

Cable Car Networks and Aerial Mobility in Tbilisi

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Intro

Tbilisi, Georgia is a unique global example of urban cable car infrastructure. With over half of a century of infrastructural development taking place during both socialism and capitalism, the city’s network covers a vast geographic area and represents a variety of different government transportation policies. Constructed between 1953 and 1988 under Soviet rule, then largely decommissioned in the 1990s, as of the 2010s the city’s cable car network is partially being reactivated and expanded to meet the needs of today’s tourism economy.

Early Soviet cable car lines aimed to connect city residents to Tbilisi’s peripheral mountainsides for recreational purposes, at the same time engendering communist ideology on leisure, health and mass mobility. Beginning in the 1960s, the city’s recreationally-focused cable car network was complemented with new lines facilitating worker commutes from the new microrayons into the core of the city. These cable cars passed above residential areas and connected passengers to the city’s wider public transit network where they could transfer to rail, bus, or metro. As examples of the Soviet Union’s modernization efforts, Tbilisi’s cable cars demonstrated the rise of new infrastructural technologies serving the mass citizenry.

Since the re-activation and proposed expansion of Tbilisi’s cable car network in the 2010s, the creation of lines that instead support tourism have become dominant, at times managed by private-sector companies receiving political support from the municipality. This can be witnessed at the city’s new line from Rike Park to Narikala Fortress, as well as in the dramatic, recently approved lines for Tbilisi’s *Panorama* project. As catalysts for market-driven urban growth, Tbilisi’s cable cars now selectively frame their surrounding environment as a tourism landscape, with scenic views of the Old City. Tbilisi’s cable car infrastructure is therefore today moving away from its role as mass public transit toward a more restricted form of privileged tourist mobility.

Below is a brief summary of Tbilisi’s proposed and constructed cable car lines.

Chavchavadze Avenue-Kus Tba (Turtle Lake)

Connection points: Chavchavadze Avenue and Kus Tba (Turtle Lake)

Construction Date: 1966

De-commission Date: late 2009

Currently Operating: Yes

The Chavchavadze Avenue – Kus Tba (Turtle Lake) line passing over Vake Park was built in 1966. The park itself was opened in 1946 and became a primary recreational space in Tbilisi. The cable car route connected park visitors up to Kus Tba (Turtle Lake) and its surrounding forest area.

In the 1990s, this line experienced intermittent power outages and only functioned occasionally. It stopped operation entirely in 2009, but was then re-activated in 2016. During its period of decommissioning, the construction of a high-rise residential building directly in front of the flight path, near to the lower station building, almost led to the full abandonment of the project. Local protest, however, persuaded the city government to halt the construction. In 2016, Tbilisi City Hall fully renovated this line, maintaining its original building design and passenger cabins in respect of its historical monument status. Today, it is part of Tbilisi’s broader public transportation network and is popular among both locals and tourists.

Didube-Saakadze Line

Connection points: Didube Metro Station and Saakadze Street

Construction Date: 1961

De-commission Date: late 1990s

Currently Operating: No

In contrast to the recreational routes vertically transgressing Tbilisi’s hillsides, a number of cable car lines built during the late Soviet era were intended to serve as daily commuter lines passing over residential areas. The first constructed in this fashion was from Didube to Saakadze Square in 1961. While little-known today, in 1970 this line was deemed a “gift to Georgia on the 40th anniversary of its Sovietization.” It quickly became the busiest of Tbilisi’s aerial transport connections, serving up to 617,000 passengers annually. The line functioned for about ten years until its decommissioning in the 1970s, when it was replaced by the adjacent Vakhushti Bagrationi bridge. In the late 1990s, the vacant station buildings were sold to private interests. Both buildings can still be visually identified, despite having undergone significant modifications by their new owners.

Rustaveli- Mtatsminda Line

Connection points: Rustaveli Ave. to Mtatsminda park

Construction Date: Began 1957; Completed October 1959

De-commission Date: June 1990

Currently Operating: No

The original, cultural heritage listed lower-station building for the cable car line that connected Rustaveli Ave. up to Mtatsminda park is located in the courtyard of the National Academy of Science building. It was designed by Georgian architect Konstantine Chkheidze and has a unique extruded oval form with dramatic glass and metal archways. It is here that in 1957 the history of Tbilisi's aerial cable car infrastructure officially began, following the earlier success of the railed 1905 funicular connecting Mtatsminda Park from further up the hill at Daniel Chonkadze Street (formerly Ivan Gudovich Street). Following the cable car's completion in October 1959, the line brought almost half a million riders annually up to Mtatsminda Park's recreational spaces. Throughout the Soviet period, Mtatsminda was one of the most visited attractions in Georgia, facilitated greatly by its ease of access by cable car and funicular. Yet, the physical collapse of the cable car hauling rope on 1 June 1990 led to multiple passenger injuries and the death of fifteen people. The line was never repaired afterwards.

In 2014, the United National Movement government unveiled plans for a brand new cable car line connecting (then) Rose Revolution Square (now, First Republic Square) and Mtatsminda park, ignoring the existing station buildings. A new lower station building was to be located a mere 100m away from its Soviet predecessor, in the center of the newly-redeveloped square. The proposed lower station building took the shape of an aerodynamic 'egg,' bearing no resemblance to the existing Soviet-era cable car buildings. The proposal was ultimately cancelled, in part due to public discontent and the change in City Hall government. Prior to its cancellation, however, the original upper station building was demolished, preventing its future reuse. Currently, Tbilisi City Hall is reconsidering the re-activation of this line from the original lower station building. Residential units encroaching on the platform area, however, have introduced property ownership concerns.

Mziuri Park Line

Connection points: upper and lower Mziuri park

Architect: Nodar Dumbadze (visionary); Irakli Maskharashvili (landscape architect)

Construction Date: 1970s

De-commission Date: late 1990s

Currently Operating: No

Perhaps the least-remembered Soviet era cable car line in Tbilisi is that which passed through Mziuri park in the district of Vake. The park itself was the 1970s dream project of Georgian writer, Nodar Dumbadze, who aimed to create a unique space for children to play along the Vere River gorge. Unlike Tbilisi's other more expansive Soviet-era cable car lines that navigated severe topographic conditions, the Mziuri park line was confined to solely within the park, quickly connecting the lower parts of the Vera River with an area close to the park's main entrance. According to the park's landscape architect, Irakli Maskharashvili,

the Soviet administration of Tbilisi had intended to enlarge the recreation space further into the gorge, and had aimed to even extend the cable car line into the nearby hilltop settlements of Tskneti and Akhladaba. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, these projects never came to fruition and the existing line was decommissioned. Following Georgian independence in 1991, the number of annual visitors to Mziuri park dramatically diminished due to poor maintenance. The cable car line was decommissioned. Today, the park is experiencing a resurgence and its lower station building is being transformed into a branch of Tbilisi's Multifunctional Libraries.

Nutsubidze – Lisi Lake Line

Connection points: Nutsubidze Street and Lisi Lake park

Construction Date: August 1978

De-commission Date: late 1990s

Currently Operating: No

The Nutsubidze Street-Lisi Lake line opened in 1978. It was built not only to connect with the recreational area around Lisi Lake, but to also provide a connection to the medical cluster built for the oncological research institutes and the hospital. Remotely nestled inside a pine tree forest and situated roughly a five-minute walk from the main recreational attractions, its impressive monolithic concrete form remains mostly hidden from society. Designed by Georgian architect Varlam Khechinashvili, the building is white and centered around a cascading open staircase. It has graffiti by the Tbilisi-based art duo *Sadarismelia* (Mariam Natroshvili and Detu Jintcharadze) that reads 'ERROR' in English.

Since the time of this line's original construction in August of 1978, the station buildings have experienced a range of ad-hoc alterations and additions—particularly at the lower station. The lower station building's street level now houses a convenience store, money exchange and hair salon. With the absence of effective national and local governments after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this line experienced perpetual power outages and was slowly decommissioned. Residential buildings constructed inside the flight path have now rendered the line entirely obsolete.

Tbilisi State University-Bagebi Line

Connection points: Tbilisi State University buildings to student dormitories in Bagebi

Construction Date: 1983

De-commission Date: 1991

Currently Operating: Restored but not operating

Similar to the Didube-Saakadze Square line, the Tbilisi State University-Bagebi line served commuter purposes, allowing students to commute from their dormitories to campus across the Vera River gorge. This line was constructed in 1983 and was in use for roughly eight years until its decommissioning. Following Georgian independence in 1991, the under-utilized university dormitory buildings took on a range of new inhabitants, including IDPs, lowering the need for student connectivity. A nearby pedestrian foot bridge built across the gorge currently acts as the primary crossing point between the two sides.

Reconstruction efforts of the cable car station started in 2016. Once operating, the line will again connect both sides of the river, further plugging into the new University metro station completed in 2017. The re-activation of this line will be the first example of Tbilisi City Hall constructing an integrated inter-modal transit link since Soviet times, done as a part of the city's broader public transport improvement strategy.

Samgori-Vazisubani

Connection points: Samgori transit hub – Vazisubani microrayon

Construction Date: 1986

De-commission Date: 1990s

Currently Operating: No

The Samgori-Vazisubani line was the last line to be completed in the Soviet era. Built in 1986 in one of the most populated areas of Tbilisi, it began operation in 1988. The line carried thousands of residents from the Soviet microrayons of Vazisubani down to Samgori, where they could easily access the city's broader transportation network at the Samgori Metro station and Navtlugi transport hub. Today, both station buildings are in serious disrepair, but the cable lines hanging between them remain, suspended in-air with two passenger cabins still attached. Both station buildings have come to blend with their adjacent urban fabric, yet two large, rusted, metal-frame support masts located mid-span are still overwhelmingly visible. Proposals for the re-activation of this line were put forward in 2015. They recommend the construction of entirely new station buildings, with the lower station being moved closer to the Samgori metro station.

As with the city's other obsolete cable car station buildings, these show innovative signs of reuse. In the upper station building at Vazisubani, the building is make-shift housing for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The occupants have made minor adaptations to the exterior of the building, including boarding up the windows and filling in the large wall holes for cables. There are other signs of building reuse, including stenciled graffiti by the Tbilisi-based art duo *Sadarismelia* (Mariam Natroshvili and Detu Jintcharadze) that reads 'IGNORE' in English. The duo describes their work as being "inspired by stories and biographies of places and people," and that their interventions are "interested in disappearing knowledge, invisible people, forgotten places, and ignored spaces." At Vazisubani, this leaves open interpretations of "IGNORE."

The construction of a new high-rise apartment building directly adjacent to the Samgori-Vazisubani upper station signals future change for the area. With the proposal to create an alternate new mid-level station building further into the built fabric of Vazisubani, the current IDP residents may not face eviction. But, it is uncertain what other future changes to the area might mean for this station building. Despite Tbilisi City Hall's several announcements to reconstruct the Samgori-Vazisubani line, work has yet to commence and government attention toward cable car development has instead focused on projects closer to the core of the city.

Rike Park

Connection points: Rike Park – Narikala Fortress

Construction Date: 2012

De-commission Date: N/A

Currently Operating: Yes

In 2012, signs of the re-activation of Tbilisi’s cable car network could be seen in the construction of a new gondola line connecting Rike Park on the left bank of the Mtkvari river up to the ancient hilltop fortress of Narikala. The gondola was introduced as a complement to the 2009 ‘New Life for Old Tbilisi’ urban regeneration initiative, which brought about rapid and controversial change to the eastern neighborhoods of the Old City. Located in the heart of the historic district, the line is indicative of government efforts toward tourism promotion. Although it is owned and operated by the Tbilisi Transport Company, it is primarily tailored toward tourists, rather than public transportation users.

Panorama Tbilisi

Connection points: Freedom Square - upper Sololaki; Erekle II Square - upper Sololaki

Construction Date: under construction 2019

De-commission Date: N/A

Currently Operating: No

The recent revival of cable car infrastructure in Tbilisi can be seen in the \$1.3 billion proposal for the real-estate mega-project, ‘Panorama Tbilisi,’ which was announced in 2014 and is funded by the former Prime Minister of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili. The project consists of four hotel complexes situated throughout Tbilisi’s Old City and its hillside adjacency in Sololaki. The majority of the project’s new facilities are to be built on lush greenfield sites, with desirable views of the downtown. Access to these remote areas will be made possible through two cable car connections that plug into urban infill sites in the core of the Old City. The first cable car line will originate at Liberty Square inside a newly-built 7-star hotel complex. The second will connect to another (yet to be built) hotel in the core of the Old City at Erekle II Square. Both lines will be privately owned and operated.

By locating the station buildings at sites for economic growth through gentrification, the Panorama Tbilisi cable car proposal exemplifies how aerial transportation has become interconnected with the politics of urban development in Tbilisi. Unlike the Soviet emphasis on equal urban mobility for the working proletariat, Panorama seeks to provide restricted access to a wealthy elite. Aerial connections to the luxury hotels, business centres, and leisure areas will enable riders to move above the city, unimpeded by street-level traffic.

Vera-Marjanishvili Line

Connection points: Vera Park – near to Marjanishvili Metro

Construction Date: unknown

De-commission Date: N/A incomplete initial construction

Currently Operating: No

At the northern edge of Vera Park is an incomplete concrete platform. It was once the beginnings of a cable car station for a line connecting across the Mktvari river to a site near to Marjanishvili metro. Today, its remains are fenced off and blend in with the greenery of Vera park.

Ethnographic Museum Line

Connection points: Ethnographic Museum Upper and Lower Destinations

Construction Date: 1983

De-commission Date: early 1990s

Currently Operating: No

Situated inside the Giorgi Chitaia Open Air Museum of Ethnography, this short-lived line was a late edition to Tbilisi's cable car network. It exclusively served visitors of the museum, with a capacity of two cabinets, each holding 25 people. The line enabled museum guests to first quickly ascend the museum's hilly terrain to visit upper pavilions before slowly making their way back down by foot. The project's engineer was Vakhtang Lezhava..