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The Visibility of Georgian Hagia Sophia: Urban Religious Transformation in Poti, Georgia

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This article addresses architectural visibility as a social construct marked by religious elements that use an ideological cartography to define public space. The analysis addresses architectural visibility and post-Soviet religiosity in Georgian urban areas. It looks at how post-Soviet religious materiality is taking place in the Georgian city of Poti through the management of sites of worship by the Georgian Orthodox Church. I seek to understand the dynamics of the social perception of the architectural reorganization of public space. This setting was previously dominated by Soviet secularism, which imprisoned Poti's Cathedral and its location as a Soviet theatre, turning it into an ideological instrument. Drawing on ethnographic research, the discussion explores the social reflections and the architectural reorganization of this central building, which is key to the identity of the city. Focusing on the post-Soviet visibility of religious architecture, I argue that the New Hagia Sophia Cathedral marks a new visual landscape that underlines the post-Soviet re-establishment of religion and the increasing power of the Georgian Orthodox Church.
Keywords: Visibility, architecture, religiosity, New Hagia Sophia, Georgia, Poti.

Introduction

While I was studying the constructed landscapes and walked around the port cities of my research field sites in Georgia and Latvia, it felt like the buildings were talking to me. They told stories related to different political, social and architectural regimes; stories that were articulated in their spatial, visible and recognizable dimensions (Brighenti 2010). Buildings that materialize urban areas always carry ideological meanings. For example, the Russian imperial cathedrals and Soviet-style blockhouses were built to legitimise and display different urban regimes in the cities of Poti (Georgia) and Liepaja (Latvia).[1]

Having conducted research in Poti and Liepaja from 2019 to 2022, it was clear to me that in contemporary urban neo-liberal settings religious buildings are full of social meanings, that they convey not only religious meanings but also architectural concerns. Thus, the religious buildings that resisted to Soviet militant secularism (Pelkmans 2009) in the twentieth century represent the pride of city residents. In this article, I focus on the religious architecture of the New Hagia Sophia Cathedral in the maritime city of Poti, Georgia, in the easternmost part of the Black Sea. I assess how its visibility refers not only to the religious institution but also to everyday social practices and the current neo-liberal urban set up.

The discussion draws on the anthropological study of cities that benefits from ethnographic knowledge to demonstrate how cities vary from one ideology and epoch to another (Prato and Pardo 2013: 97; 2018b: 5). I refer to the analysis of the relationship between people and the social elite, which since the early 1990s has been a developing field of urban anthropology (Pardo and Prato 2018a; Pardo and Prato 2018b: 6). In this article, such relationship is analysed in terms of urban visual legitimation.

Today, three architectural structures, located in different countries, are called Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). The original is located in Istanbul, while two replicas are located in Georgia and

[1] On legitimacy and processes of legitimation, see Pardo and Prato 2018a.

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Serbia. Throughout its history, the architecture of the Hagia Sophia has been subject to political contestation. In the year 532, the Roman Emperor Justinian built the Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople, the major construction of eastern Christianity. In 1453, the Muslim Sultan, Mehmet II, established the Ottoman Empire on the ruins of the Eastern Roman Empire, and the Hagia Sophia was turned into a Muslim Mosque. In 1934, in the context of twentieth-century secularization, the very visible Hagia Sophia was converted into a museum. In 2020, the building was restored as a mosque, to show Turkey's sovereignty to the outside world (Guerin 2020).

Similarly, the two Hagia Sophia replicas in Georgia and Serbia, which had been under construction since the early twentieth century, have been used to demonstrate the power of different political regimes. In Poti, the New Hagia Sophia marks the boundary between Georgian and Russian politics and religion. In Belgrade, the Church of Saint Sava, known as the New Hagia Sophia, which was opened in 2020, represents the Serbian and Russian Slavic-Orthodox brotherhood. The project was completed with the collaboration of the Serbian and Russian governments and Churches. The Cathedral's name refers to Saint Sava, a twelfth-century nobleman who was the first archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The construction started in the 1930s. The architect symbolized anti-Ottoman sentiments since it was erected in the area where Saint Sava was tortured by the Ottomans. The construction of the Cathedral was halted during the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941 and, again, in post-war communist times (Milanović 2010: 66-71). Construction resumed after the death of the Yugoslavian communist leader, Josip Broz Tito, in 1980. The Russian side contributed 15,000 square mosaics to the Cathedral. The total cost of the Cathedral was approximately 100 million euros (Mladen 2020).

The study of space in terms of political transformation and infrastructural changes is extensively carried out in anthropology. Hocquet (2013: 69) has examined the urban landscape of Berlin, arguing that the past, which is inscribed in stones, is reinvested of meanings according to the present and serves as the ultimate national, cultural and political actor in the construction of identity. Cervinkova and Golden (2020) have studied the White Stork Synagogue in Wroclaw, discussing whether the Jewish synagogue represents primarily a place of maintaining heritage. Krase (2012: 25) has addressed visual changes engendered by economic, social and cultural forces. Conversely, Klusáková et al. (2019) look at the transformation of religious sites of devotion in Poland, specifically in the cities of Tykocis, Supra and Kaxzorowo, with their historical background marked by the influence of different urban regimes. Here, I examine the religious architecture of Poti, where, as in other post-Soviet urban areas, negotiations and struggles for religious space merge with the Soviet secular legacy, nationalism and the development of religious lives (Darieva and McBrien 2021: 3).

Religious buildings with a history of ideological repurposing, I note, are found widely in post-Soviet cities. For example, in Soviet times, the Nicholas Naval Orthodox Cathedral in Northern Liepaja, Latvia, was converted into an entertainment place; then, in 1991, the Cathedral was given back to the Latvian Orthodox Eparchy. The Catholic Cathedral in Batumi was converted into a high-electricity power plant; later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was

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given to the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Metekhi Church in Tbilisi was converted into a prison. The blue mosque in Yerevan was used as a planetarium, and so on.

In light of the dominance of Orthodox Christianity, I am interested in understanding the dynamics of religious re-establishment in the relatively mono-religious city of Poti. According to the 2014 National Census of Georgia, 41,465 people live there, of whom 98.5% are Orthodox Christians, 0.5% are Jehovah's Witnesses and 1% belong to other religions (Todridze and Shavishvili 2018: 235-237). According to the State Agency for Religious Issues of Georgia (https://religion.gov.ge/cults/), the Georgian Orthodox Church has nine officially registered sites of worship, while the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Judaists and the Church of the Gospel Faith have one site each.

Historically, Poti's Cathedral exemplifies the religious revival of the Georgian Orthodox Church in urban areas. The goal of re-establishing a religious space in Poti has been challenging, due to the building's two visible backgrounds. Under state socialism, the Cathedral served as a venue for ideological events. In post-Soviet times, the Church, as an institution, reorganized its visual presence by dismantling the visual marks of Soviet ideology, specifically the theatre, thus ending religion's public invisibility in the area. The Church and the theatre reflect competing Christian and Soviet moralities in the order of the city. I argue that grasping these moral determinants in the visible city is crucial for us to understand the construction of lived and normative spatial orders. The New Hagia Sophia Cathedral of Poti, we know, experienced theatrical and religious implications, and it is through these opposing encounters that people, on the one hand, and institutions, on the other, view and produce space both inside and outside this building.

Over the last three decades, Poti has constructed its identity with substantial reference to national and anti-Soviet meanings. The transformations and experiences of the Tsarist, Soviet and Neo-liberal regimes, involving the establishment and dismantling of visual orders, have forced local people to reconsider their socio-spatial memory. Christine M. Boyer (1994: 5-6) argues that the need for recognition pushes people to forget, eradicate or repress in order to establish a new form of life experience where architecture is a substantial actor.

Soviet state socialism strictly controlled public religious practices. At the same time, Soviet atheism was articulated as a religion in and of itself, encompassing ideology and ritualization. During this period, religious visibility was expressed in private settings as opposed to public venues (Dragadze 1993). Under Soviet rule, ideological propaganda determined the architectural and social visibility of public spaces. Buildings and places took on new meanings and usage, as they were subjected to materializing political interests and nationalization politics (Crowley and Reid 2002: 3-11).

In the post-Soviet period, Georgia ceased to be a member of the Soviet Union and became an independent nation state. The meetings fomented by the Communist Party were wiped from practice. The political importance of theatres diminished. The Poti theatre, with its cultural activities, failed to adopt a new visual identity. The Cathedral building at once recovered its religious visibility and lost the Soviet-era theatrical outlook. The local theatre is now located in a new building near the Cathedral. This new building, which has collapsed several times,

represents a visual expression of the post-Soviet 'forgotten' city, while the Cathedral is a symbolic expression of the new national and neo-liberal identity. The space outside the Cathedral is not exactly public, as it is surrounded by walls and doorways. This visual boundary distinguishes the territory of the Cathedral from the public landscape and marks the space of the Cathedral as the property of the religious authorities.

The ethnography collected among Poti residents suggests that, as the Poti New Hagia Sophia Cathedral underlines the re-establishment of religion and the increasing popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet set up, it marks a new visual identity for the city. The fieldwork was carried out in December 2019, between July and September 2020 and from November 2021 to January 2022, during which time I conducted observation and semi-structured interviews. I focused on studying Poti's urban visibility, looking at the economic, political and cultural aspects of spatiality that determine the identity of the city. I considered the import of the religious visibility of the Poti New Hagia Sophia Cathedral in the centre of the city, where social and political activities converge. The interview method helped me to record the views of local people. Ethnographic observation applied to the internal and external spaces of the Cathedral, the city's central square and people's everyday activities (during the Covid–19 pandemic). I used walking as an ethnographic method to record the relevant social relationships (Shortell and Brown 2016). As I walked around the central square with my interviewees, they described their experiences related to the Cathedral.

Theoretical Approaches

The construction of space involves the visibility of everyday behaviours, which, in turn, symbolically materializes the consciousness of social unity. Social visibility encapsulates collective action in a proxemic landscape constructed by the lived experience. Places provide a sense of social stability, while changes in cultural sequences enable the continuity of visible values (Lawson 2001: 28). Power sensing exposes materialized and communicated spatiality and architecture. The materiality of the urban experience in the arch of human understanding necessitates recognition, which calls into question social visibility, territoriality, memory and politics. The making of urban religious space presupposes spatiality, materiality, rituality and governmentality (Burchardt and Griera 2020). Visibility and spatial religious materialization are entailed by the notion of lived religion, which occurs behind normative religion (Becci 2013: 150; Rüpke 2020: 16). In the local urban ideological context, institutionalized religion represents a lived experience, as the sets of religious spatiality are interlaced with social visibility — defined as seeing, looking, perceiving and recognizing (Brighenti 2010).

For Brighenti, a thorough understanding of religious visibility in a space demands the adoption of the expression 'regime of visibility', which is defined as an inscribed and projected social activity that becomes visible in a territory depending on the ideological context (Brighenti 2010: 2-4). Brighenti goes on to suggest that visibility needs mutual recognition and misrecognition. Visibility is relational in the sense that it determines the relationship between seeing and being seen. It unfolds between seeing and noticing, and its characteristics — such as

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appeal, attractiveness, repulsiveness, and so on — attract the rapid attention of perceivable or non-perceivable social relations (Ibid: 27-42). For Brighenti, urban space is a 'public domain' of the spatial order that exists between materiality and immateriality. Public space does not belong to the state or to formal public institutions; rather, it is organized by the attention and affection of an imagined unity (Ibid: 110-125).

The visual dominance of buildings punctuates the constructed environment, which shapes the perception of the city. Spatial visibility, power and religion are key actors in the social creation of the urban community. Religion and interactions between people, things, symbols and imagined relations arise in the realm of embodiment, which includes physical and imagined relationships (Knott 2005: 42). Religion manifests itself within and around space; it is embodied by inhabiting, creating and transforming sacred and profane public and private areas. Apart from the spatial aspect, the materialization of religion is constructed by a power that marks the social order embodied in the proxemic zone. For Knott (2005: 21-50), space is constructed by the religious domain, which marks power as accessible and visible, while religion marks space as powerful itself. A space that gains recognition is prone to a totality which distinguishes social, institutional and official usage, as well as spatial perceptions.

The visibility of values regularly changes the meaning of historical buildings because their distinctive architectural values have ideological undertones that lead political actors to pursue erasure or to rewrite memory (Lawson 2001: 28). Bryan Lawson (2001: 5) contrasted architecture with building, claiming that architecture is regarded as a system of signs and art that generates ideas and social rituals, adding that some architecture serves to display people in 'our' society.

Urban visibility involves social recognition; specifically, the display of an identity in public space marks social practice in a territory. Religion enters the 'public domain' through accessibility, appropriation and visibility. This domain displays Church ownership as a 'spatial power' making religious groups visible and accessible in the urban arena (Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri 2014: 646-653). Placemaking, a crucial social actor for religious visibility, materializes identity in negotiated or contested ways. The religious space delineates the boundaries between community and social practice, which can be contested and may, as a consequence, change their meaning. These spatial social boundaries are intersected by the past, present and future, a process that makes religious places contested or agreed upon at multiple levels of social discussion (Burchardt and Becci 2013: 17-20).

The Historical Context

Poti's territory has remained unchanged since the sixteenth century, when the Ottomans dominated the area. They occupied Poti in 1578 and proceeded to build a fortress, a military garrison and a Muslim Mosque. An Ottoman Pasha ruled the Poti section of the Black Sea line and its environs (Dumbadze 1957: 251). From 1829, the city was administered by the Russian Tsarist Empire. As the facilities used by the Ottoman regime to consolidate control seemed obsolete to the Christian administration, they demolished the Muslim Mosque and the fortress,

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transforming the fortress area into the city's central space. In 1859, the emperor granted Poti the status of maritime city.

The consequences of the historical urban changes meet Marian Burchardt's idea of an urban religious assemblage (2019: 7), which encompasses material and social artefacts and the construction of relations characterized by the enactment of governmentality. For him (Ibid: 2), religious organizations in an urban setting are visible to all social units, their presence serving as a tool to legitimise their place in the city and to establish boundaries between them and other urban entities. The Russian Tsarists changed the religious norms in the occupied territory of Georgia. They deprived the Georgian Orthodox Church of its autocephalous status and the Russian Exarchate powerfully Russified Georgia's religious architectural landscape. Tsarism needed to materialize religious power. Therefore, the Empire constructed sites of worship in the Russian architectural style and erected Russian military-religious architecture known as Soboro in the central areas of Georgian cities.

Niko Nikoladze, a Georgian who was Poti major between 1894 and 1914, was a driving force in the city's architectural modernization. He devised an urban plan that included the construction of Poti's central streets; twelve streets developed around a central park and a space for the new Cathedral. The Tsarist officials rejected Nikoladze's plan to build a Cathedral in the Georgian architectural style. Later, with Nikoladze's involvement, the architects Zelenko and Marfield created a new architectural project for the Cathedral as a replica of the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople. The Tsarist administration approved the new design and in 1906 Exarch Alex gave the go ahead for the construction of the new Cathedral, which was completed in 1907. The Cathedral, which followed the structure of an Ottoman fortress (Nachkebia 1957: 22), had to pay the price of imperial power. However, the problem was that it was not Russian; unlike the Tbilisi and Batumi Soboros, it did not exhibit the power of the Russian military (Chitaia 2002).

Following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia (1917), Georgia gained independence. As the first Democratic Republic was established in 1918, the Georgian Orthodox Church — 'The Protector of Georgian Culture' — regained independence, though not an autocephalous status.[2] Up to the 1990s, the Georgian Orthodox Church did not have the power to organize the urban architectural landscape. In 1921, the Democratic Republic was overthrown by the Bolsheviks and, because of Soviet secularism, religion was relegated to the margins of public life.

The Soviet system controlled the living environment, where architecture was used for visual and ideological statements (Crowley and Reid 2002: 8-9). The repurposing of the Poti Cathedral exemplified Soviet ideological rupture with a religious past. As mentioned earlier, the Cathedral was closed and the building was turned into a theatre in the 1930s. Soviet newspapers labelled the Soboro Cathedral in the centre of the city as a redoubtable symbol of bloody Tsarism, adding that the communists had the power to take charge of the moral reshaping of the building. The theatre opened in 1936 and was dedicated to the anniversary of the October Revolution (Lortkipanidze

[2] The Russian Orthodox Church recognized the autocephalous status of the Georgian Orthodox Church both in 1927 and in 1943. The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in 1990 (Komakhidze 2021).

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1939: 56). Having portrayed the Tsarist-era religious Cathedral as an institution that occupied the theatre's place in the city, the Soviets transformed it into a Soviet theatrical cathedral (Figure 1) and planned to use the building to spread communist ideology. In the 1930s, they built a towering steeple with a red star over the theatre. In the 1960s, they dismantled the steeple and erected a dome. The phrase 'all the way to the theatre' replaced the popular Tsarist-era expression 'all the way to the cathedral.' (Chavleishvili and Nodia 1963: 3).

Figure 1. Poti theatre in Soviet times (retrieved from Iverieli, the electronic archive of the Parliamentary Library of Georgia).

Following the end of state socialism and the emergence of nation states, urban areas have taken on new meanings in support of the idea of a 'return to the country' (Diener and Hagen 2018: 496). The rewriting of urban identity has included the reconstruction of historical sites and architecture, the erasure of the communist legacy and the creation of new locations.

Since the second half of the 1980s, the Georgian Orthodox Church has been considered to be the protector of the nation, paving the way for Georgia's independence. The agreement between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian state plays a significant role in shaping the public landscape. The Georgian constitution guarantees religious freedom, but a constitutional agreement signed in 2002 gives the Georgian Orthodox Church special treatment (Komakhidze 2021: 66).

Sentiments towards the building in local society evoke the need to increase the visibility of the church, not of the theatre. After Georgia gained independence in 1991, the feeling that a church should be re-established in the building where there was now a theatre intensified (Chitaia 2002: 40). In 1995, the Georgian Orthodox Church founded the Eparchy of Poti under the leadership of bishop Grigol Berbichashvili. Officials considered constructing a new cathedral building, but the Eparchy favoured the restoration of the old edifice. While striving to reconstruct the old Cathedral of Poti, the Eparchy reaffirmed its position by organizing public

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prayers outside the theatre in order to gain public recognition of its claim to the building. Eduard Shevardnadze, the second president of Georgia (1995–2003), actively discussed with local officials the need for the restoration of the building. The local community was broadly divided into two groups; one supported the re-establishment of the Cathedral, the other opposed it in favour of keeping the theatre, which was losing its visual mark in the city. The supporters of the theatre opposed the erection of the cross in front of the building because this would entail a recognition of the Eparchy's claim to ownership of the building (Nadaraia 2005: 57, 94).

In 2003, the Poti city council granted the building to the Georgian Orthodox Church. In 2005, the third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013), solemnly handed over the building's key to the Patriarch of all Georgia, Ilia II. The state invested approximately eight million Georgian Lari and people also made private donations (Janashia 2012: 2). In 2013, the Patriarch and the President solemnly opened the Cathedral of Christ's Resurrection, stating that it was a symbol of the renewal of Poti and Georgia (Potis Sakatedro Tazari 2013).[3]

Figure 2. Valerian Gunia Poti State Professional Theatre (photo by the author).

Visibility of the Cathedral

The contemporary Cathedral of Christ's Resurrection was designed by the Georgian architect Mamuka Chkhaidze as a triple-nave basilica. The Cathedral has a central entrance on the west side and secondary entrances on the north and south sides (Figure 3). The central entrance includes several reliefs of Christian saints, three ornate doors and eight columns. Above the central doors there are icons of the Holy Mother, the Archangel and Saint George. On the east side there are the altar and three apses. The interior is white. There are 21 arched windows in the dome and 22 in the eastern apses. The dome is supported by interior columns. A two-story gallery is surrounded by columns decorated with ornate plants in Greek and Byzantine styles, and the columns on the second

[3]While the Cathedral was being constructed, the adjacent territory was reorganized. A new theatre, cinema, trade centre, police office and public hall were built in the central square. The construction of a new theatre began in 2006. The Georgian state paid five million Georgian Lari towards construction expenses. The theatre was opened on 1st July 2013 by the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili. Since 2008, Valerian Gunia Poti State Professional Theatre has been a member of the International Network for Performing Arts (IETM) (see Figure 2).

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floor reflect the ionic order (Figure 4). The columns and floor are designed with orange granite. The building has a white façade. The building's courtyard includes a garden, a walkway of cobblestone and is surrounded by a fence (Figure 5). On the north-eastern side, near the church, there are a baptismal basin and a fountain. An iron decorative fence runs along the northern, southern and eastern sides, while a stone wall on the west side marks the boundary with the parking area for visitors. Near the stone wall, is Nikoladzes' tower. To the south of the Cathedral is Poti's central garden, while the Artists' Square is to the north. The entire site is surrounded by the Rustaveli encirclement, which connects twelve streets from several directions (Figure 6).

Figure 3. Facade of the Poti cathedral of Christ's resurrection (New Hagia Sophia) (photo collage by the author)

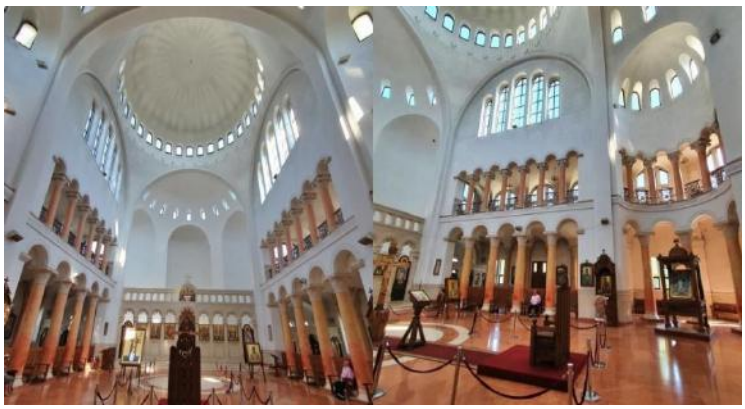

Figure 4. Interior of the Poti cathedral of Christ's resurrection (photo collage by Achim Schyboll)

Figure 3. Stone entrance wall of the territory of the cathedral (photo collage by the author)

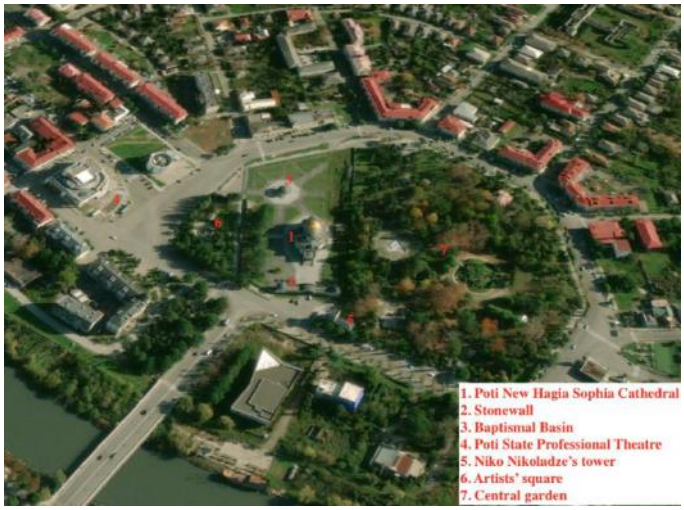

Figure 6: Poti Central square, satellite view (by the author)

During my field research in Poti, I studied the use and meaning of this built urban environment (Lawrence and Low 1990: 457), where the visibility of the architecture involves

three actors: the Georgian Orthodox Church as an institution, the current political regime and the local settlers whose visibility develops through their relationship with the Cathedral.

When I visited Poti for the first time in December 2019, I entered the city via the southern highway. At Poti's periphery, I was waiting for the bus to take me into town when a private car stopped and the driver, a 35-year-old man, asked where I wanted to go. I replied that anywhere near the Cathedral would be fine by me. He offered to take me to my destination and during the journey became my first interviewee. Having said that in Poti all roads lead to the Cathedral, while the building was still out of view, he proceeded to talk proudly about the history of the building and its meaning to the city. It was indeed at this point that I decided to incorporate this religious site into my research agenda. He said:

> 'The Cathedral of Poti is unique in Georgia. It is an old one. Nikoladze constructed it, and it is like the Hagia Sophia of Istanbul. The communists opened a theatre there, and there is a recently reopened Cathedral. Every person in Poti is proud of this building because it has experienced a lot of history as our people did' (Interview 1: 5.12.2019).

Later, when the building came into view, he pointed out the deficiency of the site. He mentioned that the fence and wall around the Cathedral were not appropriate for this building, saying,

> 'This is an amazing building, but it has an unpleasant defect. There are a wall and a fence around the building, and they were not always here. They have surrounded this magnificent building with a fence. Nikoladze said that all roads were going to the church, not to the fence. Here, everything is getting fenced in. The port is surrounded by a huge wall, privatized areas are fenced in, and why not the church? This territory is the property of the Church, but the Church means people. We do not like seeing only half of the building when we are looking at it' (Interview 1: 5.12.2019).

This conversation prompted me to collect local people's reflections on the Cathedral, which seemed to have undergone ideologically-motivated transformations. During the conversations with my interviewees, I discussed their personal feelings about the building. Three distinct eras were identified: the Tsarist Nikoladze's, the Soviet and the post-Soviet Neoliberal. One interviewee had been involved in the reconstruction work. His reflections perfectly outlined the history of the changes experienced by the Cathedral. The man was in his mid-60s and had a primary-level education. He remarked:

> 'This is a great building. It is a treasure for both Christianity and our country as a whole. This building has a sister building in Turkey. It was constructed by Niko Nikoladze, who is considered the father of the Poti people because he developed this city. I was told by friends during communist times that the Tsar ordered Nikoladze to build a Cathedral here. Nikoladze built this building, and the Bolsheviks turned it into a theatre. I remember I saw with my eyes that this building

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> was a theatre. I went to concerts there. We had parades in front of the building. Everybody called this building the Cathedral. When we attended concerts and communist parades, me and my friends had the feeling that we were doing something wrong because this was a place to God. We were getting very good shows in the building from the local theatrical crew. Then, the bishop arrived in Poti. He fought for this building. I heard that they needed people to work there, and I applied. The building has completely changed. Who could have imagined that the theatre would take back its original view as a Cathedral? While working on the site, I was thinking that Niko Nikoladze was blessing us from heaven because the building was taking back its original view' (Interview 2: 6.12.2019).

While discussing the post-Soviet reconstruction of the Cathedral, my interviewees hardly remembered that the issue of ownership of the building divided the people of Poti into two groups: Cathedral supporters and theatre supporters. As the Nikoladze museum curator, a woman of around 50, recalled the process of transforming the site, she tried to find an explanation for the repurposing of the building. She said:

> 'Since the 1980s, when the majority of the population in Georgia was protesting communism, everyone was full of patriotic feelings, which are based on Christianity. Who could believe that the Orthodox Church of Georgia finally had an opportunity to build and reconstruct churches? While everyone was calling "theatre" the Cathedral in the centre of Poti, how would it have been possible for someone to say that she or he is Christian from Poti and has a theatre in the city centre instead of the historical Cathedral? It was good that the church and people requested possession of the building from the government' (Interview 4: 18.07.2020).

Another interviewee, a woman in her mid-50s, was a member of the theatre crew. She reported on the process from the perspective of someone who had participated in the hunger strike, not against the Cathedral, but against closing the theatre:

> 'Our theatre crew announced a hunger strike when the idea of opening a church in the building was circulated. Uncertainty grew about the future of the theatre in the city. Everyone was involved in this process, whether they wanted to be or not, as the problem was related to the building located in the city centre. Bishop Grigol, together with former Soviet nomenclature and a representative of the city council, entered the building, handling candles. This act eliminated the problem, as people saw that the city elite would not leave the theatre. What I saw was that the Church and theatre, past and present, negotiated by giving the building to the Georgian Orthodox Church. This was not a struggle between Church and theatre. The theatre and its crew complained simply because they did not know what was the future of the Poti theatre' (Interview 3: 16.07.2020).

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The theatre crew included artists who had been successful in Soviet times. By protesting, they were calling on the government to pay attention not only to the Church but also to the state-supported institution of the theatre. Everyone knew that the building was not meant to be a theatre and that, historically, there should be a church there. Nonetheless, in recent times the building had been used mostly as a theatre rather than as a church. An informant remarked:

> 'Everyone was asking where the theatre was to be located. Nobody said anything about a new building for the local theatre. If the theatre crew had not initiated the protest movement, Poti would have lost its theatrical traditions. Currently, the theatre crew and their former supporters visit the Cathedral, and people are pleased with their presence at the prayers' (Interview 3: 16.07.2020).

The Cathedral has a dual identity in Soviet and in post-Soviet society. One is active, and the other is passive. During state-socialism, the active identity of the building was as a theatre, while its passive identity was as a church. Locals referred to it as the Cathedral and recalled its visual resemblance to the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople. In post-Soviet times, these two identities swapped places; so, now the church is the active identity of the building and the theatre is its passive one. My interviewees sometimes mentioned 'theatre' rather than 'Cathedral' or 'church' (IInterview 5: 2.09.2020; Interview 6: 30.1.2021; Interview 8: 6.11.2021).

Poti residents see the Cathedral's architectural complex as an individual entity that is an integral part of the city. 'This is not only a building, but it is also history', a man in his 60s stated, adding:

> 'Who could imagine the central square without a Cathedral? This is not possible. Since Nikoladze's time, this building has had a central meaning and if you look at the surrounding area, every street, every building, nature and the sea are watching the Cathedral' (Interview 7: 30.11.2021).

My research questions addressed neoliberal transformations and their influence on the Cathedral. My interview partners' narratives appear to show that the Cathedral visualizes the neoliberal identity of Poti. The Georgian Orthodox Church rightly legalized the building of the Cathedral. The Church marked its territory in the centre of the city and, to highlight its power and visibility, fenced off the Cathedral's territory, which demonstrated the power of the Church and its right to Poti's central square. Local people view this fenced space as a symbolic privatization of the site. Neo-liberal privatization is seen in a negative light by the locals, as marketization of Poti as a port city dominates the urban area. The following remarks are illuminating.

> 'Who owns this space? Why did they fence off the Cathedral? Nowadays, decision-makers do not listen to the people. This is our people's building. With this fence, it seems like it's the property of the Eparchy. This is not only a Cathedral; it is also the history of our city, and it needs to be visible from the inside and the outside' (Interview 5: 2.09.2020).

> 'We all knew that the Church has the right to own the building, but this fence and wall are something unacceptable to our people. Why is it not open? Why do I have to cross

> the gate to enter the yard? Sometimes, when I am looking at this wall, it reminds me a lot of the port. The port administration privatized every reasonable area in the city. There was a ferry travel station behind the wall of the port, which was open in the Soviet times for everyone, and there are a lot of personal stories related to this area. To me, this wall around the Cathedral symbolizes the recent privatization and hidden activities in our city' (Interview 6: 30.1.2021).

When discussing Poti's Cathedral and its visual meaning for the local people, a local historian, a man of about 60, emphasized that:

> 'The people of Poti are proud of this building. Besides its historical value, this is something that relates to their personal stories during the Soviet experience. For example, the parishes marched in front of the theatre during communist parades, people attended theatrical shows in the building, etc. Thus, besides its historical and religious significance, this building is full of theatrical memories. It was controlled by the communists, but the façade was always part of everyday aesthetics. This building was always close to you, wherever you were, in the centre of the city or in the suburbs. And now, when the building recovers its religious meaning, the boundary around it tells the viewers that access to this area is controlled not by people but by an institution. It is right that the Church controls this site, but the walls around the Cathedral do not belong in the memory of locals' (Interview 10: 7.01.2022).

One interviewee, a woman in her mid-50s, mentioned that the fence around the site dismantles the organic sense of the square depicted by Nikoladze, as all the streets in Poti end to the wall rather than to the church. She said:

> 'Who likes this wall and fence around the site? Why did they fence off the place? It is clear to me that the Eparchy has privatized this space. Everything is wrong because of this fence' (Interview 8: 6.11.2021). Later, she remarked: 'Someone has to remove this wall and fence. The heart of the city is disappearing. Under the communists, there was a theatre, but no one could enter the building without permission. Yet, people could see the centre of the city. Now we can enter the building but this ugly gate makes people feel that someone is controlling them while they enter the courtyard. Someone has to destroy this wall and fence. Without walls, this building and the whole site would look better' (Interview 9: 9.12.2021).

Economically speaking, one of the interviewees, a man in his mid-60s, questioned the spatial visibility of the Eparchy. He did not understand why the restorers had not applied Niko Nikoladze's planning model, despite it being said that this church was reconstructed to perpetuate his views. He said:

> 'During Nikoladze's time, this architecture was constructed with Tsarist money as well as donations, and this helped people see this building as Georgian rather than as

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> a Tsarist Russian Cathedral. Why is this place distanced from reality when the state pays using the people's money and donations? I do think that now we have a Cathedral that is not part of the city life. It appears to be a building that represents a space that people visit out of duty. People need to feel that this building and institution are always with them' (Interview 11: 7.01.2022).

Conclusion

The New Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Poti represents not only a sacred site but also a socially meaningful historical architecture. Crossing the fenced gate and entering the Cathedral's territory encourages people to view the site as a ritual space; a space that is not for everyday use. The Cathedral embodies the politics of urban neo-liberalization and the increasing power of dominant religious organizations in this post-Soviet city. Here neo-liberalism is seen as a political ideology that uses religious architecture as a national tool to establish itself in the central space of the city. Post-Soviet urban shrinkage and increased privatization now mark Poti and private ownership determines access to formerly public areas. The Cathedral itself symbolizes this neoliberal reality with its fenced, gated power over an important domain of the city's religious organizations.

The institutional expression of religion overlaps the inhabitants' everyday practice. It actively involves the spatial production of the lived religion, as the settings of religious materiality are visible;[4] a visibility that makes their view collective. The Hagia Sophia's architecture and the name itself represent the ideological marks of religious and political regimes in Istanbul, Georgia and Serbia which carry signifying authority and underline the identity of the urban areas where they are located. The memory of the Cathedral's history helps the locals to identify themselves as being part of the city.

The actors responsible for making this space publicly visible — namely, city officials and the Georgian Orthodox Church — negotiate and enact competing visions of the building in order to gain recognition in today's Poti and in its future image. The daily experience of this site is marked by the erected boundaries between people and space, and between inhabitants and local officials. As in the city's everyday reality the Cathedral links architectural, political and ecclesiastical visibility, it makes its space socially significant (Brighenti 2010). Today, the Georgian Orthodox Church exerts religious power and marks its urban presence in central areas of the city. While the new theatre building represents a visual expression of the 'forgotten' Soviet city, the Cathedral is a symbolic expression of Poti's new national and neo-liberal economic identity. The space both inside and outside the Cathedral is not a common area, as it is visibly surrounded by walls and doorways that separate the site as a whole from the public landscape and mark it as the property of the religious institution. By embodying the boundary between the Eparchy and other entities, it ensures the stability of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

In post-Socialist Georgia, Poti's religious space, full of materiality, rituality and governmentality (Burchardt and Griera 2020), is rich with the social integration of touch and

[4] They can be seen, looked at, perceived, recognised.

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vision into the today's reality and social memory. National intervention on the formerly Soviet-managed space demonstrates that: 1) ideological cartography (memory and spatiality) creates metaphorical tensions for the domination of the urban space; 2) through their social and spatial experiences, city dwellers organize, use and transform urban spatial marks, and current neoliberal privatization converts previously state-ordered spaces into capital-ordered spaces, resulting in the mis-negotiation of various allegories of spatial production. Through the dynamics of seeing and being seen, the spatial religious morals in Poti have exacted revenge on Soviet morals with reference to a significant building that undergoes transformations while embodying both memory and present reality.

As a spatial maker of post-Soviet everyday experience, the Cathedral bears visual testimony to the Eparchy and the Georgian Orthodox Church; at the same time, it is a reminder for the local population of how identities were reshaped through ideological changes under the Soviets. Over time, this building, living between materiality and immateriality, has changed its features and tangible and intangible roles as a church and as a theatre; roles that, we have seen, have been recently swapped. Having gained recognition from officials, inhabitants and religious authorities, it has now achieved legitimacy as a site gated and fenced off from visual accessibility.

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