reappeared in the late 1990's with the personal support of then President Robert Kocharyan. Many maintain that this was the way by which the nationalistic government would take control of Yerevan's landscape and show how an independent Armenian government could achieve something that had been previously impossible. The President considered the city centre as "an uncivilized space" that needed to be imbued with the narratives of global commerce [7].

The opening of the avenue in 2007 came at a price, especially for those who were previously living in this densely built centre and who saw their homes demolish (See Figure 1.5).

This development was one of the first large scale developments in post-Soviet area, where the ownership rights were "inherited" by privatization of commonly-owned assets. Although there were similar projects in other ex-Soviet countries, none of them had to deal with this amount of property owners. The change in the economic structure as a new wealthy social group was emerging and this intense speculation made it impossible for locals to stay in the city centre and brought in international investors, mainly Armenian diaspora from Russia, US and Middle East.

The shape given to the centre of Yerevan, amply used in the new branding of the city, radically changed with the coming of this new space. Russian empire style one- to two-story buildings made way for 8- to 10-story buildings, though Tamanyan's Yerevan had stayed away from buildings taller than 5 stories. Over half a kilometre block, local inhabitants were pushed out to make way for shiny storefronts representing modern and international Armenia (See Figure 1.6).

According to Narek Sargsyan, Chief Architect of Yerevan from 1999-2004 and 2011-2013, in the year 2000 during initial planning phase, the avenue's width was to be 21 meters. Then it

was decided, upon consultation with other architects, that it was to be 24 meters wide and that the buildings surrounding it were to be 24 meters high, meaning 6 floors aligned with the street and two floors of setbacks. He then said that certain circumstances, remaining vague about what these were, made it so that all floors were aligned with the street [8].

From the organization of public space and the spatial planning to the implemented solutions reminds of a sketch from renowned architect Rafael Israelyan's proposal found in personal archives during that period (See Figure 2.2). Israelyan, author of Stalin's statue (which after the death of Stalin was transformed to Mother Armenia statue) was an influential representative of post-Tamanyan era who was considered the forerunner of Tamanyan after Second World War.

Having been planned for development ("under the plan" as society called properties with potential destruction) since the beginning of the 20th century, the mythical avenue entered into a cycle of disinvestment for 70 years. Since the authorities knew that there was to be a new street in that part of Yerevan, no investments were made throughout the century to accommodate the population that lived there. The zone was pending demolition and this lack of investment reinforced the argument for the need of a tabula rasa.

It went through double resilience process. First, there were the architects and the intellectuals who were for the safekeeping of buildings dating back to the Russian Empire. Second, there was a human rights issue: the local population did not want to leave their homes, often of excellent quality, judging that they weren't compensated fairly. According to an official statement, 31 listed monuments were destroyed during the period of 1999-2006, five of which were in the area of the current Northern Avenue [9].

In 2014, seven years after its official opening, an extensive renovation was initiated by the Municipality of Yerevan. According to Yerevan Municipality press releases the "renovation" was carried out through external funding and would not bring added pressure on the city's budget. In fact, it was funded by Tashir, a group of companies that own the first western style shopping mall of Yerevan. The group owned by a wealthy Russian-Armenian was already in the process of opening the second mall in the residential districts of Yerevan. The renovation included drainage, changing pavements of the whole streets, setting up a new rain water management system, fixing or rather doubling the amount of steps connecting the street level with ground levels of the buildings. There was also an attempt to solve problematic intersections where two streets open to car traffic meet the pedestrian avenue (See Illustrations 3.1-3.3).

As the renovation of the street was finalized, a new banner was noticed on the street announcing the opening of Tashir Street shopping mall. Again based on media coverage, it became obvious that the first floor of the underground parking (-1 floor) was to be assigned to Tashir Group to open a new shopping mall under the Northern Avenue.

The third "transformation" of the street from Araratian to Northern (Avenue) and then to Tashir is a unique example of transformation of narrative of capital-formation of the nation. If the Araratian is the symbol of the First Republic, Northern represents well the Soviet Armenia, though it was not realized at the time, and Tashir Street is the latest layer of meaning, representing the socio-political situation of independent Armenia based on neoliberal economy. In this regard art critic Nazareth Karoyan writes: "*Northern Avenue is the axis of these developments: the purpose of this modernist project that would reveal the vector of territorialization of political rights and restoration of the nation state in the past is being reconsidered. The first of these reconsiderations is to serve the economic interests of the dominant groups in society and the strengthening of their political power. The second is the re-construction of the economy and the replacement of production with services.*" [10].



Fig 3: Araratian Street (Northern Avenue) today

1. A view looking to Opera building
2. A view to Republic Square, in front National Gallery of Armenia
3. Summer night view

5 URBAN SPACE

The pedestrian link between Republic Square and Freedom Square created by the avenue is the first and only area of Yerevan dedicated exclusively to pedestrian traffic. Though this new formal pedestrian link throughout the centre is excellent for pedestrian traffic, we must remember that small local shops supplying every day needs have been demolished along with the old urban tissue, meaning that the newly installed locals must find other means of transportation in order to run errands [11].

Based on one of the survey's carried out by urbanlab Yerevan in 2014, in the framework of a project called Other Yerevan (which is not published yet), 45% of answerers (architects, planners, artists, activists, etc.; around 70 professionals) stated that Northern Avenue defeats the purpose Yerevan's urban environment. The same survey shows that the inheritance from the Tsarist (Russian Empire) period is the most endangered heritage. A majority of respondents said that the most unique urban environment of Yerevan is Abovyan Street, which consists mostly of Russian Empire era buildings and, before the opening of the Northern Avenue, was the link between Opera and Republic squares. There is thus an importance given to the heritage of the old urban setting and a certain rejection of the planning objectives prioritized by the city's administrators.

Going from Tumanyan Street to Abovyan Street, Northern Avenue is crossed by Lalayants (currently Hin Yerevantsi), Teryan and Pushkin streets. All three are small scale streets, designed for only local traffic (See Figure 4.1-4.3). Those who wish to go from one side of Yerevan to the other take the boulevards that were designed for transit that are avoiding intersection with Northern Avenue. Where these small streets intersect with Northern Avenue, car traffic has to slow down to the speed of the dense pedestrian traffic as there are not any traffic lights and proper signs. This has positive effect on cohabitation; the drivers always cross eyes with the pedestrians and are very vigilant.

The changes brought to the avenue in 2014's, were mostly in order to clarify the intersections between the pedestrian avenue and the streets open to car traffic that cross it, such as Teryan and Pushkin Streets. There were other changes brought to the street in the end of August 2015 (See Figure 4.1 and 4.2), bringing the pedestrian and bike crossings closer in together, all concentrated in the centre of Northern Avenue. This means that there's a will to limit the amount of interactions between the avenue and its cross streets. The reason for this is hard to grasp, considering that the avenue is divided in two distinct walkways and that it isn't natural

for a pedestrian to diverge his or her path to the centre in order to cross, as we can see in the second image, making the markings on the floor seem anecdotic.

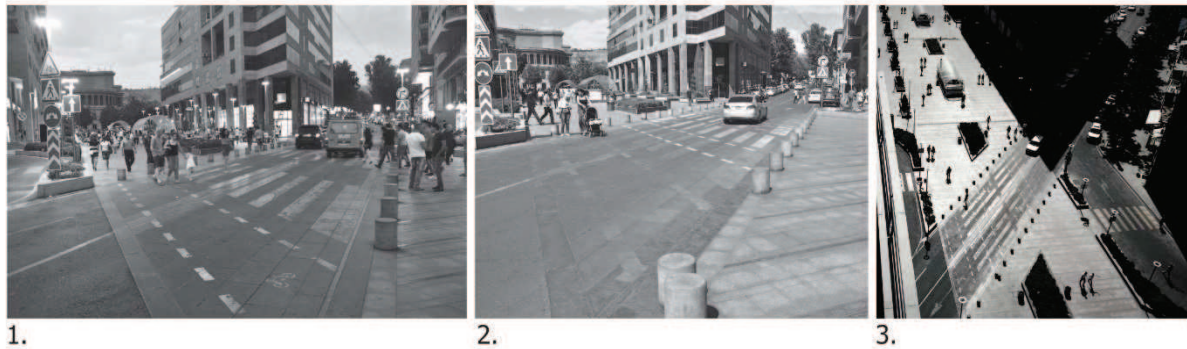


Fig 4: Intersection of Northern Avenue with Teryan and Old Yerevantsi streets
1. July 2015; 2. August 2015; 3. September 2015 (Credit: Seda Grigoryan)

The surface of the avenue and the buildings seem to be two very different entities. The entrance to the shops are located either above or below the street level (in some parts till 1.5 meter), behind an arcade which is around 2 meters wide. The steps and the distance put up a certain barrier between the pedestrian and the shops, contributing to the isolation of both.

Though the avenue can be considered relatively empty until 14:00 during summer, the evening brings to it many musicians, magicians, small object vendors, Armenian dancers and street artists, all spaced out throughout the half kilometre it occupies. In the summer, it's so popular with both tourists and locals that it's hard to navigate through. All of this happens independently from the majority of the stores, though the restaurants with their enclosed terraces contribute to the environment (See Figure 3.3).

The attempts at linking the street to an ideology have been partially successful in that they did give Yerevan a new image, though one that differs from the intended neo-liberal meaning. Another narrative has been developed by the users of the space. This fourth layer of signification, added to the ones previously mentioned, is one that wasn't imposed, but that appeared by itself. People began using this space as a linear gathering space, walking from Republic Square to Freedom Square and back, all the while entertaining themselves not with shopping, but with the aforementioned entertainers and impromptu meetings with friends by considering it one of the major public open spaces in capital of Armenia.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Abovementioned points emphasize the need for re-evaluating the importance of Araratian Street for Yerevan and obstacles for current use of the Northern Avenue. More specifically, the article shows that:

- The transformation of Araratian Street to Northern Avenue and then to Tashir Street symbolizes the ideological transformation of post-Tamanyan urban Yerevan, from the Nation building phenomenon to Soviet public space re-evaluation of 60's and to neo-liberal projects under nationalistic dictate of the Independent Armenia.
- Tamanyan's two master plans of 1924 and 1936, together with his personal priorities of shaping "corner stones" of urban fabric come to prove that the idea of such a street which would cut the pre-Soviet urban fabric was an uncertain and doubtful concept to him.

- After realization and several improvements, the street continues to have issues from urban spatial design perspective, in particular for its mobility schemes, urban qualities and public space uses.
- This situation can be improved through deeper collaborative assessment of issues by trying to approach them from wider urban perspective (i.e. vehicle traffic or pedestrian walkable network of the city centre) and also carrying an enhanced study of public space uses, more specifically by addressing needs based on current and future use.

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