

# Urban challenges of the right bank of the Mtkvari River

## Key findings of the study

The study comprehensively analyzes the development trends of the right bank of the Mtkvari River, critically assesses their impact from the sectoral perspectives of urban heritage, land use and transport policy. The main study area covers the section of the right bank of the Mtkvari River that is located in the territory starting from the Tamar Mepe Bridge and ending with the Republic Square and the former Sakanela Street. The area falls within the protective zones of the historical part of Tbilisi and it is heterogeneous in terms of topography, nature of urban development and transport provision. In the framework of the study, 16 problematic projects were examined in detail some of which are partially or fully agreed, while some are not, although the risk of their implementation is high. The projects include a multifunctional complex in the vicinity of the swimming pool "Laguna Vere", a multifunctional complex in the area of Sakanela Street, a multi-purpose complex in the area of the former Aragvi restaurant and on and at the end of Kiacheli street as well as the projects designed to be carried out along the coast.

## Cultural heritage | Key findings

➤ According to the Law of Georgia on Cultural Heritage, the purpose of establishing a protective zone is to preserve and protect from the adverse effects the components that exist within its borders: objects of cultural heritage, the urban fabric holding cultural value and individual buildings and structures, historical urban development, network of streets, planning structure, historical landscape, historical, aesthetic and ecological environment, historically formed views and panoramas, spatial dominants, architectural spatial organization, etc.

**Of the above listed values, which the applicable law aims to protect, the majority of the projects we studied pose a threat not only to one or two of them, but to all of them.**

➤ According to the Law on Cultural Heritage: a) changing and expanding of the network of the historically formed streets, raising, lowering or making other changes to the marks is considered inappropriate and allowed only in special cases (Article 37, p. 8); b) a permit with respect to the protective zone of the historical development is issued only in exceptional cases, on the basis of an expert opinion and with the approval of the Ministry, for the development of the area which has not been historically developed (Article 37, p. 6);

➤ **Most of the projects concerned are in conflict with these requirements provided for by the Law on Cultural Heritage. For example, the project planned in the area of Sakanela Street completely erases the traces of the said street. The historically undeveloped, green area located between Kiacheli Street and Javakhishvili Street is also under systematic development.**

➤ In fact, the law does not allow the consolidation of land parcels in the protective zones, as it defines new construction as an "supplementing" action in exceptional cases. Consolidation of land parcels is a common harmful practice that we find in most of the projects. Consolidation and enlargement of land parcels with the configuration, proportions and planning structure that do not correspond to the design object provide a prerequisite for development.

➤ According to the Law on Cultural Heritage, any activity that damages or threatens to damage the monument of cultural heritage or deteriorates its perception or use is prohibited in the individual protective zones of the monument (Article 36). Most of the projects concerned have a considerable impact on the surrounding cultural heritage monuments. Especially noteworthy is the impact on such landmarks of Tbilisi as the "Blue Monastery", St. John the Evangelist church and the circus building

➤ Among the projects studied, there are frequent cases of gross interference in the landscape and filling of green spatial gaps. One of the most vivid examples of such case is the development intended to be undertaken on the bank, in the area of the former "Aragvi" restaurant.

The special connection of terrain and architecture is the layer that largely creates the urban and architectural permanent characteristics of the historic city. Large-scale intervention in the landscape, filling of green area gaps and/or modern-style planning harm and threaten this unique architectural and spatial organization of the city.

➤ The planned constructions are concentrated in the first lane of the right bank, in a 1500-meter section, and form the first, frontal line of the developed area on the right bank of Mtkvari. Given the fact that Tbilisi is the city that is located on the slope of the mountain, the riverfront which creates a characteristic urban landscape largely determines the spatial-architectural composition of the city,

Ignoring the nature of Tbilisi's development, its gradation, building high-rise buildings on the lower terrace, in the first line of development, completely destroys the historically formed urban structure of Tbilisi. It breaks the integrity of the city built on two parts of the river and radically changes the views from the bank.

➤ In accordance with the Law on Cultural Heritage, when planning a new construction, the historical-cultural support plan is the basis for the development of the development plan/detailed development plan in the historical development protective zone and the development regulation zone, the principles of which must be taken into account when drafting the spatial-territorial planning documents (Article 42, p. 2). To date, the city is not guided by a historical-cultural support

plan that substantially reduces the possibility of protecting the urban heritage of Tbilisi in the planning process.

➤ According to the law, if there is no development plan in the cultural heritage protective zones that is approved in a manner prescribed by law, the design documents of each construction object shall be developed based on the pre-design historical-architectural study. The volume of the design object, the planning structure and the architectural form are established on the basis of this study (Article 43, p. 1).

**Preparation of the historical-architectural study is the responsibility of the person interested in construction. Therefore, there are often cases when a consent on the conclusion desired by the developer is obtained in advance from the person conducting the study, or the conclusions and recommendations drafted by the conscientious researcher tend to be ignored.**

➤ For years, the municipal leadership has not been able to create an effective system of integrated planning, in the framework of which the interests relating to the protection of cultural heritage, sustainable transport provision, environmental protection, economy and other sectors will be taken into account in a balanced manner. At the same time, the municipal leadership refuses to consider a thoughtful layout of large urban areas that are problematic for various reasons, including the historical part of Tbilisi. It relies on a targeted and random process of urban development. **Given the imperfect system of planning and area analysis, it becomes impossible to assess the cumulative impact of construction trends.**

➤ The general plan underlines that green spaces of Tbilisi should be considered as a single system and their improvement and connection with each other should be promoted instead of their separation by construction facilities. The general plan considers the Mtkvari river and its tributaries as an important part of the recreation system, which should perform the function of the city's ventilation and cooling corridor. At the same time, the concept considers the protection and development of the mutual dependence of the Mtkvari River and the developed area of the city as one of the priorities in relation to the activities, which change the architectural and urban appearance of Tbilisi (Article 4, p. 2).

**A large part of the agreed and considered projects in the study area are in conflict with the main principles and directions of urban development of the capital's land use general plan.**

➤ The functional zoning of the capital's general plan provides the basis for making construction decisions in the historical area of the capital. Often, the zoning parameters do not take into consideration the characteristics of the historically formed development, environmental and sustainable transportation system and allow for inappropriate development. Added to this are sporadic changes in the functional zones for the purpose of intensive development of territories, which further aggravates the overall picture.

➤ In the study area, the change from recreational areas to intensive construction areas is systematic and spontaneous. This practice has not changed significantly since the approval of the revised general plan. As a result, the once interconnected green infrastructure is becoming fragmented, which essentially contradicts the principles of the “green city” laid down in the capital’s general plan.

➤ **In the study area, the agreed and considered projects unsystematically and radically increase the density of development, which poses a threat in terms of protection of urban heritage and transportation provision, as well as in terms of long-term planning in general.**

➤ In certain cases, the method of calculation of the development parameters is problematic. Under the Resolution N 14-39 of Sakrebulo (Local Council) of Tbilisi City Municipality on the approval of the rules for the regulation of the use and development of the territories of Tbilisi Municipality, the K-1, K-2 and K-3 indicators are rounded to the nearest decimal number (Article 11, p. 5; Article 12, p. 4; Article 13, p. 4 and 5.). This calculation practice allows for quite a lot of maneuvering, especially in the case of large land parcels.

**We encounter examples of manipulation of various parameters in the study area. Among them are large-scale projects in the areas of "Laguna Vere" and "Sakanala". If we take into consideration that these examples take into account the change of the functional area in order to increase the parameters, with this calculation of the parameters, we get an even more unfair and problematic picture.**

➤ In the case of the objects under study, inconsistent approaches in relation to the documents to be presented during the proceedings, and examples of insufficient examination of the issue in the decision-making process have also been observed.

## **Transport | Key findings**

➤ Despite the fact that Tbilisi City Hall has been carrying out transport reform for several years in order to reduce dependence on cars, the city's land use and development policies cannot/do not respond to the goal set and create considerable risks of failure of the reform.

➤ The only available tool for integrated consideration of transport and land use - transport impact assessment (TIA) is flawed and unable to meet the challenges.

**TIA is required only in certain cases.** Transport impact assessment is not performed for single areas and districts. In addition, in the case of individual land parcels, the procedures for changing the zone, determining the conditions for the use of the land for construction, and building a building with the area under 6000 square meters do not require a TIA. As a result, the city leadership does not assess the overall cumulative result of district densification.

**A full-fledged methodology for the preparation of the TIA is not developed and approved, and the data on which the TIA should be based when making a comprehensive forecast does not exist or is deficient.** The city does not have a proper strategic transport model that is used in the above-mentioned forecasting.

**The basis for decision-making is not transparent and the conclusions of the Transport and Urban Development Agency are limited to a rather general and template text.** Acceptable and unacceptable consequences of the impact of urban development and decision-making criteria are not officially defined. As a result, procedures and grounds for decision-making are unclear and not transparent. There is a frequent change of position during the proceedings concerning a specific case, while the justification of the decision is limited to general and template text.

➤ The study area is a clear example of the ineffectiveness of a faulty methodological and procedural framework. According to the actual state, the transport system near the study area is overloaded, and both existing and planned transport systems do not meet the qualitative and quantitative needs of the expected development services. Yet, city leaders are allowing high-intensity large-scale development of the car-dependent undeveloped area with constant chaotic densification of existing development without a full and cumulative impact assessment and grounded and planned compensatory measures.

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