Seeing, hearing and feeling the city

Visualizing Memory is an ongoing, sensory anthropological project led by Lilit Dabagian, a Bishkek-based media researcher and curator, and David Leupold, a Berlin-based researcher in memory studies. Drawing from art and anthropology alike, it seeks to explore and visualize the multi-layered landscape of urban memory.

Sensory anthropology emphasizes the importance of senses for anthropological observations and is preoccupied with finding novel and unusual ways for communicating the sensory observations. When exploring historical layers in the urban landscape, participants employ various sensory methods which are translated into auto-anthropological texts, sound impressions, as well as still and moving images.

Pilot project: Visualizing BISHKEK | БИШКЕК (2018)

The first pilot project, Visualizing BISHKEK (2018), was launched in Central Asia to shed light on urban sites that tell new and fascinating counter-narratives on the history of the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Hosted at the venue of the art collective Laboratory C, an introductory workshop brought together participants from extremely diverse occupational backgrounds interested in the topic—ranging from urban photographers, anthropologists and historians to marketing specialists and journalists. Within a two-day workshop, this introductory session allowed the participants to understand the concept of sensory anthropology. Through workshop sessions which included guest lectures by local artists like the photographer Joshik Murzakhmetov, the participants first acquired profound knowledge on the study of memory and were introduced to innovative forms of artistic expression that include sensory anthropology and other sensory arts. In a second stage they explored four urban sites of Bishkek as multi-layered memory landscapes: Ala-Too Square, Erkindik Boulevard, Intergelpo Rayon and Kuznechnaya Krepost.

This digital platform allows you to follow their steps through the urban maze of Bishkek from the hidden backyards of Intergelpo Rayon over the rusty railway bridges to the sand-covered hills of Kuznechnaya Krepost. Through lights and sounds you will unravel the colourful past of Bishkek as a puzzle in which each and every fragment of memory forms another mosaic piece along your way from the present to the past and back...
"A house is a machine for living in" constituted the credo of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier in his path-breaking work Vers Une Architecture ("Towards An Architecture"). Inspired by the prospects of the 'Machine Age', imagining the house and its aggregation – the modern city - as a machine illustratively revealed his functionalist vision for the future of residential architecture.

Today, almost a century later, the clear-cut vision of the city as a harmoniously working, state-orchestrated "living machine" does not map well on to the present-day realities of an organically-growing, yet likewise, fiercely contested urban space. From changing regimes to non-governmental organizations and private entrepreneurs – different actors work upon the urban fabric each equipped with their own vision of the city.

In order to capture the multi-layered complexity of urban space in temporal perspective, Visualizing Bishkek, draws from a different set of imaginaries. In an attempt to make sense of the city of the twenty-first century, we propose instead to conceptualize the city as an organisme à habiter – an "organism for living in" marked by a state of perpetual metamorphosis.

From a military outpost of the Kokand Khanate and the late-Tsarist colonial town of Pishpek to the Soviet-Kirghiz city Frunze and, ultimately, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic – within less than two centuries, the site of present-day Bishkek transformed from a wasteland in the Central Asian steppe into a one-million city. Yet, how is this ongoing process of (re-)creation and destruction, the rise and fall of political regimes and its societal configurations, reflected in the memory landscape of today's city? Which maps of historical meaning does it construe?

As we retrieve from the urban fabric the multi-layered palimpsests of different historical experiences, the city reveals to us its most vital elements: her cracked skin, her sand-covered heart, her green lung, her janus face and, ultimately, the realms of her subconscious - her memories and dreams.
The city and her cracked skin
from the surface to the layers
The city and her sand-covered heart

Up until the 19th century the site of today's Bishkek formed merely a caravan rest stop located along the Silk Road. Unknown to many travelers and even residents of the city today, the forgotten heart of the city is found in the midst of a shantytown, buried beneath dust and sand at a hill known as kuznechnaya krepost.

The first known stone building dates back to as late as 1825, when a mud forest was fortified there by the Kokhan Khanate (خوآن خان). With the ruler Madali Khan being only 14 years during his ascension to the throne, his mother the famed poet and stateswoman Nodira (Mohlaroyim) was the de-facto ruler of the khanate. Now only the name of the district, kuznechnaya krepost (Russian: 'fortress of the blacksmiths'), bears silent witness to this forgotten chapter in the history of Bishkek.

However, when in the second half of the 19th century - under the rule of the Tsarist Empire - the first urban settlements were established, the center of the city shifted westwards - leaving the site of the fortress at the periphery of newly founded Pishpek.

While large-scale urbanization altered the face of the city during the Soviet period, the housing surrounding Kuznechnaya Krepost retained its rural character and was largely populated by ethnic Russians.

Within the framework of visualizing memory Cholpon Zhumanalieva and Ayibek Kimsanova visited the site of the old fortress to capture the state of everyday life nowadays. Their visual and audio material provides an glimpse into the lives of its residents, their experiences of hardship and happiness.
автомобиль: A man seeks for a bit of cover from the scorching midsummer sun for his (mainly) white Mercedes 230 model.

сад: look into the garden of a shack near the site of the entirely demolished fortress.

холм: View over an informal settlement at the foot of the fortress hill.
As we visited Kuznechnaya Krepost for the first time it was difficult to believe that this place constituted the first point-of-departure for the present-day city. Unlike other cities where the historical center formed a reference point in the construction of the city, the site of the historic fortress appeared to us as an entirely peripheralized and impoverished residential area not far away from the “Uyghurs’ Quarter.”

The reason for this might be that while the site is of historical relevance it hints at the presence of the “Uzbek” Kokhand Khanate—and thus contests the image of a mon-ethnic, Kyrgyz city.

This circumstance reminds me of Walter Benjamin’s observation in his historical theses that a “past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own threats to disappear irretrievably.”

Translation from German

Als wir Kuznechnaya Krepost zum ersten Mal besuchten, war es schwer zu glauben, dass der Ort zum Ausgangspunkt der heutigen Stadt war. Anders als viele andere Städte, wo der historische Zentrum Referenzpunkt für die Stadterweiterungen war, erschien uns der Ort als eine äußerst peripherisierte, ärmliche Wohngegend nicht weit von den „Uygurviertel“ entfernt.


Dieses Umstande erinnert mich an W.G. Benjamin’s Bemerkung in seinen historischen These, dass „eine Vergangenheit, die der Gegenwart nicht als eine von ihr bedrohung, die sie nicht in ihren Gängen ruiniert.“
Right behind the main railroad station lies the green lung of the city - today's Erkindik Boulevard, known during the Soviet period as Dzerjinskogo Boulevard and prior to that simply as Bulevarnaya.

Bulevarnaya, like many other green areas across the city, reveals the fingerprint of one of the city’s most influential ‘hidden architects’: Aleksey Mikhailovich Fetisov. When the botanist and agriculturalist arrived in Tsarist Pishpek it resembled a dusty and arid steppe land. It was due to his personal efforts that Bishkek is now remembered as the ‘city of gardens’ (gorod-sad).

Throughout the Soviet period, the extensive green spaces created by Fetisov remained of essential importance for the air quality of the city and formed decisive reference points in Soviet urban development. The greening of the city center is made possible by a sophisticated irrigation system that runs through the entire city and channels water from the mountain rivers Ala-Asca and Ala-Merdin through a network of canals into the central parks and other recreational areas.

Yet, in spite of his tremendous contribution to the urbanization of Bishkek, Fetisov was never immortalized in the monumental landscape of the city surfeit with the statues of epic folk heroes, poets, statesmen, dauntless warriors and nameless revolutionaries. His silent legacy lies hidden in the shade-giving trees that line the Boulevard to this day.

Especially during the hot and dry summer months, the Boulevard forms the ‘green refuge’ of urban life in Bishkek. Zarina Urmanbetova and curator Lilit Dabagian embarked on a walk to capture visual and audio impressions from the buzzing life in the shade of its large trees.
Some residents continue calling Erkindik Boulevard (“Boulevard of Independence”) Dzerzhinka. It was the old name of the boulevard after Felix Dzerzhinskiy, notorious founder of the Soviet secret police. Today, the boulevard is hardly associated with “The Iron Felix” though. In 1990-2000s it was cool among high school students to pronounce Dzerzhinka with a different stress, i.e. Dzherzhinka. In addition, people sometimes misspell it as Derzhinka.

The first video shows that Erkindik Boulevard as a place for lazy walks, sport activities, and street music festivals. It is a lively place for different groups of people, i.e. families with children occupying playgrounds, elderly women and men doing sports, young people meeting with friends and going on dates.

Moreover, Erkindik Boulevard is the place where the past of the Soviet intelligentsia is imagined and nostalgic sentiments about the intelligentsia of Frunze (the old name of Bishkek) are being cherished. It is where famous people like the writer Chingiz Aitmatov, or ballerina Bubusara Bayshenalievna lived and would go for daily walks. Yet, the boulevard ends with the central railway station Pishpek-2 where labor migrants used depart to Russia in the 1990s-2000s.

Many of them still go to Russian cities by train; however, four-hour flights by plane seem to become more popular than three-days ride by train. That is why the central railway station in the capital city looks very empty and deserted which can be hardly imagined in other main railway stations of capitals around the world. The second video illustrates a building next to the bus station next to Pishpek-2 where just individual sounds and the crowdless look of unhurried life at the railway station are being captured.

The third video was shot on the wooden bridge passing over the railways. The sense of the old and shattering wooden boards which the bridge is made of is being conveyed by the camera. When people are passing by the tripod, the camera trembles and the moving image gets distorted. The sound in the video mostly comes from the construction site of the new building – not from the trains. That also illustrates the placidity of Pishpek-2.

When I was a child, I just went from Belovodsk to Balykchy by train passing through Bishkek. Back then, life had not confronted me yet with this place. I passed only through by railroad over the bridge or the post (on Leo Tolstoy-Razakova or Logvinenko — do not even know which of them).

I always rearm and deeply believe that I am a stranger to this city. Bishkek and me have a complicated relationship. The city does not always accept me, but I keep coming back to it. And the railway station seems to me a place where almost all the strangers embark on travels for distant or nearby destinations. This space for me has always been associated with the turbulent 90s and labor migrants. This place symbolizes for me sadness, farewell, separation and longing. And a place of women-shuttle traders with big plastic bags, and then later in the 2000s - a place of departure for young people.

Disentangling myself from these associations, although not without any considerations, I opened my eyes to the morning of a hot summer day and went to this place. Contrary to my previous associations, I found a beautiful station building, a beautiful view from the Boulevard Erkindik, a large statue of Frunze, a rather quiet place where a couple of people walked and stopped. Bus 35 and a taxi were the only vehicles I noticed. And the noise from a multi-storey building.

Both the railways and railway station itself were entirely deserted. Yet the place seemed very beautiful, not sad. I thought that now, when other vehicles are available for long and short trips, like minibuses, taxis, planes (!), trains have lost popularity and have ceased to be the main vehicle of mobility.

But Erkindik will always remain buzzing with life and packed with young people. There are no strangers. There are all on their own. Nobody denies this place purely as "Bishkek", "Frunze" or the "city". Erkindik — is for everyone! At different times of the day this place is occupied by different people. In the morning I noticed women over 50 with children. At first glance I thought they were grandmothers with grandchildren. But then I realized that some of them were babysitting. These were in fact women who had long ago retired and made ends meet working as nannies. At lunch time, you can see a lot of people who leave their offices for dinner and their lunch point passes through the boulevard (what a pleasant place!). They are all dressed in office suits, some of them rushing, others not. And as the afternoon wans the boulevard turns into the backyard of a kindergarten and a place for romantic and friendly encounters alike.
A few hundred meters away from the hustle and bustle of Osh Bazaar lies a district made of peculiar one- and two-storey houses that bears the cryptic name ‘intergelpo’. To decipher this name means to submerge oneself into the subconscious of the city, the hidden layers of the city.

Tracing down the origin of this district name takes us from the feet of the Tian-Shan mountains to a small town in present-day Slovakia. In 1923, a group of Esperanto-learning internationalists from Czechoslovakia convened in the town of Žilina to found an industrial commune with the aim of fostering industrial development in the then Kara-Kirghiz Autonomous Oblast. Led by Raphel Mareček, 1,317 socialists from Europe came to the town then known as Pishpek where they faced severe housing conditions and lethal disease, urging some of them to immediately abandon the city. However, those who stayed committed to their cause contributed significantly to the urban development of Frunze (now: Bishkek).

During their work, the commune members developed an organic working language (spontánne esperanto) based on Czech, Slovak, German, Hungarian, Russian as well as words borrowed from local languages. Participants of intergelpo were internationalists, but no dreamers: from the mid 1920s onwards they engaged in more specific actions, as they built from scratch a whole district including an electric power station, a school, a textile factory and unique residential buildings tailored to the architectural preferences of their constructors. In the year 1943 interhelpo was liquidated and its members were persecuted during the Stalinist purges as enemies of the Soviet Union.

When Asel Osmongazieva, Begimay Mokeeva and curator Lilit Dabagian visited the district today, they encountered a different Intergelpo: non-paved roads, expensive imported cars lying idle in the courts, colorful laundry hanging between the buildings, cheerful faces of children playing in the streets, jaded faces of elderly people strolling through the streets and a former run-down dorm facility with crumbling walls inhabited by the workers of Osh Bazaar.
Some streets of Interhelpodistrict look abandoned and some appear like the specter of bygone days. The first video shows a meeting point of neighbors gathering at the water tap. In the background, one can hear the monologue of an old resident, Baba Masha, living in the dilapidated building. Baba Masha bemoans that while the city is evolving at the center, nothing improves in the outskirts. She remains nostalgic about the times when the district was taken care of, when the working class had a better economic position and when for a bit more than one rouble a person could buy “a bottle of vodka, lamb and eggs”. Likewise, Baba Masha also complains about new residents moving into the neighborhood and reminisces about the time Stalin was alive.

The second video shows a mispelled name of the district as the name of a shop. So, instead of Intergelpo (the Kyrgyz/Russian pronunciation), it is written Intergilpo. This indicates how displaced the history of Interhelpo has become from the memory of present-day city-dwellers. When one of the participants of the Visualizing Memory workshop called a taxi service, they did not only know where Interhelpo was located but whether or not it existed in the first place.
When the Line 2 trolley bus leaves the hectic hustle and bustle of the Osh Bazaar behind it, a strange-looking world reveals itself to the visitor: one- and two-storey apartment buildings with gabled roofs, cross-bar windows and massive exterior walls. While most of the blocks of flats in the city centre are now locked up behind fences after the bloody riots and looting that accompanied Bakiyev’s change of government in 2010, the inner courtyards and residential complexes of the quarter are openly accessible and convey an atmosphere more reminiscent of life in a rural community. And indeed, many of the salesgirls who work in the small, provisionally built commercial barracks of the quarter come from the rural regions of southern Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, however, the quarter reveals itself not only as a forgotten place, but also as a place of the forgotten. People who suffer from the most precarious working conditions and poverty gather at the taps in the backyards. And hardly anyone remembers what “Interhelpo” stood for as a street name and social project.
Ultimately, our journey takes us to the site that resembles the face of city. Ala-Too Square forms the center of present-day Bishkek, the place through which the city represents herself to the world (and to herself). Yet, as we read her facial traits the whole complexity of present-day Kyrgyzstan is revealed in front of our eyes. For her countenance is janus-faced, mirroring the struggle between opposing interpretations of the country’s recent past. It is the site where new dreams of a Kyrgyz past and old dreams of a Soviet future are opposing each other: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov versus the Kyrgyz epic hero Manas.

Unlike many of his twin brothers who ended up, beheaded (Ukraine), chopped to pieces (Georgia) or dumped into a deserted pool (Armenia), the Lenin statue in Bishkek was merely moved behind the State History Museum to be set up on a pedestal again. With Manas in the front of the square and Lenin in the back, the most central place of Bishkek remains a contested, site that elicits competing narratives on the past.

Just a couple of footsteps away from the main square - above which the equestrian statue of the epic Manas thrones lies the Ministry of Tourism. Beneath the foundation of the building, however, lies a Soviet "secret". When the Soviet Union celebrated its 10th anniversary, letters were buried there addressed to generations that would live 500 later.

During the Soviet period, the square was the place for official celebrations and military parades. But what does Ala-Too and its surroundings mean for the residents of Bishkek today? Perizat Rahkimberdieva and Nasiba Tahstemirova together with Lilit Dabagian embarked on a visit to the square.
The video was shot behind the statue of Lenin at the Old Square and on the backside of the Museum of History in Bishkek. What happens if you leave a tripod alone with three young men when their background the statue of Lenin is showing the path to the bright future?

The street art gallery shown in the second video is situated next to the central square Ala Too and appears to be an eclectic place where young people come on a date, commercial art is being showcased, karaoke singers perform at the background, and artists-salesmen compete with each other in push-ups.

Ala Too Square was built for showcasing military parades and organizing official political events in the 1980s. Then it became a stage for two successful political upheavals in 2005 and 2010 in Kyrgyzstan. The third video was shot at the monument that commemorates the deaths of those killed during the second upheaval. The video shows the interaction of two girls with the architecture of the monument.
I came to Bishkek for the first time when I was in sixth grade—staying at my relatives in Tunguch (a micro-district east of Bishkek). This area seemed quite unremarkable to me back then. Then my sister told me that she wanted to show me "Ala-Too". I was so worried that I even dressed up in a special outfit for my first visit to the square.

Until now, the rural (здешняя) atmosphere seems to me very friendly. When you come to Bishkek, you feel uncomfortable, there is a distinct feeling that you do not belong to this place. You go, for example, to some Burger House, where all the city people (городские) sit and you start to feel embarrassed of yourself. Unlike all other places in the city, the square is a comfortable place, because all the people here are like you... whole families of six or seven people come here, photos are taken and at night they buy luminous toys for children. Persistent photographers offer their services while in the background there is Kyrgyz music playing. And people who come to the square for the first time observe with great curiosity the changing of the guards.

At the same time, "Ala-Too" is a place for "strangers" and when you stop being there, then the square also ceases to exist for you and instead turns into a corridor, a pathway that leads you to other places in the city. A place marked by an endless flow of new people that move through it. It belongs to everyone and at the same time to nobody... like a carnival procession it draws the observer into the performances of cyclists, karaoke singers and wedding processions. It is difficult to imagine that just a few years ago it was the site of major political events in the recent history of Kyrgyzstan. One of our respondents, a man of about 50 participated in both revolutions of 2005 and 2010. But on the day of our field work he walked with his son, who carelessly rode a rented bike and from time to time interrupted our interview with exclamations: "Ata! Ata! " [Father! Father!]

Our other respondent was a saleswoman who sold ice cream and soft drinks – the woman who had worked in nearby Oak Park since her youth lamented that people these days would not know [the meaning] of the site where the eternal flame was - the place had turned into one of the spots for cyclists to perform their stunts. Monuments created under a different ideology seem to have disappeared for passers-by today, being gradually erased from memory. Or in the context of a new era, they just acquire other meanings?

PERIZAT RAKHMANBERDIEVA, NASIBA TASHTEMIROVA

"The purpose of art is to impact the sensation of things as they are perceived and not set as they are known." – Witold Gombrowicz

18
Seeing, hearing and feeling the city

Visualizing Memory

is an ongoing, sensory anthropological project initiated by Lilit Dabagian, a Bishkek-based media researcher and curator, and David Leupold, a Berlin-based researcher in memory studies. Drawing from art and anthropology, it seeks to explore and visualize the multi-layered landscape of urban memory.

The first pilot project was launched to shed light on urban sites that tell new and fascinating counter-narratives on the history of Kyrgyzstan’s capital. Graciously hosted at the art space of Laboratory CI, an introductory workshop brought together participants from extremely diverse occupational backgrounds interested in the topic - ranging from urban photographers, anthropologists and historians to marketing specialists and journalists.

Within the framework of “Arts at Michigan” the project was brought into classrooms at the University of Michigan in the winter semester 2018/19.

Lilit Dabagian is a media researcher and practitioner currently teaching at the University of Central Asia. She has co-initiated and co-curated various socio-cultural, educational and artistic projects such as Pamir-Moscow: Festival of Cultures (2017), an urban festival on labor migration in Russia, Visualizing Memory (2018-ongoing), Museum Sorts Out Its Archives, an archival art exhibition on the history of everyday life in Kyrgyzstan (2019) and ARtBUS (2019-ongoing), a series of artist talks and film screenings in Bishkek.

David Leupold is a researcher in the fields of memory and urban studies at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient Berlin. He was a 2018-2019 postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan and author of various publications on contested memory including the monograph Embattled Dreamlands. The Politics of Contesting Armenian, Turkish and Kurdish Memory (2020).

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19
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seeing, Hearing and Feeling the City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Visualizing Bishkek</em>: The City as an Organism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The City and Her <em>Cracked Skin</em>: Asphalt and surfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The City and Her <em>Sand-Covered Heart</em>: The Fortress Hill and the Kokand Khanate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The City and Her <em>Green Lung</em>: The Garden City and Late-Tsarist Pishpek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The City and Her <em>Subconscious</em>: The District of the Internationalists and Soviet Frunze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The City and Her <em>Janus Face</em>: Ala-Too Square and the Contested Memory Landscape of Today's Bishkek</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*INDEX*

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