

## WHAT ELSE CAN WE DO WITH/IN HOLES?

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“Where is a bunker?” This question started to haunt many of us in Georgian cities when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Quest for bunkers, basements and shelters, for spaces of both opacity and safety, was drawn from the possible spillover of this conflict onto Georgia that itself had been at war with Russia in 2008. Feelings of fear and anxiety snapped so strongly that they prompted us to introspect our cities from below – in search of spaces for survival.

What our renewed inquiry for bunkers revealed was that many underground spaces of Soviet blocks were not as opaque, secretive or even valid anymore. Indeed, basements in Soviet apartment buildings were intended to preserve sealing and waterproofing, and in an emergency to be convertible back to shelters. But today, in Tbilisi for instance, most of these dark spaces were reformed into privatized areas of relation, becoming small shops, big supermarkets and banks, or even beauty salons instead. Since Soviet buildings did not have much



*Figure 1* – Basement mirage. Source: Photo by author.

storefront spaces due to the restrictions on private businesses, new shops and stores have, imaginatively, popped up in these once hidden spaces.

Basements and bunkers have even taken a form of individual homes, or home-like structures, for those who have not been able to afford rising real estate prices in residential buildings in Georgia. Even those bunkers in Soviet building blocks where once domestic trash was disposed, have been cleaned, renovated, privatized and rented out as homes to students in search of affordable housing. These barely breathable spaces (without proper ventilation or lightning) are occupied by people precariously positioned. Those who are forced to seek inexpensive shelters in basements and bunkers – refugees, homeless, students and the evicted, are trapped in these abject temporalities and opacities of holes seemingly *ad infinitum*, or in a standby regime.

A basement is a minor infrastructure, one related to the concept of opacity that Martínez proposes as an alternative to live beyond transparency, while questioning what conditions of existence are worth pursuing, and what political projects have to be defended to preserving them. That is why staying with opacity endangers a critique of social and political arrangements of transparency, and perhaps also calls for their capacity for social rearrangement and restructuring.

I take Francisco Martínez's call for "the right to opacity", as first posed by Édouard Glissant (1997), seriously. But I also would like to ask how can we achieve this right in places that are stripped of the "right to the city" (Harvey 2012) altogether? What is the promise of right to opacity in cities, saturated not merely by the current regimes of visibility, transparency and discernability, but by the machines of war, destruction and privatization? What kind of promise can the right to opacity, to invisibility, or indeterminacy hold out to those whose lives are entangled in repressive powers of market and war, themselves recruiting opacity on transparency's behalf?

Looking at the city from its holes revealed, at least in Georgia, that it is made up with cleaves of not just unnoticed underground spaces, aesthetic experiments and alterative knowledge, but with an opaque set of privatizations, dispossessions and destructions. It revealed that staying with those ex-centric and peripheral spaces such as holes and underground structures does not always guarantee self-expression and adventure. For these basements often emerge as guarantees of prosperity for hegemonic order of capitalism itself resting on abject spaces, bodies, and infrastructures. It is like living in the city of Omelas, whose thriving life depends on the perpetual misery of a single child trapped in darkness and filth, as depicted by Ursula Le Guin in her short story "The ones who walk away from Omelas" (1973).

It is at this disjunction that the right to opacity may seem more complex and more multifaced for those who do not just stay with the hole, but are stuck in/with it. And although this insistence on opacity through holes is crucial



*Figure 2* – Looking from below. Source: Photo by author.

in a time of hypervisibility and hierarchical monitoring, I wonder what if we think about it together with the right to the city as elaborated first by Henri Lefebvre (1996) and later by David Harvey (2012)? The right to the city is a collective ability to change ourselves by changing our urban surroundings and to be able to imagine and govern the city beyond the market forces. Bunkers, basements, and shelters – these dark corners of architecture – embodying structures of both oppression and creation, are now superseded by an ideal of private property that has emerged as a new form of state and capital capture in Georgia. It impedes the possibility to live otherwise, to enjoy opacity as a way of creativity. So, I wonder, what would it mean to think of these basements as a way of uncovering opaque muddle of post-socialist capitalism along, those that absorb bunkers and basements as sources to expand their lives?

To defend the right to the city is to insist against the threat of one-sided, linear story of post-Soviet neoliberal development. It is to subvert those conditions that sustain such opaque promises. When routed through this way, opacity emerges not as a technology of resistance for those with little power, but it becomes a mode of being in its own right – a condition of existence. It emerges as an active force, rather than a passive reaction. It is this active force that promises to expose the hegemonic regimes of visibility, market and war, making us aware that falling into a hole is no single person's fault, but the structural condition. As Martínez aptly demonstrates, holes, then, can incite

both claustrophobic and permissive affect, which may be evoked in a *graffiti* left behind by Soviet soldiers in their military shelters: “What else can we do in *Silki*?” To put it differently, “What else can we do with/in the hole in which we are trapped?” In my experience, there is something fundamentally oppressive in holes, but the message that Martínez leaves us with is that we may dissociate them from structural precarities that discipline our lives and invent our own technologies of invisibility, the one that expands our ability to change the very terms of living.

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