ГОРОДСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА | URBAN CULTURE

https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2025-5(2)-311-320

The Soviet “Palace of culture” as a center of urban culture (the case of Abovyan)

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KEYWORDS

Palace of Culture
House of Culture
Abovyan
Soviet industrial cities
Soviet Armenian culture
repatriation

ABSTRACT

The study examines the Soviet Palace of Culture in Abovyan as an institutional mechanism for shaping urban culture and disseminating ideology. The study compares the organizational models of the Palace of Culture and the PREP. Based on analyses of institutional structures and collective memory, the study examines the dual function of the Palace of Culture as both a center of cultural consolidation and a means of promoting Soviet values. Their different but complementary roles within the Soviet ideological framework are also revealed. The results show that the Palace of Culture served as a comprehensive integration mechanism that promoted the cultural adaptation of various groups in the urban population, including migrants from rural areas to cities, across all demographic segments - from children to the elderly. Personal stories reveal multi-layered memories of the Palace's activities, reflecting various stages of life and emotional ties to this institution. The study conceptualizes the Palace as a cultural-structural mediator that regulates the interface between rural and urban semiotic systems. In the study, the Palace is conceptualized as a cultural and structural mediator regulating the interaction between rural and urban semiotic systems. In the context of Abovyan, the definition of the population's origin and the stratification of cultural values serve as an analytical prerequisite for studying the dynamics and development of urban culture.

For citation:
Muradyan, H. (2025). The Soviet “Palace of culture” as a center of urban culture (the case of Abovyan). *Urbis et Orbis. Microhistory and Semiotics of the City*, *5*(2), 311–320. https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2025-5(2)-311-320

Funding:
The work was carried out with the support of the Committee on Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia (project No. 24WS-6A020)

Introduction

After the Soviet regime was established, Soviet cultural policy developed infrastructure and mechanisms to shape and spread "Soviet culture". One of these mechanisms was the Houses of Culture and Palaces of Culture, which played a vital role in shaping the Soviet Union's socio-cultural image (Roth-Ey, 2007; Chatterjee, 2002; Kotkin, 1995). The House of Culture served as a "Soviet space" where the primary image of Soviet culture was formed. The main principles and ways of thinking that would create the basic habitus of the Soviet person were promoted.

In this context, it is interesting to explore the role of houses of culture and palaces in shaping the cultural image of Soviet industrial cities, specifically (Chatterjee, 2002). From this perspective, we have examined the development of Abovyan as an industrial city and the crucial role of the Palace of Culture in this process (Siegelbaum & Moch, 2016). This paper examines the formation and activities of the Soviet Palace of Culture as a center for the creation and dissemination of Soviet urban culture, using the example of the Abovyan City Palace of Culture.

The Study examines the differences and similarities between the House of Culture and the Palace of Culture, both created by Soviet ideology. To differentiate between the two, we apply V. Paperny's "Culture 2" theory. According to Paperny, Culture 1 signifies revolutionary equality, meaning culture spreads horizontally and everyone is regarded as the same (Paperny, 2002). Following the Bolshevik slogan, Soviet cultural identities were to be shaped consistently. As an architect and architectural historian, Paperny describes the development of Culture 1 from an architectural perspective, focusing on features of 1920s and Stalin-era architecture. His work was reissued in Moscow in 2016 with a few modifications, aside from an added introductory section by the author. In this part, Paperny illustrates the ongoing link between Culture 1 and Culture 2, making his work a valuable tool for studying the evolution of Soviet culture through these concepts. He discusses how "Culture 1" reappeared during Khrushchev's era and how "Culture 2" reemerged under Gorbachev and afterward. Ultimately, Paperny transforms his analysis of 1920s cultural material into a theoretical framework that explains modern cultural and political developments.

Using the example of the newly established Soviet industrial town of Abovyan (1963), located in the present-day Kotayk region of Armenia, this article explores the role and functions of the Palace of Culture and how this institution became a central site for constructing the "Soviet world."

The memories associated with the Palace of Culture are multi-layered, reflecting different life stages and emotions. Surveys of respondents showed that the Abovyan Palace of Culture has become a venue for social events, social integration, and adaptation to urban life. This helped to form new cultural values and also served as a center for their dissemination and popularization. It included all segments and target groups within the urban population, from children to pensioners (Muradyan, 2018). The city's Palace of Culture also brought together residents of nearby villages. It helped ease the transition from rural areas to the city, adapt to urban life, and embrace new cultural customs. At the same time, rural cultural values were also adjusted to fit the urban environment.

The research employs a complex application of qualitative methods. We explore the formation and development of the city of Abovyan, its population, and settlement policies at different stages, using archival documents and interviews with employees of the Abovyan municipality.

The study of Abovyan's case is critical because, during the post-Soviet period, the city took an interesting path in its privatization processes, especially under the influence of the formation of a local "oligarchic" class. Unlike the collapse of post-Soviet industrial cities seen in other areas, Abovyan did not experience such a decline. Most of the factories remained operational even after privatization.

Although the "oligarchization" of the city began in the 2000s, external influences were already evident in the 1990s, unlike in other industrial towns in Armenia, such as Hrazdan and Charentsavan. In this context, Abovyan stands out as a unique case with its distinct post-Soviet development path.

The palace of culture as a tool of soviet cultural policy

Houses of Culture and Palaces of Culture are considered key symbols of the former Soviet Union. Their early prototypes included village reading huts, rural clubs, and Red Corners (renamed Lenin Corners after Lenin's death). These institutions, collectively called cultural-educational establishments, were expanded on a large scale following the decree establishing the Main Political Enlightenment Committee under the Council of People's Commissars in November 1920 (Ghazaniyan, 1964, p. 72). It is noteworthy that in Soviet sources, the terms "House of Culture" and "Palace of Culture" were used interchangeably, but with minor differences. However, the observations revealed key differences, including in the spatial context (rural and urban). It should be noted that cultural centers were located in villages, and cultural palaces were built in industrial cities.

Regarding ownership and status, Houses of Culture were usually linked to factories, whereas Palaces of Culture belonged to city councils (GorSoviets). Palaces of Culture held a higher status and sometimes oversaw Houses of Culture.

Regarding the chronological distinction, Houses of Culture appeared early in the Soviet period, while Palaces of Culture emerged later during the mature Soviet era.

Regarding scale and diversity, Palaces of Culture were larger and offered a broader range of activities and functions than Houses of Culture.

Houses of Culture began spreading across Soviet Armenia in the 1930s, with numbers increasing significantly after World War II. They were established in both cities and remote villages. The first decision to build a House of Culture in Soviet Armenia was made by the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia on March 12, 1932. It was also ordered that Houses of Culture be set up in all district centers to coordinate rural cultural and educational activities undergoing reconstruction (Folyan, 1933, p. 3).

In the 1930s, the term palace was potentially ideologically unacceptable, as it evoked memories of the Tsarist past. By the 1970s, however, it had come to symbolize grandeur, dominance, and cultural prestige (kultura dva) (Paperny, 2016, p. 5–10). The exact date the term palace entered the Soviet vocabulary is unclear. Still, its appearance in names such as Palace of Congresses (Дворец съездов) and Palace of Marriages (Дворец бракосочетания) shows it had become common by the late Soviet period (Fitzpatrick, 1992; Clark, 1981).

The growth of Palaces of Culture was typical of the late Soviet era, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, when large-scale urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s left new cities and expanding existing ones facing challenges in organizing cultural life. Houses of Culture,

initially established in all Soviet villages and small towns, could no longer fully meet the cultural needs of growing urban populations. Consequently, larger, multifunctional institutions, the Palaces of Culture, started to emerge.

Unlike Cultural Centers, which were common in rural areas and small towns, Cultural Palaces were primarily built in new industrial cities and large urban centers, where populations were significantly larger. These institutions not only served as important centers for meeting cultural and spiritual needs, but also performed administrative functions. Compared to Houses of Culture, Palaces of Culture:

- Managed and coordinated other cultural institutions in the area
- Developed guidelines for cultural policies
- Centralized urban cultural life
- Became key to shaping urban culture.

Thus, palaces of culture played a vital role in the cultural and administrative plan of the Soviet urban environment. Marking the transition from decentralized public cultural houses to large state-controlled cultural centers.

While the House of Culture grew from earlier institutions like reading huts, clubs, and Red Corners, representing the Soviet effort in the 1920s to modernize and create an educated, politically receptive society, the Palace of Culture became its successor. It took on administrative and supervisory roles, expanding its influence to meet urban needs.

Until the 1950s, Soviet Armenian scholars such as Folyan, Ghazaniyan, and others did not use the terms Palace of Culture or Культурный дворец. These terms appeared later in Soviet and post-Soviet publications (Khudaverdyan, Yetimyan, Mirzakhanyan, and others).

At the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party in 1959, the plan for 'building communism' was approved. It called for launching major initiatives that involved broad public participation. As these programs expanded, the number of cultural houses grew, and new cultural palaces began to appear across the country.

Urbanization and the development of new industrial cities laid the foundation for these large cultural institutions. The role of Palaces of Culture in shaping and spreading new Soviet urban values was especially significant. A key part of Soviet policy was the development of industrial cities, often located in strategic, resource-rich areas.

In the 1960s, such cities began to appear throughout Armenia, including Charentsavan, Metsamor, Hrazdan, and Abovyan. These cities were designed as typical Soviet urban centers, in both structure and ideology. Abovyan is one such example, reflecting broader patterns of Soviet urban planning.

Why is the case of Abovyan city essential?

The case of the city of Abovyan is interesting for analysis, because unlike other industrial cities that collapsed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the city of Abovyan, as a result of the "wild privatization" process in the 1990s due to the formation of "oligarchic capitalism", retained its industrial image and became private property. Most of the factories continued to operate. The Palace of Culture in Abovyan was also privatized, but began serving more as a sports center than a cultural one. This is also one of the aspects of privatization, when the structure loses its original functionality and content and acquires new content.

The formation of Abovyan's cultural identity: the role of the palace of culture

Abovyan was granted city status in 1963. The city's population consisted mainly of Armenians who immigrated from Syria, Iran, and Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s. The city's population was diverse, including rural immigrants, returnees, and various ethnic groups such as Russians, Ukrainians, Assyrians, Yezidis, and Molokans. According to our research, many of these groups left the city after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Following its designation as a city and the opening of factories, Abovyan experienced rapid population growth. One of the interviewees mentions the following: "When the 18th factory opened in 1967, Anton Aleksandrovich, the factory director, went to the Kirovabad Radio Engineering Plant and brought as many Armenians as he could. They were given housing and jobs." (Interviewee, 2021).

This period was marked by a significant transformation of Abovyan's social and cultural landscape. The Palace of Culture played a central role in integrating the city's diverse urban population (fieldwork, interview with a municipal employee, Abovyan city, March 1, 2022).

With the simultaneous launch of four major factories in Abovyan, hundreds of jobs were created, attracting young families from nearby areas and even from Yerevan. Many interviewees describe Abovyan as a "satellite city" that aspired to become the third-largest city in Soviet Armenia.

In the 1960s, Abovyan had a population of around 2,200. In 1970, this number had reached 14,700, and in 1989, it had reached 58,671. However, after Armenia's independence, the population declined sharply due to factory closures, mass job losses, and the ensuing economic and political crisis. According to Armenia's National Statistical Service, Abovyan's population in 2015 was recorded at 44,400 (The Permanent Population, 2015).

Alongside Abovyan's industrial development in the 1960s, efforts to shape the city's cultural environment and identity also began. This process was supported by the activities of two cultural clubs established in the 1930s – Culture Club 1 (District) and Culture Club 2 (City) – both of which operated on the ground floors of residential buildings.

The main activities of these clubs were overseen by the Department of Culture under the Abovyan City Council. At the same time, the Department of Agitation and Propaganda carried out thematic supervision, including a Culture Commission. During this period, a folk instrument ensemble was established, along with a theater group led by Sergey Arakelyan (Fieldwork, Interview with a Former Employee of the Culture Palace, 1.03.2022).

The Palace of Culture became the city's central cultural institution, overseeing and coordinating other cultural organizations, including the existing clubs (which were placed under its jurisdiction), the library, and the music school, while also providing methodological support to ensure their "proper functioning" (as emphasized in interviews).

The Palace of Culture has played an essential role in uniting Abovyan's diverse population, serving as a gathering place for all city residents (Fig. 1).

The master plan was drawn up in 1937 by architect Tiran Marutyan, who also designed the cultural clubs and palaces in Charentsavan, Hrazdan, and Sevan. The central square is home to the club building, with a high amphitheater nestled in the greenery behind it. Later, Elar was transformed into an industrial city, renamed Abovyan (Fig. 2).

According to one of the former employees, the palace not only united people but also helped integrate the newly formed population of the city. The building also served as

a center for cultural exchange and interaction. The respondent also spoke about the culinary traditions of the Syrian Armenians, which were demonstrated during the thematic events: “We learned from them – coffee, tabbouleh, kuku, lahmajun. We used to drink coffee, but not so widely. They made it a part of everyday life. They served coffee with carrots and cucumbers, which was something completely unfamiliar to us” (Fieldwork, interview with a former employee of the Palace of Culture, 1.03.2022). For repatriates, the Culture Palace organized evening thematic discussions and Armenian-language courses, in line with official directives to help them integrate into local culture. Many repatriates were skilled artisans—tailors, shoemakers, jewelers, and more—who established various creative clubs at the Palace of Culture, such as macrame, crochet, and embroidery workshops.

Fig. 1. The Palace of Culture, Abovyan
Photo from the archives of the A. Tamanyan Museum

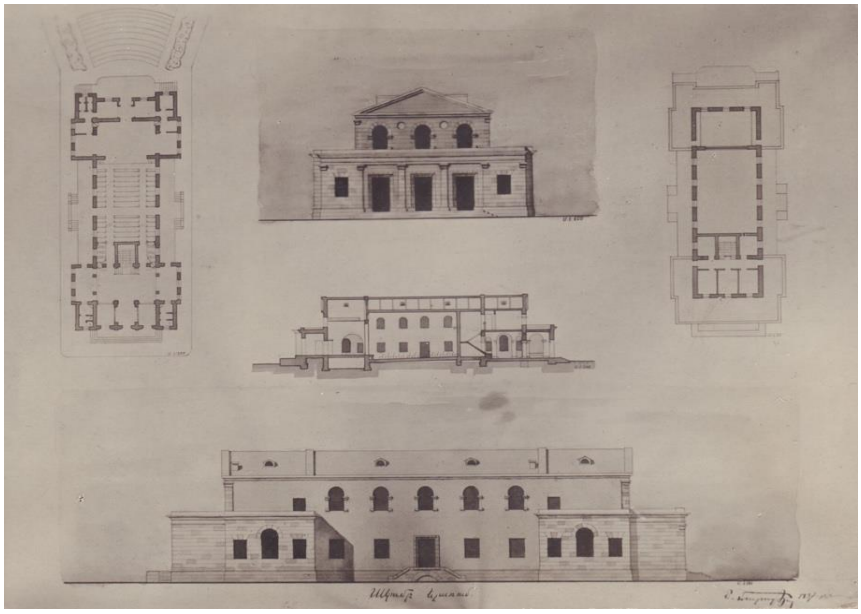

Fig. 2. Club in Ellar, architect: T. Marutyan
Photo provided by H. Marutyan

In addition to Armenians, small ethnic minority groups also settled in Abovyan, including Assyrians, Yazidis, and Molokans. At the same time, larger numbers of Russians and Ukrainians were stationed in the city to manage industrial factories. Most of these non-Armenian groups left the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Palace of Culture served as a unifying space for the city's multinational, multicultural population, introducing them to Soviet ideology while closely monitoring their cultural participation and ideological upbringing. According to old employees, he played a regulatory role in the cultural life of the city:

"The Culture Palace oversaw all cultural activities in the city. For instance, when the first restaurants in Abovyan – 'Ardziv' and 'Kotayk' – opened, we had to approve their programs. We reviewed them carefully – there could be no 'rabiz' music, no excessive vocal ornamentation. Everything had to be folk or ethnographic music. Back then, censorship existed, and frankly, it was the right thing." (Fieldwork, interview with an employee of the Palace of Culture in the town of Abovyan, 2.03.2022).

The respondents' memories of the Palace of Culture primarily relate to the period from the 1980s to Armenia's independence. However, in the 1990s, the Palace of Culture began to decline due to the closure of various sections and clubs, and separation from the central institution in an attempt to establish independent activities. By the mid-1990s, the Palace of Culture had wholly ceased to function (fig. 3).

Fig. 3. The Palace of Culture of Abovyan City
renamed the 'Gagik Tsarukyan Sports and Culture Complex' SNCO.

It is interesting that in 1982, next to the House of Culture, the "Museum of Friendship of the Armenian and Russian Peoples" was founded, and that square was renamed the Museum of Friendship (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. The building of the museum of Russian-Armenian friendship in Abovyan

In front of the museum, a Memorial Complex was erected dedicated to the 150th anniversary of Armenia's accession to Russia, sculptor: Sargis Baghdasaryan, architect: S. Barkhudaryan (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. The monumental complex devoted to the "150th anniversary of Armenian-Russian friendship"

The central area of the city of Abovyan is wholly transformed into a Soviet landscape that continues to dominate the post-Soviet period and, it seems, undergoes no particular changes in ideological terms.

It was reopened in 2005, but under a new identity as the "Gagik Tsarukyan Abovyan Sports and Culture Complex", a state non-commercial organization (SNCO). The center's primary focus shifted to sports development, with an emphasis on organizing sporting events rather than cultural activities (The Permanent Population, 2015).

Conclusion

Typical Soviet cultural structures, especially houses of culture and palaces, became centers for the rooting and dissemination of Soviet ideology and the formation of Soviet culture. Especially in industrial cities, these structures became the agents of Soviet cultural policy. The examination of the Palace of Culture in the town of Abovyan allows us to see, understand, and analyze not only Soviet processes, but also post-Soviet developments and changes.

The House of Culture of Abovyan and the broader Soviet cultural landscape are an interesting case for understanding and analyzing the paths of post-Soviet cultural collapse. The collapse of industrial cities in the 1990s did not bypass Abovyan either. It turned from a rapidly developing industrial city into an industrial wasteland. However, from the 2000s, Abovyan began to take on a new image. It started to be associated with the formation of a local oligarchic system. More or less functioning factories and cultural institutions were privatized and continued to operate, adapting to the new situation.

The collapse of industrial cities in the 1990s did not bypass Abovyan either, it turned from a rapidly developing industrial city into an industrial wasteland, but since the 2000s, the formation of a new image of Abovyan began, it began to be associated with the formation of a local oligarchic system, more or less operating factories and cultural structures were privatized and continued to operate, already adapting to the new legal system. The Palace of Culture, in turn, was renamed the G. Tsarukyan Sports and Culture Center, indicating that structures formed under the previous ideology are subject to individual changes outside the state cultural policy framework. Today, the Palace of Culture operates more as a sports complex, relegating the cultural component to the background.

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Received / Материал поступил в редакцию 14.09.2025
Accepted / Принят к публикации 02.10.2025