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The Death of Green Spaces in Yerevan

By Edik Baghdasaryan

YEREVAN (Hetq, Transitions Online)—In 1988, the square next to the Opera House was renamed Freedom Square, where the Armenian National Movement was initiated and where three years later it declared the independence of Armenia. The place was a public park, with benches under the leafy trees surrounding the square. Elderly people would relax here and take their grandchildren for walks, kids would roller-skate, and sweethearts would kiss.

Today Freedom Square is a place where the Armenian opposition stages demonstrations calling for President Kocharian's resignation, surrounded by 12 privately owned indoor and outdoor cafés.

In warm weather, there are crowds of paying customers, and you can't tell where one café ends and the next begins. Music from different loudspeakers fights for domination. Patrons are mainly young people with money to spare, among them many Diaspora Armenians who have come to contemplate the homeland. Different political parties have their own cafés—Melody belongs to members of ARF-Dashnaktsutjun, Magnolia to Orinats Yerkir, and so forth.

"If so many cafés are being built, it means that there is a demand for them," asserts Yerevan's chief architect, Narek Sargisyan, who has worked under the last three mayors, and has to approve every land allocation.

But this area was always popular, even without the cafés. "I don't bring my grandson here anymore, because there are cafes everywhere, and no benches," says Sargis Torosyan, a 72-year-old pensioner. "The kid asks for something, but I can't buy it—everything is so expensive here. We used to spend every evening here, but now we have no place to go."

The chief architect admits, "Yes, perhaps we didn't consider this stratum," and reasons, "But the cafés are always full."

"Our association conducted an unofficial survey of the businessmen who build cafés and restaurants in the green areas," says Srбуhi Harutiunyan, the chairman of the Social-Ecological Association. "We have found out that 40% of these establishments are unprofitable, the owners of another 40% don't worry about profit at all, and the remaining 20% secure a profit by avoiding taxes. This is further evidence that these ecologically unsound allocations have a negative impact not only on the environment, not only on people's daily lives, but also on the development of the market economy."

In addition to the 12 cafés and discotheques already operating near the Opera House, there are three new establishments under construction, thanks to decisions made by the office. According to the designs approved by the city's architectural department, these cafés must be

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built out of light materials, in order to be easily dismantled and relocated if necessary. But most of them are constructed with solid stone walls as well as spacious outdoor café patios. Five major structures now tower over the Opera Square. Dozens of trees have been cut down and lawns destroyed during the construction work.

“What happened to the Himalayan cedars that are so rare in our city? Or the grapevines and persimmon trees that used to grow where the Astral Disco is now?” asks Gohar Oganezova, a Doctor of Biology. “Most of the firs have dried up over time as their roots come up against the concrete base of the café. A plane tree whose branches got entangled in the fence has withered. Two years ago it was a wonderful, viable tree. The fir trees along the path next to the Atlantic Café are drying up, too. Last season they were almost leafless, their roots are so damaged.”

The land allocations for these cafés were conducted in gross violation of ecological and city planning standards. Before construction work begins, cafés must submit their designs for approval by ecologists. But according to data from the Ministry of Ecology, of the 12 cafés in the Opera Square, only the Astral has done so in 2002.

According to Decision # 555A of the Yerevan Mayor’s Office, if the size of a plot to be allocated does not exceed 20 square meters, it does not have to be put up for public auction. This has given officials from the Mayor’s Office free rein to dismantle the park the way they have. They can sign away a 20-square-meter plot, and then expand it later as much as they wish. But if allocations in the city center were done through auction, huge amounts of money would flow into the state budget.

To cite one example, according to reliable information, a café in the Opera Park owned by a senior official was recently sold for \$250,000. The owner had spent some \$15,000 to build the café, after acquiring the land from the Mayor’s Office for a trifling sum. Thus, between \$200,000 and \$250,000 could have gone into state coffers, rather than into one official's pocket. Losses to the state budget from land allocations near the Opera alone, where some 15 companies have built cafés, may amount to more than \$1 million. It doesn’t make sense that these deals aren’t made through public auction, until you start to look at who is actually making the deals.

Here are three examples:

In the beginning of 2002, Mayor Robert Nazaryan granted a 20-square-meter site to Magnolia, Ltd. In November 2002, he allocated another 20-square-meter plot. Today, according to the head of Yerevan 's Department of Architecture and City Planning, S. Katolikyan, Magnolia occupies 2,615 square meters, making it the largest of the Opera cafes. The entrepreneur who was able to persuade Mayor Nazaryan to hand over so much land is a member of parliament representing the Orinats Yerkir Party, Grigor “Bellagio Grish” Margaryan.

Around the same time, Only Merriment, Ltd. requested permission from Mayor Robert Nazaryan to build a computer games arcade in a site adjacent to Freedom Square, facing Tumanyan Street. According to Mayoral Decision #24 of January 11, 2002 , the company

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acquired the 20-square-meter site for 10 years, with boundaries drawn up by the city's Department of Architecture and City Planning. A month later, on February 22, 2002, according to Mayoral Decision # 273, Only Merriment received an additional 312 square meters adjacent to the arcade, to build an *outdoor* café, this time leased for 25 years.

And then a month later, Nazaryan amended these decisions as follows: "In the first paragraph of the decision the words 'to organize an outdoor café' should be replaced by the words 'to build a computer games center and a café.'" The formula is clear. This amendment gave the café owner permission to build this eyesore, whose structure was never approved by the city's Department of Architecture, and whose owner, Only Merriment, was subsequently re-registered as Atlantic Garden, Ltd.

According to the documents, the company was supposed to occupy 332 square meters of land. But it's hard to say for sure how much of the park Atlantic Garden now occupies, since in the course of construction the place has expanded in all directions. The explanation for why Mayor Nazaryan was so generous is simple: The owner, Anush Ghazaryan (better known to the public as Kamvolny Anush or Pretty Anush) enjoys the protection of Minister for National Security Karlos Petrosyan.

A third site was given to Parliament member Levon Khachatryan, also by Mayor Nazaryan. Once again, everything was officially registered. Khachatryan first got a 20-square-meter plot, which was later expanded. His café blocks part of the Opera House from Sayat Nova Street. Two months ago we asked Yerevan's chief architect, Narek Sargisyan, if there was any establishment in the vicinity of the Opera House that had been built in accordance with the design approved by the city's architecture department. His answer was, "No."

The government has received grants to design an anti-corruption program, and the president has appointed an advisor to coordinate the fight. The land around the Opera House is the most obvious battlefield. But will they implement the national anti-corruption program here? Can they fight the owners of these cafés? Of course not.

"Unfortunately, the people with power in this city are above the law," says Gohar Oganezova. "But they don't realize that they lose, too. We lose our city's environment, literally and figuratively. The only thing left to tell them is to take another look at the map. Then they'll see that there are still a few pieces of viable park land left, and those who haven't yet torn off a chunk still have a chance."

In November 2003, two months before he was dismissed, Robert Nazaryan told the press that 99% of the cafés near the Opera House were illegal structures. "We did not approve these designs," he said. But none of the structures came down. Instead, new ones have gone up. And the current mayor, Yervand Zakharyan, won't touch them either, because of who the owners are.

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When we asked Narek Sargisyan why he couldn't rein these people in, he said, "I try to do everything in my power, but there are too many senior officials in our government. They built these structures and consider themselves to be above the law."

The city's chief architect is clearly powerless against these people, and he doesn't name any names. But it is now common knowledge which minister or state official owns which café in Yerevan's green areas. The owners themselves proudly patronize their own cafés, although they prefer to officially register these establishments in the names of their mothers-in-law or other relatives.

The Association of Investigative Journalists has repeatedly tried and failed to view the mayoral decisions regarding land allocations from 1997 to 2003. Mayor Zakharyan has arbitrarily refused to provide us with this supposedly public information. We appealed to President Robert Kocharyan to intervene, also in vain. We have now taken the matter to court, in the hope that Mayor Zakharyan will be obliged to fulfill his duty to the public.