



## Baku and architecture: from Soviet building to archistars

**Federico De Boni**

*Architect and Geographer, Department of Education [DISFOR], University of Genoa, email: [federico.deboni@unige.it](mailto:federico.deboni@unige.it)*

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### Abstract

*The present paper intends to analyse the current urban situation of the city of Baku. Starting from its history and the vicissitudes that have seen the alternating city periods of splendour with gloomy moments, some of the great urban projects realised since the end of the 20th century and which are transforming the appearance of Baku are taken into consideration. Accomplish a new moment of splendour, favoured by the huge proceeds of the oil industry, the city of Baku is, in fact, revolutionising its appearance and its structure to become a new city of global importance, as it happened for Dubai.*

**Keywords:** *Baku - Zaha Hadid – Heydar Aliyev Centre – HOK Architects - Flame towers – Autoban – Heydar Aliyev Airport – Yanar Dag – Qobustan.*

### 1. Introduction.

When Pope John Paul II visited Baku during the Apostolic Journey to Azerbaijan and Bulgaria from 22nd to 26st of May 2002, Italian press reported that the papal delegation had had to settle for a plain accommodation in a two-star hotel, one of the few existing in the city. The Pope, now elderly and ill, had gone there, not because of the strong presence of Catholics (just 120 people), but because Baku was (and is) a city with a unique history, which stands as a gateway between the East and the West, a place of exceptionally rich and complex culture. «Rich of the multiform and specific Caucasian connotation, it gathers the contribution of various civilisations, in particular of the Persian and the Turanic ones. Great religions have been present and operating in this land: Zoroastrianism has coexisted with the Christianity of the Albanian church, so significant in antiquity. Islam has also played a growing role, and it is today the religion of the vast majority of the Azerbaijani population. Even Judaism, present here since very ancient times, has made its original contribution, still appreciated today» (John Paul II, 2002). For Wojtyła it was therefore an occasion to urge the West to rediscover the values of the East, to revive the dialogue with the Muslim world, to avert fundamentalist fanaticism (the tragedy of the 9/11 Twin Towers attack was occurred only a few months before the papal trip) and to address a heartfelt appeal to the lands still bloody with the war.

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Readers from Italy got the idea of an unpretentious place still in trouble and facing the legacy of the Soviet era: a sad city, characterised by the greyness of the Soviet buildings and the black of the oil wells, with few services and even with few prospects. Instead, the change was already taking place: Baku would soon take on a new face. By implementing an ambitious program of unprecedented change, which began immediately after Azerbaijan regained independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Baku was becoming a sparkling modern city. The results began to be seen in the years following the Pope's visit: a new Dubai was being born. The wish given by the pope at the end of his speech («To Azerbaijan and his noble people the wish for prosperity, progress and peace!») was coming true.

## **2. Short lines about Baku's history.**

The first quotes about Baku date back before 1000 A.D., though it was in the fifteenth century, under Shirvanshah Khalillulah, that the city saw some development and was enriched by the construction of a series of sumptuous palaces. Further troubled ages followed. When Peter the Great conquered the city in 1723, it counted less than 10,000 inhabitants and lacked potable water. There was no trade at all either. After passing from Russian to Persian rule and vice-versa several times, Baku was eventually ceded to Russia with the agreements of the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1872 oil extraction for commercial purposes was deregulated and the city started developing suddenly and intensely. It was the beginning of a flourishing period for Baku. Its population increased of 1200% in 30 years, a canal was built to bring water from the Russian border and solve the centuries-old problem of water shortage, and workers and entrepreneurs came from every corner of the Russian Empire. The urban revolution of the city started as well. The city expanded beyond its historical walls with the construction of urban parks and luxurious residences for oil magnates. In 1905, 50% of the world oil was produced in Baku, and the local GDP was comparable to that of Texas. However, this incredible process of economic and social development had to stop once more because of the First World War and the annexation to the USSR in 1920. Although in 1935 the first petroleum fields had been discovered at the bottom of the Caspian Sea, investments lacked, and it never got better until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Azerbaijan in 1991.

## **3. The new Baku.**

Since its independence (1991) Azerbaijan has invested heavily in modernisation and infrastructure and architectural development, trying to deviate from the legacy of Soviet modernism. In 1994 international petroleum consortia started again to explore the resources of the area. New pipelines were built, and investments on the city of Baku rebounded. Within a few years, the city became a big yard. Several urban

interventions were scheduled and mainly after 2000 the first evident signs of renewal could be seen, and the undertaken new course could be appreciated. New palaces, fountains, parks and spectacular buildings appeared anywhere, also signed by the most well-known archistars of the time. Some too "Soviet" quarters were broken down or refurbished. The precious historical centre (the Old City), now UNESCO site, was preserved and restored. Since then, the new "white city" wanted by President Heydar Aliyev has been emerging a little at a time while overlapping the old "black city" made up of the dark rusty skeletons of oil tanks and wells. In the Town Hall, a big plastic model shows the whole project which is composed by ten districts of varied modern buildings, with broad streets, squares, auditorium, schools, hospitals, sports centres, parks, tourist facilities and new infrastructures (port, airport, underground).

The approach model followed by the Azerbaijani capital is that of the cities in the Persian Gulf such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi or Doha with the intention of attracting big Russian and international magnates and activating a financial flow of massive impact on the local economy. To top it all off, the new Monte Carlo of the Caspian could not come without the project of an archipelago of artificial islands – the Khazar Islands – where to place villas, palaces and shopping centres, sports facilities. Likewise, the dream of the tallest skyscraper in the world, the 1050 meter high Azerbaijan Tower, has been projected in open competition with the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, but already surpassed by the new tower currently under construction in Dubai, the Dubai Creek Tower.

#### **4. Big projects in Baku.**

As for the specific new architecture of Baku, we must start from Heydar Aliyev Center (Figure 1), work of the Anglo-Iranian architect Zaha Hadid, recently deceased. The building is the outcome of an international contest held in 2007. It was completed in 2012, and it is the symbol of the new Baku. Its sinuous design and white colour break the patterns of the strict and often monumental Soviet architecture so much present in the city. The new revolutionary building stands as the hub of the new cultural programmes of the country, and it aims at representing the sensitivity of the Azerbaijani culture and the optimism of a nation which looks towards the future. Saffet Kaya Bekiroglu, project designer and architect of the Zaha Hadid studio, says: «The project establishes a fluid relationship between the inside of the building and the square. The latter, accessible to everyone as part of the urban fabric of Baku, envelops an equally public interior and defines a sequence of event spaces dedicated to the collective celebration of contemporary and traditional Azerbaijani culture. Elaborate configurations, such as undulations, bifurcations, folds and inflexions, transform this surface into an architectural landscape capable of performing different functions, welcoming and directing visitors to different levels of interior spaces. With this gesture, the building renders the distinction between architectural object and urban landscape, figure and background, interior

and exterior. The theme of fluidity in architecture is not new to this region: in Islamic historical architecture, lines, grids or sequences of columns follow one another like trees in a forest, building non-hierarchical spaces. Calligraphic and decorative patterns cover carpets, walls, ceilings and domes without interruption, attenuating the distinction between architectural elements and context. We intended to relate to the historical understanding of architecture, not through mimicry or accession to the iconography of the past, but by developing a firmly contemporary interpretation. Inserting itself on a site previously characterised by an overhang, the project introduces a terraced landscape that establishes alternative connections between the public square, the centre and the underground parking. This solution made it possible to avoid further excavation by converting an initial disadvantage of the site into a feature of the project» (Saffet, 2013).



Figure 1: The Heydar Aliyev Center by Zaha Hadid Architects (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Heydar\\_Aliyev\\_Cultural\\_Center.jpg#/media/File:Heydar\\_Aliyev\\_Cultural\\_Center.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Heydar_Aliyev_Cultural_Center.jpg#/media/File:Heydar_Aliyev_Cultural_Center.jpg)).

Among new architectures, this is undoubtedly the one which has got the highest international reputation. Thanks to its unique shape it has made headlines in all newspapers, even not specific ones, and it has become the landmark which makes the city recognisable at first sight, as it has been for the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Opera House in Sydney or the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Further high-level architecture works are the Flame Towers by HOK Architects (2012) (Figure 2), the Crystal Hall by GMP Architekten (2012), the Carpet Museum

by architect Franz Janz (2014) and the new airport terminal by Autoban Studio inaugurated in 2014.

Projected by the Turkish Autoban Studio, the latter has drawn attention as it faces a risky theme such as that of airport terminals, which often end up becoming “no places” lacking the character that should link them to the culture of the places they are in. In this work, designers tried to meet the challenge, and the new terminal «with its highly imaginative but cosy forms, with natural materials such as wood and stone», is to be «a tribute to Azerbaijani hospitality and the recent social changes of the country. (...) The main idea was that of making it different from other airports», stated Seyhan Ozdemir, one of Autoban’s founders. «Since travelling has become an integral part of our lives, as designers we believe we have the duty to make people’s trips as pleasant as possible, by modifying hub structures». Thus, in check-in areas and relaxation areas there are wooden cocoons surrounded by trees. «It is a micro-architecture made to bring spaces back to a more humane scale - Mr Ozdemir concluded – so that the structure would look like a nest». The Autoban project was awarded the Red Dot Design Award and the element that most attracted interest was precisely the “wood cocoons” (made using an American white oak veneer), which create a sense of welcome and discovery, as well as opportunities for meeting or seclusion. This use of unconventional narrative forms is typical of the Autoban architecture studio, known for its imaginative and human approach to design, creating spaces strongly rooted in cultural, social and geographical history, yet offering unexpected experiences that make residents and visitors reflect. At Heydar Aliyev airport, custom furnishings and lighting change the traditional airport scheme by opting for natural tactile materials such as wood, stone and fabrics, illuminated by a warm and delicate light. The cocoons - which vary in size and house several bars, kiosks and other amenities - are the exact meeting point between architecture and art and create an inviting yet intriguing panorama inside the huge hub that challenges the expectations of the airport environment.

As concerns Baku Flame Towers, they are three towers shaped like flames, placed on a hill overlooking the old city and the bay of Baku. Started in 2007, they were completed in 2012 and inaugurated in 2013. Each of them hosts a different function (residences, offices and a hotel) while in the basement there is a shopping centre. They are up to 140 metres high and can be seen from far away, and they stand as an unmistakable landmark of the city’s new skyline and especially at night the towers may look really on fire. Thanks to over 10,000 high power led lights installed, their facades become huge screens on which special effects or promotional images may be shown. They are the symbol of a high-tech city which knows how to look forward and outwards.

Designers drew inspiration for the concept from the ancient habit of worshipping fire, in use in the Caucasus, also known as the “eternal fire region”. In fact, in Azerbaijan, there are some “mud volcanoes”, small hills that erupt clay mixed with saline substances. The most famous of these volcanoes is the Yanar Dag, otherwise known as the “Burning Mountain”; the mountain burns almost always and the fire

does not seem to want to turn off soon. The Yanar Dag is located in the Abseron Peninsula, 25 kilometres north-east of the capital Baku and is a hill (one hundred meters high) situated above an accumulation of natural gas that constantly erupts flames, which also reach three meters of height. Unlike other mud volcanoes, the Yanar Dag does not release clay or liquid material, and this allows the fire to burn perpetually. The mountain view is spectacular, thanks to the real wall of fire that stands out incessantly, day and night, from this place. These phenomena have contributed to making sure that the fire has always represented an important element of Azerbaijani culture so that the country is known by the nickname of “land of fire” and a stylized flame dominates the centre of the country's coat of arms. In some places around these fires, they have arisen temples, like the temple Zoroastrian Ateshgah in Surakhani district near Baku. When Marco Polo passed through Baku during his journey to China in the 13th century, he had the opportunity to observe several similar fireworks along the Absheron peninsula and five centuries later the writer Alexandre Dumas described a similar natural fire observed in a temple Zoroastrian, as “the most interesting and fascinating thing that can not be observed anywhere else”.



Figure 2: The Baku Flames Towers by HOK Architects (Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flame\\_Towers,\\_Azerbaijan.png#/media/File:Flame\\_Towers,\\_Azerbaijan.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flame_Towers,_Azerbaijan.png#/media/File:Flame_Towers,_Azerbaijan.png)).

## **5. A new tourism destination.**

Overall, Azerbaijan has a limited tourist presence, probably due to the lack of awareness of the country abroad, even if the interesting elements are many: its culinary tradition is unique, the historical monuments are fascinating, and the population is very hospitable and open to foreigners. In addition to the capital, the beautiful mountain landscapes of the Caucasus, with its remote villages inhabited by ethnic minorities, are very attractive. As already mentioned, the country is very rich in natural resources (gas and oil) and is also making investments in the transport sector: in addition to the new airport, many roads have been improved, a modern and efficient bus station has been built in Baku, and also the railways are being upgraded. Unfortunately, the devastating effects of the Soviet industrialisation of the area are still felt, but the most remote regions have not been touched and keep their charm intact. Communicating with the Azeris is not easy since everyone speaks Russian and especially in the most remote areas the inhabitants can be surprised that a foreigner does not do the same; however, the adoption of the Latin alphabet instead of the Cyrillic has in part simplified the life of the western traveller.

The great urban development of the city of Baku, combined with the natural environmental resources (volcanoes, landscapes, etc.) scattered throughout the rest of the country, could not but have repercussions on tourist movements, generating a growing interest in the city and the country in general. Considered the most beautiful of the Caucasian capitals thanks to the charm of the Old City, today more and more tour operators offer specific travel packages to visit Baku; there are also detailed proposals addressed to the architects, with itineraries dedicated to the discovery of the architectural beauties of the past and the present. The call of Baku, already a crossroads of cultures on the Silk Road and now a booming capital where contemporary architecture is part of the urban landscape between the old Islamic city, the European-style buildings of the early twentieth-century oil boom and those of the Soviet period, it is making itself felt.

So here are the birth of proposals for tourist packages, on average 4 or 5 days, developed by tour operators specialized in architectural travel, often in collaboration with the professional orders of architects and engineers, which provide a route that touches all the great architectural emergencies of the city, starting from the airport (Studio Autoban, 2014) of arrival and passing through Flame Towers (HOK Architects, 2012), Crystal Hall (GMP Architekten, 2012), Carpet Museum (Franz Janz, 2014), Heydar Aliyev Center (Zaha Hadid, 2012); you cannot miss the main monuments of the old town within the old walls, the tour of the Old City (UNESCO heritage), the fortress, the Palace of the Shirvanshah, the Tower of Maiden. Around Baku, you can hike to Abseron to admire the Yanar Dag or to Qobustan for a visit to the naturalistic area of mud volcanoes and to the archaeological site (also this UNESCO heritage) where there are more than six thousand rock engravings, extraordinary testimony of the conditions of prehistoric life in the Caucasus region. You can then complete the visit of Baku with other new architectures of the city

and surroundings, such as the Baku Business Center (Chapman Taylor, 2010), the Socar Tower (Heerim Architects & Planners, 2014), Vershina Trade and Entertainment Center (Erick) van Egeraat, 2010), the new Olympic Stadium (Heerim Architects & Planners Co., 2015) or the rediscovery of the architecture of the Soviet era, including Fountain Square, Philharmonic Hall, Palace of Mirtaghi Babayev and House of Hajinsky.

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