



Baku at a Crossroads

The capital of Azerbaijan bridges East and West, past and future.

Story and photos by ALAN P. MAMMOSER, AICP

WHERE DOES Europe end and Asia begin? That is one of the great questions of history and geography. But I wasn't trying to answer that the first time I went to Azerbaijan. In 2014, I was hiking with friends in Georgia, and staying at a hostel in the high mountains, when I learned that Azerbaijan would host the first-ever European Games. The games took place this past June.

"Are we in Europe here?" I asked a young French woman staying at the hostel. She thought for a moment and replied, "No, not here, I don't think so."

I became curious about a place I had barely heard of and decided to extend my trip for a few days. And, to add a little romance, I traveled from Tbilisi (the capital of Georgia) to Azerbaijan on the old Transcaucasus Railway, built more than a century ago by the Russian Empire to connect the Black and Caspian Seas. After a big delay getting a visa and a long, slow overnight train ride, I arrived, rather bewildered, in Baku, Azerbaijan's capital city.

Over the next few days I became intrigued with the country, delighted by a mix of elements that feel quite different from Europe. It seemed to be one of those in-between countries, at the juncture of different worlds, whose history has produced a complex, richly layered place. Judging by my quick trip there, Baku aspires to become a bright, beautiful city and an important European capital. I found it at a critical moment, when it must embrace effective regional planning to realize its ambitions.

Finding a friend in Baku

To learn about the city, I talked to city planners (of course). And not knowing a soul, I inquired at the friendliest place I could think of, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Baku. I was hoping to meet a younger person, not a bureaucratic old communist type (if you know what I mean), to tell me all about the city and planning for the European Games. Fortunately, I was introduced to Fuad Jafarli.

Jafarli worked a stint at the State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture—a national government agency—but he became frustrated by the bureaucracy and, after pursuing independent studies at MIT, returned to Baku and began consulting for developers and others. When he started telling me about "land usings," "dormitory districts," and "crisis of housing," I knew I had found a planner, a guy who could help unravel the layers of this place.

We toured the city as planners do: We walked a transect, starting in the Old City. It goes back at least 1,000 years, when Baku was a stop on the Silk Road, and now is nicely restored. On a map of modern Baku, the Old City is a small dot. But it remains the city's heart, especially with its mysterious Maiden Tower, possibly built for both fortification and fire worship. The Caspian Sea once



Fuad Jafarli (left), an independent planner and consultant, guided the author through Baku's historic layers. Amin Mammadov (right), an assistant director at the State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture, explained the region's modern-day planning challenges.

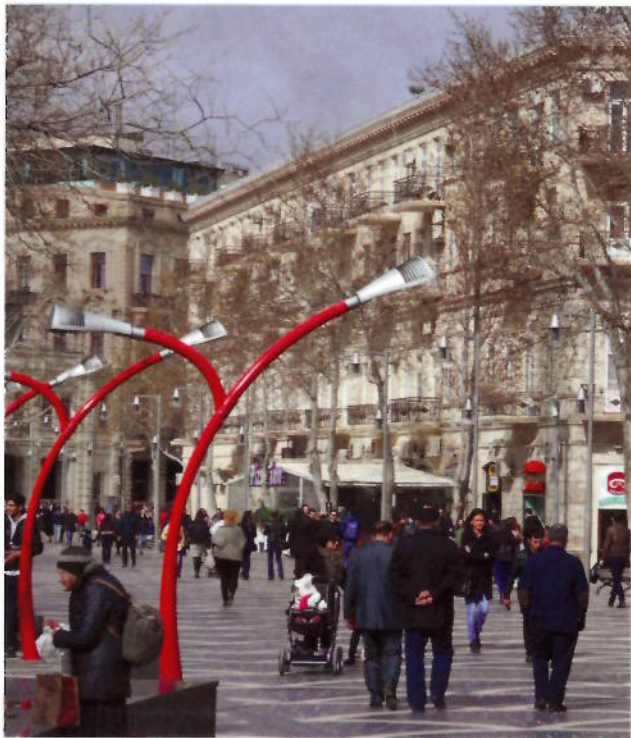
reached the base of this tower; now it is about a quarter-mile off, across a spacious pedestrian parkway called the Boulevard.

Jafarli led me through a gate into a different part of the city, this one a bright European ring around the ancient core. These elegant streets were built in the late 19th century, during the so-called first oil boom, when Azerbaijan became one of the world's biggest oil exporters. Local families and European investors, most notably the Nobel Brothers Petroleum Company, were granted concessions by the czar. They created a landscape covered with derricks, where crude oil flowed in open channels to collecting pools, then was carried away to Europe and Russia by ship and pipeline. One large area just west of the city's center came to be known as "black city" for its oil-drenched surface.

As we continued on our jaunt, Jafarli pointed out the city's subtle details while voicing a planner's warnings about appearances and reality. "That is a gateway," he said, looking for a word in English to describe the glowing city center along the sea, "but the actual city lay beyond the gateway"—and that is where most residents live. So we came into the Soviet-era city, walking up through the old *Sovietskaya* district that is being demolished by the government despite years of protest by its residents. It's unclear what will come next. There has been talk of large parks, and rumors that sheiks from the United Arab Emirates would be granted rights to redevelop it.

This Soviet realm goes on much farther than we could walk, as it still holds many of the city's residents. (Azerbaijan was folded into the Soviet Union in 1920 and declared its independence in 1991.) Jafarli says Baku's population is about 2.2 million, and the regional population above three million, disputing much lower official figures.

We looked at some fascinating spots, such as the handsome, stone-clad *Stalinskaya*—apartment buildings with their distinctive



facades and fine balconies. These functional and spacious buildings are still sturdy. They are intermixed with apartments of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. We came to one place where good, human-scaled buildings of the three eras enclose a small, simple square. Socialist housing worked nicely there, although farther out the apartment blocks have a much more monolithic look.

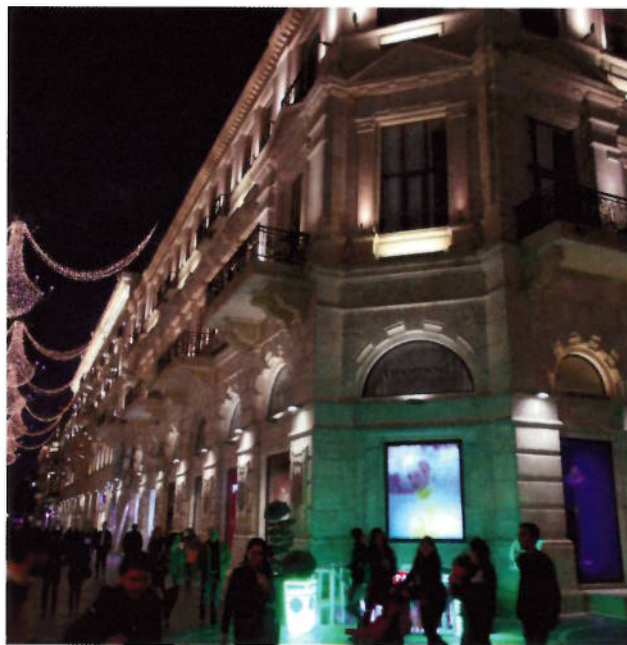
Finally we arrived at a high spot overlooking the broad expanse of the city, which slopes down to the wide curve of Baku Bay. Looming over us were the enormous Flame Towers, which were completed in 2012 and can be seen from almost every vantage in Baku today. Triple spires of steel and glass, these 620-foot towers were named for the flaming gas rising from the earth—a phenomenon, related to natural gas deposits, that since ancient times has given the region its reputation as a “land of fire.”

The modern flames include a 39-story luxury residential tower, an office tower, and a Fairmont Hotel. Traffic roared by, making me feel uncomfortable on foot. Up close the towers felt rather lonely and empty, although from afar their thousands of LED lights make a marvelous nighttime show.

Oil rich

Accounts of Baku from years past tell of an intimate and close-knit city. Now we looked out on a remarkable expanse of new apartments and luxury hotels, all built in the past 20 years. More are under construction. There is a new Hilton, a new Marriott, and the gleaming towers of Port Baku, which stand next to the old port, now being relocated.

An impressive array of tall apartment towers covers the heights of the city. Looking at this massive residential development, I was a little surprised when Jafarli told me that Baku’s greatest need today is what he called “social housing.” I asked who is buying all the luxury apartments, and he said that Baku now has many millionaires in need of investment properties. How did all of these people



Fin de siècle Baku, the city’s European center, built during the first oil boom more than a century ago, still thrives, as seen here at Fountain Square (left) and on the pedestrian-only Nizami Street (above).

get rich? “Different ways,” he shrugged, “oil and gas industry, other industries, corruption.”

The residential area called White City, just east of the city center near the shore, is in the area formerly known as “black city.” It required removal of more than 75 million cubic feet of contaminated earth. The master plan for the 545-acre site was finished in 2010. The Azerbaijan Development Company was formed with state support for project management and infrastructure development, and the British firm Atkins acted as master planner. Foster + Partners produced a detailed master plan for the waterfront portion.

The White City is already adding more gems to Baku’s growing array of futuristic architecture. When I first spoke with representatives of the development company, I was told that units there would cost about \$1,500 per square meter, which converts to about \$150 per square foot. But even \$1,000 per square meter (about \$100 per square foot) is too expensive for most families, Jafarli told me. That is why, despite all the marvelous development in Baku, Jafarli keeps discussing housing.

To see what’s driving Baku’s current growth, one must look to the placid, blue-gray waters of the Caspian Sea. There is a city out there, actually too far out for the eye to see, where thousands of men work on oil rigs and ships, running, servicing, and maintaining the platforms and pipelines. Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the so-called “contract of the century,” a production-sharing agreement that opened the enormous Azeri–Chirag–Guneshli oil field to a consortium of foreign firms led by BP. More exploration and agreements followed, with BP and other European energy giants helping to open the big Shah Deniz gas field offshore.

Azeri oilmen built the first offshore oil platforms in the 1940s. Their original city on the sea—Oil Rocks—is legendary in the oil industry. The Oil Institute of Azerbaijan was famous for its leadership in extractive technologies during the Soviet era. Now, the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic is earning enormous

revenue from production-sharing agreements, and hydrocarbons account for 95 percent of the country's export earnings. This has generated a great flow of money into a national wealth fund called the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan.

This second great oil boom is remaking the city. In addition to expensive housing, new office towers and beautiful civic buildings have gone up, such as the new Heydar Aliyev Center for performing arts, whose remarkable white ski-slope curves were designed by the London-based architect Zaha Hadid. The government funded several structures for the 2015 European Games, including new gymnastics and aquatics arenas and the world-class Olympic Stadium and village built along the road to the airport.

"You see we've had a lot of architects and engineers here," Jafarli said. "Now is the time for planners. We must get serious about strategic regional planning."

Apparatus

The next afternoon we relaxed in a small tea room near Nizami Street, joined by Jafarli's friend and associate Amin Mammadov, who leveraged his environmental studies and his knack for English into a job with the State Committee. He began by serving as a translator for World Bank consultants and is now an assistant director. The next morning, at his office, I spent some time perusing the pages of Baku's first regional plan, which was completed last year and still awaits formal adoption by the national government.

Mammadov told me that, during work on this plan, some mis-

understandings arose between senior officials at the State Committee and the World Bank's specialists. Mammadov played the role of translator and mediator, he said. "We had to convince our director that we needed a 'vision,' which the public could see, and an actual statement of what we were striving for," he explained. "That wasn't easy."

This first regional plan for Baku and its environs encompasses the entire area from the south up through the Absheron Peninsula, a large area of about 1,000 square miles. It's comprehensive, com-



The shell-shaped Baku White City Office Building (above), completed this year, stands at the entrance to a new city rising in the former "black city" oil production area. It's first residential district, a large Parisian-themed French Quarter, is under construction beyond.

The Flame Towers (left), completed in 2012, can be seen from almost everywhere in the city of Baku. Conceived by American architect Barry Hughes, the curving flame design is lit up at night by thousands of inset LEDs that turn the buildings' glass facades into shimmering screens of colored lights, representing the region's reputation as a "land of fire."



binning an overall assessment of the economy with an inventory of needs for a growing population.

Azerbaijan is a young country, with 40 percent of its nearly 10 million people under age 25. And the city of Baku has grown by about one-third during the past 25 years, with refugees and an influx of rural people. The plan quantifies needs for schools, hospitals, and housing. It sets out a general spatial framework around three poles, including the new port area south of Baku and the city of Sumgait to the north. It highlights new centers to achieve balanced development that relieves central Baku.

Overall, though, the plan seems to lack clear priorities or budgets for specific projects. It's a good start, but much more could be done to scale the document for local implementation, in my opinion. The plan places a lot of emphasis on economic diversification, identifying specific industries that might be developed. In this it builds on a priority from an earlier document called *Azerbaijan 2020*, which was adopted by the national government in 2012. That white paper said that economic development must occur more evenly throughout the country to prepare Azerbaijan for a post-petroleum future.

But Mammadov believes these initial steps fall far short of the need. He would like to see comprehensive planning carried out across Azerbaijan, in all 11 economic regions that have been identified to date. He supports decentralization—to spread out the country's economic development and limit more migration to Baku. He would even relocate some of the universities and ministries now located in the capital.

As we talked that morning, our conversation again turned to housing. Average families are suffering from a shortage of affordable housing, high housing costs, overcrowding, and a lack of housing choice, he said. (A young woman I met, a hotel worker, told me how she longed to have just a bit of land for a garden—hard to come by in high-rise apartments.)

About a decade ago the government established a foundation for mortgages, which has been very popular, although it has limited funding. Mammadov is now working with the World Bank on proposals to improve housing programs.

And to kick-start implementation of the regional plan, he wants to take municipal leaders on study tours of places with noteworthy outcomes. He thinks Poland holds lessons for housing reform. He's asked his director for funding for this trip, arguing that such an international perspective will open local leaders' eyes to the possibilities of comprehensive planning, but it seems like a long shot. "Right now," he said matter-of-factly, "there seem to be other priorities."

European Games

At the top of the list is the European Games. The government paid \$8 billion for them and has given them high priority in the past couple of years. This past spring, the public learned that the government would even pay for the travel expenses of all 6,000 participating athletes.

However, just when this news came out, the country's currency suddenly lost nearly one-third of its value against the dollar. The shock, brought on by falling oil prices, appeared to be dragging the economy into a deep recession, with more devaluations possible.

Mina Azimova, a lifelong resident of Baku, provided some in-

sight. She and her Italian fiance, Giacomo, a specialist in undersea pipeline repair, were miffed when told they could not have a wedding in June. The government had asked wedding halls to close, apparently to avoid distractions during the games. We laughed about this, but when I suggested that the games were bringing important new infrastructure to Baku, she shrugged it off. "It's just what we need," she said with an ironic laugh, "a big new soccer stadium."

Azeris don't play much soccer, but the stadium could attract more international competitions. In fact, economic development of the city center is being focused on international events, which will be needed to keep the hotel rooms full.

Whose future?

Yet I got a sense that many Azeris feel rather detached from the ongoing efforts to remake Baku into a glowing European capital and tourist destination. It's not that they dislike the notion, or feel that it won't benefit them. It might. But people are not being asked about the best use of their great national wealth; they are being told. And the story gets darker, with widely reported accounts of journalists and political activists being held in prison, and a regime ready to suppress opposition.

Yet income from hydrocarbons promises to keep flowing in, possibly delaying steps toward political reform and serious planning. The Shah Deniz offshore gas field is being linked by pipelines through Georgia and Turkey to a new Trans-Adriatic pipeline that will bring natural gas directly to Europe, offering a critical alternative to Russian gas.

Knowing this, one sees the key strategic position of Azerbaijan, whose pipelines to the West must traverse a 45-mile wide gap in Georgia, going between Russian-held South Ossetia and Russian-allied Armenia. Azerbaijan's location and resources, vital to Europe, ensure that it will remain an important piece on the chessboard of the great powers. But I fear my friends, the young city planners, will face long years of toil and disappointment if a flow of oil income distracts from turning serious attention to regional planning.

Near the end of my stay in Baku, I enjoyed a meeting with Azer Khanlarov, a senior official in the Ministry for Emergency Situations. I wanted to talk about planning, and he told me about his father, a well-known architect during the Soviet period. Then we talked about Azerbaijan.

Khanlarov has two wonderful old maps on his walls, one depicting the first Azerbaijan Republic of 1918–20, which flourished briefly before its occupation by the Red Army, the other of the country as it was earlier, under the czar. My host told me about the many elements composing his country, with ancient Persian and Turkish influences mixed together, and how Russia later brought European culture into play.

He takes pride in his fluency in Russian, and in his native Azeri tongue, a language related to Turkish that he taught himself as a young man. He told me how a business associate in Turkey once told him, "You Azeris are our cousins, but you are more European than us."

Our meeting left me wondering all the more about the future of this fascinating city and country at a crossroads. ■

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TALKBACK



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