1. Vani Archaeological Site Museum - Georgia

Museums in Georgia

Dieter Pfannenstiel - Germany

The Vani Archeological Museum-Reserve was founded in April 1981 as a local history museum, and was opened to the public in September 1985 during an international symposium. The Museum is situated on a hill close to the town of Vani in the western Georgia. The Vani Museum-Reserve is of strategic importance with its scientific and educational programs adhering to the highest standards of the Georgian National Museum.

The museum includes: the archaeological site of Vani, the expedition base, and the museum itself. The museum houses the majority of the archeological materials discovered in the site of Vani. In 1987, after the discovery of a rich burial, the Gold Reserve was opened at the museum, which preserves the unique pieces of Vani’s ancient goldsmiths. The exhibition covers the period between 800 BCE and 100 CE. Visitors could also see an exhibition presenting the Vani site as a temple-city. This exhibition presents architectural materials and gold work, as well as unique bronze figures and their fragments. The museum is temporarily closed to visitors due to intensive reconstruction and extension works.

The Golden Graves of Ancient Vani

Ancient Colchis, located on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, is best known from Greek mythology as the land where Jason and the Argonauts went in search of the Golden Fleece. It was here that Jason fell in love with Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes, who helped the hero complete his legendary feat. Archaeological finds from the 20th century prove that this was indeed a land rich in gold. Yet the myth of Jason and Medea provides a very limited image of Ancient Colchis.

Findings from different exactions over the years in Vani provide a glimpse into the ritual life of a major Colchian city. Spectacular finds from two sanctuaries and four tombs illustrate that Colchis was at the crossroads for many different peoples. Dating from the early fifth to the first centuries B.C., objects include silver drinking vessels, bronze and iron figurines used in religious ritual, and a splendid array of gold and silver jewelry. (fig.1) These archaeological finds, which were mainly exhibited in the site museum, clearly show that Vani not only maintained a coherent individual identity, but also possessed direct links with Greek, Achaemenid, Phoenician and even Nomadic cultures. Further, from the
number of tomb objects related to drinking and libation, it is clear that wine played an important role in Colchian social and religious life. (fig.2)

For decades the Vani expedition with its unique discoveries has been attracting attention of the international community of scientists. These facts clearly illustrate that Vani is an archaeological site of international historic importance not just for scientists for visitors from all over the world as well.

The Vani archaeological site

Vani district situates in western part of Georgia - Imereti and south-western part of this region. It is bordered by Samtredia, Tskaltubo and Bagdati rayons and from south by Guria region. Distance to Kutaisi is 41 km, the nearest railway station, 23 km, is in Samtredia.

Vani is located in subtropical climate zone. The districts weather include: comparatively dry and hot summer with short-term drought periods, temperate warm winter, forward spring, and rainy autumn with pronounced rushing wind.

Vani museum-reserve is of strategic importance with its scientific or exposition programs in the frames of the Georgian National Museum. The museum includes: Site of Vani, expedition base and the museum itself.

The archaeological site is defined by natural boundaries: the limits of the hill upon which the city once stood, surrounded by defensive walls, and a small river to the south. Apart from this topography, there are no physical barriers or fences to the site perimeter. (fig.3) A public asphalted access road leads through the middle of the site, passing directly through one of the original entrances to the city, and obviously damaging the archaeology of the ancient settlement here and in other areas. This road not only serves the archaeologists living and working at the site, but also (and more significantly in terms of traffic) leads to the larger modern settlement of Upper Vani. The other characteristic of the site is that more than 50% of its total area is occupied by privately owned houses and gardens. Indeed some of the most exciting recent finds come from within these areas, temporarily leased for the duration of excavations. (fig.4)

There are relatively few standing architectural remains at the site: much has been destroyed in antiquity, and the site has clearly been used as a quarry for useful stone blocks. The surviving architectural remains do not match the interest provided by the material finds from the site. Many of the still exposed remains have undergone consolidation/ conservation and some have physical protection in the form of shelters above them. Most excavated areas have been backfilled. Shelters are particularly necessary because all stone and mud brick features on the site, once excavated and
exposed to the elements, rapidly degrade. This has resulted in the need to carry out fairly heavy reconstruction of ashlar walls, for example, wherever they remain exposed. (fig.5) At the centre of the site stand two buildings that house the excavation team of which one has recently rebuilt and which temporarily houses excavation finings and exhibits from the currently closed museum. This area is connected in northern direction to the hill upon which the museum stands by a narrow steel suspension bridge, allowing a very convenient circuit of the area to be made by visitors on foot starting at the lower city gate and returning by the bridge, with the Museum seen either at the beginning or the end of the itinerary.

The former Museum Building

Vani Archeological Museum named after Otar Lordkipanidze housed the majority of the archeologic materials discovered on the site of Vani. In 1987, after discovery of the rich burial, the Gold Fund was opened at the Museum, which preserved the unique pieces of Vani Goldsmith.

The exposition covered the period from VIII c. BC to I c. AD.

The museum itself was opened on September 17, 1985.

The building has the form of a rectangular box. It was clad in limestone with porticos at either ends and a metal pitched roof. The structure is three storeys plus ground level, and is partly buried in the side of the hill. The principal access for visitors and staff was in the south portico at second floor level through a single door which was impropriate for a museum of its kind. A secondary access was in the north portico at ground level. (fig.6)

External envelope:

The building was designed in 1975 and completed in the early 1980s by architect George Lejava. Original drawings for the project survived, which show that some modifications to the design were made during the execution of the project. But in general the building differed only slightly from its initial design. (fig.7) As far as the primary structure of the building concerned, it had quite a solid quality. Although Georgia is in an area of high seismicity the building apparently sustained no damage from the last major earthquake in April 1991 (measuring 7 on the Richter scale). One main impediment to the use of the structure was the ingress of water: all rooms that are buried in the contours of the hill were damp due to an absence of waterproof isolation in the external wall at points of contact with the surrounding terraced ground, and the absence of a waterproofing detail to prevent rainwater penetration from the terraces themselves. The limestone cladding which covered all of the building, were partly falling off, particularly in the two porticos, so that the face of the building was in an unsightly shape. The appearance of the
Porticos, in particular, was architecturally unsatisfying owing to the strange proportion of the columns and their junction with the pitched roof overhang. The underside of the south portico roof had been lined with a proprietary white plastic cladding. The north portico had areas where the concrete cover to steel reinforcement had blown off, leaving steelwork exposed to the elements. (fig. 8)

Windows of the museum were softwood timber frame opening section with single glazing. External sills were formed by limestone slabs of 2 cm thickness not, however, laid to a fall and without any overhanging drip. This had the effect that accumulated moisture from standing snow and rain had caused the growth of moss on the sills and rot in many of the bottoms of the window frames.

At mezzanine level, three rooms on the south end of the building were allegedly constructed as vaults for the display of precious objects, with reinforced concrete walls and steel doors. The roof structure, with the exception of the roof over the exhibition hall, was made of simple timber trusses. There was no thermal insulation, and probably no other waterproofing apart from the metal itself.

One main public stair served to connect all floors. Another fire escape stair was located at the north-west corner of the building. Floor surfaces in the building were of a local dark grey tufa-like stone in most public areas, dark marble for staircase treads, and parquet in offices.

Exhibition spaces:

The displays of the museum occupied a large hall, with a mezzanine perimeter balcony, and some additional small rooms on floor +2. The main hall was dark, with no ambient natural light. The ceiling of the room was made of a preformed patterned acoustic tile attached to a suspended structure. (fig. 9) A planned air condition system for the entire museum was never functioning and even the installation of a heating system was never finished. Handrails to the mezzanine and staircase were open steelwork painted black, with timber horizontal rails. The steel staircase had cantilevered treads, with marble infill, which were uneven and unsafe to walk on. In one corner of the room was the enclosed fire escape stair which did not extend to the mezzanine gallery level. Internal walls had been covered with combustible fabric, and the cases were not dust or theft proof. All exhibition spaces had to be entered through steel doors of an intimidating design.

The Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of Vani Archaeological Site Museum

Description of EWA role:

EWA were the project architects appointed via a small competition in 2008, providing full architectural services, landscape/external works design and lead consultant role for the design team. (fig. 10)
A contemporary, preservational treatment and presentation of the exhibits required a conversion and extension of the existing building. For this purpose a building was designed that also improves the entrance area, the visitor circulation and the spational relation to the surroundings. The extension offers additional space for extra exhibition areas, a cafeteria and an auditorium.

Description of Project Context:
The reconstruction and extension of the Vani Archaeological Museum forms the heart of the efforts to be undertaken in order to reach a considerable standard of displaying the found historic values from the adjacent excavation site and to present them to a broader audience.
In the course of investigating the existing situation and the future requirements the following main topics for the museum reconstruction had been identified as being in need for action:
- Additional space for temporary exhibitions, a cafeteria, an auditorium and conservation works were required;
- The entrance situation to the museum needed to be re-evaluated;
- The escape way situation had significantly to be improved;
- Internal spaces should benefit more from the attractive surrounding;
- The daylight and exhibition light situation of the exhibition space had to be improved;
- Provision of accessibility for handicapped visitors and staff was demanded;
- Exhaustive refurbishment of the existing building needed to be undertaken. (fig.11)

Description of Design Concept:
The main idea of the concept is the formation of an additional building structure which reflects the functional requirements as well as the topographic preconditions and respects the existing building. As a result old and new become a new entity which provides more value than the sum of its single components.
The proposed design adds an angled volume of three storeys on the south-eastern side to the existing building for accommodation of the additional spaces. A glass gap works as connecting link between the two building structures. A generous new entrance situation is created by emulation of the portico and roof overhang on the southern tip of the existing building in conjunction with the formation of a funnel-like entrance as enclosing part of the new volume.
The entrance plaza is defined by the two building volumes, the existing southern edge of the plaza and the topography of the surrounding nature.

The new semi transparent southern façade of the old building attracts the visitor with its golden shimmer and leads him to the new entrance. When entering the building the view is focussed through the building towards the neighbouring valley. (fig.12) Internally the void of the existing part is reflected in the new part of the building. Both voids restructure the visitor spaces and enable better orientation and an attractive flow through the public areas. Determinate façade openings enable attractive views towards the exterior parts of the museum site. (fig.13)

Design Approach to the Existing Museum:
In order to upgrade the existing exhibition space a new roof light is introduced above the void. It is designed as an internal lighting element of similar appearance as in the new part of the building. The visitor’s stair is rearranged for better circulation. (fig.14) As mentioned before the existing portico on the southern tip of the building is demolished and a new semi-transparent façade is introduced. The outer layer of this façade shows vertical metal ribbons whose golden shimmer refers to the golden treasures found in Vani and shown in the exhibition. Due to this intervention the building has got different front sides. The existing terraces in front of the exhibition space are accentuated and the building reacts better on the surrounding. (fig.15) For sufficient escape routes an external steel-staircase is added on the north-western corner. The perforated metal sheet cladding evolves a semitransparent look. The perforated metal sheeting returns with the sliding panels for sun protection of the main windows.

Description of Appearance:
The new design intends to create a museum which is distinctive contemporary but does not neglect the existing and its history. A few deliberate interventions into the existing structure transform the appearance but perpetuate the heritage. The new structure is added as a discrete volume which is developed out of the surrounding preconditions.

Material Concept and Relevance of Climatic Influences:
The idea of the dynamic conceptual exchange between the two building volumes has to be transported via the façade materials: The facades should look different but familiar at the same time. This contradictory seeming task is resolved with a sophisticated façade
cladding – glass fibre reinforced concrete sheets. These slim but highly stress-able sheets provide extreme durability and resistance against UV-radiation and water. The concept allotts white cladding with a smooth surface for the new part and light mocca brown panels in a variety of smooth, sandblasted and brushed surface finishes for the existing building.

With this cladding a monolithic look of the two main volumes is evolved whilst slight differentiations regarding surface finishes and window reveals are still enabled. The different colors (all solid-coloured) of the basically same material fulfill the task – a contrasting play of familiar appearances. (fig.16)

For the special demands of the subtropical climate a ventilated façade system is strongly recommended. The ventilated rain screen cladding (VRC) system is characterized by a constructive separation between insulation and outer cladding. Since the air cavity regulates the temperature of the building, the ventilated façade has several advantages concerning building physics and economics: Thermal, driving rain and condensate protection is ensured.

The new façade of the southern tip of the existing building facing the entrance plaza has got an outer layer of swiveled anodized aluminium ribbons of golden colour in front of an inner glass façade. It accentuates the entrance, refers to the content of the exhibition and indicates the intervention to the existing structure. With its golden shimmering anodized surface the aluminium ribbons have got a highly durable and robust finish. (fig.17) (fig.18) (fig.19) (fig.20)

Recent development

After two years of intensive architectural planning the conceptual design for the reconstruction and the extension of the museum was presented to the wider public during the Vani Conference in October 2010. In the following two years EWA developed the full detail design in constant close collaboration with a highly professional team of Tbilisi based structural-, HVAC- and lighting engineers and especially with the responsible experts of the Georgian National Museum and its architectural group (Zaza Iashvili, Nino Okruashvili and others.)

In autumn 2012 construction works on site started financed by the World Bank and the Municipality Development Fond of Georgia. The first execution step of the local construction company, which was selected in an open tender procedure, was the gutting and partly demolition of the existing museum building. Shortly afterwards excavation works, followed by first shell construction works started on the extension part of the museum. (fig.21)

Due to different reasons, which were unfortunately neither under the control of the architects nor of the management of the GNM, construction works were constantly...
interrupted. Finally the construction company, which did not have the specific knowledge for a complex system of a state of the art, but even easy to operate museum building, disappeared from site. The former museum building was left unprotected to the climatic conditions of two rainy and even snowy autumn and winter seasons. These awkward circumstances caused serious damages to the already affected shell structure of the building. (fig.22)

Recently after two years of stagnancy construction specialists from Tbilisi recommended the complete demolition of the existing building. It was stated that a redesign and reconstruction on the footprint of the former museum would be necessary.

In constant dialog with the Georgian Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Municipality Development Fond of Georgia the specialists of the Georgian National Museum, lead by its Director David Lordkipanidze, searching for a solution to reanimate the redesign works and to continue with construction works on site. (fig.23)

World Bank already granted a program in July 2014 to continue with the construction of the three story extension and to protect the existing building with a temporary roof. Hopefully execution of it will happen soon and will lead to a positive solution for the Vani Archaeological Museum, so that its doors can be opened to the public in near future again. (fig.24)