

Kond: the Elements of Memory

audio-narrative
i n s t a l l a t i o n

project curation
CSN Lab

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GOETHE-ZENTRUM
KOOPERATIONSPARTNER



the geography of memory

Kond is located in the very heart of Yerevan, and memories of Kond occupy one of the central parts of the city's collective memory. Remembering the past, the dwellers sometimes joke: "Kond has always been the capital city of Yerevan." When recalling the past of their family, home, street, and district, the people of Kond, or the Kondetsis, always stress that their daily life, their routine, their memories are inextricably intertwined with the life of the city center. Although Kond is situated in the epicenter of the hustle and bustle of urban reconstruction typical to downtown, it has managed to keep the vernacular architecture of the past century, the social life peculiarities which emerged decades ago. It seems like the rhythm of the life of Kond engulfs the entire city.

At the same time, the memory of Kond is essentially the memory of a compact, often closed community with clear-cut mental and physical boundaries distinguishing it from other districts. The Kondetsis constantly mention how the district has shrunk in the last decades. And this physical shrinkage has also resulted in the reduction of the space of the locals' private and collective memory. When listening to stories of this or that daily practice or a past memorable event, it may often appear like the storyteller wandering in the memory mazes is also walking along the streets of Kond; then all of a sudden the story will abruptly stop, followed by a pause, because the events continued at a point from which the district has already shrunk, at a place which is already cut off from Kond and no longer constitutes Kond. This district is apparently one of the city's rare districts where the influence of both the district position and the border changes on the local memory is so tangible. "What has actually remained? They've left only a shadow of Kond. It used to be much larger, and now only this small part remains from the real Kond."

Thus, the obliteration of architectural and urbanistic memory triggers the personal and social memory. The opposite process takes place: the Kondetsis who can no longer be found in their homes are recalled figuratively by their neighbors, whose stories trace them back to their homes, roofs and yards. The space of the memory of Kond is characterized by this kind of eternal motion and reparations: one is substituted by the other, oblivion evokes memories, and vice versa. And despite all the wounds the district has sustained in the last decades, it continues to live, preserving its unique memory, hence, its identity. And Kond's identity is uphill, in the center of our city, always over our heads.

the architectonics of memory Therefore, the memory of Kond is subjected to the relief of the place. Kond is not only a center, but also a highland, a mountain. That is why the local memory is also built upon this relief correlation of ups and downs, highs and lows. As regards the Kondetsis' unique rhythm of remembering and forgetting, stories about the past always go down the mosque and the church – to Rustaveli Street or towards the gorge. It shapes a certain urbanistic density: the higher you go, the denser the buildings, the family stories, the collective past.

At the same time, it is the relief of Kond that determines the disposition of the houses. Stories about the past of a house can often transform into stories about the yard, and since the yard of one house is hanging on the roof of the neighboring house just one level below, we can subtly slide from the memory of one house to another. In addition, the oral stories we have collected show how the density of the space of the memory of the district is diffused in the dwellers' memory. One of them, for instance, says: "Our part is the European section of Kond," and thus focuses on its proximity to the other part of the city. The Kondetsis' memories get closer and intersect, ascending from the bottom to the top, and in that ascent, family stories stand as tight together as the coalesced walls of the neighboring houses.

the elements of memory There is hardly any family story where the Kondetsis do not transition from the story of their own family to the past of their neighbors. In this respect, the memory of Kond is open in much the same way as the doors of Kondetsis' houses used to be; they would not be locked even at night. It is noteworthy that one of the daily practices mentioned in almost all the stories is the Kondetsis' habit to sleep out during the hot summer nights: "It was not only us who slept in the yard, the neighbors' children would come to sleep in our yard at night." The elements of the memory of Kond stem from this kind of common-to-all practices, which are preserved in the family story.

The Kondetsis recall the so-called "Kond Cinema" launched during the years when TV-sets were not widespread yet. It was a 'film-screening wall' next to the 'electrohome'¹ by which everybody gathered every evening to watch movies. As it often happens, oral history shows that local memories are brooks of narratives about childhood. Kond's childhood was, first and foremost, the games all the children of the district knew.

¹ 'Electrohome' is the name used by the locals to refer to the electric enclosure.

The common place of childhood for all the Kondetis is the spring Jangyulum¹, football, hockey and skiing, stories about which show how the place shaped the daily life and how the memory was 'tied from the ski and went down the slopes.'

The church and the mosque have become one of the most vital elements of the memory concentration. The mosque is a unique part of the narrative of the local memory: there is hardly anybody among the current dwellers who was present at the time when the mosque was functioning, but everybody attaches quiet a great significance to it in their recollections. Yet, the church suddenly evokes a different kind of memories, the kind where you can spot an idealization of the district's past: "In the past, there were only weddings, there was happiness here, while now funerals take place." The transformation of the significance of Kond's church is evident in the memories of both the middle-aged and senior generations.

The elements of the memory of Kond line up in the walls of the houses and stretch along the narrow streets of the district. They have a vibrant architectural manifestation, an utmost physical expression. And that architecture is popular, hand-carved by the locals the way they envisioned it; it belongs to the local dwellers in much the same way as their local memory belongs to that architecture.

¹ Jangyulum is the Feast of the Ascension and a lottery game forms part of the celebration.

KOND'S MOVIE

- Did you ever climb up the roofs?
- Yes, we still do.
- No. My leg hurt.
- Did it always hurt?
- Why would I climb up a roof? The kids would climb up the roofs. We were watching a movie on the roof – Kond's movie.
- What's Kond's movie?
- Look, it's over there.
- The movie yard.
- There used to be an open-air movie. It's over there, two hundred meters to that side. They were screening an Indian movie at the beginning of the year, and at the end of the year, again an Indian movie. We would come home in tears.
- They were screening it there and you were going up?
- Yes, there, the roof of the electrohome [electric enclosure]. Look, it can be seen. If you look this way, the roof of the electrohome is at that edge, there, at the very end of the school. We would climb up there. We were just kids then; we had no money. Who would give us 30 kopecks to watch a movie every day? So instead, we would just climb up, lie accurately and watch [a movie] at a low cost and with a high quality.
- Turns out his leg didn't quite hurt...

HOCKEY

- And what were you playing?
- Hockey.
- Where were you playing hockey?
- Over there, in the school yard... A tree has grown here now. Back then it was a normal school yard. There was everything there... Eh, look, now trees have grown. These trees didn't exist...
- And when did the school close down?
- It's the fourth year.
- That school yard was not closed, it was open... There were backboards, basketball stuff, there was everything there.
We would attach the tin of preserved food to the logs to make a... um, a hockey stick... And we would play.
- I see, so it turns out that ice isn't a must.
- In those times there wasn't such a ball or a hockey stick. We made them ourselves. And then, do you know how we were ice-skating? Those sledges. We would remove the outsole of shoes, fasten [it] to the bottom of the logs, and descend from the steep slopes.
- Dude, in those years, people even skied on asphalt.
- Yes, if you descended from the slope, you couldn't walk down there in winter. It was snowing so hard. Children would sledge and ski so much... that they turned snow to ice.

THE WHOLE WORLD CAN BE SEEN

– Don't sit there; it'll be uncomfortable. Sit on that stump.

When my grandpa was born, this house already existed, and we haven't changed anything here. We only dyed the walls and that's it, pal. These walls and whatever you can see here are the same. My dad has just lacquered them to make it look nice. Let's say, if tourists come, and all of a sudden, they see a cockroach crawl out of the wall, won't they be disgusted? They will. And they won't come again, will they? [Dad] has lacquered ... All of this is the same now...

Turks used to live here. This was part of the mosque. The mosque has three parts – one of them is this, there's another one there – in the schoolyard you mentioned, and another one, do you know Chkalov? Chkalov 53, part of the mosque is there. When they split the mosque, Indians were already living here... then we started living here...

– Since when?

– My grandpa is seventy-two years old... um... they came when he was twenty-six. This is that old. Then, when already... this wasn't ours, pal. Only the house on that side was ours, we had [a house] there. This wasn't ours, but later my grandma and grandpa saved money, then bought this.

Would you like me to take you upstairs?

– What's upstairs?

– The place where we sleep is upstairs, but there's a balcony there [from where] you can see the whole world. Would you like to go up? Careful, come, come, pal... This is it, look, pal... all of it... come this way. Come from this side to see well... come, pal, look straight... come here and look straight... Look, Ararat can also be seen...

GUARDS-GUARDS

– They were making fights, among different districts...

– You moved here after marrying your husband, but you know it best.

– There was "guards-guards." They were fighting with each other. How are Armenia and Azerbaijan fighting? They combated in much the same way. With armour, pieces of wood, clubs...

– The children of the district of Kayaran?

– Children would wrangle with the Kondetsis, the Kondetsis – with other districts – with the Tram Park... So... they would crush each other with armour, with tire iron. There was one such guy, a hooligan, here he is, my son sitting here.

– And where did you typically have those wrangles?

– Wherever.

– They would go down the gorge. Haven't you seen that movie? Eh, which one was it?... 'Our Yard,' where [the actor] says, "Let's go down the gorge and wrangle." They were wrangling just like that. They still do... They keep on swearing hard, the same way. The generation of Kond is growing up in much the same way.

- The Kondetsis weren't swearing.
- Oh, really? You were just passing by.
- It may have happened in Kayaran, but not in Kond...
- They were doing it here as well. Expletives covering cutlets in the mother's mouth, holed tooth and this is not the exhaustive list.
- People are civilized here...
- Oh, really? What a cradle of civilization!
- You came here and advanced from the level of Kayaran.
- It only seems to you.

IN THE SHIRAZ' YARD

- What kind of fate awaits this people remains unclear.
- What happened [to the people living] near the church? They are still tramping the streets. It's already 20 years.
- Of course, people died since the year eighty-eight, and their papers got lost.
- There's the elite building under construction. I shall also have the same fate...
- The elite building near the church, people like us used to live there. They destroyed it, [promised] to give them an apartment from there. They gave money for one year's rent. They went and lived on rent for that one year, and after that, no money at all. That building isn't built till now.
- These people are in the streets.
- Most of them have died.
- Half of them died, the other half are renting, paying the rent from their own pocket, living on rent for already twenty years.
- And they still don't know when they'll receive a flat.
- And they still don't know whether or not they will receive a flat from there as several construction entities changed.
- When was it?
- It was destroyed twenty years ago, in the 2000s.
- During... um... during the time when the Northern Avenue [was built], was it at that time?
- Yes, after that, they made destructions here as well.
- It changed, several organizations changed, one of them was declared bankrupt. The other one took over, but it was also declared bankrupt. And now another one has replaced it.
- Four persons bought the same apartment; they sold the same apartment to four persons.
- Now we may find ourselves in the same situation...

QUEUE FOR WATER

I remember we would gather in the evenings. You know how fun it was? We would gather and sit with all the neighbourhood – all of them. Everybody would bring something from their home. We would sit, eat, drink, and enjoy ourselves. There was no lavishness, but it was a happy life, and people backed up each other. If somebody had a shortage of something, if somebody were ill, immediately...

We have never closed the door before sleep. We would all sleep in the common yards. A while ago they were saying that they put stuff on the door to look through, see who was there and then only open the door. I said we don't do such things; we even sleep out and the neighbour walks over us to go to the toilet. Everybody's doors were open, everybody was, um... And now, they say that people close [the door] even when they have nothing; they are afraid.

...

We made food preserves. We helped each other. One would say, "I'm canning caviar," the other one would say, "We're grilling and canning aubergines and tomatoes." We helped each other, cleaned, made the fire; back then there was no gas.

For instance, we, this many neighbours, have always used her yard. She was a very kind woman. They were spouses, they had nothing. It was called "A Big Hearth." A hearth was built there. They would put the cauldrons, one would make caviar, someone else would pickle beans. We were helping each other this way, of course.

...

There was a tap at the site where we're sitting now. This house didn't exist; I built it later. The neighbours living downstairs had no water. Water supply started at six in the morning. Everybody would come with buckets and sit here, forming a queue, "Olya, brew some coffee, we're coming to queue." I'd say, "No. You bring the coffee, and I'll give the cups." We were waiting for the water to start running so that everybody could [fill the buckets] one by one... You filled two buckets, next is Olya's turn, then Ano's. First, everybody [could fill] two buckets. Then the queue was over, and they repeated it again. That's how we lived, and we were very happy.

...

It was sort of fun. Everything was hard, but it was a happy life; we were happy. And as regards Kond, I repeat, we were fond of it. And initially when they were giving accommodation in other places, my husband, my children said: "No, we want [a house] in this location. We don't want to leave this environment, that friendship, that neighbourhood and receive a home in another place."

KOND'S CENTER

The centre of Kond used to be here. Wait, number two, um, two hundred forty. When you go this way for a little while, there's a tap and this kind of chair is placed there. [That place] was called "Kond's Centre." When I had to mention it, I said 240, because they were gathering next to that very house. That venue was right in front of that house. It was called 240. "We'll gather in 240." The guys would come by that house number and would gather in the evenings.

...

Then they [played] the egg [game] on the Easter days, um, putting them in their hats like this. All the youth would gather in that centre, playing the egg [game], and what not... Stuff like that. They still gather and sit occasionally, but it used to be more, um... happier. They were playing card games, chess, backgammon.

And now they have built so many houses that they have crossed the street. The largeness is lost, that venue doesn't exist. Then a ropewalker used to come here. The children used to install that thing, take the chairs, go, sit and watch. That day everybody in Kond (it seems small, but do you know how many households there are), the whole Kond, everybody, would go. People would say to each other, "Did you know a ropewalker has come? Come on, let's go." Then the ropewalker was often welcome in the Children's Park. Again, everybody from Kond was there, the whole Kond.

...

We always took [children] to the gorge, to the park down the gorge. We weren't afraid, we felt free to do it. The neighbour would 'fill' the car with children, ride them to the park and leave them there. They used to play there. In the evening he would go to bring back [the children].

JANGYULUM [FEAST OF THE ASCENSION]

– I have played whirligig, chlik dasta, lakhti, I've played asshole cop, I've played hide-and-seek, I've played gortsagorts, I've played rope, I've played seven stones.

...

My brother, oh, Manuk, I remember, I remember, he would dye himself, put on black clothing and rush from house to house. We were driving mad the neighbours, scaring them. Manuk would dress in black clothing, and we would go from house to house, to everybody's houses; we were scaring them. I played Jangyulum, yes Jangyulum. Do you know what it is? Um... I guess it's in May. I have just forgotten, can't even remember. That Jangyulum happened by the end of May. So, during that Jangyulum, they would take a nice child like me, and turn her into a bride. She had to dance. Early in the morning, at six, we would go. To cut it short, we would knock on the neighbours' doors. They would wake up. So, we were knocking on the door; [we were singing] "I will say Jangyulum and form a string, Jangyulum, jan, jan." If they came to your home, you had to give money for instance. They would give money, as well

as eggs, candies, bread, this and that, and they would gather things that way. Kond is entirely an Armenian territory, right? They would go down, the kids would go down, to the cars, they would hold it and they would give money.

– Where was it?

– Prospekt, they went to Prospekt. This way we would collect the money and go to... um... Then the adults would go, buy food, bring it to somebody's house, come together. We would sit, eat, drink, celebrate and party a lot... tashi-tushi¹.

–Then we would do, um... we would play a lottery. There was a book, and you had to throw a button into that book...

– Hello!

– Hello, sweetie. The other person would throw something, I don't know what. Everybody had to throw something inside, and seven days later we would steal some water, we had to steal water silently from seven drinking water fountains. We had to [put up with] staying silent for a while. If others came and fell down, tried to make you speak, beat you, you had to keep silent. We left it that way for one week, and those, um, those buttons remained inside. There was a jug, we threw it into that jug. That's how you start, you would turn it, take out the button from it. They would read what was awaiting that person. I wish these days of Yerevan were back.

SHOGHIK'S TOILET

– He's asking, "What was the centre?" I say, "Shoghik's toilet."

– Lenin Square.

– It seemed like she was Lenin's statue.

– Do you remember your grandma used to say to all the taxi drivers, "And this is our Lenin Square." That toilet is Lenin's statue. There was this kind of a toilet in the centre. Her name was Satik, she's already left, she went away from here. She would enter the toilet and sing, um: "Where are you going, my angel, gracefully, gracefully." She'd sit on the toilet [and] sing.

CAMP

– There were camps here, they were organizing a camp.

– Really, they treated the camp very seriously. Serious concerts were taking place, they were competing with the adjacent yard to see which group sang well, recited well.

– Roze, no, I say Roze, I mean Varduhi...

– They call me pretty lady [sings],

– Kharabakh's pretty girl [sings],

– She is a lady,

– She is a lady, she is a girl...

– They tell me, "Stand up and dance, with all your grace, stand up and dance' [sings].

¹ Interjection used during dances to express joy and encourage other dancers.

– We would install this kind of wood, like this. There are papers, colour papers, and, um, how to say it, we'd make it look like a flag, we would go ahead and tie five-six [papers] to that wood, and it already looked like a camp, it was an outdoor camp. Let's say, now we... if our outdoor camp existed now, we would [start] at these hours, right at these hours in the evening. You know, we rehearsed before that. For example, I was so responsible, I swear. Now me, you, three-four of us should recite something, the other group has to say a poem byheart, the next group, for instance, shall dance. There are adults, there are games, they would organize games and our days would pass this way. Around two-three hours, can you imagine? From that end to here, there would be lots of people as spectators. They would come with their own chairs, small stools. So, they would come and sit like this and watch.

THE CHICKEN

– Oh, it entered...
– Stand there, stand there...
– Don't come forward...
– Yeah, right there, stay there.
– Sweeties, and you come to this side. That's how it is, you see, we work as part-time traffic cops.
– Hi.
– Hi, Ano jan, hi.
– My and Shusho's work starts after six o'clock, from half past five, we only don't have the batons of the police.
– My daddy was born a hundred years ago here in Kond, right here. My grandpa came from Turkey, he fled during the massacre, he fled, came and resided here. My dad was born here. When they started building Dvin, my dad worked there; he even had a work there – a very nice sculpture which he made himself.

...

We were the first [family in Kond] to have a TV-set, "Garizont." It was a big box of this size. It was this big. We placed it outside. We were putting it outside. My daddy Ash would take it out, place it in the Boulevard; we had Old Men's Boulevard. They were watching football. The entire neighbourhood would gather and watch football. It was called Old Men's Boulevard, that's how we called it. It was just such an area, open like this, but it was neither very big, nor very small. Old men would sit there. They were senior people, who would gather there, sit, play "Dama," play "Backgammon," play "Rod," that's how it was called. Then the younger generation would sit there after them.

...

– We had a chicken, we kept a chicken. A chicken was paying us a guest visit every New Year. I mean it. You know, it was coming, it was like that, for several years the chicken would all of a sudden visit us, and period, that was it. Before the New Year, a few days ahead, the chickens would come, and we would slaughter and eat them.
– But whose chicken was it?
– I don't know whose chicken it was. How would I know?
– Didn't the owner come?
– No, why would they? They didn't know themselves that it was in our place.

- Oh, folks, there used to be no such things here. Everybody was immersed in each other's homes.
- We would slaughter them and eat and then have fun, in a word, party with tashi-tushi.
- In our Kond, even entering neighbours' houses is not forbidden; we can go, open the door, enter, and if I get sleepy, we can sleep there.
- For instance, Galust, wasn't he going to the house of... ummm... of Astghik, and sleeping there?

LAKHTI (BELT)

- Red button, broken telephone.
- The gardener collected from all the fruits except Armanush.
- I fell in love.
- With whom?
- But I don't know that one.
- Really?
- You didn't have a good childhood, madame.
- No way. Have you played "Asshole Cop"?
- I have played "Asshole Cop."
- Have you played "Halamula"?
- Yeees, of course.
- Have you played "Billiards"?
- Yes, aunty, the billiard table was in our yard, everybody in Kond played billiards in our yard.
- Have you played "Lakhti"?
- What?
- Lakhti. Look, you draw a large circle like this, and you place belts side by side in those circles, and you stand on it, like this, with your legs open, you stand on it.
- Outside, that opponent, you should act so as not to allow them to take the belt. When they get the belt out, they take it, snatch it and start beating you with it. Then when you jump out, you start beating them.
- And the winters, you know what interesting winters we had.
- We played Bingo, lottery.
- Everybody would come here, we would pour... from the roofs... There's a hatch in the part where there is a green ball in the middle, we were making a trampoline on it...
- It was our trampoline.
- So that they could come and sledge on it.

BAREFOOT

- On August 12 we would go [to the church] with the entire neighbourhood.
- The night of the eleventh, when it's about to turn twelfth, we would go [to the church].
- When we were already passing and gathering [to leave]. But we used to leave at three, Shush.
- At three o'clock in the night we walk to Nork from here. And age doesn't matter, folks.
- The old and the young, children, the youth and the seniors, all of us would go.
- We were going by foot till Nork-Marash, to the Church of Saint Mary, yes, Saint Mary, Holy Godmother, to there.
- And people make a wish and go barefoot.
- I used to go there but I haven't gone in the last two years; I'm no longer able to. My mother went for seven years, seven years, and each year - barefoot. She would even come back barefoot.

We took my brother's baby with us. He was very young; he hadn't even turned one. She did the following, she said, she told me, "Hurry up, take a taxi," - she said, "take the baby and go home. We'll come later." We got in that taxi, quite a lot of us. We left the baby and got in the taxi ourselves. Oh, girl, she was screaming, "Where is the baby? Where is the baby?" The baby had been left there. Oh, girl, we should be glad that she didn't kill us.