

ARTICLE

The urban palimpsest of Yerevan: Architectural heritage, spatial philosophy, and sustainable development perspectives

Martin Harutyunyan* 

Fine Arts Department, Institute of Arts, Yerevan, Armenia

Abstract

This article examines the architectural stratification and spatial relationships within a selected urban fragment of Yerevan by analyzing two photographs. It focuses on three major architectural layers: 19th-century traditional vernacular dwellings, monumental and modernist architecture of the Soviet period, and contemporary high-rise developments of the 21st century, increasingly influenced by global capital and market-driven urban development. Together, these layers provide a visual basis for considering how Yerevan's built environment relates to broader historical, political, and socio-economic transformations in Armenia. Through visual analysis and spatial theory, the study explores the spatial dissonance and architectural eclecticism that emerge from the coexistence of these different periods. Rather than viewing this heterogeneity as a consequence of fragmented urban planning, the article considers whether the spatial relationships visible in the selected urban fragment may be interpreted as an expression of the city's evolving architectural condition. Drawing on Edward Soja's concept of Thirdspace, the study examines how historical memory, everyday experience, and contemporary development intersect within the city's physical landscape. It also addresses the growing tension between market-driven transformation and the preservation of architectural and cultural heritage. In relation to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11, Target 11.4, the article argues for a more balanced approach to urban development—one that recognizes Yerevan's layered architectural memory as a valuable cultural resource while allowing economic development, ecological responsibility, and the continued evolution of the city.

***Corresponding author:**Martin Harutyunyan
(martinharutyunyan@hotmail.com)

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1. Introduction

Urban space is far more than a mechanical assembly of stone, concrete, streets, and structures; it is a complex, living organism that serves as the material embodiment of human consciousness, historical upheavals, and societal transformations. Every building carries the ideology and spirit (*Zeitgeist*) of its era, leaving an indelible imprint of time on the physical fabric of the city.

In this context, Yerevan—with its centuries-old history yet continually reconstructed

and reinterpreted cityscape—presents itself as a unique architectural palimpsest.¹ Just as on an ancient parchment where earlier inscriptions have been partially scraped away to accommodate new text while remaining subtly visible beneath, the traces of preceding epochs in Yerevan never entirely vanish. Instead, they continue to bleed through the contemporary urban layers, generating profound spatial and mnemonic contrasts across the cityscape.

The two photographs (Figures 1 and 2) selected for this study provide a particularly concentrated visual representation of this urban palimpsest, allowing the coexistence of different architectural and historical layers to be examined within a specific urban fragment. Captured from different perspectives overlooking the capital's panorama, these images clearly depict the confrontation, juxtaposition, and forced coexistence of three distinct architectural and axiological epochs.

In the lower foreground of the photographs, we clearly observe traditional, human-scaled vernacular neighborhoods embedded within lush greenery, symbolizing the city's organic past. Imposed directly above them are the larger-scale structures of the Soviet era, including the prominent building on the right side of the first photograph, which forms part of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia complex on Marshal Baghramyan Avenue. The main Academy building was designed by architect Samvel Safaryan; construction began in 1948 and was completed in 1958. The complex was subsequently expanded in the 1970s with additional buildings for research institutes and the library. Its institutional function and monumental scale reflect the important role assigned to scientific and cultural institutions within the urban structure of Soviet Yerevan.² Finally, towering in the background are modern high-rise developments flanked by construction cranes, bearing witness to the ongoing process of private investment and contemporary urban expansion.

The purpose of this article is to subject this intricate visual-spatial text, captured in the selected photographs, to a philosophical and phenomenological analysis. It seeks to decode the socio-cultural signifiers embedded in these three architectural layers, examine how they interact within the urban fabric of contemporary Yerevan, and consider how this spatial dissonance relates to broader questions of urban identity and perceptions of the past, present, and future.

2. Research methodology

This article is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach that integrates urban phenomenology, architectural semiotics, and urban sociology. The primary empirical

sources for this study are photographs of Yerevan's urban panorama (Figures 1 and 2), which are examined not merely as static illustrations but as a problematic visual-spatial text.^{3,4} The photographs were taken by the author of this paper, Martin Harutyunyan, in June 2026 across the residential sectors surrounding Baghramyan Avenue and Antaryin Street in Yerevan.

The deliberate focus on these two photographs reflects the specific aim and scope of the study. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive visual survey of Yerevan or to represent all its architectural and historical districts, the research focuses on this particular urban fragment, where different architectural layers can be observed simultaneously within a single visual field. The photographs were taken from the Institute of Arts of Armenia, where the author conducted his research, making this viewpoint both a specific physical position and a situated perspective from which the changing urban landscape can be examined. The two images are therefore treated as focused visual case studies through which the architectural, spatial, and philosophical dimensions of urban stratification can be explored in depth.



Figure 1. City of Yerevan. Location: between Baghramyan Avenue, Sarmen Street, and Antarain Street. Photograph by the author (June 2026).



Figure 2. City of Yerevan. Location: between Baghramyan Avenue, Sarmen Street, and Antairain Street. Photograph by the author (June 2026).

The research combined focused visual analysis with architectural and spatial-philosophical interpretation. The two photographs were treated as visual case studies rather than as a comprehensive survey of Yerevan. The first stage identified the visible architectural and spatial characteristics of the selected urban views, including the coexistence of traditional residential structures, Soviet-era buildings, contemporary high-rises, vegetation, streets, and topography. To make this visual analysis systematic, each photograph was examined through the same set of analytical categories: building scale and massing; materiality, façade treatment, and architectural language; spatial relationships among buildings, streets, vegetation, and topography; indicators of historical and temporal layering; and points of spatial contrast or continuity. These observations were first recorded descriptively, without theoretical interpretation. They were then organized according to the traditional, Soviet, and contemporary architectural layers and compared across the two photographs. Only after this descriptive stage were the observations interpreted through the selected theoretical concepts. This sequence establishes a transparent analytical path from visual evidence to theoretical interpretation and limits the assignment of theoretical meaning to elements

that are not directly supported by the photographs. The second stage interpreted these observations through the concept of the urban palimpsest, examining how different historical layers remain materially present and interact within the contemporary city. The third stage applied the theoretical frameworks of Lefebvre⁵ and Soja⁶ to examine the relationship between material spatial conditions, conceived forms of planning and development, and possible dimensions of lived urban experience. Supporting perspectives from Augé⁷ were used selectively to clarify the relationship between architectural identity and processes of standardization or deterritorialization. The limited empirical scope of the study is intentional: the two photographs serve as focused visual case studies of a specific urban fragment rather than as a representative sample of Yerevan. Consequently, the study does not claim to provide a comprehensive account of the city's urban identity, nor does it treat the photographs as sufficient evidence of residents' experiences or attitudes. Instead, the theoretical concepts interpret the spatial relationships and architectural characteristics that are directly visible in the selected images. Where broader historical, institutional, or planning processes are discussed, they are treated as contextual frameworks rather than as findings derived solely from the photographs.

2.1. Scientific novelty of the study

The scientific novelty of this study lies in applying an integrated spatial and architectural-philosophical framework to interpret Yerevan's contemporary urban transformation. Rather than treating the city's historical periods as isolated architectural styles, the study examines their coexistence as interconnected layers of an urban palimpsest. The combination of Lefebvre's⁵ theory of the production of space and Soja's⁶ concept of Thirdspace provides a framework for linking the material configuration of the city to the planning systems and institutional processes that produced it, as well as to the meanings and experiences that may emerge from its continued use and transformation. Supporting perspectives from Augé⁷ further clarify the relationship between standardization and changing architectural identity. The originality of the approach therefore lies not in presenting a comprehensive survey of Yerevan's architecture, but in using the two photographic case studies to examine how different historical and contemporary forms of spatial production remain visible and interact within the same urban field.

2.2. Initial analysis and conceptual framework

The analyzed photographs capture the complex, multi-layered fabric of Yerevan, clearly revealing three primary tiers of urban space.

The initial visual analysis of Figures 1 and 2 identified three principal characteristics of the urban environment. First, the photographs reveal the coexistence of distinct architectural periods within the same spatial field, particularly through the relationship between traditional tufa-stone houses, Soviet-era structures, and contemporary high-rise buildings. Second, differences in scale, materiality, density, and architectural language create a noticeable visual contrast between these layers. The older residential fabric is generally characterized by smaller-scale structures, local stone, courtyards, and vegetation, while the Soviet and contemporary buildings introduce larger volumes and different spatial relationships. Third, the photographs demonstrate that these architectural layers are not isolated but remain physically interconnected within the contemporary city. Their proximity produces a complex visual and spatial condition in which historical continuity and contemporary transformation are simultaneously visible. These observations provide the empirical basis for the theoretical interpretation developed in this study.

Regarding spatial dialectics, the older neighborhoods extending across the lower section of the photographs represent the city's organic concept of *dwelling* (the home), where humans and nature (fruit orchards, verdant courtyards) exist in harmonious equilibrium. However, this horizontal residential environment exists alongside the massive and geometric structures of the Soviet era, reflecting both the centralized planning system of the period and the broader processes of modernization, institutional development, and collective urban construction.

Additionally, the panorama is crowned with contemporary high-rises and construction cranes. This topmost layer transcends human scale; it reaches upward, clearing the space of urban memory and establishing a new market-driven and capitalist logic.

Thus, the initial analysis revealed that Yerevan's contemporary panorama is not a harmonious ensemble, but rather an arena of persistent tension and collision between distinct temporal dimensions and architectural languages.

3. The rooted past: Old neighborhoods, the philosophy of dwelling, and human scale

3.1. Human scale and the existential concept of dwelling

The low-rise residential quarters consisting of 1–2-story houses depicted in the lower and central sections of the photographs form a distinct architectural layer within the selected urban panorama. Their significance can first be observed through their physical characteristics: relatively

modest building heights, small-scale openings, individual courtyards, pitched roofs, and close relationships between domestic buildings and vegetation. These characteristics produce a spatial environment that differs considerably from the larger and more monumental structures visible behind and above them.

The importance of this difference is not limited to architectural form. The relatively small scale of these dwellings establishes a closer relationship between the individual, the house, and the immediate surroundings. The courtyard, garden, entrance, and façade are experienced at a more intimate scale, while the presence of vegetation contributes to a sense of enclosure and continuity between domestic and natural space. From this architectural observation, the notion of dwelling provides a useful philosophical framework for interpreting the character of this environment.

In his seminal essay “*Building Dwelling Thinking* (*Bauen Wohnen Denken*),” Martin Heidegger² argues that dwelling represents a fundamental way in which human beings establish a relationship with the world, rather than simply occupying a constructed building. Applied cautiously to the architectural condition visible in the photographs, this concept helps illuminate how the traditional residential environment can be understood not merely as a collection of houses, but as a spatial setting associated with rootedness, familiarity, and everyday life.

From this perspective, several characteristics of the photographed residential environment can be interpreted through the concept of dwelling:

- (i) Anthropocentric scale: The relatively modest height and proportions of the houses establish a direct visual and physical relationship with the human body. Unlike the larger structures occupying the middle and upper parts of the panorama, these buildings do not dominate the observer through monumental scale. Their architectural dimensions contribute instead to a more intimate perception of domestic space.
- (ii) Relationship between house and courtyard: The visible combination of houses, gardens, trees, and enclosed domestic spaces suggests that the dwelling environment extends beyond the building itself. The house is connected to a surrounding territory of everyday activities and memories. This relationship provides a concrete architectural basis for considering Heidegger's² notion of dwelling in relation to the photographed environment.
- (iii) Bachelardian poetics of space: Gaston Bachelard's⁸ discussion of the house as a space of intimacy, memory, and imagination provides a complementary interpretive perspective. In the photographs, the

small windows, pitched roofs, individual entrances, courtyards, and vegetation can be read as architectural elements that contribute to the intimate character of domestic space. The photographs themselves cannot demonstrate the personal memories of individual residents; nevertheless, these architectural features allow us to consider the potential relationship between domestic form, intimacy, and memory.

Thus, Heidegger's² concept of dwelling and Bachelard's⁸ poetics of space are not treated here as direct explanations of the photographed buildings. Rather, they provide philosophical frameworks through which the architectural characteristics observed in the images can be interpreted. The distinction is important: the photographs establish the physical and morphological evidence, while the philosophical concepts help explore its possible experiential and cultural significance.

3.2. Materiality, locality, and the organic connection with nature

The visual-morphological analysis of the photographs revealed a deep equilibrium between the old neighborhoods and their surrounding natural environment:

- (i) The language of local stone: In [Figure 2](#), the façades of houses constructed from local tufa and basalt stone are particularly prominent. Tufa is not merely a construction material; it represents the materialized memory of the Armenian Highlands. The warm, earthy hues of the stone anchor the building to the soil, creating the impression that the structure has naturally "grown" out of the landscape.
- (ii) Organic integration of greenery: In both photographs, the old houses are thoroughly submerged within a dense canopy of trees and vegetation. Unlike contemporary landscape design, which is often artificially curated, the gardens and courtyards here constitute an integral element of the living space. The trees act as a natural shield, generating a horizontal, breathing ecosystem.

3.3. Organic urbanism vs. planned development

A key defining characteristic of this layer is its organic, non-linear development trajectory.

In contrast to the rigid layouts of the Soviet or modern eras, the historical neighborhoods (such as Kond or Kozern, elements of which are visible absorbed along the slopes in the photographs) evolved incrementally over time. Houses were expanded or added to continuously in response to generational shifts and the growing spatial needs of families.

This irregularity gives rise to an authentic urban identity.

Here, repetitive or monotonous façades are absent; instead, every home retains its distinct, individual character.

However, as the photographs illustrate, this horizontal, anthropocentric realm finds itself in a defensive posture. It is encircled from above by overbearing Soviet volumetric masses and threatened from the flanks by modern high-rises—symbolizing the retreat and vulnerability of traditional urban memory in the face of contemporary urbanization processes.

3.4. The Soviet urban layer: Planning, housing, and everyday life

The Soviet architectural layer visible in the photographs should be understood within the broader process of Yerevan's 20th-century urban transformation rather than solely as an expression of political monumentality.⁹ The development of Soviet Yerevan was closely connected with successive master plans, beginning with Alexander Tamanyan's 1924 plan, which established a major framework for the subsequent development of the capital. The plan combined a comprehensive urban structure with a new north-south axis, public buildings, residential areas, and the transformation of the existing urban fabric. Later, Soviet planning continued to modify and expand this framework in response to population growth, industrialization, and changing housing requirements.^{10,11}

The post-war decades were particularly important for the development of residential Yerevan. Rapid population growth and industrialization generated a substantial demand for new housing, leading to the construction of large residential districts and multi-apartment buildings. According to research on Soviet housing in Yerevan, most of the city's apartment buildings were constructed during the 1960s–1980s, while the transition toward standardized and more economical construction after the mid-1950s significantly accelerated the production of housing.¹² The Soviet urban layer visible in the photographs should therefore be understood not only through monumental public architecture, but also through the expansion of residential space and the material organization of everyday urban life.

Housing construction was also connected with broader social objectives of Soviet urban policy. The provision and allocation of apartments were administered through institutional mechanisms, and access to housing was closely related to employment, state institutions, and social networks. Research based on narratives of Yerevan residents demonstrates that the process of obtaining an apartment involved both formal administrative procedures and informal social practices. Consequently, Soviet residential architecture cannot be understood

only as a physical manifestation of state ideology; it also constituted the everyday environment in which families lived, established households, developed neighborhood relations, and experienced the changing social structure of the city.

This dimension is important for interpreting the Soviet buildings visible in the photographs. Their large scale, geometric forms, and institutional character certainly reflect the centralized organization of Soviet urban development, but these characteristics were also connected to practical requirements of housing, infrastructure, public services, and the accommodation of a rapidly growing urban population. The Soviet residential environment therefore combined ideological objectives with material and social functions.

The transformation of Yerevan during this period also altered the relationship between the older low-rise urban fabric and newly constructed residential and institutional environments. Existing forms of domestic architecture increasingly existed alongside multi-apartment buildings, public institutions, transportation infrastructure, and planned residential districts. The resulting urban condition was neither a complete replacement of the traditional city nor a simple continuation of it. Instead, different forms of urban life became spatially superimposed, producing the layered condition that remains visible in the contemporary panorama.

This historical context complicates a purely symbolic interpretation of the Soviet layer as an expression of state dominance. The architecture should be understood simultaneously as a product of centralized planning, modernization, housing provision, demographic transformation, and everyday social life. In the photographs examined in this study, the Soviet buildings therefore represent not only the institutional power of the period but also a historical urban environment that became integrated into the lived experience and collective memory of Yerevan.

4. The post-Soviet layer: Capital, verticality, and the logic of late capitalism

4.1. Vertical expansion and the logic of late capitalism: a Jameson-inspired interpretation

In the upper sections of the photographs, along the slopes of the hills, a different architectural condition becomes visible. The contemporary multi-apartment buildings are characterized by greater height, larger volumes, extensive glazed surfaces, and a strong vertical orientation. Their scale and material expression contrast noticeably with the low-rise residential structures in the foreground and with the larger Soviet buildings occupying the middle of the

visual field. Construction cranes further indicate that this part of the urban landscape is undergoing an active process of transformation.

These visual characteristics can first be understood as signs of urban intensification within the contemporary development of Yerevan. The increasing verticality allows a greater amount of residential or commercial floor space to be accommodated within a limited area of valuable urban land. In the central and adjacent areas of Yerevan, this process has been accompanied by the conversion and redevelopment of existing urban plots and by the increasing construction of multi-apartment buildings. Such development reflects the growing economic importance of urban land and the increasing role of private investment in shaping the city's built environment.

This transformation also creates a specific tension between development and the existing urban fabric. In areas where new multi-story buildings are introduced near older low-rise residential structures, differences in building height, density, land use, and architectural character become particularly visible. The photographs cannot establish the ownership structure, financial arrangements, or specific planning decisions behind the individual buildings shown. They can, however, document the spatial result of this development: increasing vertical density and the coexistence of new investment-oriented construction with an established low-rise urban environment.

The contemporary Yerevan context is therefore important for interpreting the photographs. The high-rise buildings should not be treated simply as abstract examples of global capitalism or as automatically "neoliberal" architecture. Rather, they represent a local process of urban redevelopment in which land value, housing demand, private investment, planning decisions, and the existing architectural fabric interact. This provides a more concrete basis for applying Fredric Jameson's¹³ concept of late capitalism as an interpretive framework rather than as a direct explanation of the individual buildings.

At the same time, the application of Jameson's¹³ framework to Yerevan requires a degree of contextual qualification. Jameson's account was developed primarily in relation to Western late-capitalist societies and cannot be transferred directly to the post-Soviet Armenian urban context. Yerevan's contemporary transformation has been shaped not only by global economic processes, but also by the specific legacies of Soviet planning, post-Soviet privatization and property transformation, local housing demand, and the continued presence of inherited architectural structures. The spatial condition visible in the photographs should therefore be understood as the result of an interaction between globalizing economic tendencies

and locally specific historical and institutional processes.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson¹³ examines the relationship between contemporary cultural and architectural forms and the expansion of global economic and financial systems. His approach allows the architectural characteristics visible in the photographs to be considered not simply as matters of style, but as expressions of broader transformations in the production and organization of urban space.

From a Jamesonian perspective, the vertical expansion visible in the photographs may therefore be interpreted as part of a wider process in which urban space becomes increasingly integrated into systems of investment, commodification, and capital accumulation. The high-rise should not, however, be understood automatically as evidence of neoliberal development simply because of its height or contemporary appearance. Rather, the photograph provides a visual starting point for examining how changing economic conditions may become materialized through building scale, density, construction activity, and the increasing commercialization of urban land.

The contrast between the three architectural layers consequently reveals a broader transformation in the relationship between architecture and urban space. The traditional residential layer is primarily organized around low-rise domestic environments; the Soviet layer reflects a period of large-scale planned development and institutional architecture; while the contemporary layer demonstrates an increasing emphasis on vertical density and investment-led construction. These differences should not be interpreted as completely separate or internally uniform systems, but as historically specific forms of urban production that now coexist within the same spatial field.

The concept of late capitalism therefore serves in this study as an *interpretive framework* rather than a direct causal explanation of the buildings visible in the photographs. The visual evidence identifies a particular spatial transformation, while Jameson's¹³ theory helps situate this transformation within a broader discussion of the relationship between contemporary architecture, economic processes, and the production of urban space.

4.2. Globalization and Marc Augé's non-places

Marc Augé¹⁷ introduced the concept of *non-places* (*non-lieux*) to describe spaces characterized by transience, anonymity, circulation, and a weakening of traditional historical and relational attachments. Unlike anthropological "places," which are associated with identity, relationships, and historical continuity, non-places are produced primarily for movement, consumption, and temporary occupation. The

concept provides a useful complementary perspective for examining the changing architectural character of Yerevan, particularly when considered in relation to both the Soviet and contemporary layers visible in the photographs.

The relevance of the concept to the Soviet layer lies in the standardization and repetition that characterized important aspects of Soviet residential construction. Standardized building types and construction methods were used across many Soviet cities, producing architectural environments in which similar spatial and formal solutions could appear in geographically distant locations. From an Augéan perspective, this repetition may contribute to a partial weakening of architectural specificity: a building can belong simultaneously to its local urban context and to a wider standardized system of construction. However, Soviet residential environments cannot simply be classified as non-places. They were also lived spaces in which residents developed family relationships, neighborhood connections, memories, and forms of collective everyday life. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that the physical standardization of architecture does not automatically eliminate the social production of place.

The concept becomes particularly relevant to the contemporary layer visible in the photographs. Several of the new high-rise buildings employ extensive glazing, large volumes, and an international architectural vocabulary that is not immediately associated with the traditional material and formal language of Yerevan. Their visual characteristics may therefore be interpreted as signs of increasing architectural deterritorialization. Such buildings can resemble developments found in many other rapidly transforming cities, making them less immediately distinguishable through specifically local architectural references.

The photographs thus reveal two different historical manifestations of architectural standardization and deterritorialization. In the Soviet period, repetition was closely connected with centralized planning, standardized construction, and the large-scale provision of housing. In the contemporary period, similar effects may emerge through globalized architectural languages, private investment, real-estate development, and the circulation of internationally recognizable building models. The economic and political mechanisms are therefore different, even though both periods can produce architectural forms that appear partially detached from their immediate local context.

This comparison should not, however, suggest that Soviet and contemporary Yerevan are equivalent forms of non-place. Their historical conditions, social functions, and relationships to the city are fundamentally

different. The value of Augé's⁷ concept in this study lies instead in identifying a particular tension between local architectural identity and processes of standardization or deterritorialization. In the photographs, this tension becomes visible through the contrast between the distinctive tufa-stone houses and vegetated courtyards of the lower layer, the standardized and planned character of parts of the Soviet layer, and the internationally oriented architectural vocabulary of the contemporary high-rises.

The post-Soviet Armenian context further complicates the application of Augé's⁷ concept. In Yerevan, architectural standardization cannot be understood only through the logic of anonymity or transience, because standardized Soviet structures became embedded in local patterns of residence, memory, and everyday use over several decades. Similarly, contemporary buildings with internationally oriented architectural languages are not necessarily detached from local identity simply because they resemble developments elsewhere. Their meaning is shaped by their specific location, relationship to inherited urban fabric, and role within the ongoing transformation of Yerevan. Augé's concept is therefore used here selectively to identify tendencies toward architectural standardization and deterritorialization rather than to classify particular buildings or urban spaces as non-places.

Augé's⁷ concept therefore functions in this article as a supporting interpretive lens rather than a complete explanation of contemporary architecture. It helps identify how certain architectural forms may become less strongly tied to local historical identity, while the concept of Thirdspace developed by Lefebvre⁵ and Soja⁶ provides a broader framework for understanding how these forms are subsequently perceived, inhabited, and negotiated within the lived urban environment.

4.3. The symbolism of the crane: incompleteness and creative destruction

In both photographs, construction cranes constitute one of the most visible signs of ongoing transformation. Unlike the completed buildings surrounding them, the cranes indicate that the architectural configuration of the landscape remains unfinished and subject to further change. Their vertical position also creates a strong visual relationship with the high-rise buildings, emphasizing the upward direction of contemporary construction and the continuing transformation of the urban skyline.

At the most immediate level, the crane can therefore be understood as a visual indicator of urban transition. It marks a moment between demolition, construction,

completion, and occupation, making visible the fact that the contemporary city is continuously being produced rather than existing as a finished architectural composition. In the context of the two photographs, this condition becomes particularly significant because the new construction appears in direct visual proximity to older low-rise residential structures and established urban forms.

This observation provides a basis for a more theoretical interpretation through Joseph Schumpeter's¹⁴ concept of creative destruction. Schumpeter describes capitalism as a process in which economic development continually transforms existing structures through the introduction of new forms of production and organization. Applied to the urban context, the concept can help interpret development as a process in which existing spatial arrangements may be replaced, reorganized, or rendered economically obsolete by new forms of investment and construction.

The photographs, however, do not provide sufficient evidence to claim that any particular building has been demolished because of a specific investment decision, nor can the crane itself be regarded as direct proof of creative destruction. Rather, the crane serves as a visual entry point for examining a broader process of urban transformation. Its presence draws attention to the tension between construction as a sign of economic and architectural renewal and the possibility that such renewal may place pressure on existing structures, residential environments, and historically significant urban landscapes.

In this sense, the crane has a dual significance. On the one hand, it represents possibility, investment, and the emergence of a new urban future. On the other hand, when positioned above or beside older residential structures, it can be read as a symbol of uncertainty concerning what elements of the existing urban fabric will survive the next stage of transformation. The metaphor of creative destruction is therefore used here not as a literal description of the specific construction projects shown in the photographs, but as a theoretical lens through which the contradictory character of urban renewal can be considered.

The crane consequently becomes an important visual element in the palimpsestic character of the photographed landscape: it represents not another completed historical layer, but the process through which a new layer is currently being produced. This distinction is important because the urban palimpsest is not only a record of what has already been built; it is also a record of continuous processes of alteration, replacement, and negotiation between past and future.

5. Spatial dissonance, the urban palimpsest, and the philosophy of eclecticism

5.1. The city as palimpsest: the visual juxtaposition of eras

The most essential feature captured in the photographs is not a single architectural style or historical epoch, but the simultaneous coexistence of different temporal, material, and spatial conditions within the same urban field. To interpret this condition, the study employed the concept of the urban palimpsest, while recognizing that the metaphor has a more complex meaning than the simple coexistence of old and new buildings.

André Corboz's concept of *The Land as Palimpsest* (1983) understands territory as the outcome of a long and continuous process of transformation. Like a manuscript that is repeatedly written, modified, erased, and rewritten, territory retains traces of previous interventions while being continually reshaped by new social, political, economic, and spatial processes.⁷ The palimpsest therefore does not imply a simple accumulation of chronological layers. Rather, it describes a process in which earlier configurations may be preserved, modified, partially erased, or incorporated into subsequent transformations.

Andreas Huyssen¹⁵ further develops the idea of the urban palimpsest in relation to urban memory and the persistence of the past within contemporary space. In this understanding, traces of previous periods remain active within the experience and interpretation of the modern city. The palimpsest is therefore useful not simply because different buildings from different periods can be seen together, but because these material traces allow different historical experiences and memories to remain present within the contemporary urban environment.

Applied to Yerevan, the concept therefore refers not simply to the visual presence of three architectural periods in one photograph, but to the continuing interaction between different historical formations occupying the same urban territory. The traditional low-rise dwellings, Soviet structures, and contemporary high-rise developments visible in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) represent different stages of urban transformation. Their significance, however, lies in their present spatial relationship: earlier forms of dwelling and planning remain visible while new forms of development are introduced around and above them.

At the same time, the palimpsest metaphor should be applied critically. Urban transformation is not necessarily a harmonious accumulation of historical layers. Processes of redevelopment may involve demolition, displacement,

unequal access to urban space, property loss, and the weakening of cultural memory. As Nadia Bartolini¹⁶ argues, although the palimpsest is useful for describing chronological superimposition and traces of the past, it can become insufficient when urban environments are characterized by complex material, spatial, and temporal juxtapositions. For this reason, the present study does not use the palimpsest to romanticize architectural conflict or to suggest that every form of coexistence represents cultural richness. Rather, it is used as a critical framework through which continuity and erasure, coexistence and conflict, memory and transformation can be considered together.

The photographs present Yerevan as an urban palimpsest in which several historical layers remain simultaneously visible. The traditional layer is represented by the tufa-stone residential houses, courtyards, vegetation, and relatively intimate spatial scale of the older urban fabric. These elements express a strong relationship between local material culture, domestic architecture, and the natural environment. Their presence provides a visual and spatial reference against which subsequent transformations of the city can be understood.

The Soviet layer appears through larger-scale residential and institutional structures associated with centralized planning, modernization, and the expansion of collective housing. These buildings introduced different scales and spatial organizations into the existing urban environment while becoming part of everyday life in the city. Their significance therefore extends beyond their architectural appearance: they represent a historical period in which urban space was shaped through particular systems of planning, housing provision, and institutional organization.

The contemporary layer is visible most clearly in the newer high-rise buildings and their larger volumes, extensive glazing, and internationally oriented architectural vocabulary. These structures reflect the changing economic and developmental conditions of post-Soviet Yerevan, including private investment, real-estate development, and increasing integration into global architectural and economic processes. Their presence introduces a new scale and visual language into areas where earlier architectural layers remain visible.

The significance of the urban palimpsest lies precisely in the coexistence of these layers rather than in their individual characteristics. Traditional houses, Soviet structures, and contemporary high-rises occupy the same urban field and consequently enter into relationships of continuity, contrast, and tension. The photographs therefore reveal not a linear replacement of one architectural period by

another, but an accumulated spatial condition in which earlier and newer forms remain materially present at the same time.

This coexistence also explains the spatial dissonance identified in the study. Differences in scale, material, density, architectural language, and relationship to the surrounding landscape make the historical layers visually and spatially distinct, while their physical proximity connects them within a single urban environment. Yerevan can therefore be understood as a continuously transformed urban palimpsest in which historical traces are neither completely preserved nor entirely erased, but are incorporated into new configurations of urban space.

The urban panorama examined in these photographs therefore represents not a simple chronological sequence, but a spatial record in which different historical processes remain simultaneously visible, interact with one another, and continue to shape the experience of the contemporary city.

Within the specific urban panorama examined in these photographs, historical epochs do not appear as neatly separated periods; rather, they coexist and accumulate within the same visual field. This generates a unique compression of time, wherein past, present, and projected future coexist side by side.

5.2. Spatial dissonance and Thirdspace: a Lefebvrian interpretation

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre⁵ proposes that social space is produced through the interaction of three interconnected dimensions: spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space). Edward Soja⁶ later develops this spatial triad through the concept of Thirdspace, which brings together material spatiality, conceptual representations, and lived experience rather than treating them as separate or mutually exclusive categories. Thirdspace is therefore not simply a third location positioned between two others; it is a way of understanding space as simultaneously real and imagined, material and symbolic, planned and lived.

- (i) Perceived space/Spatial practice: This dimension refers to the material and observable organization of space as it is produced and reproduced through everyday practices. It includes the physical arrangement of buildings, streets, vegetation, infrastructure, routes, and spatial relationships, as well as the ways these environments are used and encountered in everyday life. In the photographs, the tufa houses, Soviet structures, high-rise buildings, vegetation, streets, and topography constitute the material urban environment

through which spatial practices occur. The photographs primarily provide access to this visible dimension; they document the physical configuration of the urban landscape, while the everyday practices associated with it can only be interpreted cautiously rather than directly observed.

- (ii) Conceived space/Representations of space: This is the space produced through plans, designs, regulations, architectural concepts, planning policies, and institutional visions. It is the domain in which architects, urban planners, state authorities, and developers formulate particular ideas about how urban space should be organized. In Yerevan, the Soviet planning system and contemporary development processes represent different historical forms of conceived space.
- (iii) Lived space/Representational space: The third dimension concerns how urban space is experienced, remembered, imagined, and invested with meanings by its inhabitants and users. It includes emotional attachments, memories, symbols, cultural associations, perceptions of belonging, and interpretations of the urban environment. In the present photographs, the intimate scale of the traditional houses, the visual presence of Soviet structures, and the vertical expansion of contemporary buildings may generate different experiences of familiarity, historical continuity, disruption, or uncertainty. Because the photographs do not contain interviews or ethnographic observation, these experiences cannot be presented as empirically established facts about individual residents. They are instead considered as possible dimensions of lived urban experience that emerge from the spatial relationships visible in the images.

These three dimensions should not be treated as independent categories. The physical environment of Yerevan is shaped by planning decisions and institutional systems; those decisions become materially visible in buildings, streets, densities, and spatial arrangements; and these material conditions are subsequently experienced, interpreted, remembered, and sometimes contested by the people who inhabit the city. The relationship is therefore dialectical rather than linear. Conceived space can shape spatial practices, spatial practices can modify the material environment, and lived experience can challenge or reinterpret the meanings intended by planners and institutions.

Thirdspace provides the conceptual framework for bringing these dimensions together. The urban panorama shown in Figures 1 and 2 can therefore be understood as a real-and-imagined space in which the material traces of

different planning systems coexist with the meanings and experiences attached to them. The traditional residential environment, the Soviet urban layer, and contemporary high-rise development are not simply three visual styles. They are products of different forms of spatial production that continue to interact within the same urban field.

The application of Lefebvre's⁵ and Soja's⁶ spatial concepts to Yerevan also requires attention to the city's specific historical and post-Soviet conditions. Their frameworks were developed in different European and North American theoretical contexts and should not be treated as universal explanations of urban space. In Yerevan, the interaction between perceived, conceived, and lived space has been shaped by the coexistence of pre-Soviet and Soviet spatial structures, post-Soviet changes in property relations and development practices, and contemporary processes of market-oriented urban transformation. The concepts are therefore used here as analytical tools for interpreting these locally specific relationships, rather than as predetermined models into which Yerevan's urban experience is fitted.

From this perspective, the spatial dissonance identified in the photographs arises from the encounter between different forms of conceived, perceived, and lived space. A Soviet building may have been conceived through a particular institutional and ideological planning system, become part of the material everyday environment of the city, and subsequently acquire meanings that differ from those originally intended. Similarly, a contemporary high-rise may be conceived as an investment or development project, become a new physical component of the urban landscape, and may subsequently be interpreted by different users or observers as a sign of modernization, opportunity, displacement, or loss. Thirdspace allows these different interpretations to coexist without reducing the urban landscape to a single meaning.

The concept is therefore particularly useful for this study because the two photographs capture not only what Yerevan looks like, but also the interaction between different systems through which urban space has been planned, materially produced, and experienced. The urban palimpsest becomes, in this sense, a lived and negotiated spatial condition rather than merely a visual accumulation of historical buildings.

5.3. Aesthetic and ethical dimensions

The spatial dissonance visible in the photographs has both aesthetic and ethical dimensions. From an aesthetic perspective, the juxtaposition of traditional tufa-stone houses, Soviet-era structures, vegetation, and contemporary high-rise buildings produces a visually heterogeneous urban landscape. The contrast is not simply

a matter of architectural style; it also concerns differences in scale, materiality, density, and relationship to the surrounding environment. The intimate proportions and local materials of the older residential fabric contrast with the larger volumes and more vertically oriented forms of the newer buildings, creating a visual tension between continuity and transformation.

This aesthetic tension is closely connected to ethical questions concerning the future of Yerevan's architectural identity. Urban development necessarily involves change, but the transformation of historically established environments raises questions about which architectural values should be preserved and which forms of change can be considered appropriate. The issue is therefore not whether the city should remain unchanged, but how new development can be integrated without erasing the historical and spatial relationships that contribute to its identity.

From this perspective, the photographs reveal an important challenge for contemporary urban development: balancing modernization with continuity. The coexistence of different architectural layers can contribute to the cultural richness of the city when historical structures, local materials, vegetation, and new construction are considered as parts of a connected urban environment. Conversely, when new development becomes disconnected from the existing spatial and architectural context, the resulting dissonance may weaken the sense of continuity between historical layers. The aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the urban palimpsest are therefore inseparable from broader questions of heritage protection, contextual design, and sustainable urban transformation.

The preceding analysis provides the basis for connecting the philosophical interpretation of Yerevan's urban palimpsest with questions of sustainable urban development. The concept of spatial dissonance identifies a concrete planning challenge: different architectural layers with distinct scales, materials, historical meanings, and forms of spatial production coexist within the same urban field. This condition does not in itself determine a particular planning response, but it indicates where conflicts between continuity and transformation may emerge. Sustainable development can therefore be approached as a process of managing these relationships rather than simply promoting either preservation or new construction. In this sense, the transition to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11.4 in **Section 6** follows directly from the spatial analysis: the preservation of cultural heritage becomes one of the practical dimensions through which the tensions identified in the photographs can be addressed.¹⁷

6. Urban heritage preservation, ecological balance, and sustainable development perspectives in Yerevan

The spatial and philosophical analysis developed in the preceding subsections identifies a central problem for the contemporary transformation of Yerevan: how to accommodate new forms of development while maintaining the historical, material, and spatial relationships that constitute the city's layered urban character. The following discussion translates this analytical problem into a sustainable development perspective. Rather than treating sustainability as a separate policy topic, it is considered here as a practical extension of the spatial analysis, with particular attention to cultural heritage, ecological conditions, adaptive reuse, and context-sensitive development. SDG 11.4 provides an appropriate policy framework for this transition because it directly addresses the protection and safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage.

6.1. Loss of cultural heritage vs. Sustainable Development Goals

In the case of Yerevan, the tension between urban development and heritage preservation is also shaped by the country's existing heritage-protection and urban-planning framework. Armenian legislation provides for the state registration and protection of immovable historical and cultural monuments, their surrounding historical environments, and designated protection zones.¹⁸ Urban-development procedures likewise incorporate historical-cultural justification and heritage-protection requirements into spatial planning and construction processes. However, the existence of a formal protection framework does not by itself resolve the practical tension between heritage conservation, private property interests, redevelopment pressures, and the economic value of urban land. The spatial dissonance identified in the photographs provides a concrete basis for this approach. The coexistence of low-rise traditional structures, larger Soviet buildings, and contemporary high-rises demonstrates differences in scale, density, material expression, and spatial character within the same urban field. These differences suggest that sustainable intervention should address not only the protection of individual buildings, but also the relationships between architectural layers. In practical terms, this may involve context-sensitive height and massing, the preservation of significant vegetation and spatial gaps, the adaptive reuse of suitable existing structures, and the careful integration of new development with established urban patterns.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the type of urban fragment visible in the photographs. Not every

low-rise building shown in the images can be assumed to have formal monument status, and the photographs alone cannot establish whether particular structures are legally protected. The significance of these buildings in the present analysis therefore extends beyond their possible legal status: their value also derives from their contribution to the historical character, spatial continuity, vegetation, and human scale of the surrounding urban environment. The challenge for sustainable development is consequently not simply to preserve individually designated monuments, but to consider how new construction can be integrated into historically significant urban contexts without eliminating the spatial relationships that give those environments their identity.

From this perspective, the preservation of Yerevan's architectural heritage requires a balance between legally protected heritage, historically significant urban fabric, and legitimate contemporary development needs. Such an approach is consistent with SDG 11.4 because cultural heritage protection is not treated as an absolute prohibition on urban change, but as a requirement to manage change in a way that maintains cultural continuity while allowing the city to evolve.¹⁹

6.2. Spatial ecology, microclimate, and resource management

The relationship between architectural heritage and sustainable development can also be considered through the spatial ecology of the selected urban fragment. In addition to differences in building height, massing, and architectural language, the photographs reveal variations in vegetation, open space, building density, and the relationship between built and unbuilt areas. These characteristics are relevant to environmental quality because vegetation and permeable or open spaces can contribute to shading, air movement, and the moderation of local microclimatic conditions. The photographs do not provide measurements of temperature, humidity, air circulation, or other environmental variables; therefore, the present analysis does not claim to demonstrate specific microclimatic effects. Rather, the visible spatial configuration provides a basis for identifying environmental considerations that should be incorporated into future planning and design decisions.

The contrast between the greener, lower-density portions of the photographed fragment and areas characterized by greater building concentration also raises questions concerning the environmental consequences of continued spatial densification. The preservation of existing vegetation, gardens, courtyards, and significant open spatial relationships can help maintain environmental functions that may otherwise be reduced through excessive

site coverage and replacement of existing structures. In this sense, vegetation should not be considered only as a visual component of the historical landscape, but also as part of its spatial and environmental infrastructure. Any future intervention in comparable urban fragments should therefore consider the retention of significant vegetation and open spaces alongside questions of building scale, massing, and density.

Resource management is similarly connected to the treatment of the existing built fabric. Existing buildings represent already embodied material, energy, and construction resources. Where structurally and functionally appropriate, retaining buildings and adapting them to new uses can reduce the need for complete demolition and the consumption of new construction materials. Such an approach also preserves elements of the material and spatial continuity visible in the photographs. The present study does not calculate the lifecycle impacts or embodied carbon of the individual buildings shown; instead, it identifies retention, selective adaptation, and material conservation as relevant sustainability principles for managing comparable urban environments.

These considerations complement the heritage perspective developed in **Section 6.1** while remaining distinct from the more detailed discussion of adaptive reuse in **Section 6.3**. The focus here is the relationship between spatial configuration, vegetation, environmental quality, and resource conservation. In the specific urban fragment examined through the photographs, sustainable development can therefore be understood not only as accommodating new construction, but also as maintaining ecological and material continuities within an already layered urban environment. Context-sensitive development should consequently consider the combined effects of building density, open space, vegetation, existing material resources, and the potential environmental costs of unnecessary demolition.

6.3. Adaptive reuse as a sustainable urban planning solution

Adaptive reuse and context-sensitive development provide important strategies for managing the relationship between Yerevan's historical layers and contemporary urban needs.²⁰ Existing buildings can be adapted to new functions while retaining significant architectural and spatial characteristics, allowing heritage structures to remain active components of the contemporary city. Such an approach can reduce the pressure for complete replacement of older buildings and can support continuity between historical identity and present-day use. In relation to the spatial dissonance identified in the selected urban

fragment, adaptive reuse offers a way of maintaining existing architectural layers while accommodating changing functions. The low-rise traditional structures visible in the photographs represent not only individual buildings but also elements of a broader spatial pattern of smaller scale, vegetation, and continuity. Where such structures are suitable for adaptation, retaining and reusing them can help preserve these relationships while reducing the need for complete replacement. Adaptive reuse therefore functions here not simply as a heritage-preservation technique, but as a means of managing the coexistence of different architectural layers within the same urban field.

The implementation of adaptive reuse, however, depends on practical conditions including ownership, financing, planning regulations, building requirements, and heritage protection policies. The preservation of a building cannot therefore be considered separately from the institutional and economic conditions that determine whether adaptation is feasible. Effective heritage-led development requires coordination between property owners, developers, municipal authorities, conservation specialists, and local communities.

Context-sensitive new construction is equally important. Contemporary buildings do not necessarily need to imitate historical architecture in order to contribute positively to the existing urban environment. Instead, attention should be given to their scale, massing, materials, height, visual relationships, and connections to surrounding streets and buildings. In areas where traditional tufa houses and Soviet-era structures remain visible, new high-rise development can be integrated more carefully when these contextual relationships are considered during the planning and design process.

Such an approach also supports a more polycentric understanding of urban development. Rather than concentrating new investment exclusively in areas undergoing rapid vertical transformation, development strategies can strengthen existing urban centers and neighborhoods while distributing cultural, social, and economic functions across the city. Heritage can consequently become an active resource for sustainable development rather than an obstacle to modernization.

The challenge for Yerevan is therefore not simply to preserve selected historical buildings or to accommodate new construction, but to manage the relationships between different urban layers. Adaptive reuse, appropriate regulation, context-sensitive design, and heritage-led development can contribute to this process by allowing historical structures and contemporary architecture to coexist within a continuously evolving urban environment.

7. Conclusion: Conflict as identity and the architectural future of Yerevan

The visual-morphological examination of the selected urban fragment demonstrates how urban space can be understood not merely as a collection of buildings and streets, but as a layered environment in which historical, political, and existential dimensions remain interconnected.

The three primary architectural languages articulated throughout this research represent major historical transformations of Armenian urban society (Table 1). The traditional, human-scale layer embodies a form of dwelling and spatial groundedness associated with domestic life, local tufa stone, vegetation, and the continuity of individual and collective memory. The Soviet urban layer represents a period of centralized planning, modernization, housing expansion, institutional development, and collective forms of urban life. Its monumental and modernist architecture reflects both the political structures and the spatial organization of the Soviet period, while also forming part of the everyday environment and collective memory of the city. The post-Soviet contemporary layer, meanwhile, reflects changing economic conditions, private investment, globalization, and increasing vertical development. Its high-rise architecture and ongoing construction demonstrate the continuing transformation of Yerevan's urban environment and the emergence of architectural forms that may be less strongly tied to traditional local references.

Table 1. The Yerevan palimpsest

Traditional	Soviet	Contemporary
• Authenticity • Memory of dwelling	• Monumentalism & modernism • Planning, modernization, & collective urban life	• Global capital • Non-places & cranes

7.1. The future of the urban ensemble: tension as an asset

The spatial dissonance arising from the juxtaposition of these three layers should not be perceived merely as an urban planning failure or a lack of organization. Within the selected urban fragment examined in the two photographs, this unfinished and sometimes conflictual dialogue can instead be interpreted as a visible expression of the coexistence of different historical and contemporary architectural conditions. The analysis therefore suggests that the significance of this spatial dissonance lies not in

representing Yerevan as a whole, but in revealing how contrasting architectural layers can coexist within a specific urban field.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of urban planning and preservation, a critical ethical question emerges: How can the layered, palimpsestic structure of urban memory be preserved when global capital and ubiquitous construction cranes threaten to completely engulf and erase the traces of preceding eras?

The selected urban fragment can instead be interpreted as a dynamic Thirdspace in which the tufa of the past, Soviet concrete, and contemporary glass coexist and remain in spatial tension. The success of the city's architectural future will depend on the degree to which this tense equilibrium can be preserved—ensuring that new layers do not erase the very historical text upon which they are built.

The analysis developed in this study therefore connects three levels of interpretation: the visual identification of Yerevan's layered architectural environment, the philosophical interpretation of these layers as a spatially produced and negotiated urban condition, and the practical question of how such a condition can be managed through sustainable development. The concept of Thirdspace provides the principal connection between these levels by emphasizing the interaction among material space, planned interventions, and lived meanings. From this perspective, heritage preservation and sustainable urban development are not external additions to the architectural analysis but practical responses to the tensions revealed by the urban palimpsest. The preservation of significant historical and spatial relationships, combined with context-sensitive new construction, adaptive reuse, and appropriate planning regulation, can therefore be understood as ways of managing the spatial dissonance identified in the selected urban fragment while allowing comparable urban environments to evolve without unnecessary loss of historical and spatial continuity.

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