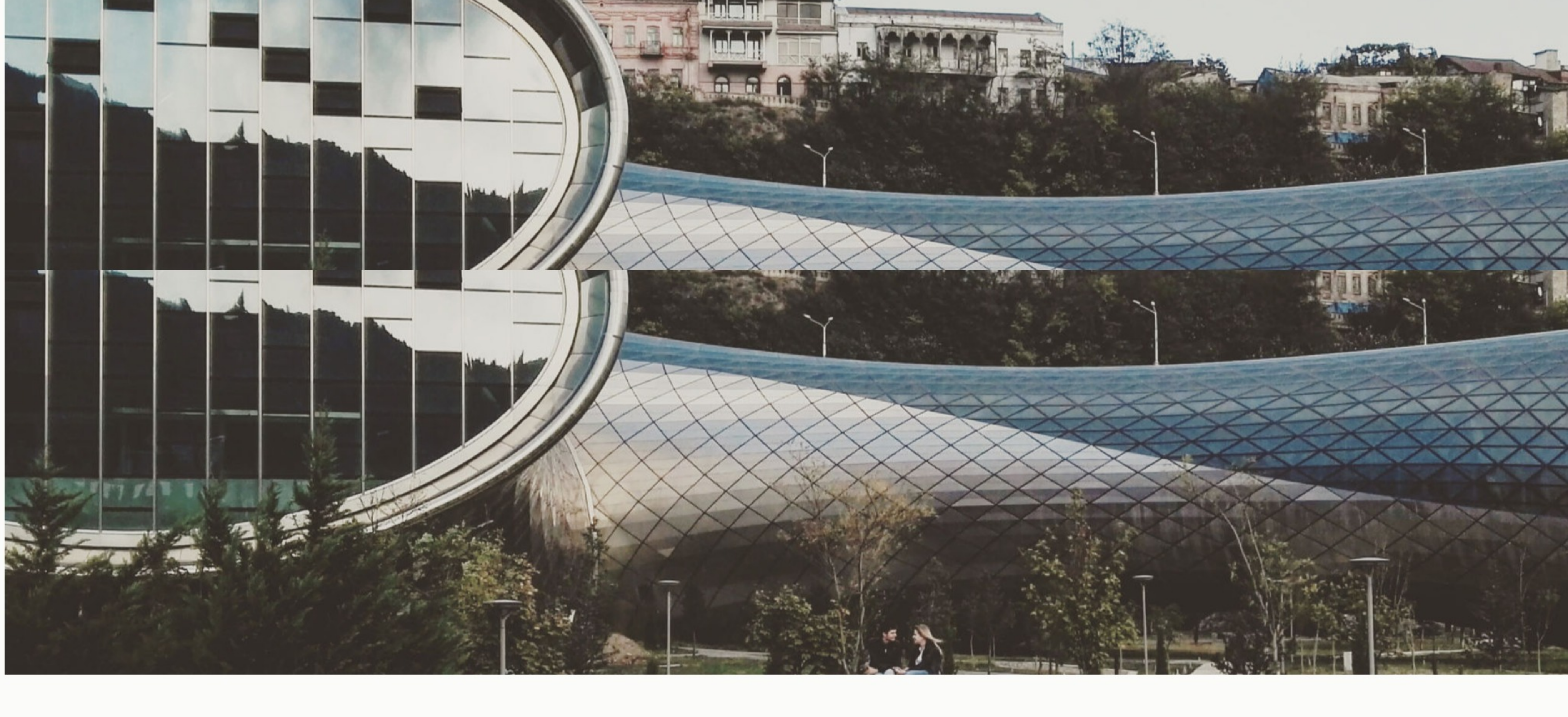


Tbilisi: Why Tbilisi is so cool right now

TBILISI IS ONE OF THE MOST ORIGINAL AND INTRIGUING DESTINATIONS IN OUR HEMISPHERE TODAY. ITS AURA AND UNCONVENTIONAL APPEAL POSSESS AN INIMITABLE KIND OF COOL. ITS COMPLEX IDENTITY IS HARD TO GRASP. WE VISITED THE GEORGIAN CAPITAL, HOPING TO UNCOVER ITS UNCOMMON BRAND OF MYSTIQUE.



There is something about Tbilisi – the capital of Georgia – that makes it irresistibly cool today. It's not just its geographical location, smack on the border between East & West, on a sliver of land sandwiched between the Caspian and the Black Sea, Europe and Asia. Nor its rich cultural heritage, forged by an intricate mix of influences of those populations that inhabited this trade center of the Caucasus through the centuries: the Persians, the Arabs, the Mongols, the Russians. It is rather its quirky, innovative and multilayered present incarnation: the latest of a city devastated by invading armies, the plague and powerful earthquakes, a city that has shown iron resilience and a talent for reinventing itself. A visit to Tbilisi today, where the vibrant post-independence energy still hangs in the air, is a unique experience.

The famous Georgian hospitality ("every guest is a gift of God" says a local proverb) and the capital's intriguing and elusive identity will engage you, surprise you, leave you yearning for more. The city, a breeding ground for futuristic architecture, experimental art, and avant-garde fashion, where Brutalist monuments meet Byzantine domes and Art Nouveau palaces, and hip joints with a New York feel stand side-by-side with fading old-charm cafés, will entertain you with an inebriating mix of deep-rooted tradition and wildly original innovation, relaxed rhythm of life and a vibrant, urgent contemporary vibe. Plunge into it. It might reveal its secrets.

EAT

Georgian cuisine is a heady mix of diverse culinary influences introduced by the merchants travelling along the Silk Route. Eating and drinking is a serious matter, with "supras" or traditional banquets (but also simple dinners) lasting until the wee hours of the morning.

The eating tradition lives on in Tbilisi, and Georgian cuisine is still in pole position, but with a twist. Like that of star chef Tekuna Gachechiladze, whose talent can be tasted at **Culinarium Khasheria**, in the Old City, a casual venue where you can enjoy a lunch accompanied by excellent fermented wines. Or at **Café I littera**, located in the courtyard of the old Soviet Writers' House, in the area of Sololaki. The exquisite cuisine peppers Georgian dishes with European ingredients and European dishes with Georgian touches. Tucked away at the end of the small street and housed in an old wooden building, **Keto & Kote** is a hidden gem favored by locals. The ambiance is cozy, the Georgian food fusion; sit on the terrace or in the garden for a breathtaking view of the city. Enjoy traditional food revisited and typical Georgian atmosphere at **Shavi Lomi**. While at **Barbarestan**, a family-own eatery, the dishes of modern Georgian cuisine are realized elaborating the recipes by 19th century Georgian duchess Barbara Jorjadze. Non-meat eaters will rejoice instead at **Café Leila**, a charming venue in the Old City where the decor is Moresque and the veggie food yummy.



SHOP

Heralded by ambassadors such as Demna Gvasalia – creative director of Balenciaga and founder of the uber-cool brand Vetements – Georgian style is making waves in the international fashion arena. No wonder boutiques of home-grown talent are sprouting up all over the city. Its cluster is in the old district of Vera: where crumbling historical buildings house old barber shops and grocery stores alongside hip boutiques, urban lifestyle shops, and cafés hidden in ancient courtyards. Such as **Moda Moda**, a quirky café/store where you can browse through garments by young local designers while admiring art by young Georgian artists on the walls.

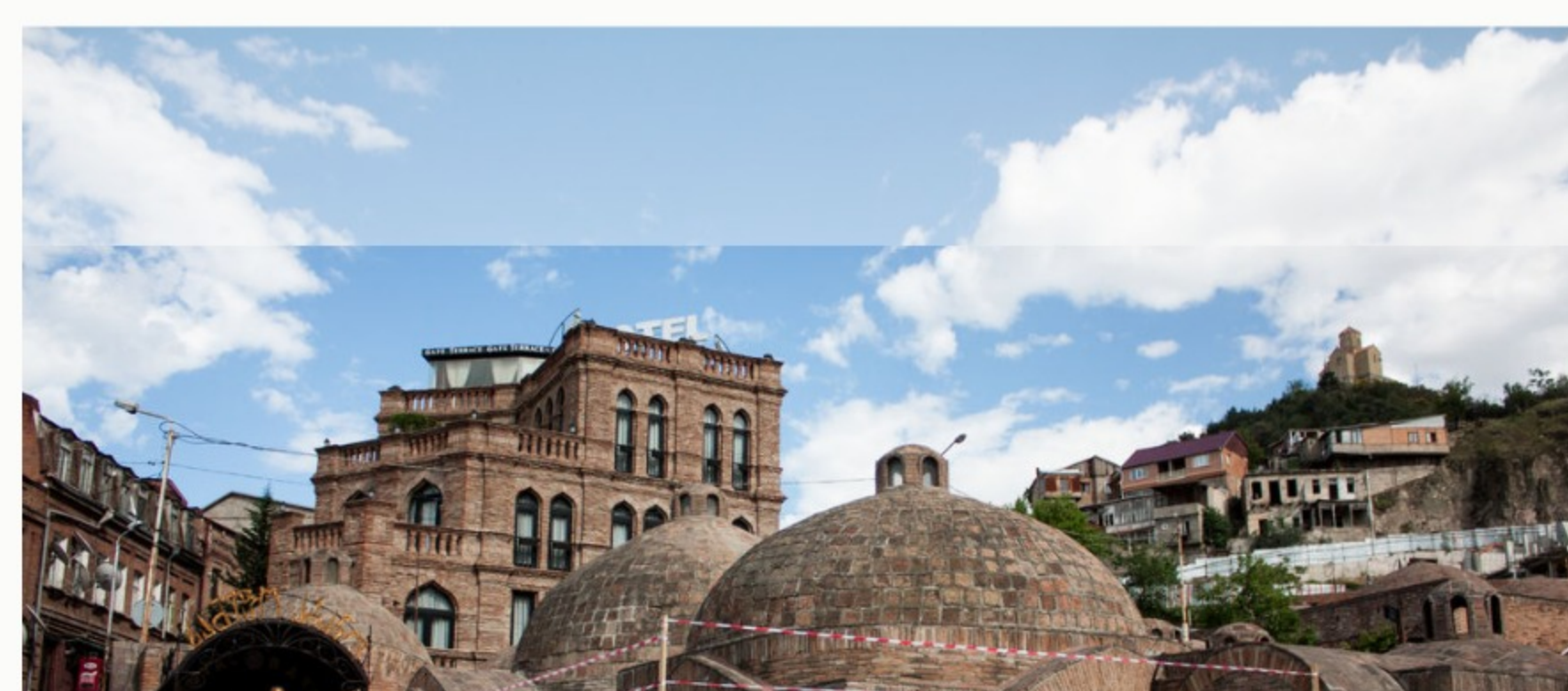
Contemporary Georgian fashion is at its best at **Chaos**, a concept store showcasing new local designers and edgy international labels. It is also where the hip tribe meets, gathering around the ping-pong table, the (unmade) bed and the skateboard ramp decorating the loft-like space. For a carefully curated selection of pieces by international and local marques head to **Pierrot Le Fou**, a sleek megastore. Or discover the sophistication of Georgian traditional clothing at **Samoseli Pirveli**, where you can have a "chokha", an embroidered cloak still worn by men in traditional ceremonies, custom-made. For Soviet-era memorabilia head to the colorful **Dry Bridge Market**, where distinguished ladies peddle antique porcelain next to old men selling elaborated daggers.

ART & ARCHITECTURE

Nothing speaks of the intricacy of Tbilisi's past (and present) like its eclectic architecture. Old and new world mingle in the streets of the capital: visit **Abanotubani** – the Old City, where a dip in the waters of the ancient Sulphur Baths is a must – to admire traditional Georgian architecture in the shape of ornate houses with elaborate wooden and wrought iron balconies. For a glimpse of things to come, cross the Kura River on the futuristic **Bridge of Peace** by Italian architect Michele de Lucchi. Or wonder at the sight of the **Music Theatre and Exhibition Hall**, a tubular construction by Italian architects Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, also responsible for designing the **Public Service Hall** nicknamed **The Umbrellas** for the sculptural petals adorning its roof. **The Berbuk Towers** by Ellis Williams Architects, due to become a landmark of the city, are still under construction. Experimental contemporary art, in full swing in Tbilisi, flourishes in a variety of locations.



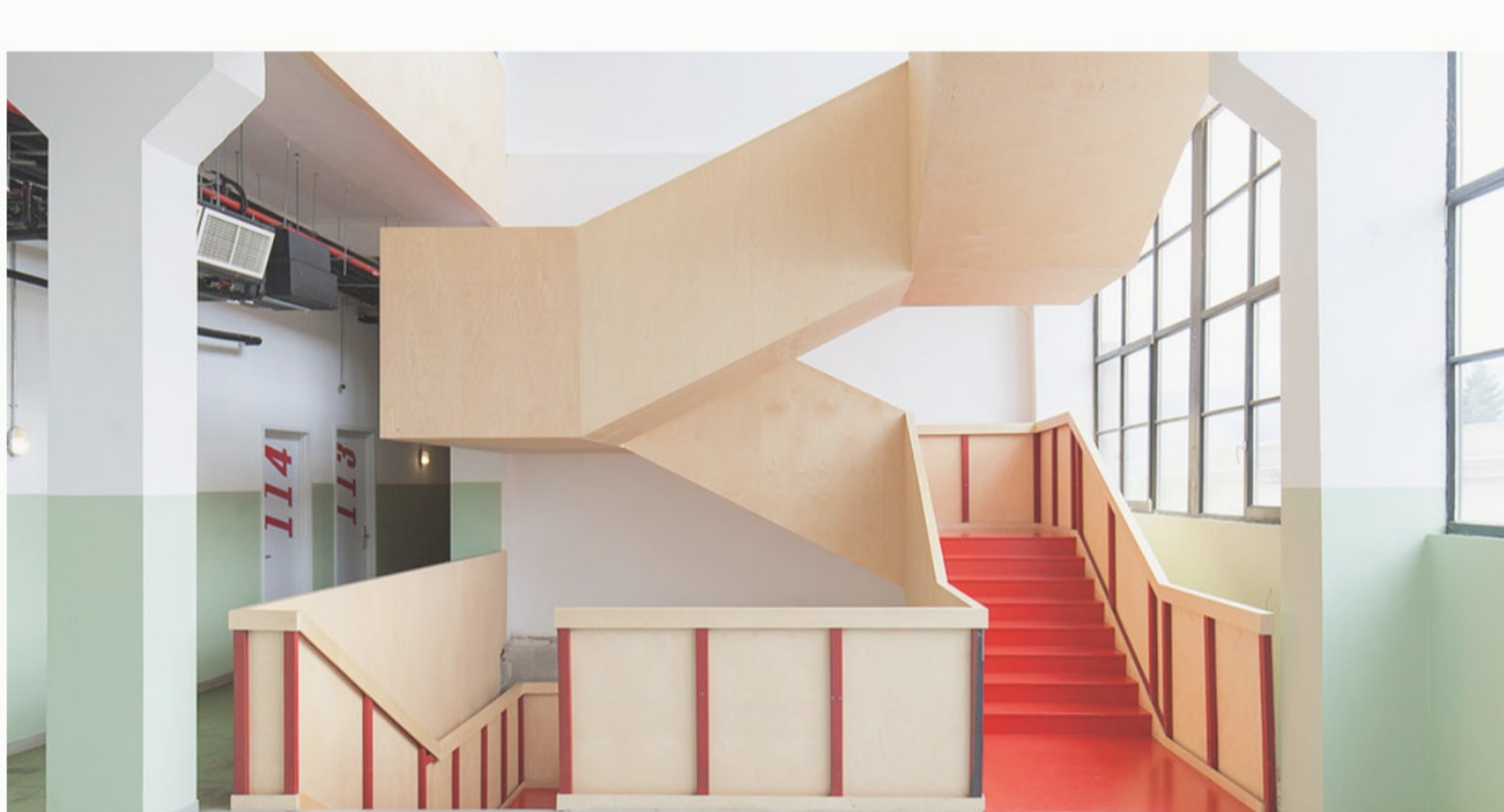
See **Window Project**, a pop-up initiative installing works of young unknown Georgian artists in unused shop windows, whose only permanent gallery is in a délabré building on the central Rustaveli Avenue. Founded to support local artists and specializing in art of the period after the collapse of the Soviet regime, the **Gala Gallery** is today the ambassador of Georgian creativity at fairs such as Art Dubai. The reference point for the young art community is the **Center of Contemporary Art**, a non-profit institution focusing on education.



SLEEP

When it comes to hotels, there is just one name on everyone's lips: **Rooms** is the informal ambassador of the capital's cool, hosting many of the creative happenings and events taking place in the city; and the playground of Georgia's dynamic creative tribe and discerning international guests, socializing in spaces where New York art deco, world design and traditional Georgian blend effortlessly. A range of exclusive tours focusing on architecture, cuisine and art connect guests to the contemporary scene in Tbilisi.

And a 40-minute helicopter ride takes visitors to **Hotel Kazbegi**, the hotel's sister property in the Caucasus Mountains, in style. In order to experience the young alternative pulse of the city visit **Fabrika**, in the recently renovated old neighborhood of Chugureti (or New Tbilisi). The former Soviet sewing factory is an inspiring creative urban hotspot: it features a design, video, and music media school, co-working spaces, design studios, a graffiti store, urban cafés and eateries, and sleeping accommodations ranging from dorms to stylish private rooms and apartment-style suites; and hosts everything from art exhibitions to experimental shows, and activities like yoga classes on its rooftop with a 360° view of Tbilisi.



FUN

Tbilisi's nightlife is multifaceted, like its daylight persona. Warm up for the evening with a glass of excellent natural Georgian wine at **Vino Underground**, a wine bar housed in a cellar; or at **G. Vino**, a cozy little bar in the Old City. Or mix with the young in-crowd for a drink (or two) in the chilled-out spaces of **Lolita Bistrot & Lounge**: the food is farm-to-table, the cocktails elaborate, the atmosphere always lively. If you're looking for a Berghain-like experience, join the underground techno music lovers dancing the night away at **Bassiani Club**, in a drained swimming pool. On weekends, choose **Café Gallery**, one of the oldest clubs in Tbilisi, a café/art gallery during the day that at night morphs into a club hosting interesting happenings. In the summer, explore the venues of the **Ezo Festival** by Mzesumzira (May-September), whose eclectic events are held in different locations. The sound is a mix of electronic music and live instruments, the food vegetarian, the mood peace & love, the aesthetic gypsy-style. A new form of entertainment that encourages socializing. Modern and oh so cool: like Tbilisi today.

An article by **Alessandra Signorelli**

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