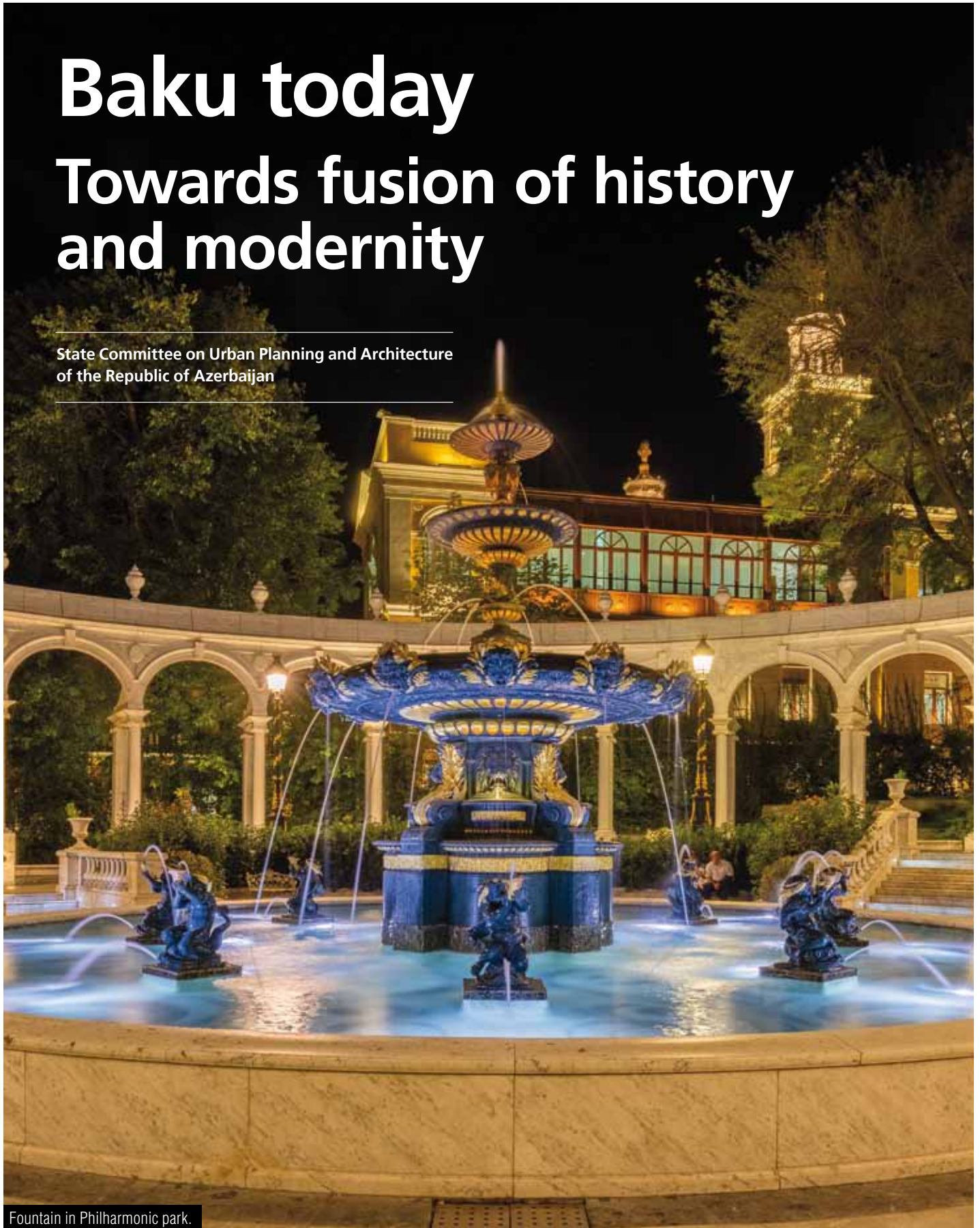


Baku today

Towards fusion of history and modernity

State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture
of the Republic of Azerbaijan



Fountain in Philharmonic park.

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Some call Baku ‘the city of winds’ for its variable weather conditions. Others say Baku is the ‘European marvel of the East’ and ‘the place where East meets West’ for its remarkable combination of Oriental and Western traditions. These are visible in the local medieval fortress and the European-style 19th-century architecture, and echoed in the Soviet-era buildings as well as the ultra-modern skyscrapers that shape the new image of the city today.

Among well-known landmarks of Baku today are Icherisheher (the Inner City or the Walled City), included in the UNESCO World Heritage List; Baku Seaside Boulevard that was reconstructed in the 2000s; the Heydar Aliyev Center that was named Design of the Year by the London Design Museum in 2014; and the Flame Towers that are the tallest structures in Baku.

The area of Baku is believed to have been inhabited since the Paleolithic period. The city itself emerged in the Middle Ages as the fortress, and still retains much of its 12th-century defensive walls, though certain constructions presumably date back to the 7th century BC. Baku has a unique mix of Zoroastrian, Sassanian, Arabic, Persian, Ottoman and Russian cultural presence along with the dominating Azerbaijani element.

Oil capital

Baku has long been a transit point on the historical Silk Road but it obtained real prominence in the mid-19th century when oil production started around the city, sparking a new era for the entire Caucasus. Baku turned into the oil capital of the Russian empire and then of the USSR. In the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries the emerging oil tycoons tried to gain visibility and match their newly-acquired wealth with social status. They invited European architects to design grand mansions, some of which still stand in downtown Baku. They also donated large amounts to charity, sponsoring construction of schools and hospitals and helping to improve the well-being of the vulnerable. This was also the time when Baku’s first master plan was implemented, though it covered only the area of the medieval Inner City (Icherisheher).



Baku night view.

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Another three master plans were implemented during the Soviet era, when the city developed in the form of an amphitheatre around the Baku Bay. The collapse of the USSR adversely impacted the city and though the last Soviet-time master plan was prepared in 1987, the changed political and legal context and subsequent socio-economic turbulence of the early 1990s created many difficulties in its implementation. At the time the city urgently needed a coherent institutional and regulatory framework and adequate professional urban development capacity.

Recent developments

Comprehensive reforms and government policy actions initiated by the National Leader of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev and then successfully continued by the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev have significantly contributed to urban development and the overall image of the city.

According to the magazine *The Economist*, in 2016 Baku ranked 9th out of 10 cities that had considerably improved quality of life. A Lonely Planet survey conducted in 2017 ranked Baku one of the top ten cities for architecture lovers and TripAdvisor put it among its best five travel destinations for tourists the same year. According to Numbeo, Baku is 42nd among 327 cities in terms of safety while TourStat agency keeps on upgrading Baku’s ranking among the top five travel destinations

in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Much remains to be done, however, regarding quality of life and the related balanced use of the urban area. This demanded the preparation of the first master plan for Baku as the capital city of independent Azerbaijan, covering the period from today until 2040.

Under instructions from President Aliyev, the State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture proceeded with developing a new master plan of Baku in July 2018. The Committee contracted Boston Consulting Group (BCG) to ensure that the process complied with international standards and international best practices. Based on a survey of citizens and experts, the parties prepared the Development Concept Paper of Baku that responds to challenges, incorporates worldwide trends and considers the competitive advantages of the city.

The Concept has defined four strategic development priorities for Baku. These are: development of multi-centre infrastructure of the city with sub-centres to ensure sustainable urban development; recovery of the urban environment and efficient use of the area for citizens’ quality of life; preservation of the cultural heritage and the city’s architectural appearance, and diversified cultural life; and postindustrial sectoral and business development with a focus on creative industries, online services and tourism.



Heydar Aliyev Center.

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Ismailiyya Palace.

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Preparation of the master plan

Based on these conceptual priorities, the government is currently preparing the Baku master plan, the key urban planning document for the next twenty years. It will provide policies and a legal framework for future physical development of the capital of Azerbaijan. Considering the role of the master plan as a broad guideline in the city's long-term development, one of the above-mentioned priorities has special significance for Baku's cultural heritage. The Concept Paper underlines the importance of preservation and development of cultural life and the city's inherited architectural appearance. Today the city has a successful mix of classical European, modern and Soviet architectural styles. However, there is a need to balance the traditional image of Baku and modern creative solutions that add new flavour to the city. Therefore, the Concept Paper prioritizes preservation of historical-architectural monuments, development of related infrastructure and touristic capacity, where relevant, and higher legal responsibility of the private sector for preservation of priority monuments and their protection from destruction and acts of vandalism.

Cultural resources

Preservation and development of the rich cultural values and traditions, and protection of the nation's historical and architectural heritage are among the Government of

Another urban development priority is a more vibrant cultural life as it is a strong incentive for strengthening sustainable development of the city and its touristic capacity.

Azerbaijan's top priorities. In this context, a number of initiatives were successfully implemented within the last decade under the personal guidance of the First Vice-President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO and ISESCO Mehriban Aliyeva.

Another urban development priority is a more vibrant cultural life, as it is a strong incentive for strengthening sustainable development of the city and its touristic capacity. Nowadays, Baku has several cultural landmarks such as the Heydar Aliyev Center, a number of cultural museums including the recently redesigned Azerbaijan Carpet Museum, street art sites and a well-established network of theatres, concert-halls and cultural-educational centres. And Baku has room to expand its calendar of cultural events, as the city has abundant human and cultural capacity – there are communities of designers, musicians and other creative activists, for example the YARAT contemporary space of modern art, Icherisheher Centre for Traditional Arts, Baku Media Centre and others.

There is a need for more creative platforms, co-working centres and art

incubators, and a higher number of locally trained producers and managers in media, design and other creative professions. Also, an event and museum tourism agenda is needed to use touristic revenues for sustainable development of the city.

Improving quality of life

Within the last decade, the city of Baku has hosted a number of major international sport and business events. Strong efforts by the government aimed at improving public infrastructure are having a positive impact on quality of life in the city that translates into population growth and an increased number of visitors. Baku is becoming a better place for work and life, for leisure and entertainment. Baku's much-loved Seaside National Park has been central to city life for well over a century. Originally occupying just a few hundred metres – the area between Icherisheher and the Caspian Sea – the historic Boulevard has gradually lengthened and dramatically expanded to 16 km today.

Meanwhile, public authorities keep working on proper city planning in order to face further challenges of urban development and the necessity to provide



Baku White City.

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more comfortable life conditions. The city needs diverse infrastructure to ensure sustainable development. The Baku master plan preparation process envisages development of the citizen-oriented compact multi-centre city with sub-centres development requirements that will ensure balanced urban environment and development of the living local urban spaces.

Several years ago Baku started transforming the area in its eastern part, called the 'Black City', which is urban heritage from the first oil boom of the late 19th century. The result of that successful development today is the 'White City', one of the largest modern projects in the world, built entirely on an ecologically reclaimed industrial zone. Proper urban design, ecological compatibility, architectural diversity and a well-thought-out integration of the new development into the existing urban context of the city are major elements of the concept of Baku White City, the new residential area covering hundreds of hectares.

Appropriate planning and careful development of historic downtown Baku will continue. Today Baku has an ambitious task ahead: to prepare an urban development code in the post-industrial era based on modern urban design methods. Today's investments in identity will further modernize Baku and make it an even more remarkable and balanced city. 🌀



Renovated waterfront of Baku.

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Government House.

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