

## The bus shelters of Azerbaijan

Decorated, reinforced concrete bus shelters are a distinctive and ubiquitous feature of roadsides throughout the countries of the former USSR. For anyone unfamiliar with the region, the photographs of Christopher Herwig (2006) provide a good impression of the time, effort and imagination that went into the construction of these roadside bus shelters, each one apparently individually designed. He gives examples of bus shelters shaped like 'blocks, domes, columns, towers, A-frames and archways, even ones shaped like birds, yurts and hats.' The seeming flippancy of many of these structures stands in marked contrast to much of the legacy of soviet era building, with its monumentally grandiose showpiece public buildings and the starkly functional apartment and workplace blocks. As lowly buildings, they seem to have escaped the strictures of architectural orthodoxy and allowed a creative expression that would not have been considered appropriate in more formal settings.

In Azerbaijan, the range of designs of the basic concrete structure is more limited, though the canted slab roof held up by triangular sides, used along the main east-to-west road, in Mukhtariyah, Yeni Ganja (Plate 1) and elsewhere, is distinctive and striking.

Otherwise, the variety comes more from the mosaic decorations. The more functional designs incorporate the name of the town or village, including a notable pair on opposite sides of the road in Shamkir, with the Russian form of the name worked into purely geometric designs, in Roman script on the north side of the road and Cyrillic on the south side.

Unsurprisingly, soviet-era symbolism looms large, especially in the more urban areas. The mix of disembodied hammers and sickles, clenched fists, flags and stars on the southern end of the Yeni Ganja shelter (Plate 2) is very typical, as is the more aesthetically satisfying happy peasant girl on the northern end.

Scenes celebrating local industry and agriculture belong to a similar tradition. In the Kura valley, in the centre of the country, cotton is an important crop, and cotton bolls feature prominently (Plates 3 and 4). Further west, the fertile alluvial and loess soils, irrigated by the meltwaters of the Caucasus and Karabakh mountains, have produced a rich wheat-growing area, similarly celebrated (Plate 5)

Local folkloric themes are also popular. In the western part of the country, the legend of Koruglu, a heroic outlaw from the Karabakh mountains whose feats in avenging the blinding of his father are often compared to the stories of Robin Hood, is regularly depicted (Plate 6).

Although clearly having no pretence of artistic merit the designs are nevertheless aesthetically distinctive, with the bold constructivist style (Plate 4) overlaid and softened by a naive sentimentality. It would be curmudgeonly not to be charmed by the curving inner and outer panels of a particularly striking example from Shamkir (Plate 7 and 9).

To visitors, the structures exemplify the character of the country: they are part of what makes the country the way it is. To the Azerbaijani population, of course, these bus shelters carry very different cultural associations and they are largely unregarded and unloved; the thought that they could have any interest to archaeologists is a matter of some amusement. They are, after all only street furniture. Any cultural associations that they may have would be with a recent past from which the Azerbaijani people, largely Russian-speaking but proudly independent, would rather move on. The country, though still bedevilled by the practices of a heavily centralised administration, is increasingly looking westward. The urban population of Baku in particular, regard themselves as firmly European, and there is a strong thrust towards the modern and the technologically advanced. In the rural areas, the efflorescence of galvanised metal roofs, decorated with minarets and crescent moons, perhaps speaks of a desire to recapture an older culture, with echoes of central Asia. Either way, the artefacts of the Russian colonial era are bound to suffer.

So far, this account has described the bus shelters in the present tense, but this is misleading. The photographs illustrating this article were mostly taken in late 2005 and almost all of these bus shelters have since been lost (Plate 8). Improvements in the road system have been a high priority for Azerbaijan, which occupies a pivotal position between the largest economic powers of the region: Russia to the north, Iran to the south and Turkey to the west. Trade between these countries is a very significant element of the economy. Within the country, the availability of transport to the markets of Baku, the centre of the oil-producing Caspian region as well as the capital city, is an important constraint on the development of the rural areas. The bus shelters shown here have been the victims as the legacy of poorly surfaced and deeply potholed roads has been vigorously tackled. The replacement bus shelters are by mass-produced tubular steel and glass. Even in rural areas, where road improvement has not yet reached, the bus shelters are reaching the end of their design lives, with the reinforced concrete showing signs of water seepage, causing deterioration and flaking of the mosaic designs.

Possibly at a local, village level there are those who regret the passing of their old, familiar bus shelters and feel a sense of loss, but there is little sign of the kinds of interest groups and enthusiasts that would undoubtedly be campaigning for their preservation if they were, for instance, in England. In theory, a programme of basic recording and documenting would be relatively easy to implement if there was sufficient enthusiasm from the local population. Modern technology, in the form of mobile phones, digital photography and internet cafes, has penetrated even into the relatively undeveloped rural areas of the country, and compiling an annotated photographic archive uploaded to a website could be achieved with very few extra resources. But, although there may be a sense in which these bus shelters are part of a wider, international cultural heritage, without the impetus from within Azerbaijan, those that still survive are probably destined to disappear from memory, as well as from the roadsides throughout the country.

Reference: Herwig, C. 2006 Soviet bus stops, [www.herwigphoto.com](http://www.herwigphoto.com), available in print from [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com).



Plate 1: A distinctive bus shelter, on the outskirts of Ganja, the second city of Azerbaijan



Plate 2: Soviet-era symbolism is very evident on many of the bus shelters



Plate 3: Local crops, such as cotton, feature prominently in many of the designs

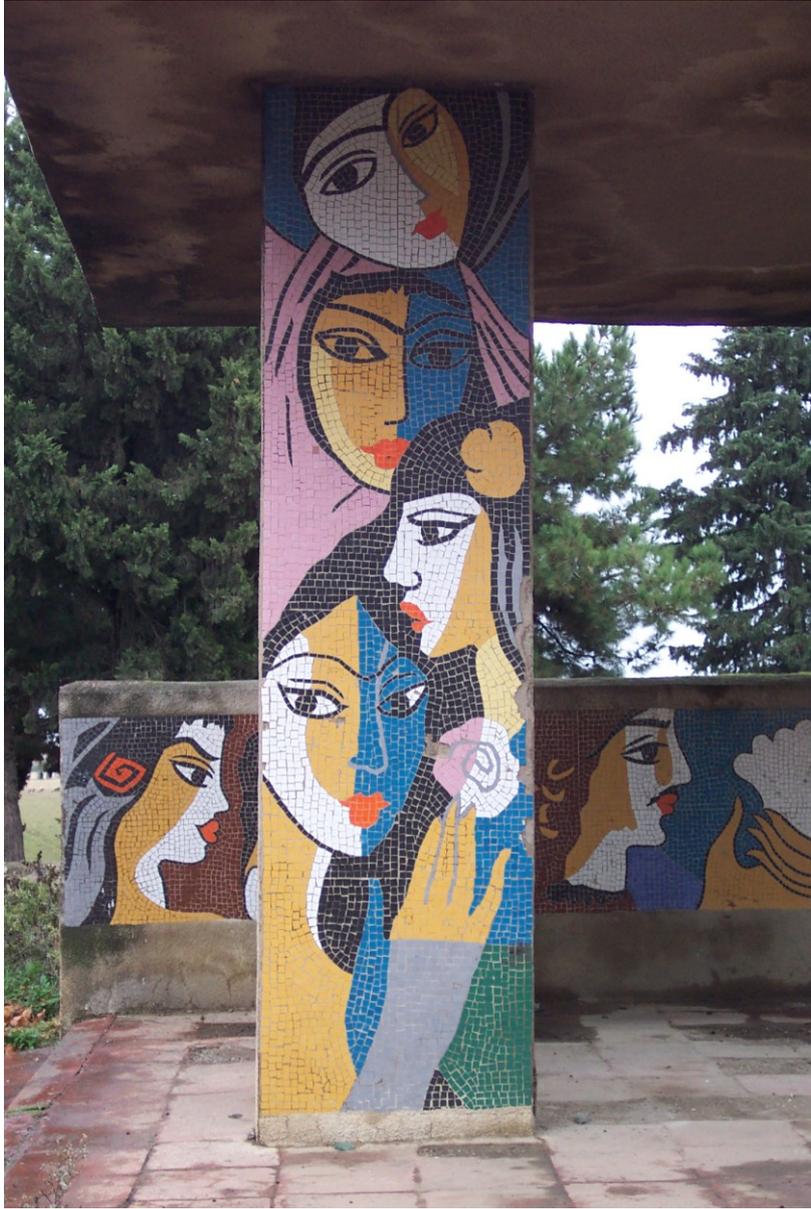


Plate 4: A striking example of the very distinctive style used in many of the mosaic panels

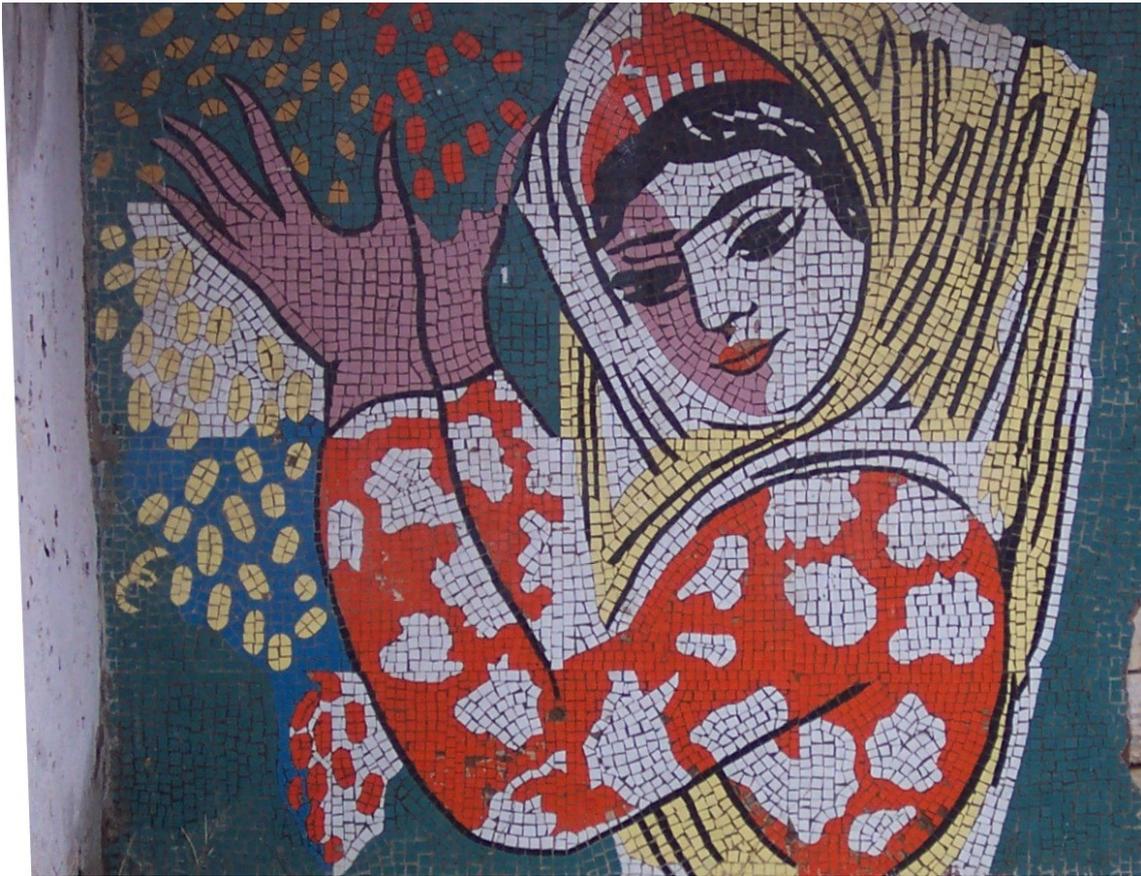


Plate 5: An example from the wheat-belt to the west of Ganja



Plate 6: The folk-hero Koruglu, in this design near Tovuz, in the west of the country



Plate 7: A delightfully sentimental design, from Shamkir



Plate 8: The sorry state of many of the bus shelters is exemplified by this example, photographed shortly before its demolition



Plate 9: Another example of the stylised naïve designs of many of the mosaic panels