

## GEOAIR



EMPLOYMENT  
DIVERSITY IDENTITY  
PARTICIPATION  
NETWORKS LOCAL  
REGENERATION  
COMMUNITY  
SUPPORT CREATIVITY

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### 1. Context

Being the capital city of the country with many changes in previous decades, Tbilisi has faced intensive urban transformation, still ongoing. Citizen participation in the makeover of the city has been rather passive. However, Tbilisi has kept or attained many interesting and hidden sites, lots of contemporary processes or personal stories reveal much about it.

Our projects engage audiences actively with unknown parts and narratives of the city through a diverse collection of collaboration projects, interventions, residencies, publications and activities. GeoAir works with both international and local artists, activists, and researchers to constitute a larger kaleidoscopic perspective on a city trying to find its identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Recurring topics highlight the challenges the city is facing, such as privatization of public space, “recent” migration to Georgia, the remains of the Soviet-time architecture and the denial of its existence in official narratives of the city.

### 2. Tbilisi and culture

Since our first project in 2003 we wanted to serve as a place to instigate, talks, meetings, discussions and presentations because we felt a need for more active citizen participation in defining the future of Tbilisi, both in terms of values as well as urban planning. It is about making a place where people can come and share creations, knowledge, experience and ideas that originate or are to be found worldwide.



We started in 2010 with running a residency program because there was a lack of cultural activities and lack of international outlook and network. It was a self-directed residency program, that offers curators, culture producers and artists the opportunity to base themselves in Tbilisi, Georgia and use this location as a starting point to build networks, meet artists, cultural institutions and curators from the Caucasus region, and develop and deepen their knowledge and research of the Caucasus context.

GEOAIR WORKS WITH BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS AND RESEARCHERS TO CONSTITUTE A LARGER KALEIDOSCOPIC PERSPECTIVE ON A CITY TRYING TO FIND ITS IDENTITY AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION.

### 3. Goals and project implementation

#### 1.1. Main aim and specific goals

GeoAIR organizes projects that bring together people from different cultural backgrounds to find relevant context for them to work in Tbilisi. Priority is given to socially engaged projects in which, through close collaboration of local artists, audiences, and communities, participants share experiences and ideas about the city.

#### 1.2. Development of the project

##### Main actions carried out

By now we have over a decade of experience working site-specifically in public spaces of Tbilisi and have initiated many pioneering urban projects, now being transformed in accumulated research, knowledge and expertise into The Alternative Guide to Tbilisi. Examples of projects include:

- Chess palace - the neverending battle. A striking example of late Soviet Modernist architecture, the Chess Palace was constructed to manifest the strength of Soviet chess and

in particular the “Georgian phenomenon” of strong female players. Built from the modernist philosophy of harmony between nature, architecture, and design, it ended up becoming a battlefield between the initial tenants, and newer peculiar tenants such as a beauty salon and burger bar.

- A neighborhood of markets. The central market Dezerters Bazaar has been deserted after its privatization because of high rental prices. The market sellers have spilled into the surrounding area, creating a complex maze of secret outdoor bars, shoe alleys, pickle basements, and vegetable markets. A walking tour will take the reader to places that even locals might not know.
- Beyond the surface. An experiential tour to life below and above the surfaces of the street: the underground passage where people live and sell secondhand clothes, and the bridges that connect residential houses and plateau districts.
- Pirmze. a cross-media project which reflects upon a transformation of a place built during the Soviet period for housing maintenance and repair services to a new shopping and business center, capturing the transition from socialism to capitalism and the challenges of people in this process.

### Main actors

GeoAIR is a group of people united by the same idea, who aim to develop socially-engaged art practices and increase its influence on existing reality. Our activities are directed towards supporting the professional circle and towards the active involvement of wider public into art processes. We work with many minority groups, schools and other educational institutes, local government, community-led organisations, small businesses in Tbilisi as well as with international arts organisations and foundations. We are also partners in the EU-funded project 'The Green Art Lab Alliance' an international knowledge alliance on environmental sustainability for the cultural sector, which was awarded as a 'Success Story' by the European Commission. We are proud to be a predominantly female core team, next to a big national and international community of friends, participants and Tbilisi citizens.

GeoAIR team members:

- Sophia Tabatadze - founder, visual artist
- Nini Palavandishvili – manager, curator
- Data Chigholashvili – coordinator, anthropologist
- Tata Chirakadze – accountant

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## 4. Evaluation

GeoAIR has concretely impacted the city in three main (interconnected) directions: collaborative cultural projects, a residency program and Archidrome – an accessible Contemporary Art Archive. GeoAIR team has been developing activities dealing with urgent issues, having given hundreds of people a voice and a platform to participate in defining the city. Key has been our flexibility: GeoAIR constantly develops activities to be more research-based and engaged in the specificity of the given environment. A fundamental impact of GeoAIR is the interaction with the public: we have created a cultural community through inclusive, fun, diverse and collaborative initiatives and projects across the city of Tbilisi.

## 5. Recommendations

It would have been better to have a more reliable stream of income because we have always been struggling financially, even though people supported us a lot, this did not translate into funds. Also it would have been a lot better to have a closer relationship and support from our local government to the many projects we realized for the city. The projects could have been implemented more structurally (and therefore be more sustainable) and more embedded also with the formalities and policies of the city.

## 6. Further information

This article was written by Sophia Tabatadze, founder of GeoAIR and visual artist, Tbilisi, Georgia.

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