

Chapter Title: A Ride on the Elevator: Infrastructures of Brokenness and Repair in Georgia

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Book Title: Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough

Book Subtitle: Ethnographic Responses

Book Editor(s): Francisco Martínez, Patrick Lavolette

Published by: Berghahn Books. (2019)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1850hkq.12>

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## CHAPTER 4

# A Ride on the Elevator

## *Infrastructures of Brokenness and Repair in Georgia*

TAMTA KHALVASHI

When Nino finds out that she does not have a 10 tetri coin for the prepayment elevator to get to the ninth floor of her Soviet building apartment in Tbilisi, the first thing she does is curse. Then she calls her daughter and asks her to send a coin to her by elevator. Nino's daughter fetches the 10 tetri coin from a small wooden bowl standing on the shelf in the entrance hall of the apartment, walks out to the elevator and puts the coin on top of the prepayment box, a small iron machine fixed into the wall of the Soviet-era lift. Down on the ground floor, Nino then presses a button for the elevator. When the doors open again, the 10 tetri coin is waiting. Nino rides the lift home. 'When you come home after work or grocery shopping and you are absolutely tired, it is a nightmare to find out that you are out of 10 tetri coins', says Nino. 'Sometimes people are lucky to have family members at home to get coins quickly. But sometimes, you need to go back to a store and exchange money or wait for another neighbour who can give you a ride.'

Tbilisi has upward of ten thousand Soviet-era elevators, many of which long ago exceeded their recommended life-span and which are therefore in need of special maintenance. One stop-gap innovation has been the introduction of coin-operated lifts. Their goal is in part to raise funds for electricity bills and technical equipment repair for the elevators, but their immediate effect has been to discourage use of the elevator entirely for those who can walk, or for those (like most in Georgia) who have to watch their budget carefully. Users do not need to purchase or load up credit

cards or tokens in advance, but ensure they have 5 or 10 tetri coins at their disposal, depending on the residential unit.<sup>1</sup> Inserting these coins into the sensor boxes installed inside the elevator directly mediates access to the flow of bodies and things, dividing rich from poor, healthy from weak, or mindful from unmindful, those who remember and those who forget to have coins

The increasing deployment of prepayment technologies within Georgian elevators reflects a larger political, temporal and semiotic shift in many parts of the world. Indeed, such technologies signal precarious times in which dependence on regular salaries and income has become increasingly problematic (Von Schnitzler 2016). They are therefore oriented to avoid the nonpayment of service charges, bypassing or illegal connection to services. While prepayment technologies, from mobile phones to electricity to water provision, are used ubiquitously in many parts of the world today, the prepayment elevators are not widespread phenomena and one can rarely encounter it today.<sup>2</sup> It was first introduced during the early 2000s to ensure the collection of fees for elevator maintenance and repair in a context of mass nonpayment and infrastructure breakdown. This was part of the larger political process in Georgia that implied the increasing decentralisation of state maintenance for common spaces in residential buildings, prompting people to critically reflect upon how to maintain crumbling spaces. As such, prepayment boxes emerged as additions to Soviet elevators to ensure money collection. In the past ten years, they have thus become a vivid and ready marker of transition from socialism to the brave new world of market economics. To be sure, the transition from socialism to neoliberal market economics created the problem of managing, caring for, and navigating urban spaces, and offered woefully insufficient solutions, that reveal the serious challenges to the very notion of common good not only on the level of state policies, but much smaller communities, such as Samezoblo or neighbourhood. Prepayment elevators therefore came to constitute the material domain through which the notions of space, community and the state are being retooled and reimagined. As such, they are part of the global trend of privatization and marketization that reproduce states of failure and unsustainability, especially when applied to outdated infrastructures. Prepayment boxes are markers of such trend, as they constitute a new urban order alongside the old one.

How, then, can we understand this breakdown of urban order in Georgia? One way is to think through Brian Larkin's idea that infrastructure breakdown is not simply failure but becomes a condition of existence for emergence (2008). As he argues, breakdown generates fixes and necessity for repair (Larkin 2016). Certainly, this seems to tap into what Larkin is getting at when arguing that infrastructures generate politics and poetics

of space (2013). They thus create room to understand the role of breakdown and the forms of life to which breakdown gives rise. Indeed, broken Soviet elevators are objects that have created the conditions for the emergence of prepayment technologies to help repair and maintain outmoded elevators that had become increasingly dangerous. Yet, these new strategies of repair and maintenance have themselves become entrenched in free market logics and politics. Hence, while these technologies are essential for managing and caring for infrastructures, Soviet elevators nonetheless continue to break down. Small wonder, then, that prepayment boxes do not shape a new state of repair. Instead, they continue to reproduce states of failure. This shapes the part of urban order that I term *infrastructures of brokenness and repair*, creating both certainties and doubts about environments within which people move and experience space. This is to say that while I retain the idea that broken infrastructures have become grounds for certainty (Petersen and Carey 2017) to repair, I nonetheless stress the condition of their continuous breakdown to reproduce radical ambiguity.

Most prepayment elevators in Georgia are today operated by private companies rather than the centrally administered Soviet bureaucratic structures, which had previously provided elevator maintenance services. Despite their challenges, many choose prepayment machines over voluntary bill collections precisely because the latter are considered even more unreliable for providing elevator maintenance. Hence, the new urban order in Georgia is today predicated on the reciprocal exchange between humans and machines. Taking a ride on a paid elevator, with all the uncertainty about the availability of coins and regular breakdowns, has become a constant reminder to Georgians about their place in changing urban environments. Broken elevators in this way provide shifting experiential realities, often marked by affective relations (Brennan 2004) to space, state and community. Conceived of in this manner, what I refer to as infrastructures of brokenness and repair are also a series of techniques, strategies and skills by which people try to navigate uncertain urban environments. To be sure, residents, through their practices and strategies of cheating or bypassing, become infrastructures in their own right, as they continue to maintain uninterrupted mobility by using their bodily techniques and skills.

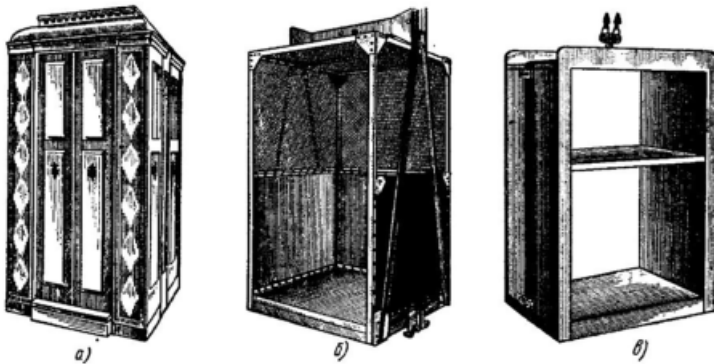
As Lauren Berlant in her study on infrastructure during transitional times argues, 'to attend to the terms of transition is to forge an imaginary for managing the meanwhile within damaged life's perdurance. . .' (2016: 394). Berlant provides a refreshing text for thinking about infrastructures as 'glitches', that involve local patching and mending, while not generating durable forms of repair. Drawing on Berlant, I argue that the terms of postsocialist transformation continue to be particularly troubled in Geor-

gia precisely because obsolete infrastructures continue to create states of breakdown and repair. As I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, revitalising the broken elevators does not produce a reliable and enduring apparatus of repair and collective action. Instead, they continue to generate breakdowns and temporary fixes while reproducing provisional states of upkeep. So, if the infrastructural ‘glitch’ (Berlant 2016) makes apparent the conditions of disrupted movement or circulation, it also makes evident that collectivity stays bound to the ordinary failures that make up their immediate life and space. The prepayment elevators thus offer us a way of understanding the meanwhile – modes of breakdown and management, which are no longer seen as transitory. Hence, I propose infrastructures of brokenness and repair as an alternative to the neoliberal reform narratives that have dominated the postsocialist transition. There have been attempts to establish transition as a temporary process, leading to ‘new states’ and citizens based on market economy. Yet ambiguities or breakdowns have become embedded in everyday sociality and urban order. They are not merely the temporary legacies of socialism but part of the ordinary in their own right (Frederiksen and Knudsen 2015). Infrastructures of brokenness and repair in this way are a form of communication, affect and meaning. It is thus far from being a condition that applies only to the post-Soviet context.

## Precarious Elevators

Anyone who has spent time in Georgian cities will have been struck by the disruptive presence of now derelict elevators in many Soviet building blocks. Using these elevators evokes associations with taking a ride on a rollercoaster, starting with the cracking noise of the rusting elevator chain and doors suddenly slammed shut. Most buildings have only one elevator, but some have two, one usually for freight and another for passengers. These elevators for carrying people and things up and down link Georgian cities to broader patterns of Soviet infrastructural modernity (Collier 2011). They also constantly resist the process of turning into the very scrap metal that they currently tend to produce.

Elevators were key architectural features of multistorey buildings as a result of vertical extension of building structures in Europe since the end of the nineteenth century. They have come to form the previously unknown semi-public material spaces within houses, making it possible to encounter strangers almost every day (Bernard 2014: 15). The progression of multistorey housing structures and elevators was therefore a crucial indicator of



Фиг. 15. Кабины лифтов:  
 а — пассажирского; б — грузового; в — грузового малого.

**Figure 4.1.** Soviet cabins for freight and passenger elevators, taken from *Elektricheskie Lifti: Ustroistvo i Montaj* [Electrical Elevators: Device and Instalment] published by the Soviet Scientific-Technical Press of Mechanical-Building Literature in 1952.

Soviet modernity, coinciding with other dimensions of a city's physical and social development.

Considered a key technical element in the Soviet city building, a book entitled *Electrical Elevators: Device and Instalment*, published by the Soviet Scientific-Technical Press of Mechanical-Building Literature in 1952, describes the significance of elevator machinery for the Soviet construction boom: 'Such grandiose construction requires the relevant extension of production and technical sophistication through installing in them passenger and freight hoists (elevators)' (Tushmalov 1952: 3).<sup>5</sup> In this way, the Soviet urban order depended on the improvement, operation and maintenance of electrical elevators.

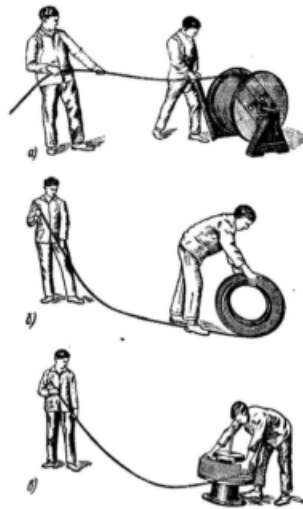
The very qualities of elevators that made them crucial for modernity also accorded them affective significance. This affective significance hinged upon the elevator's very technical characteristics, and on the vertical transportation that it enables. In his book, *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*, Andreas Bernard touches on this in an account about elevators:

That the staged prevention of a fall, the presentation of an automatic braking device, retrospectively became the primal scene of elevator history is inseparable from this deeply ingrained mistrust of the cable, reinforced by numerous mining accidents. The suspension of containers for vertical transport represented a latent danger, and for an invention such as the passenger elevator to become accepted above ground, it first had to explicitly guarantee the safety of the unstable principle of suspension. (Bernard 2014: 27)

Contingent on its fundamental technical traits, the elevator itself emerged as a precarious technical object. The possibility of an accident served recurrently as a catalyst for sophisticated technical guidelines on how to improve, install and maintain elevators. A glance at the numerous Soviet handbooks about vertical transport makes clear a notable focus on such technical details intended to avoid calamities and breakdowns. The Soviet architecture was articulated through the political use of infrastructure to promote a socialist order (Buchli 1999; Fehérváry 2013; Humphrey 2005) by making citizens subjects of state protection, rather than self-protection.

Elevators were centralised entities directly connected to the state-employed technicians or dispatchers through the elevator buttons in cases of emergency. Unlike the post-Soviet Georgian state that made citizens responsible for taking care of their own urban facilities and spaces, providing material structures was the perpetual preoccupation of the Soviet state. Any optimistic anticipation of an elevator's indestructibility by sophisticated technical guidelines, however, was frequently disappointed. Accidents in Soviet social life were in fact quite frequent and produced everyday fear, cynicism and feelings of uncertainty about the state. In other words, the fear of being stuck in the elevator was a source of politicisation. To be rescued from the elevator was not merely a technical operation but it mediated a specific relation with the state.

A memorable Soviet Georgian film, *Blue Mountains, or an Unbelievable Story* (1984), depicts this paradoxical working environment in a Tbilisi publishing house. An elevator is often out of order and employees often get trapped inside, forcing them to wait endlessly for the state elevator technician – both metaphorically and literally implicating the bureaucratic failures of the late Soviet state to maintain its infrastructural order. The



**Figure 4.2.** Soviet guidelines for elevator chains. Taken from *Elektricheskie Lifti: Ustroistvo i Montaj* [Electrical Elevators: Device and Instalment] published by the Soviet Scientific-Technical Press of Mechanical-Building Literature in 1952.



**Figure 4.3.** *Blue Mountain, or an Unbelievable Story*. Director Eldar Shengelaia, 1984. Screenshot taken by the author.

experience of being stuck in the elevator is thus presented as a normalised condition and omnipresent reality of that period.

When one employee gets trapped in the elevator, for instance, he continues editing his text with total indifference. As the man in charge of building maintenance informs him that the elevator technician is going to rescue him by the end of the day (hence, no reason to worry), the trapped passenger angrily replies, ‘I am not afraid of anything’. Then with a smirk, he adds, ‘whether you go up or down it does not really matter’, indirectly hinting at the overall experience of uncertainty and nihilism generated by the late Soviet state crisis and failure.

‘Disruptions and breakdowns’, as Stephen Graham reminds us, ‘allow us to excavate the usually hidden politics of flow and connection, of mobility and immobility’ (2010: 3). Indeed, broken elevators mediate a puzzlement about the political – that is, they are sites through which technical and political concerns converge and produce uneasy affects. The question, then, is how a film made in a different political and technical system, addressing specific issues, continues to work in post-Soviet times, when we are said to live in a totally different system. In fact, contemporary Georgia represents the afterlife of Soviet modernity. It is a different temporality in which the Soviet ruins endure and shape an uncertain urban order. What joins the Soviet past and the present rests on infrastructural debris. It is not debris that is memorialised, romanticised or revered, but rather what people are simply left with (Edensor 2005).



## Broken Infrastructures

'Before installing the [coin-operated] box, I was often stuck in the elevator because these elevators are so old and we did not manage to collect money to repair them', recalled Nino, the middle-aged woman living in the outskirts of Tbilisi, whom I introduced earlier. She was reflecting on the elevator's condition and its maintenance, which became a common issue in the early 1990s. 'If lucky, some buildings had an elevator technician as a fellow tenant who could rescue trapped people. But we did not. So, I had to wait until one of my neighbours would figure out how to rescue me.' What this experience left Nino feeling about her movement marks a remarkable segue, one that shows how broken elevators bridge uncertainty and technological predicament. She said, starting to laugh, 'When I entered these lifts, I started crossing myself, sometimes even praying'.

Nino was one of many residents in Tbilisi who had come to experience the constant breakdown of the Soviet-era elevators in the early 1990s. She recalled that during Soviet times, the maintenance of multifamily buildings, including cleaning and repairs for the common areas, was carried out by the state housing maintenance organisations. Residents paid for maintenance and utilities, but these costs were highly subsidised and fees were among the lowest in the world. Unlike the Soviet period, however, in the 1990s the state unplugged people from centralised systems of urban provisioning. The elevator breakdowns then became chronic in Georgia. As Nino pointed out, getting trapped in an elevator was not only due to the age of the elevators or lack of maintenance. Frequent power cuts and the theft of mechanical parts to sell on the scrap market, a ubiquitous practice in the early post-Soviet era, also contributed to the regular trapping of passengers.

The broken elevators emerged as objects of conflict, channelling political and material crisis and decay in early post-Soviet Georgia. Together with other infrastructures, elevators called into question established systems of state and space. This has been expressed in daily conversations as well as in media and literary works. One novel, *Hide*, by the Georgian writer Aleko Shugladze, ironically depicts this experience in 1990s Tbilisi:

The theme of being stuck in an elevator is a very complicated one and requires deep analysis. Trapped people can be divided into two groups: those who fall silent and those who start screaming. This does not at all mean that the silent ones are fearless, they just lose their voice due to fear. The screamers perhaps are trying to encourage themselves. . . . The silenced ones used the phrase: 'You'll rescue me, right?' while the screamers used the phrase, 'Rescue me, you mother-fuckers!' (Shugladze 2016: 16)

Being repeatedly trapped in an elevator is indexical of uncertainty in 1990s Georgia. This actually resonates with many transitioning states across the world (Greenhouse 2002). It provides an opportunity to probe radical ambiguities brought by postsocialist transformations that became manifested in urban space of Georgia. To be trapped in the elevator did not merely emerge as a source of uncertainty about the political, however, but also came to define a particular relationship between space and community. It mobilised a feeling of mistrust connected to the unpredictability of being rescued by ‘someone’ (previously a dispatcher) and a sense of danger charged with the moral language of responsibility. In other words, language of responsibility, hinging upon the availability of caring publics to rescue trapped passengers, mediated the frustrations about the state that withered from many spheres of life.<sup>4</sup>

The broken elevators are embedded within wider political transitions and shifts, producing their own infrastructures of brokenness and repair. Geographers Steve Graham and Simon Marvin have demonstrated how the modern infrastructural ideal is severely fragile. They label this condition ‘infrastructure crises’ (2001: 94), indicating the breakdowns reflected in, among other things, electricity cuts, water shortages and potholed roads in many parts of the postcolonial and postsocialist world. In their account, Graham and Marvin outline the broad set of forces (re)producing such ‘infrastructure crises’. In particular, they stress the role of liberalised models of infrastructural provision together with the obsolescent infrastructure networks that in the context of post-communist countries were incorporated unevenly into flows of privatisation, capital, information and technology.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the obsolescent legacies of Soviet elevators pose systematic challenges for the residents of Georgia. As old systems of maintenance disappear, new forms of urban provisioning do not provide equivalent services. Soviet infrastructures prove stubbornly ‘intransigent’, one reason being the lack of resources and institutional frameworks to upgrade crumbling infrastructures (Collier 2011). Infrastructural decay thus occupies multiple historical temporalities in Georgia. The broken elevators are the products of past defects that are permeated into the present. They are the ruins that serve as reminders of decay (Frederiksen 2016), as well as defiance against it (Manning 2008). Uncertainty and doubt in this way are also present in the invalidity of ruins (Pelkmans 2013), which are as much part of the former political system as they are the very manifestation of the current urban order. It is this uncertainty embedded in the urban environment that forces Georgians to develop practical techniques and solutions. These techniques, however, create their own states of brokenness and repair, and with them, affective worlds that are both distinct from and similar to those of the late Soviet state.

## Fragile Maintenance

Like many other broken things, the elevators became a battlefield and a space of creative solutions to enable mobility in early post-Soviet Georgia. A crucial question that arose in the 1990s and that continues to linger today is who is actually going to repair or take care of outdated elevators? As I myself grew up in an eight-storey Soviet building block in Tbilisi and later moved to a fourteen-storey one (in both cases living on the top floor), I came to understand how this was achieved. The most active advocates of elevator maintenance were those living on upper floors, including my mother, who was actively involved in finding a way to make these rides possible and safe for us. Horrified by her own memories of walking the eight floors while carrying heavy grocery bags, she told me that a life of broken elevators had resulted in constant back pain. Yet even when the elevator would occasionally work due to a temporary repair of its parts, she was constantly afraid that one of us would be trapped if we chose to ride on it.

For many residential blocks, hence, there emerged a money collector, a resident of the building, usually living in a unit on the upper floors, who started to serve voluntarily as a housekeeper to provide technical maintenance or elevator repair. If the residents had formerly relied on the state to secure the mobility of elevators, in early postsocialist Georgia the elevator movement and maintenance in this way started to hinge upon individual collectors. In fact, the city municipalities revoked most of the state funding for maintaining residential buildings in the 1990s. It was only in the late 2000s that the state started to provide finances for major infrastructural breakdowns, but not for permanent maintenance. The money collectors thus came to be responsible for reaching out to an elevator technician or a private company to provide regular maintenance services, and to visit the neighbours in order to secure monthly payments, usually from 5 to 8 lari a month. In a way, the exhortation to pay for elevator maintenance came to be managed by the money collector, who replaced the moral obligation of the state to take care of common areas. The money collectors are thus still key in many residential buildings in Georgia. As well as collecting money for elevators, they sometimes also reach out to gather funds for cleaning or renovation purposes. In most cases, such payments are made in person, as most of the Soviet building blocks do not have bank accounts.

While the purpose of the money collector is to secure funds for elevator maintenance, the main goal of elevator technicians is to look after the derelict technical parts of elevators that need constant care. As Kote Mchedlishvili, a doctor of technical sciences, explained on a radio show about elevators, the way in which Soviet elevators are constantly maintained in Georgia hinges upon the recycling of their technical parts. He

explained, 'When an old elevator is repaired, its extra elements are used for repairing other elevators', emphasising the expensive tariffs for installing new technical elements and the lack of funds to replace them.<sup>6</sup> The elevators thus depend on the existence of other broken elevators, whose technical parts are referred into circulation.

Let us return to the case of Nino, who in fact herself had served as a money collector since the 1990s, before installing the coin-operated pay-box in her dilapidated Soviet building in 2016. At the time I met Nino in 2015, prepayment boxes had already replaced most of the human collectors in Georgia. Yet Nino still continued to gather payments in person and resisted installing the coin-operated box. Of all the money collectors whom I met during my visits in 2015 and 2016, it was Nino who seemed the most persistent in collecting money for elevator maintenance. Although Nino found it difficult to make neighbours pay, she insisted that it was cheaper to run the elevator by direct payments than by prepayment boxes. Nino noted, however, that many neighbours were unable to make payments. Identifying the causes of nonpayment was not a very difficult task for her. Careful to adopt a tone of voice that was not too angry, she said:

This is one of the hardest and most stressful jobs I have ever done in my life. Most neighbours who live below the fifth floor often refuse to pay. Their explanation is that they are not using the elevator at all. But this is just an excuse. They are ashamed to say that they do not have the seven GEL a month to pay for elevator maintenance. Collecting money above the fifth floor is also problematic. But at least people on upper floors try to find a solution!

The nonpaying neighbours, as Nino continued, were not only the poor ones, however. There were also residents hiding behind those who could pay. 'In both cases, people were still using the elevator for free', added Nino, as she poured a cup of tea while slowly getting angry about her neighbours. Every effort made by her to urge neighbours from lower floors to help pay for the elevator failed. To avoid free rides, the technicians helped Nino fix the elevator so that it would not stop below the fifth floor. This was a common technique, especially in the 1990s. Another creative solution to limit unpaid rides reported to me across Georgian cities was to remove elevator buttons for the lower floors completely, as those living on lower floors were considered the most unreliable payers. These technical solutions to nonpayment, however, in turn birthed strategies of bypassing. The most common strategy, as Nino explained, was riding the elevator to one of the upper floors and then walking down – walking down being preferable to climbing. This left the elevator technicians the impossible task of controlling free transits.

When neighbours evaded payments, elevators lacked repairs and often broke down. This has evoked conflicts and unpleasant encounters between money collectors and neighbours. Elevator maintenance in this way generated a certain shift in the relations between neighbours, what in Georgian is called *mezobloba*, or the relations between neighbours based on solidarity and friendship.<sup>7</sup> While *mezobloba* is often revered and cherished in Georgia, the imperative to pay for elevators threatened to change its meaning with new moral economy, generating a sense of mistrust. Nino's husband for more than twenty years often liked to recount nostalgically, 'We had much more amicable *mezobloba* before elevators broke down. Now neighbours do not even trust each other anymore'. Nino and her husband felt that the money collection generated a sense of mistrust that had previously not been part of their relations with their neighbours. 'It's not only about the difficulty of collecting money or bypassing but also about the mistrust that the neighbours express about such payments. Many of our neighbours think that we charge them more money to use it for personal reasons', concluded Nino.<sup>8</sup>

Nino's story opens the way for an understanding of people's capacity to imagine new strategies to take care of common areas in contexts of escalating socioeconomic inequalities. Yet it calls into question the collective forms of action or coordination, and reveals skills in finding provisional solutions to failures. Perhaps nowhere else is this more visible than in the fragile maintenance of elevators by money collectors in Georgia. I suggest that to some extent this is (re)produced because of insufficient funds for decayed elevators, and to some extent because they are not perceived as common things, that people start to capitalise on radical urban uncertainties. While the broken elevators generate strategies of repair and maintenance, these strategies are more often than not fragile. In fact, the lifting of bodies and things continues to reproduce breakdowns and generate doubts both in relation to space and among people. Like many other money collectors, Nino thus suffered from this spatial uncertainty, prompting her to finally give way to a prepayment apparatus that occurred as a moral technique to replace her.

## Prepaid Spaces

Maintenance and repair entail moral relations to technologies (Jackson 2014), or, as pointed out by Bruno Latour, 'We have been able to delegate to nonhumans not only force as we have known it for centuries but also values, duties, and ethics' (1992: 232). In Georgia, to pay for the mainte-

nance of common things, such as elevators, is indeed delegated less and less to humans, and more to non-humans, such as coin boxes. In other words, payment technologies substitute for the unreliable payers. Just like electricity meters that emerged as 'tools of moral improvement' in South Africa's townships after apartheid (Von Schnitzler 2016: 123), so did the coin boxes become moral devices to secure payments in post-Soviet Georgia. The coin boxes make the elevator ride not just an occasion of transportation, but an ethical experience. They are ineluctably embedded in prepaid motion and emotion and persist as apparatuses for maintenance.

The steady colonisation of Soviet elevators by prepayment boxes since the 2000s exemplifies this contention. In fact, the first elevator paybox was invented precisely because of this failure to pay for elevator repair and maintenance. Bacho Sharashenidze, a money collector and a skilled electrician who lived on the sixteenth floor of a Soviet residential building in the 1990s, devised the coin-operated box to finally end the moral battle of collecting payments.<sup>9</sup> By the late 2000s, and in a context of large-scale nonpayment, prepayment payboxes therefore began to be commercially produced by Georgian companies.<sup>10</sup> The coin-operated boxes were hailed as a major technological innovation that it was hoped could end nonpayment problems. It introduced market mechanisms of operation and maintenance into common areas that charged the residents on the basis of use. These iron boxes created the technical possibility for a kind of provisional moral unity of neighbours to share maintenance and repair costs. A ride on the elevator started to rely on a certainty in a prepayment apparatus that recognised the unreliability of collective responsibility.

While the political underpinnings of this major infrastructural change were not directly admitted, it was clear that this was part of larger efforts to officially decentralise urban provisioning in Georgia since 2007. The Rose Revolution reformers, who came into power in 2003 with the ambition to end the postsocialist transition and modernise the country, included housing repairs in their own neoliberal critique of state regulation. The reform implied moving away from a system of heavily subsidised, government-financed utility services to one in which housing is maintained and managed by the occupants. One exemplary document entitled 'Homeowners Associations in the Former Soviet Union: Stalled on the Road to Reform', produced as part of the World Bank's Cities in Eurasia project and reprinted by the International Housing Coalition in 2012, described this reform and its obstacles in various post-Soviet countries.<sup>11</sup> The author of the paper, Barbara J. Lipman, a consultant to the World Bank, observed: 'the legacy of Soviet times has left a mix of occupants of different incomes and ability to pay living under the same roof'. The paper continued: 'nor is public or private financing available for badly needed capital repairs and energy

efficiency improvements. What can be done? Apartment owners should be given control of the common areas' (2012: 1).

A major purpose of that paper was to document the decrepit conditions of common areas in postsocialist residential building blocks and to underline the importance of the Home Owners Association (HOA) in their management and maintenance. The paper summarised the current state of thinking in Georgia among other countries in former Soviet Union: a turn from government intervention and regulation to its opposite, nonintervention, deregulation and privatisation of common areas. Despite adopting such views on urban provisioning, the market was still not seen as an absolute alternative mechanism for efficiently allocating infrastructures in Georgian cities. The local municipalities, hence, continued to provide some funds for major infrastructural renovations for common areas, precisely because of the lack of communal resource to repair and maintain the decayed residential buildings. Yet such state funds often proved insufficient. Broken roofs, cracked walls, shattered stairs and peeling hallways all mark the troubled afterlife of Soviet infrastructures in most residential buildings throughout Georgia.

The Georgian prepayment elevators emerged as a part of this much wider transformation of the postsocialist restructuring of the urban environment. They coincided with ambitious plans of the Rose Revolutionary government to form new urbanism by pursuing marketisation and privatization policies (Manning 2009; Rekhviashvili 2015). Common areas in residential buildings emerged as those few spaces that were subjected to the principles of common property by HOA, dubbed as Amkhanagoba in Georgian. Yet most of the common areas continue to be outside of any specific management structures or property law, which generates conditions of disrupted property regimes, responsibilities, recourses, moralities and circulation. The majority of residential buildings do not even have properly functioning HOAs. Instead, in many buildings, money collectors continue to play a crucial role in making things work.

Elevator stories hence powerfully transmit the common space tension and ambiguity. When I told him I was writing about elevators, Levan, an erudite former money collector and a doctor of technical sciences, plunged into a story about recycled elevator parts. Levan's friend, who had a spare elevator part, did not waste it, but gave it to Levan. Levan kept the gift in the shared attic to use in case of elevator breakdown. One day, the elevator part disappeared. It turned out that the new money collector, who was later elected as an HOA chief, had secretly sold the recycled part. This story helps us see that common spaces or things are not always used or seen as common. It is this ambiguous management of common areas and the social uncertainty about a ride on the elevator that plagued the rise of

the prepayment boxes. In the constellation of elevator stories, the prepaid technologies are thus constantly evoked for resurrection and maintenance of common areas. Alexander, a retired biologist, told me how, despite the efforts of several neighbours to collect funds without machines, they were constantly lacking enough capital. Where the money collectors failed, the coin-operated boxes grew.

## Shortchanged Lives

Technologies are unstable objects not only due to their malfunction but also in how people use them (Larkin 2008). While 'technical devices can define actors, the space in which they move, and the ways in which they interact' (Akrich 1992: 216), these devices can at the same time reiterate already existing social or cultural repertoires. For Hanna Knox (2017), although objects might have the capacity to affect and reframe actors as the grounds for new sociality, they may still reproduce conventionally framed forms of practices. Coin-operated elevators indeed illustrate such contentions as they both reframe and at the same time reproduce actions.

As a replacement for money collectors, the elevator coin boxes were cast to control the movement and to punish those who transgress them by denying them a ride. A great number of people living in urban Georgia thus came to be short of change, meaning that they do not have the loose change they need to pay for elevator transactions. While residents are shortchanged by life, as they lack the money they need, they shortchange coin boxes by using various strategies. These strategies are fostering the practices and ideas of thrift that are widespread in many postsocialist countries and beyond (Schlecker 2005). To be sure, thrift and cheating presume that a stream of wealth is limited. People in Georgian elevators thus use different bodily techniques and skills of bypassing, even though the intention of the coin-operated mechanisms is to control free rides. In this way, prepayment technologies continue to have tricky social lives in Georgia.

How the coin boxes are shortchanged and how apartments are reached by prepayment elevators diverges in each building. The practices of bypassing have a myriad of shapes and forms. The most common trick is the use of coins with a hole drilled through, which serves as a hanger for a thread. The user slides the coin into the box, which registers its disposal, and then through the help of the thread slides it back. The thread method does not fully deliver the change to the coin box. In this way, residents are always sure to have the necessary coin for the ride.

After installing the coin-operated boxes, Nino explained that she could not resist getting a drilled coin for herself. She made sure that her ride





**Figure 4.4.** A drilled 10 tetri coin for coin-operated elevator boxes. Creative Commons.

would be uninterrupted, even when she was out of coins. Using the coins every time someone had no change for the elevator ride, as many of her neighbours did, Nino said, was now a problem best avoided. Although Nino's neighbour, Eka, had a small family, consisting of a husband and her daughter, each of them had their own drilled coins at hand. One of them even used a Danish drilled Kroner to save drilling a Georgian lari. 'Danish money is just what we need here in Georgia', Nino said.

Other physically more flexible residents produced even more complicated ways of bypassing the boxes. Because elevators without any weight in them can make unlimited rides, residents started to deploy this trick. In this strategy, it is crucial that a person holds their whole body up in the air by swinging on the ceiling or hanging on a rack of the elevator, until one gets to the designated floor. While this awkward form of movement resembles training in acrobatics, it is also about training in visceral and bodily adjustment to the elevators. If one suddenly falls down, the elevator gets stuck, hence this trick is mainly used by younger people who have more energy for such effects. The entrance of coin-operated boxes into



**Figure 4.5.** A hole in the elevator, marking the stolen coin-operated box. Photograph by Tamta Khalvashi.

the Soviet building blocks in this way makes residents dependent on how they can accommodate their bodies, skills and fantasies to the elevator and to new restrictions on elevator transportation. It should be clear by now why residents, through their practices and strategies of cheating, become infrastructures in their own right, as they continue to maintain incessant mobility by using their bodies.

While payment elevators were designed to produce funding for elevator maintenance and repair, such finances have often been difficult to achieve due to this myriad of bodily and social tricks. The payment boxes in this way did not produce morally charged publics; rather, they reproduced reluctance to pay. The iron boxes filled with thousands of 10 tetri coins, moreover, attracted thieves to the buildings. The breaking and stealing of these boxes became frequent. This form of payment thus came to hinge on a shift in embodied practices, not least of which is the transformation of bodily techniques and their insertion into technology.

Usually, it is the chief of the HOA or the money collector who is responsible for collecting the coins from the elevator boxes and exchanging



**Figures 4.6 and 4.7.** Coin-operated boxes with lockers and iron structures to avoid sliding drilled coins. Photographs by Tamta Khalvashi.

them in local shops to pay private companies for the service fees. Sometimes, this procedure is carried out by the elevator companies themselves. In any case, installation of payment boxes created new routines and rules of money collection in Soviet building blocks. Previously hazardous daily actions of payment collection now became an explicit object of securitisation and protection. In many instances, thus, the coin-operated boxes became shielded with extra technical elements to prevent the bypassing or stealing of coins. Lockers or convoluted sliding iron structures were among the numerous innovations that today try to secure elevator payments. With properly locked payment boxes, as one collector suggested, ‘it becomes more difficult to break and steal these boxes’.

Coin-operated boxes are affective grounds (Thrift 2004) for learning new bodily techniques and tricks in order to manage constraints imposed by the technology. But there are also less visible bodily strategies that are brought about. For instance, because coins often get stuck, the elevators continue to be temporarily out of order. Indeed, coin traffic is one of the most ubiquitous complaints. Residents often use their own keys or sharp

objects to make trapped coins flow through the slot and enable the sensory mechanism to work. If this technique fails, they call the chief of the HOA or a money collector who owns the key to the box to periodically liberate the coins. Given the height of Soviet building blocks, normally ranging from seven to fifteen floors, this means that people choose to wait until they make the box work. Thus, new technology is sometimes also sensed as time consuming. It is intimately linked to a 'political economy of waiting', not least because waiting is sensed as a waste of time and money (Hage 2009: 3). Hence, waiting time in these contexts is also seen as a measurement of the lack of efficiency of coin boxes. Elevator tricks and techniques therefore become a form of affective labour to make mobility possible.

## Conclusion: Infrastructures of Brokenness and Repair

Breakdown is indicative of the state of ambiguity and a condition for constant certainty and repair. As many infrastructures in Georgia – water pipes, roofs, streets, sidewalks, squares and roads – are decayed or at the edge of breakdown, a sense of omnipresent traffic and immobility is taking hold around the urban environment. Yet people are reclaiming space to mend, fix and maintain at least bits of infrastructures through various strategies and techniques to enable flow and movement. However, these strategies and techniques are themselves entrenched in the logic of market economy rather than in alternative methods of organizing communities. In fact, private elevator companies compete to innovate in producing more sophisticated technologies of money collection. Hence, some buildings have introduced electronic payment cards that are intended to eliminate the problems of cost recovery. Yet, such practices of care cannot amend the systemic infrastructural problem. Instead, prepayment elevators continue to act as sites of ambiguity.

Throughout this chapter, I thus termed the urban environments and practices around them *infrastructures of brokenness and repair*, a placeholder for forms of endurance in times of crisis that have become constant. Hoping to contribute to the anthropology of infrastructure, the ethnographic case study of payment elevators provided a way to suggest that infrastructures may be conceived of as forming temporary practices of upkeep. They create techniques for taming the uncertain urban spaces in their immediacy. What I have dubbed infrastructures of brokenness and repair, thus, is not only governing logic of the state and strategies of navigating urban spaces, but also unsustainable states of repair and maintenance. The reason it is germane to speak about infrastructures of brokenness and repair then is that while neoliberal narratives promise sustainable states and permanent

order, in reality they only endure the systemic crisis. This forms part of a 'loose convergence', making 'a collectivity stay bound to the ordinary even as some of its forms of life are fraying, wasting, and developing offshoots' (Berlant 2016: 394).

Forming temporary convergences through infrastructures in times of permanent crises resonates with many parts of the world today. In a documentary film, *Africa Shafted: Under One Roof*, for instance, an elevator in Africa's tallest apartment building in Johannesburg forces a unique interaction and conversation to take place between migrants from different countries.<sup>12</sup> The space of this communal vehicle triggers a series of interconnections that create temporary alignments and dialogues in the context of prevalent xenophobia. Similarly, a ride on the elevator in Georgia brings into being temporary states of repair in the context of a prevalent infrastructure crisis. Yet, while these machines register the ongoing techniques and strategies of mobility and transportation, they continue to create states of brokenness and repair around them.

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## Notes

1. Georgian currency, the lari, consists of 100 tetri.
2. There is a non-functioning coin-operated elevator in La Spenzia, Italy installed in the lift produced by Fiam (Fabbrica Italiana Ascensori Montacharichi) in 1950s.
3. All translations are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.
4. In Russia, for instance, where the government decided to take part of the state-owned Moscow Elevator Company, Moslift, and create a joint company with the American firm Otis, specially trained elevator mechanics rescue citizens trapped in elevators.
5. A famous documentary film, *Power Trip*, by director Paul Delvin, depicts how the American AES Corporation assumes control of the newly privatised electric company Telasi in Georgia but finds it difficult to renovate broken infrastructures and make the Georgian people pay for their electricity.
6. A radio programme on 'Elevators and Elevator Technicians', Radio Imedi, March 2015.
7. *Mezobloba* is a special form of social organisation, made up of neighbours who live in one building or in close vicinity to each other, who have known one another for many years, and rely on each other's help and solidarity. Foundational works that analyse the phenomenon of *mezobloba* with different spatial and temporal scales focusing mainly on rural environments in Georgia include those by Giorgi Chitaia and Tedo Sakhokia.

8. The collection of money became even more challenging when intense urbanisation created the grounds for housing mobility from the 1990s onwards. While the money collection requires a level of familiarity with the neighbours, creating a shared sense of responsibility and reciprocity, with the flow of new people it became more rigid.
9. An article published in the Georgian online journal *AT*, entitled *Liptis kutebis tsar-moshoba da evolutsia* [The Emergence and Evolution of Elevator Boxes], discusses how the prepayment boxes emerged in Georgia. Retrieved (2 September 2018) from: <https://at.ge/2018/01/08/%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%A4%E1%83%A2%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A7%E1%83%A3%E1%83%97%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%AC%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9B%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A8%E1%83%9D%E1%83%91%E1%83%90/>
10. One of the biggest producers of the coin-operated boxes in Georgia is Computer Land.
11. The project was carried out under the portion of that project directed by Christine F. Kessides of the World Bank, formerly in the bank's Europe and Central Asia office (ECSSD).
12. Information about this film, by Ingrid Martens (2016), can be found at <https://www.imoriginal.co/africashafted>.

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