

## ARCHITECTURE OF TBILISI – ON THE BORDERLINE OF TWO WORLDS. PART I

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### Abstract

The paper presents selected examples of Tbilisi's architecture both historic and modern constructed in the last decade. The main task is to show the architectural variety reflecting the turbulent history of the country, which was strongly influenced by the Islamic, Byzantine, Arab or Persian cultures and which bears traces of the Turkish Anatolia and Iranian styles. Particular places in the city can be distinguished by the multitude of forms and solutions beginning from the early Christian sacred architecture built of stone. The study was divided into two parts. The first one deals with selected examples of the sacred architecture and the architecture of the Old Town. The second one is devoted to the architecture at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries along with the latest projects.

### Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wybrane przykłady architektury Tbilisi zarówno historycznej jak i najnowszej powstałej w ostatnim dziesięcioleciu. Głównym wątkiem jest ukazanie różnorodności architektonicznej wynikającej z burzliwej historii państwa, w której odnaleźć można wpływy islamskie, bizantyjskie, arabskie, perskie, ślady tureckiej Anatolii oraz stylu irańskiego. Poszczególne miejsca w mieście charakteryzuje wielość form i rozwiązań począwszy od wczesnochrześcijańskiej architektury sakralnej wznoszonej z kamienia. Opracowanie podzielono na dwie części. Pierwsza omawia wybrane przykłady architektury sakralnej oraz architekturę starego miasta. Druga poświęcona jest architekturze powstałej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku oraz najnowszym realizacjom.

**Keywords:** Georgian art; Tbilisi's architecture; Sacred architecture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Georgia, a country in Asia, stretches out in the central and western part of the Transcaucasian region, in the south-western part of the Caucasus and covers a part of the southern hillsides of the Great Caucasus. It borders Russia in the north, Azerbaijan in the east and Turkey and Armenia in the south. The western border of the country runs along the coast of the Black Sea. Georgia is divided into 2 autonomous republics, Abkhazia and Ajaria, 9 administrative regions and the city of Tbilisi.

It has been a country with the state tradition lasting for over two thousand years. Located in a difficult

geopolitical zone it has been tormented, destroyed but also shaped by numerous invaders – the Persians, Arabs, Ottoman Empire as well as the Mongolians and Tatars. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the face of the Iranian invasion Georgia turned to Russia for help, in 1801 it lost its independence and was incorporated in the Russian Empire. The city of Tbilisi became the administrative centre of the Russian authorities in the Caucasus region. In 1991 Georgia regained its independence.

An interesting and original culture developed on the territory of Georgia, which later had a substantial effect on the architecture. It originated in the pagan

times, but its basis was formed by Christianity. In the ancient times Georgia maintained close ties with Greece and Rome and at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries with the whole Europe, as a Christian country (the second largest power in the Near East, next to Byzantium). The influence exerted by Islamic, Byzantine, Arab or Persian styles is noticeable. The culture has also traces of the Turkish Anatolia and the Iranian styles.

Multiculturalism and turbulent history contributed to the uniqueness of the art and architecture of the Georgian state, which has always maintained its own features and when accepting foreign patterns it set its stamp on them and implemented them into its own tradition. The feature, which best characterises the people living in that area, is an excellent aestheticism along with the ability to combine beauty and functionality. The territory of the country, which is cut unevenly through by mountain ranges has always been known for its picturesque landscape.

The art created its own forms unprecedented anywhere else in the world. Particular attitude towards ornament should always be distinguished by its superb workmanship, elegance and combination with the whole composition of the architectural work. It often takes the form of plaiting merged with a motif resembling a palmette. A palmette is a decorative motif in the shape of a stylized palm leaf which is symmetrically arranged or spread in a fan-shaped form. Palmette can be found as a single element or as a continuous ornament. The motif was already known in the architecture of the ancient Greece, it comes from the art of the Near East. It was used in polychromes, attic cornices [5]. Variety and individual nature of the culture, art and architectural solutions can be admired up to the present day and apart from the ancient monuments you can also meet modern architecture.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

In order to complete the subject undertaken in the article the following scheme of action was accepted, which consists in distinguishing the following tasks:

- to define the issues – scope and object of the research;
- to do historical research on the development of the sacred architecture in the city of Tbilisi and on the selected characteristic buildings located within the Tbilisi's Old Town (Narikala fortress, Mother Georgia Monument, Baths) based on the historical data, archival materials, in situ analyses and the

author's photographic documentation;

- to define the dependence arising from the analyses of the selected architecture of diversified degree of the scope of determinants in two problem areas: tradition (Tbilisi – on the borderline of two worlds. Part I) and the present day (Tbilisi – on the borderline of two worlds. Part II);
- to draw conclusions.

The task related to the research on the sacred architecture imposed specific methods of study and research. The study carried out in the background of its historical transformations was based on the application of such historical research as: searching, identifying, selecting, source grouping, comparing one another, interpreting, concluding.

Photographs attached to the article constitute the physical evidence – supplement to the text, which enables to clarify the issue. Author's illustrative material, not published so far, required a special selection.

## 3. THE CITY OF TBILISI

Tbilisi, formerly known as Tyflis, is the capital and the largest city of Georgia. It was founded in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by the monarch of Georgia's ancient precursor Kingdom of Iberia. It became the capital of the country in the 6<sup>th</sup> century replacing the nearby city of Mtskheta in that honourable title. Tbilisi is an exceptional city, enchantingly situated on the hills surrounded by the Caucasus Mountains. It stretches out picturesquely in the valley on the River Kura, in old Georgian called Mtkvari. Two worlds intermingle here, which can be defined as the modern West and traditional but extremely colourful East. Both futuristically shaped ultra-modern buildings and the ones constructed in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium border each other in this city. Various buildings are integrated into the beautiful mountainous surrounding, many of them are excellent dominant features – landmarks, which majestically overlook the city. The scenery of the city is distinguished by the domes shining like gold from the distance combined with bright walls of the silhouettes of churches, the stately towering Narikala fortress, and all this is watched over by Kartis Deda, the Mother of Georgia monument.

## 4. ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURE OF TBILISI

For ages the Georgians have been well-known for their passion for art and they have always cared about

the aesthetic qualities of the erected buildings. The Georgian architecture, both the oldest and the newest one, is always properly adapted to the needs and conditions of everyday life. Where the ground conditions were unfavourable the citizens used to build dwelling-houses on stilts (Kolkhida due to swampy soil), whereas in a high-mountain Svaneti they used to build so-called “tower-houses”, stone houses with high watchtowers equipped with embrasures. Uplistsikhe and Vardzia, two cities carved in the rock of high vertical slopes, testify to the excellent craftsmanship of the early medieval masters of the Georgian architecture. In his books on architecture Vitruvius described a type of house called *darbazi* with a characteristic roof, where the successive tiers of beams taper towards the top leaving only a small opening. Such a house became a prototype of the oldest form of the Georgian architecture [2].

The art which came into being in Georgia was not free from the impact of its neighbours, occupants and enemies, but it had always been bound up with local traditions. In spite of the fact that the Georgian medieval art reveals similarities to the art of the East and the West the country was on the boundary of those two worlds. Architects were able to create their own forms, frequently unprecedented anywhere else, which were distinguished by their specific approach to the ornament that was always meticulously made, elegant and bound up with the whole composition of a work of art. The Georgians’ passion for various decorative forms was perfectly expressed in handicraft: enamels, ceramics, woodcarving, icons, bindings of Gospel books and reliquaries. Georgian partition enamelling was a very popular technique in the medieval Byzantium and Georgia. The first example of the Georgian enamel dates back to the 8th century. The peak development of that technique fell on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Artistic enamelling technique is the technique in which the design of the work is made by soldering a number of bent metal or gold strips at the right angle to the decorated plaque. The space made in such a way is then filled with a given colour of enamel. After burning and grinding a plaque decorated with a section enamel looks like a mosaic [7].

## 5. TBILISI’S SACRED BUILDINGS

An important event in the history of the development of the Georgian architecture and art was the acceptance of Christianity because the Georgians, just as the Armenians, created their own technique of

constructing churches. In the first centuries under the Christian rule buildings were hewn out of stone according to the local tradition. Basilicas built in Georgia were spatially diversified in respect of the view configuration: single-nave, three-nave and cruciform buildings with a central dome resting on four main axial bearings (Jvari Church near Mtskheta, dating from the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries).

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century a new style in architecture emerged in the south-western Georgia defined as “Tao – Klarjeti” [1]. Monumental buildings used to be constructed in that period, which in reality were the cross-domed architectural system creatively transposed in a large scale. The central nave rose higher and higher and numerous window openings let lots of light into the interior expanded by a second tier, which was a gallery situated along the western wall. Slender facades are rhythmically decorated with arcaded friezes and arcades, which impart a dynamic character to the entirety.

At the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century the unification of the Georgian regions was followed by the boom of the building craft, which was expressed in the improvement of the religious buildings. A lot of cathedrals and monastery complexes were built, which were perfectly integrated into the surrounding mountain landscape. They did not differ, however, from the principal established trend in the religious building of Georgia. Its view is a prolonged configuration of a rectangle and the dome is supported by crosswise arranged pillars. (Alaverdi Cathedral in the Alazani-River Valley in Kakheti region).

A lot of churches were erected in the following centuries, but they were usually the different versions of the above described prototypes.

There are several sacred buildings and monasteries in Tbilisi. Within the precincts of the Old Town there is an Anchiskhati church. Sioni Cathedral is also a characteristic building.

On the rock, at the foot of which flows the River Mtkvari there is a Metechi church. Presumably it had been there from the 5<sup>th</sup> century and it belonged to the palace complex.

For some time the church served as a prison. At the King Vakhtang’s Square there is St. George cathedral dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which is the Armenian temple. Within the city bounds on the hill there is also the Father’s David’s monastery. The present church dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is delightfully situated among the trees.

The Georgian sacred architecture is distinguished from the outside by its monumentalism emphasized by the material it is built of in the form of stone blocks. The interior is accentuated by the decoration: vault arches, window niches and pilaster caps decorated with sumptuous ornamentation of paintings.

Armenian masters brought carving in stone to perfection, the art which had been known in Armenia for ages. Famous Armenian cross stones “khatchar” have no counterparts in the world art.

Closely linked with the architecture is the development of monumental sacred sculpture distinguished by its great composition licence. Achievements of the Georgian wall painting are also outstanding. Unlike the frozen, stereotypical figures from the Byzantine frescoes the Georgian ones are shown with a great charm in motion. Georgian artists have always imparted national characteristic to the features of faces, even in case of biblical figures.

### 5.1. Anchiskhati Church



Figure 1.  
Anchiskhati Church

The spatial structure of the church building was erected thanks to the son of the King Vakhtang Gorgasali, the Georgian king of Kartlia. The oldest

part of the church dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The mass of the church has a very original form which is not like the typical temples constructed in later years. The remaining part of the spatial structure was preserved thanks to the reconstruction carried out in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The church was built of the cut stone. It is a three-nave building typical of the early medieval sacred architecture of Georgia.

Protruding apse based on a semicircular plan as well as aisles joined with semicircular-shaped arches resemble a basilica in Bolsini, which dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. On the side of the western façade of the church there is a campanile from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Inside there are wonderful frescoes, a part of which date 400 years back.

The name Anchiskhati derives from a holy icon from the Anchi cathedral situated in Klarjeti, thus on ethnically Georgian territories conquered by the Turks. The icon is a masterpiece made by an outstanding goldsmith and metalwork artist Beka Opizari who lived and worked at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### 5.2. Sioni Cathedral



Figure 2.  
Sioni Cathedral



The Sioni cathedral was built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It constitutes of a classical Georgian example of a sacred building made of stone. It was based on the Greek cross plan with a dome and an altar apse. As a result of numerous conquests it was destroyed. At the beginning of the 18th century the walls and dome of the cathedral were faced with golden tuff thanks to the King of Kartlia Vakhtang VI. In Georgia tuff is used as a building material. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the interior decoration was changed. The walls were covered with frescoes made by a painter Grigory Gagarin, who introduced changes to the iconostasis as well.

The frescoes and iconostasis significantly differ from the old Georgian traditional art, they additionally contrast with an extraordinary simplicity of the cathedral interior.

The cross of St. Nino is kept in the Sioni cathedral, which is one of the most precious relics of Georgia (the state relic of the patron of Georgia). The cross is made of two grapevines plaited with the Saint's own hair. Thanks to St. Nino's missionary work Georgia accepted Christianity in 337, as the second country in the world (after Armenia). Religious life of contemporary Georgia centres around the Sioni cathedral. The cathedral is the residence of the Catholicos Illia II, Patriarch of the Autocephalous (independent) church of Georgia.

Near the cathedral there is a campanile built in 1812 to the design of an architect coming from Petersburg. He introduced a typical Russian classicism into the city of Tbilisi.

### 5.3. Metekhi Church

In the narrowest place of the canyon of the Kura River, on the high left embankment of the river there is the Metekhi church built on a rock protrusion, which the Georgians call Metekhi. It was constructed on the rock which vertically falls to the waters of the River Mtkvari. The walls of the temple, golden and sandy coloured, constitute an extension of a gigantic rock precipice.

The first church was built here as early as in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The present church was constructed within 1278 and 1289, and it was numerous times rebuilt. A castle of the Georgian kings was also erected here, which was surrounded by high walls. Today the church bears testimony to the palace complex destroyed by Genghis Khan. The palace ceased to exist when the city was destroyed by the Persians in 1795. The tsar authorities changed the survived church into a prison,



Figure 3.  
Metekhi Church

which existed here till 1935. In the 1970's the interior of the Metekhi church served as a theatre. After almost two hundred years the building has regained its title of a church building.

Metekhi church is one of the prides of Tbilisi. Its simple stone silhouette belongs to the most recognizable landmarks constituting a dominant feature overlooking the Old Town. The building's design is based on the Greek cross plan with a pyramid-shaped dome over the crossing of the aisles and the apse surrounding the presbytery. It is a classic example of the Georgian architecture of that time. A simple interior with a wooden iconostasis is lightened with the glow of burning candles. In a square in front of the temple stands the statue of the King Vakhtang Gorgasali sitting on a horse, who was one of the most powerful Georgian rulers. The sculpture made by one of the most outstanding Georgian sculptors Elguja Amashukeli is turned towards the rocky hills of the Sololaki Ridge, on the right bank of the River Kura where the walls of the Narikala fortress can be seen. There is a superb view from the walls of the church over the Narikala fortress and the Old Town, which are situated right behind the river.

#### 5.4. Tsminda Sameba Cathedral



Figure 4.  
Tsminda Sameba Cathedral

Tsminda Sameba Cathedral (the Holy Trinity Cathedral) is the largest church in Georgia. It stands on the Elia hill above Avlabari. It offers an unforgettable view at night when it is beautifully illuminated. The cathedral was built in 2004. The construction work lasted 10 years. It is 84 metres high and it is topped with a golden dome. A manuscript of the New Testament bound in calfskin is kept in the cathedral.

#### 5.5. Kashueti Church

In the nineteenth-century part of the city on its main road vis-à-vis the parliament building there is the Kashueti Church built of white stone. It used to be the place of the pagan cult.

### 6. TBILISI OLD TOWN – MOEDONI

In the centre of Tbilisi on both sides of the River Kura there is an enclave – Tbilisi Old Town. It is a very charming place full of narrow, winding, cobbled, steep streets.

The architecture blending into the landscape of the rocky slopes delights with its diversity both in the spatial structure of the architectural form and in material combination of wood and stone. The houses are



Figure 5.  
Kashueti Church



Figure 6.  
Dwelling houses – Old Town



single- or two-storey buildings with intricately carved balconies (open or roofed), arcades, columns and diverse extensions creating harmonious and compact masses. These decorative, bracketed balconies are the characteristic feature of the Georgian wooden architecture. Their hand-made decorations frequently resemble the oriental arabesque designs. This architecture blends into the landscape of the rocky hillsides and into the green of grapevines surrounding the houses and courtyards, the twisted and stunted trunks of which seem to be as old as the houses many times blackened with age. The front elevations of the buildings with porches and wooden arcaded galleries are turned to the street, they are in no way separated from it. Fencings with gates and driveways can be occasionally seen in newly-constructed dwelling houses. Picturesque, narrow streets of the Old Town can be distinguished by the predominance of the oriental designs. However, in their openness they differ from the streets of the Muslim cities.

Presently renovated buildings enrapture both by their wooden detail and by the sequence of the stone walls. A new architectural detail also deserves attention as it non-intrusively merges into the whole concept. All this has been designed to be made of cut stone and wood. There are very few plastered buildings as well as the ones built of brick. The building development is full of courtyards covered with grapevines.

Another distinctive element of that part of the city is the colour. The buildings are very diverse and often “stuck together”. They are colourful, but in spite of a wide colour range they retain the pastel range of colours, from ochre to burnt sienna, from white, azure to the blue, etc. The buildings in that part of the city are usually roofed with red tiles.

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### 6.1. Narikala Fortress

The ruins of the Narikala fortress majestically overlook the red roofs of the Tbilisi Old Town. Despite the fact that not much of the original construction survived to this day the whole yet looks very impressive. It is recommended to admire the fortress from under the walls of the Metechi church situated on the left bank of the River Mtkvari. On the other hand the most favourable entrance to the fortress is from the Abanotubani – a district famous for its baths.



Figure 7.  
Narikala fortress

Narikala was destroyed and rebuilt many times. The layers of stones filling the wall, which come from different ages testify to that. The fortress gave the Tbilisi's citizens shelter during numerous enemy invasions. The first walls were built already in the 4<sup>th</sup> century upon the order of the Persian oppressors. But the majority of what survived to the present day was constructed during the rule of the Arab emirs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, the fortress lost its military importance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became a ruin in 1827 as a result of an earthquake. What remained are some fragments of semicircular towers and stone walls.

Moedoni – situated on the Kura River is the oldest part of the city. The Old Town spreads out at the foot of the mountains on the top of which there is the Narikala Fortress, which dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century when the city was under the Persian rule.

### 6.2. Mother Georgia Statue – KARTIS DEDA

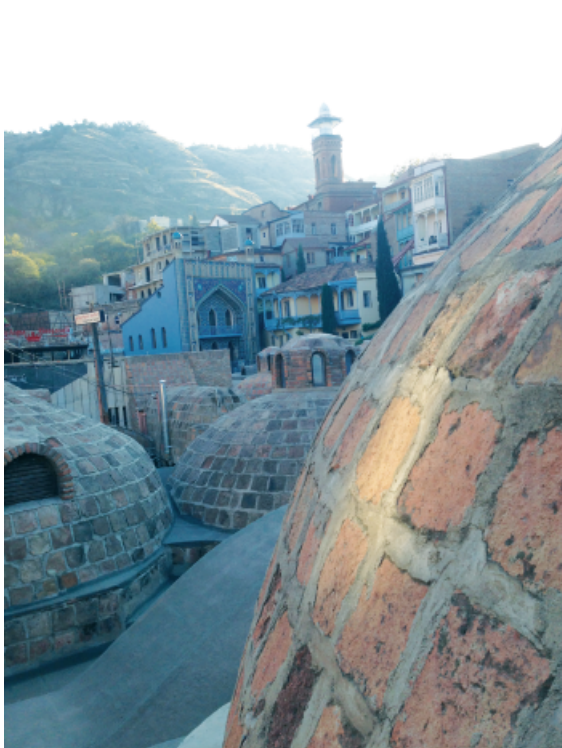
The statue of a woman holding a bowl in one hand and a sword in the other (symbol of “Mother Georgia”) is 20 meters high and it is made of aluminium. Through that statute the Georgians show the world their affection for friendship and a strong craving for freedom and independence. Wine sym-



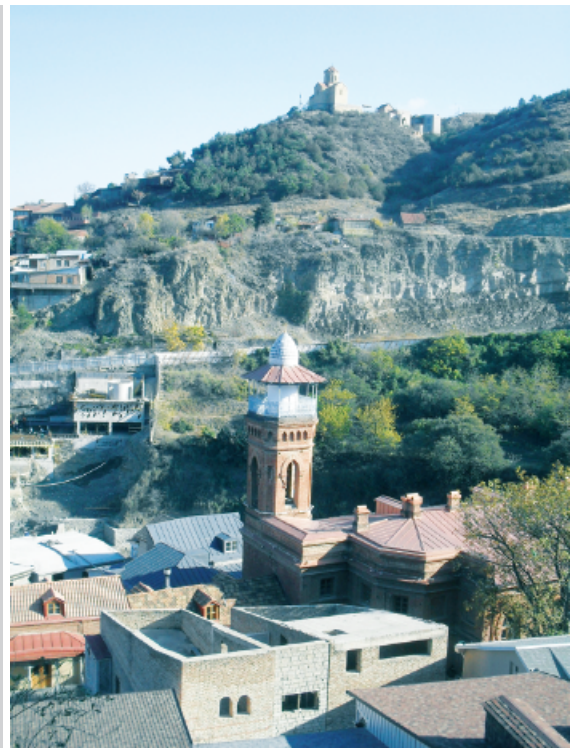
**Figure 8.**  
A monument of Mother Georgia – Kartis Deda



**Figure 10.**  
Panorama of the city – a view over the roofs of the Old Town, the Peace Bridge, Theatre and the Parliament



**Figure 9.**  
Domes of the baths



**Figure 11.**  
A view over a part of the district with baths, a minaret in the foreground





**Figure 12.**  
A detail of a roofed balcony intricately carved

bolizes the Georgian hospitality. This huge, light-coloured statue standing on the Mount of Mtacmi can be seen from many places in the city.

### 6.3. Baths

In the oldest part of the city there is the Abanotubani district famous for its baths, which are about 1500 years old. It is a special place in the city because in the past the role of a bath went beyond the mere hygienic function. It was a place of social gatherings of high societies, a favourite nook of the bohemia and even a sort of a hotel for the rural people trading in the city. The charm of the Tbilisi's baths was praised by famous writers and poets such as Alexander Dumas or Alexander Pushkin. Several old baths survived at the Bath street.

The view of a bath is an architectural surprise, that is an unusual view of marvellous brick-domes springing up as if straight from the ground. Not far from the domes there is "Chreli abano" Azreli Abano, multi-coloured Bath, the portal of which decorated with two small minarets resembles the Persian architecture. The elevation of the bath is covered with a mosaic. In front of the baths is a fountain with a falcon of Vakhtang Gorgasali, the first ruler of Georgia.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The research carried out in a many-sided way enabled to present the analysed issues concerning the selected buildings situated in Tbilisi, taking into account different historical impacts including the continuation of tradition, its disappearance and modern solutions. Individual field research constituted an essential part. Direct observation of both spatial structure: arrangement of views, architectural forms, building materials which were used and structural solutions as well as detail elements allowed to determine the building features of the Tbilisi's sacred architecture. This research additionally supported by inventory methods (photographic and pictorial) of particular buildings enabled to obtain the picture of the solutions for the analysed buildings, which concern the traditional and contemporary architecture (Tbilisi – on the borderline of two worlds. Part II).

**Table 1.**  
Summary of features distinguishing the Georgian architecture

General feature	<b>ornament</b> – meticulously executed, elegant and linked with the whole composition of the architectural work; frequently taking on forms of plaiting connected with a motif similar to a palmette
	<b>material combination of wood and stone</b> – diversity of solutions to the spatial structure of architectural form <b>darbazi type of house</b> - characteristic roof, successive tiers of beams taper towards the top leaving only a small opening
	<b>ability to combine beauty with functionality</b>
Features distinguishing the housing architecture of the old town.	<b>decorative, bracketed balconies</b> – distinguishing feature of the Georgian wooden architecture, hand-made decorations frequently resemble the oriental arabesque designs
	<b>material combination of wood and stone</b> – diversity of solutions to the spatial structure of architectural form
	<b>a new architectural detail</b> non-intrusively merging into the whole concept
	<b>colour</b> in architecture

Sacred architecture	<b>spatial structure (view configuration)</b> – diversity of the view combinations: single-nave, three-nave and cruciform with a central dome resting on four main axial bearers
	<b>spatial structure (architectural form)</b> monumentalism emphasized by the material of a building made of stone blocks (cut stones)
	<b>structure</b> – inventing a unique technique for constructing churches according to the local tradition
	<b>building materials</b> cut stone; peak development of the building craft
	<b>ornament</b> which makes the entire composition of the building mass
	<b>new style</b> of the Georgian architecture defined as “Tao – Klarjeti” – enormous buildings, which in reality were the cross-domed architectural system creatively transposed in a large scale
	<b>urban-planning context</b> marvellous integration into the urban fabric and the surrounding mountain landscape
	<b>interiors</b> accentuated by decoration: vault arches, window niches and pilaster caps decorated with sumptuous ornamentation of paintings
	<b>sacred sculpture</b> monumental, distinguished by its great composition licence
	<b>wall paintings</b> – figures shown with a great charm in motion; imparting national characteristic to the features of faces, even in case of biblical figures

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