Why Bayırşəhər is More than Architectural Heritage

written by Leyla Sayfutdinova Leyla Sayfutdinova

Since October 2024, persistent information about the upcoming demolition of the Bayırşəhər (the Outer City) neighborhood, namely the area covering the vicinity of Təzə Pir Mosque and a number of streets around it (Zargarpalan, Nizami, Abdulla Shaig, Chingiz Mustafayev, Tolstoy, Mirza Fatali Akhundov, Nabat Ashurbayova, Murtuza Mukhtarov, Bashir Safaroghlu, and others) began to appear in the media. In these publications, the demolitions are justified by the large number of buildings described as "derelict" and "dilapidated." Although the demolition plans in this area contradict the Baku General Plan (State Committee 2022, 80), which designates Bayırşəhər as a "Special Protection Zone," and raise numerous objections from urban activists, neighborhood residents, and Baku's cultural elites, demolitions of individual buildings continue, raising ongoing concerns about the future of the neighborhood. The debate has mostly revolved around the issue of architectural heritage – whether Bayırşəhər is significant enough to be preserved in its entirety, or whether it is mostly a collection of old, dilapidated buildings beyond restoration with just a few architectural gems hidden among them. At the same time, activists and intellectuals insist on the importance of Bayırşəhər for the urban identity of downtown Baku, pointing out the cultural heritage of the community that has lived there for several generations and contributed to Azerbaijan's science, art, and civil service. This ongoing debate points to the key question that will determine Bayırşəhər's fate – the question of what constitutes heritage.

Authorized Heritage Discourse and Bayırşəhər

In Azerbaijan, the official understanding of heritage is aligned with the global Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD).

The AHD is a historically recent phenomenon, rooted largely in European modernity and the history of industrialization, when the material legacies of the previous epoch, such as religious temples, castles and palaces, were seen by the old elites as objects worth preserving and memorializing (Smith 2006). Over time, these particular structures became the core of the global heritage discourse and practice.

Azerbaijan adopted the AHD initially through the Soviet heritage institutions. The Soviet Union eventually endorsed the AHD within its participation in UNESCO and worked hard to include its own architectural heritage into international heritage institutions (Deschepper 2019). This was a largely top-down exercise; and like elsewhere, it prioritized the past related to ancient and medieval periods. The period of modernity and industrialization is rarely deemed worthy of international heritagization; in the Soviet Union, if such objects were heritagized at all, they were done through local history (Rus: *krayevedcheskie*) and factory museums (Sklokina and Kulikov 2019). One of the many problems of this approach, which is slowly beginning to change globally, is the assumption that modernity, first, is not worthy of remembrance, and second, that modernity is essentially Western and global, while only pre-modern history can be a repository of a truly national past.

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan has inherited this approach to heritage, and while independence has allowed Azerbaijani institutions to directly engage with global heritage organizations, the very ideas of what heritage is, and what deserves to be protected stem from this top-down Soviet discourse that privileged palaces and religious temples of the pre-modern and preindustrial past. It is not difficult to see, then, why Bayırşəhər, built up mostly in the 19th – early 20th centuries, after the beginning of industrialization in Azerbaijan, and comprised mostly of middle-class and working-class dwellings, is not seen as inherently valuable from the AHD point of view.

Another feature of the AHD is the issue of scale. UNESCO identifies globally significant heritage, nationally significant heritage, and heritage with local significance. These *scales* of significance – from global to local – are often, and incorrectly, interpreted as the *value* of significance, as if something that has significance at the global level is more valuable than something that is local. Yet, the question of the value of heritage cannot be reduced to scale alone. Local heritage can have far greater emotional or sacral value to specific local groups, a value that is incommensurate with its global significance. Moreover, because of the complex and unequal processes of global knowledge production and exchange, and the complex bureaucracies of getting recognition for globally significant heritage, it may take a long time for local heritage to be recognized at the regional or global scale. This should not mean, however, that national or local heritage that does not qualify for global significance under AHD should not be preserved or protected. Rather, it means that the question should be rephrased and redirected. Instead of asking *does this object [building, part of city etc.] qualify for global heritage?* the question we should be asking is *why is this valuable, and for whom?* Reframing the questions about heritage in this way would allow us to move beyond the *architectural gem vs a derelict* dichotomy that has defined the debate on Bayırşəhər.

Bayırşəhər: global innovation, local context

Why, then, is Bayırşəhər important for Baku, and why are activists and community members protesting its demolition? The answer to this question can be found in Baku's unique history of urban development, the history that was propelled by industrialization and the oil boom. By the time of the Russian conquest in the early 19th century, today's Bayırşəhər was sparsely populated with a few structures like caravanserais and hammams (baths) serving the trade to and from the Baku fortress (Fatullayev 1978, 9-10) (Figure 1a). However, from

1809, and especially after the Turkmanchay Treaty of 1828, the area became the first planned district built outside of the İçərişəhər (the Inner City or the Old Town) walls with a layout designed in accordance with the most advanced urban planning principles of the time. The new district utilized a grid plan – a form of urban planning with streets intersecting at right angles (Fatullayev 1978, 11-13) (see Figure 1b). In Europe and the Middle East, this urban form is traced back to Ancient Greece and Rome. It was abandoned in Europe during the early medieval era but began to be revived during the Italian Renaissance. Cities that were built and rebuilt in Europe and the New World since the 18th century extensively used this system of spatial organization – from post-earthquake Lisbon in the 18th century, to the iconic examples of Barcelona, La Plata, American cities and many others across the world built from the 19th century on (Sennett 2018).

Figure 1a: Baku plan, 1806

Source: Wikimedia commons.

Figure 1b: Masterplan of Baku fortress with *Forstadt*, 1854

Source: Fatullayev (1978, 18). Note the different street layouts in İçərişəhər and Bayırşəhər.

For Baku, the introduction of the grid plan was a major innovation. İçərişəhər, Baku's oldest neighborhood, is built on completely different principles, common in Islamic urban contexts. These involve organic planning with winding streets providing shade, and inner courtyards and roofs serving as family spaces. Bayırşəhər, with its straight streets, was not only a newer part of the city – it was a part of the city that made a statement about spatial innovation, urban modernization, and adoption of Western urban planning ideas. Thus, Bayırşəhər is not just a collection of buildings – it is also a monument of urban planning innovation, of urban modernization, and of Baku's integration into both the global economy and the modern representations of space (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Streets crossing at right angles in Bayırşəhər

While the grid plan was a clear innovation, it was not just a reproduction of a Western model of urbanization. For all its innovativeness, Bayırşəhər remained embedded in the local landscape, culture, and tradition, in both material and social terms. The primary material used in the construction of Bayırşəhər is locally-sourced limestone – the same material that has been used in Baku since ancient times and became a signature element of the Shirvan-Absheron architectural school. Many of the buildings also contain decorative elements drawing on traditional ornaments and made of carved stone, thus continuing local craft traditions (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Stone carving and original wooden door, Bayırşəhər

Yet the most significant mixing of modern innovation and local culture occurred not in the material realm, but in the social sphere. The coexistence of winding old towns and new grid-based districts is, of course, hardly unique, and can be found in a variety of European, Islamicate, and postcolonial contexts. Some examples include Edinburgh’s Old and New Towns, Lisbon’s Castelo fortress and Pambaline districts, Kasbah and *ville europenne* in Algiers, or old and new towns in Tashkent, Beirut and others. Baku, with Bayırşəhər mostly built during Russian Imperial times, can also be situated in this postcolonial context. But what is different and perhaps unique is that, unlike in Algiers and Tashkent, where the spatial boundaries of the old and the new cities marked the social boundaries between colonizers and colonized, Baku’s grid-based Bayırşəhər housed a large local population and became a site

where Baku's vibrant, multi-ethnic urban community developed. Historically, Bayırşəhər consisted of several adjacent ethnoreligious neighborhoods populated by Muslim, Jewish, Armenian and Russian-Western groups and covered a large area from the city walls to the present-day Nizami metro station and Samad Vurgun street (DeHaan 2018). However, it is worth mentioning that parts of Bayırşəhər located closer to İcərişəhər were mostly populated by privileged groups, including nobility, merchants, oil barons and their servants. In the context of the oil boom and the influx of oil wealth into the city, class rather than ethnic origin was key in the spatial organization of this new part of town.

Baku courtyard culture: pre-Soviet and Soviet heritage

One of the defining features of Bayırşəhər is the combination of European architectural styles with local traditions of spatial organization. The inner courtyard (Az: *həyət* / Rus: *dvor*) is a prime example of this cultural fusion. According to a historian of architecture we interviewed, the courtyard culture began to develop in Bayırşəhər in the 19th century. The grid structure allowed for larger houses to be built here, compared to Içərişəhər. These bigger houses surrounded an inner courtyard, which became a shared social space between inhabitants of several buildings (Figure 4). After the Bolshevik takeover of Baku, many of the larger houses in Bayırşəhər were nationalized and divided into smaller apartments to accommodate working-class families in conditions of rapid urbanization. This type of shared housing is known as communal apartments (Rus: *kommunal'nye kvartiry*) – an important socio-cultural and economic phenomenon of the time that represents the shifted power dynamics between the descendants of the repressed owners and the newcoming working-class families.

Figure 4. Shared courtyard, Bayırşəhər

Source: Image courtesy of Lala Aliyeva

This combination of the grid structure and the division of large apartments into smaller ones made Bayırşəhər home to a unique form of urban community – a courtyard, where multiple families of different ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds shared an intimate space of a courtyard. Today, these courtyards are a living memory of two distinctly different eras in the history of the city: A space once privately-owned by the local rich and designed in accordance with the Islamic traditions became a distinctly different yet unique urban form in Soviet times. These multifamily courtyards have gained new cultural significance over time, with *Baku courtyards* usually portrayed as a distinct form of living that got recognition in the post-Soviet context for being home to people from different professional, religious, national, and social backgrounds, with diversity seen as its core value. These courtyards are widely referenced in art – including music, poetry, and cinema – while the behavior standards that have developed there are celebrated as *truly Bakuvian* values. These

behaviors and values include sharing spaces and celebrating communal feasts, networks of mutual care, routine respect for elders, and patriarchal social control of women and family life.

Market economy and urban redevelopment

With transition to a market economy, the Bayırşəhər area has experienced a few significant transformations that have physically divided some historical neighbourhoods. For instance, as part of a major redevelopment project from 2008-2013, a large portion of historical Bayırşəhər was demolished for the Winter Park and Central Park. This redevelopment project involved the forced relocation of the local community, which was fragmented and dispersed to the outskirts of the city (Valiyev & Wallwark 2019). The project faced resistance from the residents, but they could not withstand the process because of the lack of organization and support from the broader public in conditions of stigma about the area and themselves As a result, several significant architectural monuments, namely the House of Tahmazov brothers (1900-2016), Haji Farajullah Hammam (1888-2016, the former building of Azerbaijan State YUĞ Theatre), the Mansion of Mehmandarovs (1911-2009), Gulam Sharifov's House (1910-2016) – once the home of Abbas Mirza Sharifzada, historical Shollar water tower (1917-2016) are gone forever,

The remaining part of Bayırşəhər has also been affected by the transition to a market economy. Many of the residents privatized their apartments, with some selling to new owners, while others, especially those with flats on the first floor, converting their property into commercial enterprises such as shops and cafes. These economic adaptation measures led to significant changes in the social and demographic structure of the area. Some common cases involve younger generations opting for more modern and spacious types of housing, while others have moved out in exchange for small monetary compensation. Sometimes these apartments are seen as an investment for

outsiders who intend to demolish and redevelop for potential financial dividends. However, most of the residents of these neighborhoods (the absolute majority, as they themselves say) are against relocation and the demolition of Bayırşəhər courtyards. Senior residents usually mention the cultural, historical and architectural significance of the area as the main reasons for their resistance. Even though some resistant locals are the grandchildren of the first owners of the houses (who own only a single, usually tiny apartment today), people who moved to the area under the Soviet Union are also against demolition in Bayırşəhər. They have expressed their dedication to its cultural and architectural significance.

Furthermore, the residents complain that the plans for the demolition, which began with making paint markings on historical buildings, are not properly communicated to them. They report that the people who made the markings are rude and have no official identification, present conflicting information, which creates a lot of uncertainty and unrest in the neighborhood. The area is regarded as *backwards*, *a disgrace for central Baku*; the supporters of demolition use the tropes of *drug havens* and *houses full of rats* – to delegitimize residents' grievances. As confirmed by the communication from the Azerbaijan Architects Union, there is no officially approved redevelopment project for the area, while the only information disseminated through local media is on the plans to use the area for expanding Central Park. This creates what Roy (2009) calls a condition of "urban informality," when major decision makers grant exceptional rights for redevelopment (in our case, demolition) to contractors that usually exclude communities from the planning of the spaces where they live.

What are the alternatives?

As this overview of the neighborhood's history suggests, Bayırşəhər's heritage value goes beyond that of the architectural monuments located in it. The neighborhood has

historical and social value, and is a home to a long-established urban community. Demolition is unpopular with the residents and can create significant discontent. Converting the area into a grassy park, even with preserved architectural monuments, would erase the historic grid structure and the iconic courtyard culture. It would also push out the residents of the area. But what is the alternative?

Many residents of Bayırşəhər believe that redeveloping Bayırşəhər for tourism purposes is the healthiest alternative that can improve their living conditions, bring prosperity to the neighborhood, open the community to the broader world, and save them from eviction. People feel proud when Western tourists visit the area and take pictures of the buildings and the historic wooden doors. Indeed, globally, touristification of historical neighborhoods – that is, their opening for tourism through places such as restaurants and art galleries, showcasing historical buildings and local crafts – has been a popular strategy for the conversion of cultural heritage into economic value (Ferro et al. 2024). Such strategies often create opportunities for income generation for the local communities, open spaces for creative industries and professionals. In Baku, such a strategy was used in the redevelopment of several central adjacent streets (namely, Islam Safarli, Hazi Aslanov, Leo Tolstoy, Mirza Ibrahimov, Bashir Safaroghlu), which helped preserve the historical monuments while making it a touristic hub of the city. It could also help transform Bayırşəhər and strengthen Baku's city branding as a place of cross-cultural exchange and enrichment.

If a touristification strategy is adopted, it would be crucial to prevent the gentrification of the area. Gentrification refers to the process by which lower-income residents are pushed out of their homes when prices for property and rent rise. Rising property prices sometimes make moving out an attractive option that may allow people to improve their living conditions, albeit outside of their neighborhood.

However, such displacement results in the fragmentation of established communities, which breaks down networks of support and reduces people's access to cultural, educational, and social infrastructure in inner cities. The economic opportunities presented by touristification, therefore, need to be considered in relation to the impact on the residents.

Literature on urban development suggests that *spaces* transform into meaningful *places* when people form emotional attachments to where they live (Gans 1962; Fried 2000). With gentrification leading to a drastic increase in housing and rental prices, people in Bayırşəhər, who predominantly own the apartments they live in, can benefit from its outcomes. Consequently, moving out of the gentrified neighborhood may seem like a lucrative alternative for locals, yet it would be harmful to maintaining the spirit of the neighborhood. The decision about Bayırşəhər's future therefore entails a significant moral dilemma: Given the historical and cultural importance of the area, preserving its historic buildings—even at the cost of market-driven relocation of its residents—appears to be a lesser evil than the forcible displacement and demolition of the area entirely, especially since no viable alternative has yet been proposed to avoid both outcomes.

But a third way, beyond the demolition and preservation with displacement, is possible. A community-based approach to urban renewal would consider not only the economic exchange value of the area, but also its *use value*, which involves people's emotional attachment to the place (Logan & Molotch 1987). The city authorities should learn from similar projects in other countries that have emphasized local pride, culture and community inclusion over immediate gains. One example of such a community-based approach is BIP/ZIP projects being implemented in Lisbon, Portugal. The strategy involves social mapping of neighborhoods, and engagement of the local communities in redevelopment projects in their areas by providing grants for local initiatives, extending microfinance

loans and encouraging the families to take part in the economic revival of their neighborhoods (URBACT, nd). Drawing from this example, residents, local cultural associations, and representatives from the State Committee could be brought together to map housing conditions, social facilities, and public spaces through a series of community meetings to unravel the socio-economic potential of Bayırşəhər. The redevelopment of the area could be promoted as a pilot project under the implementation phase of the General Plan, incorporating various voluntary and professional associations, as well as students from a number of universities to support social mapping and evaluation processes. Months of collaborative work would open up the community to identify the key areas for improvement and assess the proposals for micro grants. Designed to improve their living conditions or to support micro-enterprises and local artisans, the targeted financial support would allow the locals to multiply their output and stay competitive in the changing economic reality of the city.

Another example of community-led urban regeneration is the Darb Al-Ahmar neighborhood in Cairo, Egypt. Previously one of the poorest and most densely populated areas of Cairo, this project, implemented jointly by the Government of Egypt, Cairo Governorate, and Aga Khan Trust for Culture, improved the living conditions of the residents while also restoring and conserving historical buildings. The project began with a detailed survey of the residents, seeking to understand their needs and capabilities. In the next phases of the project, measures to support residents with their work and living were developed. This included series of micro-finance loans and grants, which allowed the residents to actively participate in the regeneration of their neighborhood while generating income and economic value for their households and the city (Sehayeb, 2011).

A similar approach, which includes the residents, can be developed in Bayırşəhər. It would require an understanding of

the composition of the local community, the residents' needs, and an evaluation of their current skillset. This would allow the incorporation of residents into Bayırşəhər's economy in the future by offering them capacity-building opportunities, which would prevent gentrification's negative consequences. Involving the residents in the redevelopment project would also resolve the problem of a lack of transparency in communication with the local community, which currently creates a lot of frustration and anger among residents.

Conclusion

Bayırşəhər is not just a collection of old buildings. Its location next to İçərişəhər, the grid structure, the culture of inner courtyards, the material heritage of local stone carving, all show that it is an important part of Baku's urban fabric, reflecting the urban transition to modernity. Demolition of this neighborhood will erase an important layer of Azerbaijan's history of integration into the global economy which combined modern innovation with local culture and tradition. In contrast, community-based regeneration of the area located between the UNESCO world heritage site and the newly constructed Winter Park would help to transform all of the city center into an attractive area for living, working, and leisure, both for Bakuvians and tourists. Such regeneration would enhance the sense of urban continuity by connecting the city's past history with the present emphasis on beautification and spectacular architecture. Azerbaijan has both the resources and the expertise to make this happen.

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