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# Modernising the Waterfront: Urban Green, Built Environment and Social Life of the Baku Promenade

**TSYPYLMA DARIEVA**

## **Abstract**

*This paper comprises of a description and analysis of materiality and social life of one specific urban public space, the Baku Promenade. Drawing on ethnographic field work in Azerbaijan, I provide some insights into Baku's experience of the recent modernization of urban public space by looking at the method of modernization employed to realize the visions of a public green park. Particular attention will be paid to the role of trees and green architecture as a tool for ordering the city and the political mobilization of nature in the process of constructing socialist and post-socialist public spaces in Azerbaijan. Beyond the changing materiality of the built environment and urban green, I discuss how the Baku Promenade has been perceived and used by ordinary people, as well as the meanings visitors attach to the urban park in their memories of the late Soviet era. I argue that the official redevelopment of Baku Promenade has purified the space not only from the materiality of its Soviet era asphalt, but also from its egalitarian sociality and local intimacy of tree-shaded walkways.*

Urban green, modernization, Azerbaijan, waterfront, sociality, leisure

## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Modernisierung am Wasser: Städtisches Grün, bebaute Umwelt und soziales Leben der Promenade von Baku**

*Dieser Beitrag besteht aus einer Beschreibung und einer Analyse der Materialität und des sozialen Lebens eines spezifischen öffentlichen Ortes im städtischen Raum – der Promenade in Baku. Unter Bezugnahme auf die Ergebnisse ethnografischer Feldforschung in Aserbaidshan gebe ich einen Einblick in den Modernisierungsprozess von öffentlichem Raum. Dabei konzentriere ich mich auf die Modernisierungsmethode, die bei der Konstruktion einer öffentlichen Grünanlage, eines Erholungsparks, zum Einsatz kam. Ein besonderer Schwerpunkt liegt dabei auf der Rolle von Bäumen und grüner Architektur als Werkzeug zur urbanen Ordnung und politischen Mobilisierung der Natur im Kontext des sozialistischen und postsozialistischen Lebens in Aserbaidshan. In einem Ansatz, der über die sich verändernde Materialität hinausgeht, erörtere ich, wie die Baku Promenade von ganz normalen Menschen wahrgenommen und genutzt wird, jedoch auch, welche Bedeutung Besucher dem Stadtpark in ihren Erinnerungen an die späte Sowjetzeit beimessen. Ich argumentiere dahingehend, dass die rezente Sanierung und Kommerzialisierung der Promenade den öffentlichen Raum nicht nur von der Materialität seines Asphalts aus der Sowjetära befreit hat, sondern auch von seiner egalitären Geselligkeit und der von Bäumen beschatteten lokalen Vertraulichkeit.*

Stadtpark, Modernisierung, Aserbaidshan, Ufer, Sozialität, Freizeit

*Советский парк – массовый парк, он проводит огромную культурно-воспитательную работу; его посетитель – трудящийся самых различных национальностей.*

The Soviet park is a park for masses and it is the place to promote the cultural-educational work; its visitors are workers of very different nationalities.<sup>1</sup>

In the past, the city had a soul; today it has become beautiful and shiny, in a somehow unfamiliar and scary way. (Раньше у города была душа, сейчас только лоск и красота не понятная, а где-то даже пугающая ...) <sup>2</sup>  
Vyacheslav Sapunov 2011

## Introduction

Commemorating the centenary of the Baku Promenade, the newspaper *Bakinskiy Rabochiy* (Baku Worker) enthusiastically wrote on August 14<sup>th</sup> 2009 about a modernization and re-development project, initiated and funded by the state authorities: “New modernized hotels and a business centre are already under construction on Baku Promenade. The most positive news is that all industrial structures located within the construction area will be removed. This will improve the ecological situation and the environment in our Baku Bay”<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper, I provide some insights into Baku’s experiences in the recent ‘modernisation’ of urban public space by looking at the method of modernization employed to realize the visions of a public green park. Particular attention will be paid to the role of trees as tool of ordering and as an arena of ideology (Low 2000, 2005; JONES and CLOKE 2005) on one hand, and to the meaning of social life of green architecture in the process of creating a public space in Azerbaijan, on the other hand. One of the characteristic features of modernity and modernist practices has been the idea of the city as

an object of governance (MITCHELL 1988; RABINOW 1989), and the socialist city was designed as “the cradle of progress and (...) a generative model of transformative modernity” (ALEXANDER et al. 2007, p. 3). As the editors of this special issue outlined in their introduction, this instrumental understanding of the city is characteristic of Soviet urbanism, and found its expression in the realms of urban design, infrastructure and architecture. Another integral part of Soviet city planning as a tool for effective governance was urban green and garden art, whose mission was to reinforce the dominance of ideology and to frame a view of an official building glorifying socialist achievements. Adapting Howard’s Garden City principles, the fundamental idea of Socialist Realism included not only<sup>4</sup> building *microrayan*<sup>5</sup> as the socialist neighbourhood unite, Palaces of Culture (SIEGELBAUM 1999; ДОНАНОЕ and HABECK 2011), the House of Pioneers (REID 2002) as public sites of human engineering, but also environmental planning. Indeed, in the studies of socialist modernity, little attention has been given to the meaning of green elements of public buildings, parks and green stripes in the city as equally grandiloquent symbols of socialist urbanism. Construction of green spaces for public use occurred on both sides of the world. Like Nazi Germany’s *Kraft durch Freude* folk campaigns, the mission of the Park of Culture was to emancipate, civilize and nationalize workers’ free time and leisure by promoting the active use of public spaces, hygienic habits, fresh air and access to nature. But unlike European and US American experiences, modern socialist leisure and recreation was centralized and organized outside the realm of commerce and private clubs. Open air space was considered to be a place for regulating Soviet-type ‘cultured leisure’<sup>6</sup>, an important aspect of Soviet life with its aesthetic vision of a progressive society. Cultured leisure activities in the Soviet

Orient included adults’ and children’s sports, educational entertainment, walking and viewing the landscape; they were beyond the reach of religious desires and the traditional norms of leisure activity within private courtyards, which were regulated by the hierarchy of kinship and gender segregation. HUMPHREY outlined the meaning of the Soviet urban courtyard (*dvor*) and of greening for the urban ideology of Russia’s residential areas, where inhabitants were expected to cultivate a sense of collective wellbeing in a micro-climate by spending hours doing voluntary work, such as planting trees, gardening and watering (HUMPHREY 2005, p. 52). However, the urban courtyard in Soviet cities was planned for recreation and communal services as a protected inner area, contrasted with the outer zone of streets and squares. As in the West (BERMAN 1988), the Soviet state had been engaged in developing mass leisure culture and one can observe a spectacular growth of open air leisure activities also in traditional Moslem societies. Similar to Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure in Moscow, parks in the Caucasus and Central Asia should provide a new space for Soviet ‘spiritual values’ and the new understanding of nature, a healthy environment for the leisure of the working masses.

Exploring the changing materiality of public space and the redesigning of urban green landscape in Azerbaijan, in the following pages I discuss how Baku Promenade has been designed by city planners and how it has been perceived and used by ordinary people. It will be suggested that visitors’ memories of the urban park in the late Soviet era still contribute to the conceptual world of post-socialist Bakuvians. Focusing on the transformation of one specific public green space, a waterfront promenade, I locate this artefact in the larger context of the Caucasus’s history of urban modernity, and make linkages to contemporary gentrification processes in port cities globally. Based on ethnographic research, an analysis of informal interviews with visitors, archival documents and literature, the paper

1 See in USSR’s Park Architecture 1940, p. 3.

2 Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mCjfc-3SYk&feature=related>.

3 See in DZHEVANSHIR 2009.

4 Compare with SHAW 1979, ZUZANEK 1980, PETZOLD 1988, KUCHER 2007.

5 See more on *microrayon* in FRENCH 1979, SMITH 1996.

6 Compare HOFFMANN 2003.

attempts to illuminate what kind of values Bakuvians express towards the formal beautification design, the recent physical renewal of the embankment and its new spirit. Similar to Seta Low's (2000) analysis of Parque Central in San Jose and relying on DE CERTEAU's (1984) idea of everyday practice in response to official strategies for ordering the city, I argue that the official redevelopment of Baku Promenade has purified the space not only from the materiality of its Soviet era asphalt, but also from its egalitarian sociality and tactics of intimacy of the late Soviet era. In referenceto the globalizing processes in cities, outlined by HERZFELD as 'social and cultural evacuation of space' (2005), I shall suggest that the Baku

Promenade, packaged in marble and granite, lined with exotic palm and cactus trees, has been turned into a sanitized commodity decorated with global symbols of modernity and designed for local and international elites.

**Locating Baku Promenade**

Baku Promenade is a waterfront space with green public areas, referred to in quotidian accounts simply as the *Bulvar* (Fig. 1). Built between the 1880s and 1909, it occupies a large part of the Caspian seashore (3.5 km) and is a part of the natural amphitheatre of Baku Bay. The stripe between Azneft Square and Baku Harbour is one of the largest urban open public spaces in Transcaucasia. It is

the central city landmark of Baku and has been the subject of and portrayed in numerous guidebooks, novels, tourist pictures and advertising postcards. It can be easily reached by means of public transportation (metro station *Sahil*), by private car and by foot from different corners of the city. Constructed and designed on artificial soil, the waterfront Baku Promenade claims to represent the modernist city close to nature.

It was the Soviet master plan of 1937 that significantly reshaped Baku's city structure by centralizing the core of the city around the waterfront of Baku Bay and the House of Government. The urban green landscape was designed as a 'fixation' of main roads and boundaries be-

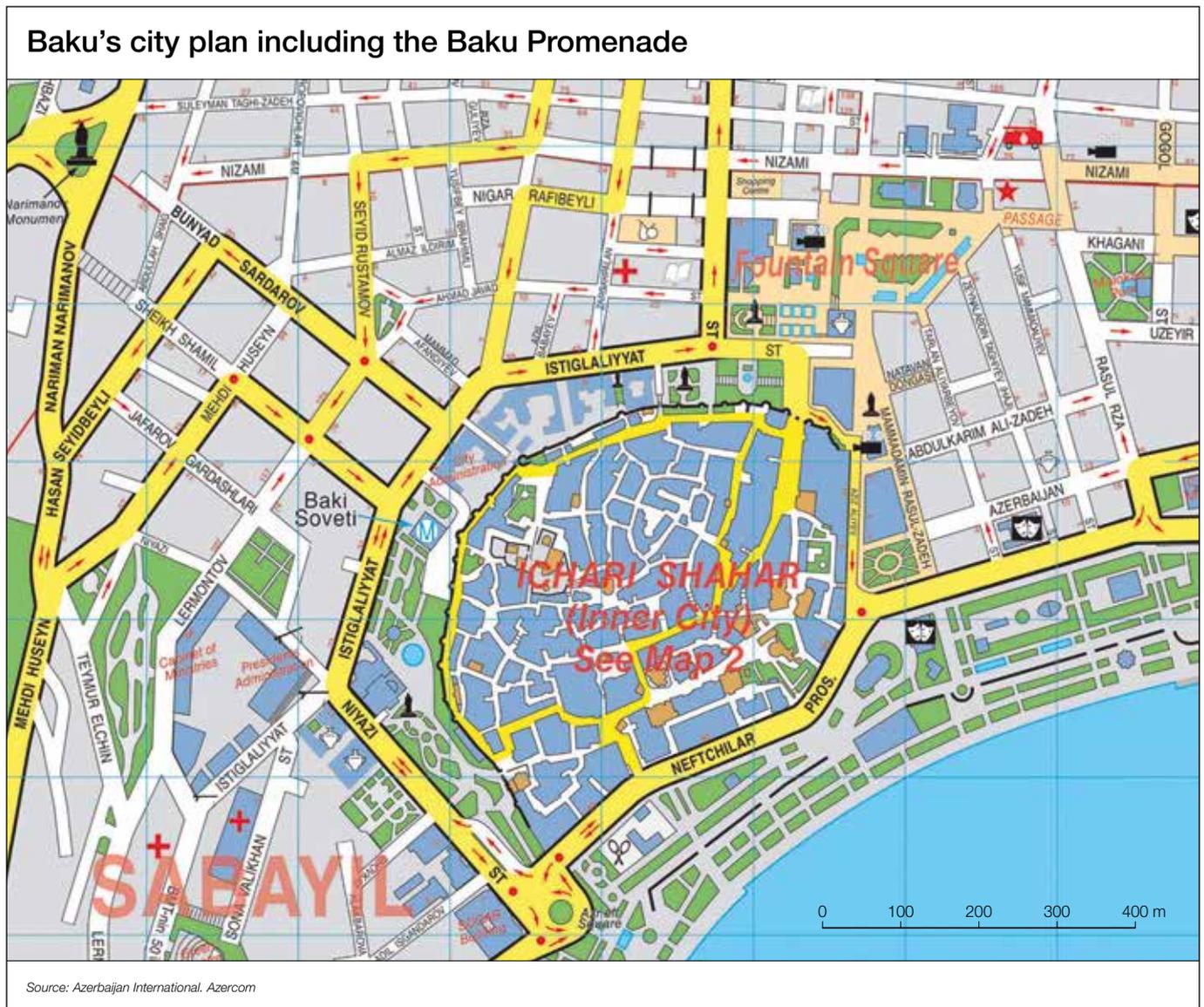


Fig. 1: Baku's city plan including the Baku Promenade

tween different zones: residential, industrial and cultural zones. In line with the concept of the Soviet institutions Azerbaijan's leisure and holiday resorts, public parks and outdoor leisure centres have been employed to realise the visions of socialist transformation and the making of a new man. Accordingly, since the early 20th century, an increased diversity of green spaces such as recreational public parks (*Park Kultury*), botanic gardens, sports areas, playing grounds in residential courtyards and green stripes between streets has characterized urban planning and everyday urban life in the oil city of Baku. Though, some larger projects were never realized, the city's greenscape nonetheless grew significantly during the socialist period of governance. Since the collapse of the Soviet state, some of the territory belonging to parks and green sites in Baku has been decreased in size, modified, or has disappeared due to the process of post-socialist privatization and the spectacular construction boom (BURGER 2010; VALIEV 2009). Post-Soviet Baku, with a population of approximately three million, is a vibrant urban centre in Transcaucasia mostly due to the second oil boom<sup>7</sup> that started in the region after the signing of the 'contract of the century' by the former Azerbaijan president Heydar Aliev and major international oil companies in 1994. In line with the nation-state ideology, most of the parks have been renamed: Kirov Park to *Şəhidlər Xiyabanı* (Martyr's Lane), the green stripe of 26 Baku Commissars to *Sahil Park*.

Once created as a 'remarkable gift' of the Russian colonial past and later enlarged and reconsidered as a modernized socialist space to demonstrate the achievements of Soviet 'cultured leisure', over the last decade the Baku Promenade faced a new era of neo-liberal, state-supported redevelopment. The waterfront

revitalization programme planned for 2009-2015 aims to turn the green promenade into a showpiece of post-modern Caspian urbanity of the Dubai type, controlled by the state authorities, new elite groups and international companies. According to the ambitious plan, the proposed redevelopment of the 3.5 km stripe of Baku Promenade includes the idea of expanding the length of the Promenade by another twenty five kilometres, of removing the harbour and other industrialized zones completely. The official efforts to make the waterfront Promenade more attractive to tourists and international investors involves an active attempt to 'purify' the place from its Soviet past and materiality, from local migrants and the poor appropriated the Bulvar in the late 1990s, and to create a new global image of Baku as 'Dubai on the Caspian Sea'.

In 1999 Baku Promenade was included on the list of strategic places for city redevelopment, signed by the 'Father' of the independent Azerbaijani nation, President Heydar Aliev, and in the state's coastal zone management plan. Bulvar received a new status and name – *Primorsky Park* (National Seaside Park). As a state-financed property, today it is governed directly by the Cabinet of Ministries and not by the municipal administration. At the same time, this change was part of Baku's mayor Hajibala Abutalibov's 'purifying project', initiated in 2001, whose bulldozer campaign cleared the city centre of kiosks and the dwellings of poor refugees and migrants was carried out under the slogan of returning Baku to the way it appeared in the 1970s and 1980s.

Costly renovation activities started in 2007, however, the ambitious plan to expand Baku Promenade to the Zykhi regi-



Fig. 2: Baku's waterfront project

Source: <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=610923> (last access on August 11th, 2015)

7 The current oil boom is called the 'second' in relation to the first oil boom at the end of the nineteenth century as the utility of oil reserves was identified for the economy. After the 1960s, the Soviet oil industry in Azerbaijan did not invest much in oil industry development, since huge oil and gas reservoirs were discovered in Western Siberia.



Fig. 3: New green design at the Promenade, April 2011 (Tsypylma Darieva)

on was not innovative one. It should have been mentioned that the idea goes back to the 1989 Soviet master plan for Bulvar's reconstruction. In the 1980s, architectural competitions were held locally and throughout the Union to generate designs and norms for the waterfront reconstruction, however the plans have not been realized. According to the master plan (1989-2005) a gigantic green esplanade was designed to link the western corner of Sabail with the eastern part of Akhmedly microrayon (GASSANOVA 1996, p. 176).

Nowadays, the Primorsky Park project is as grandiose as the newly constructed embankment of the Ishim River in post-socialist Astana (Kazakhstan).<sup>8</sup> The renovation activities are visible not only in new facilities, edifices, and design, but also in a new materiality of national stability. This visual manifestation of post-socialist stability can be seen in the use of costly materials like granite stone, cobblestone paving, and stone polished tiles instead of the cheap asphalt and grass of Soviet times. The park is deliberately designed not only as a place for orderly strolling of the working masses, but

as a new 'civilized' environment for global business and neo-liberal capital, with wellness centres and parking lots. Rebuilding the ceremonial and multifunctional place attractive to international business people and tourists from the West, it is here that people are expected to understand what the new Azerbaijan and modern Baku represent. Though water and water viewing is an important element in the image-making of Baku, however the city does not present itself explicitly as a port city. The built environment and the atmosphere of the Bulvar are intended to reflect the secular presence of a strong nation-state<sup>9</sup>. Rather than providing a space for leisure and recreation, their central mission is once again about propagating national ideology and re-educating the local population.

The first step to mark the Promenade as 'central' to the state's redevelopment plans was to replant the promenade with costly imported trees and numerous decorative plants. This action is similar to the activities undertaken during the tsarist period in 1909 and during the socialist period to construct the seashore park

with trees associated with urban life. But today's positioning of the trees, their form and the ways in which they 'work' are different to the past. The trees should demonstrate not only Baku's new green materiality; they are also a symbolic marker of Azerbaijan's new connectedness to the global urbanism. In the summer of 2009, more than fifty Washington palm trees and numerous exotic trees from South Africa, the Netherlands, the Canary Islands, Mallorca, and Saudi Arabia were imported to Baku and planted at great expense in the soil of Baku Promenade. However, the promotion of the new global green does not provide enough shelter or shade during the hot Baku summers. The second step has been to enhance the area through the construction of modern public toilets and the addition of large numbers of designed rubbish bins – accompanied by the deployment of numerous cleaning personnel with modern technology for cleaning and cutting grass. Another practice of the reconfiguration of the green landscape was the erection of large ornamental stone gardens with a variety of exotic cactus plants. Spaces around restaurants and cafes entrances are often marked and beautified by evergreen Mediterranean thuja bushes and East Asian bamboo plants. The processes by which trees become culturally and politically meaningful have significant implications – on understanding how the place and landscapes are imagined – in this case the 'Dubai on the Caspian Sea'. Having a predominantly decorative function and performing special 'legal' statuses, these sorts of plants and trees (palm trees or cactus) represent the state's desire for a new geo-political positioning. In this way the trees serve as decoration in a 'neo-triumphal' aesthetic sense, and at the same time they symbolize the instrument of ordering and the way political power is shaping the Promenade. According to popular narratives circulated in Baku, the trees planted on the Promenade and at other sites were chosen because the current Baku mayor prefers global palm trees to traditional native species, such as plane trees (*chinar*). The final step to per-

<sup>8</sup> See more on Astana development in BUCHLI 2004, BISSENOVA 2014, LASZCZKOWSKI 2014.

<sup>9</sup> In 2001, a new mosque was erected on the site where Sergei Kirov's monument was toppled in 1994. However, the image of Sunni mosques, built in a recognizable Turkish style, is not included in the cultural repertoire of Baku's official city landmarks.

form national agenda on the territory of the park was the act of 'planting' a gigantic flag on a pole 162 m high.

This development forms the backdrop for an epochal shift in the usage of the waterfront, namely, the creation of private residential properties in the former state park and on harbour territory. The monumental names of the buildings, such as Port Baku Towers or Flame Towers, explicitly promote Azerbaijan's brand as the modernist 'Land of Fire'<sup>10</sup> and Baku's waterfront as the 'finest' of addresses due both to its proximity to the city centre and its prized panoramic view over the water. Unlike Western capitalist cities, where the suburbs are the preferred space for creating gated communities for upper-class and middle-class residents, the central part of large post-socialist cities is still attractive to the residents. Among the new elite, it is considered to be a prestigious place to build residences despite the deteriorated ecological situation in the central parts of cities. Developers of elite waterfront residences seek to create a new image of the former industrial areas and the state park by segregating the location from the rest of city's history, life and its infrastructure, offering a new type of 'gated' residence with little or no contact with other public spaces – as reflected in the language advertising these new properties in Baku.

Port Baku is an exciting new destination that is set to become the capital's most prestigious address. The development will include luxury residential apartments and penthouses, retail and restaurant facilities, on-site leisure amenities and state of the art, iconic headquarters and office space<sup>11</sup>.

### Historical and Social Contexts throughout the Twentieth Century

Prior to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were no public green parks in Baku (GASSANOVA 1991, p. 127; FATULLAEV 1987).

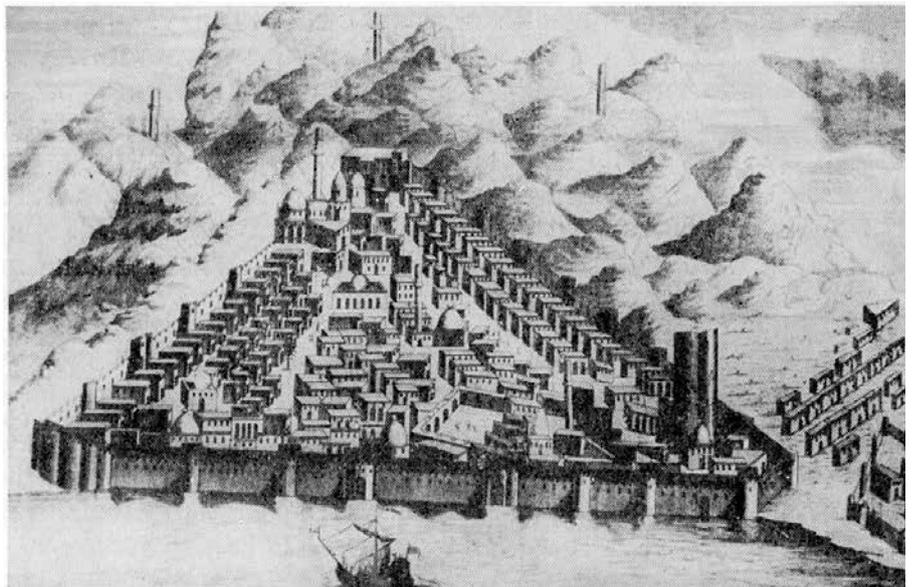


Fig. 4: Baku Promenade as a medieval castle, painted by Gmelin  
Source: BRETANITSKY 1970, p. 13

In the middle of the nineteenth century, after being separated from the Safavid Persia, Baku was associated with a provincial town on the margins of the Russian Empire, *uezdnyi gorod Shemakhinskoi gubernii*.<sup>12</sup> Till the 1880s, Baku's built environment had an urban structure typical of Moslem cities, including the architectural dominance of the Shirvan-Shah Palace complex, and the Maiden Tower at Baku Bay inside the walled inner city, *Icheri Sheher*. Surrounded by mosque complexes, bathhouses, caravan sarays, crooked streets, small markets and the traditional neighbourhood unit called *mahala*, the Palace was protected from the waterfront and the outside world by a thick double wall (Fig. 4).

Regarding spatiality, traditional Moslem urban spaces were characterized not only by the lack of a fixed division between private and public spaces, but also by the centrality of an inner courtyard with different degrees of accessibility, the spatial segregation of men and women, and quarters that could be closed off and locked for the night (MITCHELL 1988, p. 56; GILSENAN 2000). The traditional concept of urban greenery in Azerbaijan goes

back to the medieval garden culture known throughout the Middle East and the Caucasus and associated with small parks with flowers and fruit gardens (*bag, yashil, gül*). Green gardens in old Baku were planted mostly for private purposes. Some trees were planted to surround public places such as mosques and markets<sup>13</sup>, with the main utilitarian aim being to provide shadow in the hot city and protection from the strong Caspian winds. Usually it was *chinar* tree (plane tree) which played the central role in organizing the green spaces in the South Caucasian towns. Another commonly found form of green areas were gardens traditionally designed as flower gardens or fruit orchards, with a highly decorative function and used as an intimate private space, not accessible or visible from the outside (GASSANOVA 1996, p. 48). Till the 1870s, Baku's gardens and orchards covered an area of 166.5 ha, when the territories of *Icheri Sheher*" (23 ha) and *Vorstadt* (89.3 ha, outside of *Icheri Sheher*) are taken together<sup>14</sup>.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baku appeared in official documents as *guberns-*

<sup>10</sup> See SCHINDLBECK 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See in: <http://www.portbaku.az/towers/location/> (last accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup> 2014).

<sup>12</sup> 'Uezdnyi gorod Shemakhinskoi gubernii' is the historical definition of this city and means a 'town in Shemakha province'. The Russian term *uyezd* (district) was used for the administrative division in the Russian Empire. See FATULLAEV 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Usually four trees were planted on one spot (SALAMZADE 1964; GASSANOVA 1996).

<sup>14</sup> *Vorstadt* was the term used in Baku to define the residence and trade quarters built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century outside of *Icheri Sheher*. See in FATULLAEV 1978, 1998.



Fig. 5: The Baku waterfront at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Source: Fotofond of the Museum for Azerbaijan's History, *pakka Sahil*, Nr. 4314, Baku

kiy gorod (regional city), a colonial industrial centre of the Russian Empire. This change occurred as a result of the first oil boom (1850 and 1920) and the inclusion of Baku into the international oil economy, when urban spaces in Baku were significantly transformed. Many gardens were removed for industrial and transportation purposes. The city suffered from a shortage of water. The colonial government introduced a new order of openness reinforced by the construction of wide, straight streets, plazas and edifices built in the European style and surrounded by the local architecture of caravan sarai, shops, *naftilnye fabriki* (small factories manufacturing oil products for local households).

The modern spirit of the European style was considered to be radically different to the traditional Moslem spatial organization of a city<sup>15</sup>, as open squares, quays, promenades and larger parks with public management were rarely a primary concern in traditional Moslem urban settlements. In order to cope with the demands of the rapid oil-boom driven urbanization processes, the thick medieval castle walls of Icheri Sheher were pulled down to make space for a harbour and transportation. The narrow waterfront



Fig. 6: The western part of the waterfront  
Source: *ILJINE* 2013, p.12

strip was used predominantly for economic purposes – as a space for warehouses, stocks, and piers. Forty five industrial piers made up the waterfront stripe, among them the most influential oil companies were *Kavkazi Merkurii*, *Lebed*, *Kaspiy* (FATULLAEV 1998, p. 52). Later on, the waterfront strip was enlarged in order to make space for an improved transportation system. Through the physical extension of the seashore area, the traditional residential mahalawas 'moved' further into the city, so that the newly created artificial waterfront territory

was mainly used for economic and military purposes by the Russian colonial administration and industrial companies: shipping, oil transportation, laundry washing (Fig. 5, Fig. 6).

With the launch of the first construction plan for the Promenade in 1909 (architect Nicholas von der Nonne), the seashore began to turn ever more into an aesthetic object.<sup>16</sup> Further parts of the Old City (Icheri Sheher) walls were removed, the harbour was cleared of ware-

15 See Janet ABU-LUGHOD 1978.

16 See FATULLAEV 1978.



Fig. 7: The Governor's Garden at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Source: ILJINE, p. 73

houses, docks, and other structures, and the city turned to face the Caspian Sea with a wide strip of open boulevard. This shaped Baku's urban landscape according to European sensibilities and highlighted the seascape's aesthetic value.

It is an interesting point that urban life in pre-industrial Baku was clearly separated from the Caspian waters and the maritime landscape. The thick walls of the medieval castle protected the city population not only from outsiders, but also from the strong Caspian wind (*khazri*). In contrast, the Baku Bay area was redesigned to create a modern public 'meeting place': Baku Boulevard, with its open access to seashore views, which should shape an urban vision and the European conceptions of urban aesthetics and hygiene. The first green parks – *Gubernatorsky Sad* (Governor's Garden), the Garden at Nobel's Villa Petrolea, *Mariinsky Sad* and *Tsitsianovskiy Sad* – were designed in the 1880-90s as sites for an aristocratic way of life, diplomatic occasions and distinguished visitors<sup>17</sup>. Later on, in 1909, room was made to allow the use of the waterfront and the water as a place for leisure activities, with restricted access.

The seafront strip called *Nikolaevskaya naberezhnaya* did not become a place for

strolling until 1920 and it was not a space for socializing for the common workers and the urban poor. The emergence of Baku Promenade as a place with public access to the water for leisure and recreation can be traced back to 1921. Thus, from its beginning to today, the Baku Promenade's history can be divided into four different periods of modernization:

1. from medieval oriental castle wall to industrial space (1870-1909);
2. from industrial space to recreational site with restricted access (1909-1920);
3. from a capitalist to a socialist place of cultured leisure (1920-1991);
4. from a socialist egalitarian to a neoliberal showpiece of national heritage (1999-2015).

The landscape, its use, the social context, and the meanings of the waterfront as a public space have differed during each period in ways that reflect the different interests of the urban managers and their plans for the purification of the space. Though this story of purification pertains to one specific public place, this case provides a good example of the way in which the locally built environment shaped a new profile of the post-colonial city by creating spatially-separated and, at the same time, interweaving worlds: on the

one hand, traditional, narrow, Moslem, private, irrational; on the other, modern, linear and open, European, public, rational.

An important step in the modernization of the new space and the institutionalization of the park was the planting of trees as a mechanism for social ordering and landscaping. Particular species of tree were introduced, those trees with urban associations – horse-chestnut, weeping willow, elms, pines, a local species of plane tree and olive tree. Public trees and the park were seen to be for therapeutic purposes and not only as purely decorative and for the production of fruits typical to the Caucasus. After the socialist revolution, Baku, being a highly industrialized oil city with a significant number of multi-ethnic working-class people, gained new status as the 'outpost of socialism in the Orient'.<sup>18</sup> Associated with the spread of modernity, European enlightenment, and human progress<sup>19</sup>, the arrival of socialism in the urban Caucasus resulted in the adaptation of Howard's ideal of Garden City and the development of the 'proletarian wellness' industry, the systematic production of green spaces for cultured leisure within city boundaries.<sup>20</sup> According to the socialist ideals, the specific ideological point in Baku was to develop the seashore as a place of collective relaxation not just for entertainment, aesthetics and simple joy, but rather for health, hygiene and civilizing all social groups in the collective body of the 'backward' nation, including the Azeri indigenous population.

The grand transformation of the city from colonial to socialist involved both change and continuity in the way public places were redesigned and used. By ex-

<sup>18</sup> See BABEROWSKI 2003, SWIETOCZOWSKI 1995, GASIMOV 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Compare with HIRSCH 2005, GRANT 2010, ALEXANDER et al. 2007.

<sup>20</sup> This development model for urban parks is relevant to larger and smaller cities in the former Soviet Union like Moscow and the neighboring Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia. However, whereas Yerevan was constructed as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the socialist era, the Soviet urban planning in Baku and Tbilisi incorporated the previously existing urban structure. Compare with TER-MINASSIAN 2007, ASSCHE 2009, BOTYAKOV and KAPUSTINA 2013, KALYUKIN et al. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> About the development of 'aristocratic' and formal gardens in Europe see, for example, in MUKERJI 1994.



Fig. 8: Sergei Kirov's monument at Nagorny Park in Baku in the 1980s  
Source: RENZ 1985, p. 53



Fig. 9: Celebrating the May 1 in the 1960s  
Source: SOVIET AZERBAIJAN 1958

tending the openness and accessibility of Baku Promenade, this public space acquired a new meaning that differed from that of the past. Initially restricted to the city's elite, the Baku Promenade became a space for the masses. Instead of being the backdrop to the minarets of Icheri Sheher and the money of oil magnates in the Outer City, the natural amphitheatre of Baku Bay was to function as the stage for socialist state scenery, which promoted an idealized egalitarian society for the working class and peasants beyond commerce and social inequality. Thus, use of the 'remarkable gift' of the coloni-

al past continued under the Soviet rule. Whereas the official principles of Soviet culture prescribed behavioural norms based on order, cleanness and sobriety, the straight open green pathways, asphalt and representative flowerbeds with Soviet symbols were assumed to discipline the 'uncoordinated' activities of the masses.

The planning of the public green space was considered to play a socially transformative role by functioning as a bridge to emancipation from the traditional gender roles of Islamic society, to the upbringing of a new Soviet generation, and as a

locus of political propaganda and technological modernism.<sup>21</sup> It was far beyond the idea of western parks made only for holidays, pleasure, play and fun for those who had time and means. Consequently, the built environment around Baku Promenade was framed by monumental socialist architecture in the form of Stalinist palaces such as the Lenin Museum<sup>22</sup> and the Government House<sup>23</sup> as well as the gigantic figure of Kirov<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 8), erected at Nagorny Plato in 1939. Government buildings and the monument were supposed to achieve a 'commanding presence' (HERZFELD 2005) and in which spectacular design would triumph over the messiness of mahala and the dominant Maiden Tower. The Promenade was a visible sign of the political regime of Transcaucasia and was regularly used for the demonstration of political power in the form of spectacular celebrations on Soviet holidays, namely May Day on May 1<sup>st</sup> and Victory Day on May 9<sup>th</sup> (Fig. 9).

Until the 1960s, Baku Promenade was dominated by the display of Soviet military advances and the ideology of raising the new Soviet man through the construction of sports centres and 'cultured' places, whose task was to develop heroic socialist spirit, European sensibilities of progress, and to cure the Soviet Azerbaijan men and women with fresh sea air. From the 1930s to the 1960s, a major attraction of the waterfront promenade was the modernist structure of a public and professional parachute jumping site.

21 See HOFFMANN 2003. On the spatial and architectural dimension of 'cultured leisure' also see SIEGELBAUM 1999.

22 The museum edifice is built in a typical monumental Stalin Empire style with references to antique Greek temple architecture; G. Medzhidov was the architect of the Lenin Museum.

23 The Government House, a gigantic triumphal complex, was erected in 1952 by the Moscow architects Lev Rudnev and Viktor Munts according to the ideology of 'national in form and socialist in content'.

24 Sergey Kirov (Sergey Kostrikov) 1886-1934, Russian Communist whose assassination marked the beginning of the Great Purge in the Soviet Union (1934-38). Kirov worked in Transcaucasia, in 1921 he was appointed as the first secretary of the Azerbaijan party organization and subsequently helped to organize the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (March 1922), which at the end of 1922 was incorporated into the U.S.S.R. Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/319265/Sergey-Mironovich-Kirov> (last accessed on September 13<sup>th</sup> 2014).

A ninety-five-metre high tower resembling an oil tower was located in the middle of the Promenade and was the symbol of Azeri modernization within the socialist Soviet nation. In the 1960s, after a few accidents had occurred at the parachute tower, the site was stripped of its original purpose and turned into a purely aesthetic site, often referred to by city guides as 'our Eiffel Tower'. Today, Baku's Eiffel Tower has been reduced to functioning as a public clock tower that shows the local time, air temperature, and the speed of the Caspian wind.

Baku Promenade became a laboratory for new forms of urban life with regard to socialist leisure and the Soviet urban 'green' policy<sup>25</sup>. The thirties were years in which the strategic greening of Baku and the development of recreational areas led to a significant increase (40 times) in the size of green spaces, and in this way reshaped the surface and the dry, dusty air of Baku. Along with Nagorny Park and the Baku Promenade, smaller urban parks and green squares were laid out: Vladimir Ilyich garden, the 26 Baku Commissars Square, Karl Marx Park, Nizami Park, Sabir and Vurgun green squares. As GASSANOVA noted in her study on gardens and parks in Azerbaijan (1996, p. 136) the early plans drawn up by the Baku Commission of the Azerbaijan Communist Party (August 16<sup>th</sup> 1931) envisaged five new recreational parks on a large scale: Zykh Park (300 ha), Shykh park on the Caspian shore on the Patamdah hills (150 ha), Nagorny Park (150 ha), Dzerzhinsky Park (106 ha), and Lenin Park on Stepan Razin hill (180 ha). Unlike western designs for recreational parks intended for enjoyment, with swimming beaches, parking lots and golf courses (see Low et al. 2005), the new parks were supposed to call for walking, sport and

body activities. Except for Nagorny Park, none of these larger projects were realized because of the lack of proper irrigation systems and professional skills to build such green grandeur in the Southern city. Nagorny Park, located at the south-eastern part of the Baku Bay waterfront, was designed and realized by the Moscow architect Lev Ilyin, who described the main function of socialist green architecture in the national Soviet republics as 'socialist in context and national in form'. From the point of view of its functionality, it was supposed to be composed for the sake of civilizing the human being's senses and body in relation to local nature.

"The natural beauty of Baku's amphitheatre landscape and the park itself should be admired by visitors, but not just as an exotic and entertaining element, but as a synthesis between local culture and nature characterized by the freshness of the Caspian Sea's breeze and by the smell of beautiful southern flowers" (GASSANOVA 1996, p. 138).

Incorporation of and emphasis on the value of local nature in combination with the sea view was in the fore of Baku's park composition. These concepts led to the implementation of green terraces and parterres mixed with rows of large deciduous trees, all different in their sizes and green colour tones. The local stone and marble was used for the construction of raised terraces and viewing points at Nagorny Park. Similar to Nagorny Park, two long terraces at Baku Promenade were planted with endemic and exotic evergreen and deciduous trees such as: karagach, plane tree, pine tree, cypress, Chinese sofora, weeping willow and palm trees *Washingtonia*.

The Soviet park management policy found its expression in the division of the park terrain into two main zones: children's and adults' recreational zones. Whereas paths for strolling, restaurants, cafes, traditional open-air *chahanes*<sup>26</sup>, the pa-

chute station and the library were considered to serve adults' leisure, the children's zone included the State Puppet Theatre, open air cinemas, a chess club, amusement attractions, and a recreational place for young families called 'Little Venice'. The shape of recreational spaces in Baku was much influenced by a centralized ideology which experienced significant transformation during Khrushchev's Thaw period. The new construction policy in the 1960 put into practice Khrushchev's abandonment of the Stalinist Empire's 'triumphal style'. Instead of stone and marble, Soviet architects used new construction materials, such as concrete blocks, and metal technology<sup>27</sup>. In contrast to the monumentality of triumphal palaces designed as a means of propaganda, such as the Government House with its row of 'blue pine trees' combined with flowerbeds in national colours, the summer cinema and the Café Pearl, erected in the 1960s by the Russian architects Shulgin and Nikonov, differed from the former in their lightness, accessibility, and visible 'people-orientedness'. The transparent walls, large windows, light frame structure, numerous 'democratic' entrances, and the proximity to nature (green areas and water) enabled these places and their clients to easily interact with their surroundings. In the 2000s, the chess club and the 'Little Venice' amusement attractions were removed or replaced by new structures; however the Café Pearl has retained its original form and seems to be successful as a tourist attraction.

### "It was a warm city ...": Remembering Bulvar as a Location

Between September and December 2009, I conducted my field work in Baku including the collection of a set of informal interviews with visitors to Baku Promenade. Sevil Guseynova, a local sociologist and a PhD student at Humboldt University Berlin, assisted me in this phase of collecting material. The aim of the observations and conducting informal talks

25 In the 1930s and later on, classification of green squares and lanes was proposed by the Central Committee of City Planning: 1) a green square in a heart of a city with the main City Square, 2) a green zone in front of public buildings (city council, theatre, university, etc.), 3) a green zone inside residential quarters, microrayon, 4) a green strip at the intersection of several streets, 5) a temporary green square on the sites of destroyed buildings or areas temporarily free of buildings. See in SMOLENSKA 2012, p. 231.

26 *Chahane* is the local term for a tea house, which usually serves tea, snacks and non-alcoholic beverages. Such tea houses offer a space predominantly for male visitors to the promenade.

27 Compare with REID 2002.

with the visitors was not to provide a representative survey of the park's usage after its beautification, but rather to provide an insight into the local attitude towards the redevelopment processes. The park is an important element in understanding the urbanity by function and by location. The majority of interviews were conducted with visitors who define themselves as *Bakintсы*, 'real Bakuvians', long-term residents and second generation city inhabitants whose parents were born in the city or moved to Baku from Russian or Ukrainian cities in the 1960-70s. I am aware of the limitations of this method and of its situative character; however in spite of methodological challenges the data provide valuable insiders' views which help to get access to another dimension of the waterfront world and to its sociality.

Bakintсы are considered to be the opposite of the local rural migrants and highly skilled international expats who comprise a significant percentage of city population. Among Bakintсы there is a strong sense of social boundaries, which is expressed through a public display of 'urban manners', a multi-ethnic background, a higher level of education, and a fluent command of the Russian language.<sup>28</sup> In October 2009, half of the promenade strip was packaged in white marble and granite, and newly planted Washingtonia palm trees marked the manifestation of the solid materiality of state power and Azerbaijan's connectedness to global urbanism. Though reconstruction works had started, the other part of Bulvar was still a popular and important site for recreation for many old and new Bakuvians, including people of different generations and social backgrounds: pensioners, families with children, recent migrants from rural areas, students, business people and tourists.<sup>29</sup> Not only in the summertime, but also in other seasons, the

waterfront had attracted Bakuvians from different districts to take a break from noisy central Baku, to stroll, to view the sea and to partake in other informal activities. The smell of popcorn, roasted sunflower seeds and vanilla ice-cream was usually combined with the sound of the animated voices of street photographers, offering to take cheap photographs of passersby at the shore. In 2009, the major attraction of the eastern part was a long pier, about four hundred metres long and fifty metres wide, stretching out into the sea. Before the restoration, it was the pier and the eastern part of the Promenade which were most intensively used for multiple activities and the routine 'arts of doing' (DE CERTEAU 1984). At different times of the day, at least a hundred and twenty people were standing, sitting, walking, listening to music, doing gymnastics, sleeping, kissing, and taking photographs on the pier. Two years later, after my return to Azerbaijan in March 2011, the Baku Promenade has been completely renovated and cleaned. Instead of vitality and a diversity of visitors, there were increased security measures and the park was dominated by cleaning women and civilian watchmen<sup>30</sup>. Although on a weekday one could expect to find an empty Baku Promenade, it was few local Bakuvians and tourists who visited the park at particular times: early in the morning and during the daytime. Many of the visitors were those who lived in local neighbourhoods, but also those who came to the Promenade by car.

The visitors complained about new regularities and having a strong feeling of being under surveillance, as was noted by one of the visitors in October 2009: "You are not walking in a public park but in a state-controlled area like a military compound." Dogs were and are strictly prohibited on the entire strip of Baku Promenade, as is the riding of bicycles, including bicycles for kids during the daytime after nine in the morning. Filming is not allowed without permission. Furthermore,

re, it is forbidden to crack roasted sunflower seeds, which are part of popular everyday nutrition and the cracking of which is a social activity all over the Caucasus. The Soviet modernism of Baku Promenade – a state park promoting a culture of maritime viewing and the urban practice of strolling, without commerce and businesses – has been replaced by the state's coastal management plan and real estate marketing design.

Our study has revealed that, though acknowledging the physical beauty and visible improvement of the surface of the promenade, long term residents of Baku do not feel comfortable with and connected to the new image of the Baku Promenade. The 'scary beauty' of the shiny and clean stone coastal stripe seems to be left exclusively to the owners and producers of this place: the state, new elites and foreign investors. Many local visitors expressed that they miss the cosy familiarity and the sense of community tangible when the Promenade was filled with people doing mundane activities during the late Soviet period. Despite the centrality of socialist ceremonial uses and its role as a site to demonstrate 'cultured leisure', the Bulvar was simultaneously a place for ordinary pastimes, informal activities and urban routines that built a sense of local community. Shady trees and seaside benches offered denizens an open space to express individual relations and intimacy beyond socialist obligations. Though shaped by the Soviet asceticism and a modest consumerist culture, due to its openness it was a public realm characterized by a diversity of visitors and vivid interaction between different social groups.

On November 27<sup>th</sup> 2009, a fifty year-old male visitor with two children remembered his specific feeling of leisure before the renovation: "No doubt, they have beautified the Promenade properly. The park became surprisingly clean and you can find rubbish bins everywhere. But, something unfamiliar is occurring here ... I do not know ... There is no 'the Bulvar' feeling anymore. Perhaps this place can be compared with Istanbul's waterfront, but it is a different atmosphere. The same

28 See more on this issue in DARIEVA (2011), GRANT (2014).

29 However, in the eyes of long-term Russian-speaking Bakuvian residents, the image of Bulvar was strongly associated with the presence of rural migrants and bad manners of those who were 'unprepared' for urban life. I discussed this issue in my previous publications. See DARIEVA 2011, 2013.

30 For these purposes, sixty men were recruited as the Promenade policemen by the Ministry of Sport.

yachts, but no fishermen and people having picnics, and have you seen the outfits of our girls? They go out to the Bulvar wearing high-heeled shoes! You know, I grew up close to this place and my grandparents always took me to the Promenade. We met many kids here and it was never boring for us. We used to go to the open-air cinemas and the Children's Theatre. Different boys from different areas gathered at the Bulvar and sometimes we had our local battles, in particular with boys from Bailovo, the working class hooligans. I have to say that people had a different understanding of leisure in Baku and it was somehow differently organized. Usually we visited the park with a group of friends or with family members. In the summertime it was a special joy to buy ice cream, and in the winter to order a grilled chicken *tabaka* at café Sahil, or just sitting on the bench ... everyone was in a good mood, and it was quiet. Today, it is different ..."

Often, interviewees indicated that the Promenade was associated with space for personal freedom, holiday and relaxation beyond the control of official institutions and family norms. The sense of community and the tactics employed to create personal space took place under the shade of large sycamore and olive trees. On December 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, a 55 year-old female visitor emphasized the free character of the park, which tolerated informal and private forms of leisure and mundane enjoyment: "Bulvar was always a special place for me: Sometimes we children, instead of going to school (No 134 at Baksovet) during the day, escaped to the Bulvar, bought ice-cream and sat on the bench. Moreover, at our school we had a special tradition of continuing to celebrate our graduating party at the Promenade and we danced till the sun rose.

There was a visitors' boat at the shore. Today, no one would let their children celebrate a party at Bulvar. Nobody would want to, instead we face watchmen everywhere. My son recently had a problem with them. He was going to be married, and of course he regularly met his future wife on dates. One day, sitting on the



Fig. 10: Bulvar in the 1980s

Source: Fotofond of the Museum for Azerbaijan's History, papka Sahil, Nr. 6862

bench, they were just enjoying the park and being together and holding hands. Perhaps my son kissed his girlfriend. Suddenly a policeman approached them and fined them for their 'amoral behaviour' in a public space. Can you imagine, my son and his future wife were forced to go to the police station and stay there until we parents were able to rescue them by paying 100 US \$. You know, later on, I heard that it was the way in which the policemen earned their pocket money at the Bulvar ..." (Fig. 10).

Local senior citizens and their grandchildren comprised a distinct and important group of visitors during the late Soviet period. According to a 38 year-old male visitor, senior citizens, children and dogs had daily contact with the Bulvar. The interviewee believed that the park was a peaceful place for different social groups. Soviet modernism within Baku's green public space resembled the everyday urban culture of other European societies in the twentieth century in the way in which it identified commonality among neighbours and ordinary people, who were drawn into semi-interpersonal networks: "When I was a schoolboy, I used to spend my whole free time here at the Boulevard. There were many senior citizens playing domino, chess and *nardy*.<sup>31</sup> It was a quiet, safe and peaceful place. After lessons, five or six of us pupils came here to play billiards and each of us

had one rouble in his pocket. We felt that we were rich. It was so popular to play billiards in those times! I also remember how I caught a serious cold. It was the winter time, and the doctor recommended that I eat one fresh egg yolk with a piece of butter and go out to breathe fresh air at the Bulvar each morning. So, every morning I got up at six o'clock, ate this egg yolk and went out to Bulvar together with my father and our dog. It was a really beautiful time. There were twenty or twenty-five people who gathered with their dogs at our traditional spot. The dogs brought us human beings together, and we knew each other personally. There was one guy, an Armenian, who went jogging every morning with his huge aging bulldog Kio, who ran behind him. All those dogs played with each other, and we owners chatted and shared news and gossip. It was a warm atmosphere in the city ... Today you don't see dogs anymore. Do not know where all these dogs are gone ... There is too much control. It reminds me of Tsarist times, I read somewhere that there was only one entrance to the park and a guard (*gorodnichi*) watched the entrance gate and let people inside. If he did not like somebody, this person was denied entry into the park. Today, I have a similar feeling, as if somebody is always observing me. In Soviet times, nobody cared about your behaviour at Bulvar, and all visitors were somehow peaceful. It was an urban culture."

<sup>31</sup> *Nardy* is a local term for backgammon game, a board game for two persons popular in the Caucasus, Middle East and Turkey.

The memories of the late Soviet era and localized reflections expressed by Bakint-sy about the new technological and ideological production of the space indicate silent objection. Shiny purification practices have challenged long-term residents of Baku, who perceive the place as an object of admiration, yet one which actually reminds them of a panopticon. The Promenade has vanished as a location and as a site for 'cultured' and informal activities: instead it has been used as a stage for the major strategic re-making of the image of a new Baku, the Dubai on the Caspian shore.

### Conclusion

This description and an analysis of one specific urban public space have shown that the socialist and post-socialist modernisation of Baku Promenade can be perceived as a spectacular history of purification. The collapse of Soviet socialism reflected the changing strategies of how to create a show-piece of monumental culture at the Caspian Sea. Apparently, the visible exterior, the application of post-modernist solid materials, the marking of the social order through the presence of watchmen, the cleaning services, the exotic trees, and a new accent on globalized urban architecture allow the authorities and developers to produce a new cultural means of power and controlling public space. My attempt was to bring to the fore a 'regionally nuanced understanding of post-socialist modernism' (PICKLES 2010) and the issue of political mobilization of nature in the post-Soviet Caucasus which is shaped by the legacy of socialism and an openness to the new geographies of connectedness. I argue that though the built environment and the socialist monumental architecture, including the park and green square designs, played an enormous role in shaping Baku's communist every day life, we should still consider the sociality and the power of individuals who appropriated the space for their own in a variety of ways.

Further, in Baku we can observe global trends in revitalization of urban water-

fronts and, as is taking place in US and European port cities which undergo a post-industrial transition, transforming working class areas to recreational areas with middle class residences and upscale users: hygienic and spacious with the emphasis on more light and fresh air for residential purposes<sup>32</sup>. Whereas in the western harbour cities a significant change occurred due to the shift from industry-dominated towards tertiary-sector urban economies, Baku Promenade and Baku harbour were redesigned as a result of a top-down decision with the purpose of creating a spectacular centrepiece of national identity on the world scale. As highlighted by Bruce GRANT (2014), a 'hyperbuilding architecture' becomes another opiate of the masses. Purification of the Bulvar is part of the aestheticization process, those visible and material strategies to exorcise the past which render urban green spaces as technologies of urban governance and social exclusion. However, this process is not unique to Baku. Global trends in the Bakuvian green aesthetics indicate the decay of the legacy of socialist Garden City planning in the South Caucasus, and a promotion of state sanctioned new content and forms leading to a loss of former egalitarian access. Broken by an insecure period of the 1990s (RUMYANSEV 2008), the previous sociality and local intimacy of tree-shaded walkways was replaced by aesthetically driven physical and imaginary solid 'forms of order', lined with business centres, expensive clubs, palms and high-heeled urbanism. Green architecture is again used as a powerful tool for marking the territory of power, however this time of a select portion of the population of Baku. Though they are fewer, however, locals have incorporated tactics of using the Bulvar in to their intimate memories and their own understanding of living in modern Baku.

<sup>32</sup> Compare with SIEBER 1993, KOKOT 2008, HEIN 2011.

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## Резюме

ЦЫПЫЛМА ДАРИЕВА

### Модернизируя городскую набережную: Зеленые насаждения, застройки и социальная жизнь Приморской набережной Баку

Статья представляет собой описание и анализ меняющейся материальной субстанции и общественной жизни одного городского пространства – Приморской набережной Баку/Бульвара. На основе результатов этнографических полевых исследований в Азербайджане даётся представление об опыте Баку по осуществлённой модернизации городского общественного/публичного пространства. При этом особое внимание уделяется роли деревьев и зелёной архитектуры в качестве инструмента для структурирования города и политической мобилизации природы в рамках создания социалистических и пост-социалистических общественных пространств в Азербайджане. В подходе, который выходит за рамки анализа меняющейся материальной субстанции среды, рассматривается, как бакинская городская набережная/Бульвар воспринимается и используется обычными людьми, а также какое значение посетители придают Бульвару в своих воспоминаниях о конце советской эпохи. Исходя из этого утверждается, что стерилизация бакинского променада освободило пространство не только от материальной субстанции асфальта советской эпохи, но и привело к потере эгалитаризма, равной доступности общественного пространства и расслабляющей атмосферы тенистых аллей.

Городской приморский бульвар, модернизация, Азербайджан, берег моря, социальность, отдых

## Résumé

TSYPYLMA DARIEVA

### La moderne au bord de l'eau: espaces verts, environnement bâti urbain et vie sociale de la Promenade de Bakou

Cet article décrit et analyse la matérialité et la vie sociale d'un espace public urbain particulier, la Promenade de Bakou. En m'appuyant sur des travaux ethnographiques réalisés en Azerbaïdjan, je fournis quelques aperçus de la modernisation récente des espaces publics urbains de Bakou en examinant la méthode de modernisation utilisée pour réaliser les visions d'un parc public. Les arbres et l'architecture verte feront l'objet d'une attention particulière, puisqu'ils permettent à la ville de prendre part au processus de construction d'espaces publics socialistes et post-socialistes en Azerbaïdjan. Au-delà du changement de la matérialité de l'environnement bâti, j'explique la perception et l'utilisation de la Promenade de Bakou par les gens ordinaires et l'importance que les visiteurs attachent au parc urbain dans leurs souvenirs des dernières années de l'Union soviétique. J'affirme que le réaménagement officiel de la Promenade de Bakou a purifié l'espace non seulement de la matérialité de son asphalte caractéristique de l'Union soviétique, mais également de son caractère social égalitaire et de l'intimité des allées ombragées.

Espaces verts urbains, modernisation, Azerbaïdjan, bord de mer, sociabilité, loisirs