



by Pirouz Khanlou

CONSTRUCTION! DESTRUCTION?

Blueprint for Baku's Urban Development

Since Azerbaijan gained its independence in late 1991, Baku's growth, as evidenced by the recent building boom, has been phenomenal. In the past five years, more than 500 new high-rise towers have "sprung up like mushrooms after rain," as the Azerbaijanis say.

Unfortunately, Baku's development has been anarchic with no reference to any comprehensive strategy for urban planning or design, according to Architect Pirouz Khanlou of Los Angeles, who has carried out numerous architectural projects in the city. Regrettably, the city is barely able to cope with such accelerated growth. Khanlou stresses urgency in addressing these issues and insists that unless serious steps are undertaken, the future spells disaster, especially given that the city is located in an active earthquake zone.

As one who has been directly and continuously involved with Azerbaijan since the first days of its independence in the early 1990s, Khanlou shares his concern for the city's development and particularly for the safety of those living there.

Khanlou suggests tackling these problems on both a short-term and long-term basis. Some issues can be resolved quickly; others require a major overhaul of the municipal infrastructure. He urges a broad vision for the city and recommends that the government employ professionals and experienced consultants to conduct in-depth, comprehensive studies in search of practical, but reliable solutions.

The consequence of ignoring growth issues, Khanlou argues, is a guaranteed formula for disaster. Officials and "nouveau riche" developers can fool themselves as much as they want, but their negligence in addressing such issues will not change the bitter truth about Baku's future. One day, sooner or later, Nature will insist on following its own rules. Today is the moment to act. Tomorrow may be too late to avoid catastrophe and correct problems brought on by negligence and incompetence.

It's for this reason that we have undertaken to translate this lengthy article into Azeri and to publish it alongside the English version. We believe these issues are critically important for the welfare of Azerbaijanis and hope that our efforts will lead to community discussion and tangible results.

Ten years ago on October 28, 1995, fire swept through one of Baku's evening Metro trains during rush hour, killing more than 300 commuters and injuring another 500.¹ It was the worst Metro accident ever recorded in the history of railway transport—anywhere in the world.

Shortly afterwards, I challenged Baku's lack of strategy in transportation planning.² "The reality," I wrote, "is that traffic on Baku's streets is far more congested today [1995] than it was even just three years ago. In fact, traffic is rapidly turning into a nightmare. In sections of central Baku, it's faster to go on foot than to drive. In this period of transition from a socialist to a market economy, the city will continue to develop in a haphazard way unless there is a serious strategy that anticipates the future. Entrepreneur activities will become paralyzed."

Well, a decade has since passed, and the haphazard development of the city has continued at an even more rapid pace than one could imagine. Traffic has become a daily nightmare and has, indeed, brought the city to a halt. Today, traffic jams are the everyday norm.

Complicating this issue is the fact that there has been a tremendous boom in construction in Baku, particularly during the past five years as more than 500 high-rise towers have been erected—not to mention the thousands of new low-rise buildings. This has led to an incredible high density of population in the center of the city.

Nothing is wrong with development, in and of itself. But when it leads to serious negative consequences related to the safety and welfare of the people, then the issue of urban development must be examined and steps taken to rectify these problems. Development needs to move forward in a planned, deliberate, systematic and scientific fashion, not one based on spontaneity or whim.

An Azerbaijani friend of mine—an intelligent, highly educated and socially conscious fellow—recently broached the subject with me: "Construction is a sign of progress," he observed. "I realize that something is wrong, but I don't know exactly how to pinpoint the issues."

In this article, I attempt to identify some of these problems and propose some pragmatic solutions—both short term and long term. This article is



Panoramic view of Baku's skyline. More than 500 towers have been erected in the past five years. Architecturally, there is no sense of unity and cohesiveness. Photo: Pirouz Khanlou, October 2005.

written for the general reader—and thus does not use highly technical architectural and engineering terms. The most important thing to understand is that Baku is facing a major crisis, which will have enormous repercussions and consequences if the City does not move quickly and seriously to address these issues and resolve them.

THE LARGER CONTEXT

The issue of traffic should be examined within the framework of its much broader urban context. Traffic congestion is merely a symptom of an “urban planning disorder”. Baku's transportation system was designed for the Soviet era [1920-1991], and it simply can't keep pace with the demands of a more open market economy, fueled by the independent spirit of entrepreneurship.

During the Soviet era, there were relatively few cars in Baku. Archival photographs, taken as recent as 15 years ago, show fairly empty streets with few vehicles. The road system seemed fairly adequate with its fairly wide avenues and boulevards.

The use of private cars during the Soviet period was deemed a privilege, primarily reserved for ranking government officials. Even so, it wasn't easy to get a car; there were long waiting lists. People waited for years. In general, the public relied upon mass transportation—buses, trolleys and the Metro.

Oil Baron Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev (1823-1924) is credited with being the first person in Azerbaijan to own a car. Soon after Henry Ford began manufacturing Model T's in the United States in 1904, he had one shipped to Baku. By 1911, there were 36 automobiles bumping along the cobble stone streets alongside horses, carriages and pedestrians.³

The City Plan at the beginning of the 20th century was quite adequate. By that time, Baku had become the most sophisticated metropolitan center in the Caucasus. Based on well-conceived Urban Planning, the municipal infrastructure included parks, streets and public transportation.

Problems such as securing a safe water supply, which had plagued the city for nearly half a century, had finally been resolved. The Shollar Pipeline brought water from the foothills of the Caucasus, nearly 190 kilometers away.⁴ A sewage system was in place, as was a transportation system that included both rail and trolley. Public buildings had been constructed, including schools, hospitals, theaters, government administrative offices, and places of worship (mosques, churches, a huge cathedral and a synagogue). The crowning jewels to Baku's architectural landscape were its private residences—elegant, ornate and often palatial—built by the oil industrialists.⁵ During the height of the Oil Boom (1880-1920), Baku witnessed incredible urban development. More than 700 residential and community buildings were constructed. Both local and European architects were involved.

But these glorious architectural buildings faced destruction at an alarming rate when the Bolsheviks seized power in 1920 and confiscated all property. In many cases, the owners who had not fled the country were killed. Buildings were subdivided into multiple living units, sometimes housing as many as 20 to 25 families. Family accommodations were often limited to one and two rooms, but the kitchens and bathrooms had to be shared with other families as communal space. Still today you can see hundreds of examples where dining rooms with highly ornate decorative ceilings were literally partitioned right down the middle of the room with a wall that separated living space for two different families.

Another neglectful practice of the Soviet period that negatively impacted the buildings of the Oil Baron period was the failure to maintain the buildings. Deprived of a sense of ownership, apartment residents did not feel responsible to take care of public spaces such as entrances, stairways, courtyards or facades. As a result, communal spaces often became dilapidated and run down simply because they “didn't belong to anybody”. No one felt responsible. Buildings collected a century of dirt and grime, and by the time Azerbaijan gained its independence 70 years later (1991), most buildings were in desperate need of a facelift, via sandblasting. Exterior facades cried out for a coat of paint.

With today's rise in land value, developers are buying up these old properties and demolishing them so they can profit on the limited premium space in downtown. Towers of 15-25 stories are replacing the old buildings that used to exceed no more than two, three, or at most, four floors.

As far as central planning was concerned during the Soviet period, beginning with Stalin's era (until mid-1950s), the center of power was transferred to Moscow, as were all decisions related to its Master Plan. This period was marked by the New Economic Plan (NEP) in the Soviet Union and the undertaking of major construction of numerous public buildings and infrastructure projects.⁶

The next major wave of construction (late 1950s to mid-1980s) is identified with Khrushchev and characterized by large-scale, massive housing projects, consisting of pre-fabricated, low-quality concrete buildings, typically nine stories high. Generally, the same typical floor plans were duplicated throughout the Soviet Union, without taking into consideration the local context, architecture or culture.

From the early 1980s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991, the Soviet bureaucracy, crippled by an economy that was nearly bankrupt, proved to be incapable of continuing its ambitious Socialist city planning and urban development projects. It could no longer maintain the existing buildings and aging infrastructure. Some experts suggest that the government's inability to maintain the infrastructure was one of the contributing factors that hastened the downfall of the Soviet Union. This collapse suddenly left 15 independent republics, including Azerbaijan, to fend for themselves and take on the responsibility of charting their own destinies.



BAKU TODAY

Obviously, Baku's reality today is quite different from that of the Soviet period. Market economy and private ownership both introduce a different complexity. Owning a car is no longer a luxury. In recent years, an estimated 12 new cars per day have been added to Baku's streets. Traditionally, it was men who drove. Today, many women sit behind the wheel.⁷ A few years ago, it would have been quite exceptional for a family to own more than one vehicle but not so today.

Despite the enormous popularity of cars, Baku has not built a single street, highway, overpass or underpass, or developed any other means of modern transportation system during the past 15 years. In fact, many of the existing surface modes of road transportation, such as the electric trains and buses, have been retired. Today, new asphalt covers the old tracks. With the exception of a limited Metro system (two lines), there is no standard single transportation company, which operates what could be called a comprehensive transportation system that meets up to Western standards. There are, however, a great number of bus and mini bus services that operate throughout the city, which are both convenient and operate frequently. However, this mode of transportation cannot be said to be efficient or safe.

For example, there are no properly designated bus stops, which provide benches or seating facilities for passengers who must wait. There are no timetables, route maps and signage. Instead, these mini buses operate, more or less, on a spontaneous basis, picking up passengers and dropping them off seemingly anywhere.

There is no standard ticket system—for example, monthly passes with discounts for senior citizens, students and the disabled. Nor are there facilities to accommodate those who are handicapped to foster independent mobility throughout the city.

Many buses are not well maintained. During morning and evening rush hours, they tend to be overloaded, creating dangerous conditions for passengers, as well as other drivers. Accidents occur. Passengers have even been thrown out of moving vehicles and killed, because of malfunctioning locks on doors. There have even been occasions when people were thrown out when the doors were left open for ventilation.

CITY MASTER PLAN

These days, no city can develop successfully without a carefully deliberated City Master Plan; nor should it be allowed to. Such plans must be based on a series of thorough studies in relation to the actual rate of city growth. The Master Plan should offer solutions for the city's infrastructure in many spheres,

including transportation, communication, utilities, housing, commercial activities, and public spaces.

The City Master Plan defines Zoning Ordinance requirements for various types of activities, in relationship to residential, commercial, public services, and industrial sectors. It determines and differentiates between the population densities for land use. It anticipates the complex needs of future growth and development. It is absolutely mandatory for every modern city to have a Master Plan as a blueprint for its current as well as future development. But when you look around Baku and see the chaotic urban development, it's clear there is no Master Plan.

In 1994, a new stage in the development of the country was ushered in with the signing of the "Contract of the Century" for the development of Azerbaijan's largest oil reserves in the Caspian Basin. Western companies began to establish themselves in the capital, during the phenomenon that is often referred to as Baku's Second Oil Boom. But this time, the development has been much more rapid and on a much grander scale than the First Oil Boom that took place at the end of the 19th century.

Catapulted by a market economy, major commercial and residential projects have developed at an extraordinary pace. Construction and development have been so rapid that existing legislation, inherited from the Soviet past, has not been able to keep pace. This is especially true in terms of the municipal administrative bodies, city ordinances and the establishment of various active architectural and planning commissions and other crucial public services governing bodies.

GAS, POWER, WATER SHORTAGES

Existing public services and infrastructure, including roads, electricity network, water and gas supplies, and sewage systems are loaded far beyond the capacity for which they were designed. They are now on the brink of collapse. For the past 20 years, there has not been any major upgrade to these systems. These new towers place exponential demands on gas, water and power supplies. Electrical blackouts occur frequently, especially during winter. The drainage system can't even handle a single heavy rain without serious flooding in the streets.

There are frequent interruptions to water and gas supplies. Outages can last for hours, or even days. This is not to say that such shortages did not exist during the Soviet period. The truth is: they occurred quite frequently.⁸ But it is inexcusable that nearly 15 years after independence, these problems have not been solved. The density of so many high-rise buildings in the center of the city merely exacerbates these problems.