With the support of the Harriman Institute’s new Civil Society Graduate Fellowship, I spent the summer as an intern with Transparency International and the Council of Europe. Taking my background in heritage management and urban planning into account, Transparency International Georgia (the national chapter of an international anti-corruption NGO) assigned me to a new joint EU-Council of Europe program, “Community-led Urban Strategies in Historic Towns” (COMUS), intended to support reinvestment in low-income historic towns of the EU Eastern Partnership: Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

As the first heritage-based sustainable development policy in Georgia, COMUS stands to provide a framework for future urban rehabilitation policies, building democracy and supporting human rights by ensuring that all people (not just those living near major UNESCO tourist destinations) have access to their cultural heritage and the tools to make incorporate it into their livelihoods. Ten small- to medium-sized towns with populations ranging from 4,500 to 15,000 were selected based on the presence of historic resources but lack of investment in both tourism and traditional local industries. In most countries, architectural heritage preservation began with the most elite structures—in the US, the first major historic preservation case was George Washington’s plantation estate, Mount Vernon. This established a trend leading up to the present in which preservation efforts tend to gravitate towards famous and/or monumental structures, as opposed to “the everyday.” Perhaps the most interesting opportunity presented by preservation in Georgia is that (churches aside), the most famous cases have centered around more vernacular structures or spaces used by the general public.
My job was to facilitate and monitor relationships between national ministries, local authorities, community stakeholders, and the supporting international agencies as the initial phases of the project were implemented. The goal of the summer’s project was to promote civil society by making long-ignored problems public, by creating a platform to engage the public with local governing bodies, and by redefining the role of politicians as public servants rather than public executives.

My first two weeks were occupied with research and strategic planning meetings at the Council of Europe office in order to assemble social, economic, political, and cultural profiles of each town. Beginning in mid-June, I traveled to eight of the ten selected towns (Abastumani, Akhaltsikhe, Borjomi, Chiatura, Dusheti, Gori, Mestia, and Poti) in order to meet with local political and community leaders, assess local historical sites in need of investment, and determine potential conflicts between stakeholders and/or authorities.

I found that the interdisciplinary nature of COMUS created the opportunity for representatives from the Ministries of Culture to propose more innovative partnerships with local authorities - drawing on my previous experiences in the Georgian planning sector, many heritage-related projects are implemented on either a national scale with no consultation of local authorities, or are implemented on an entirely local level without the Ministries’ knowledge. By early August I was back in (sweltering) Tbilisi, creating dossiers and contact lists for each town to inform project implementation in 2015. The resulting preliminary report will help ensure that as many stakeholders identified over the course of the summer are included in the decisionmaking process as possible.

My colleagues in Georgia continue to keep me updated about progress with COMUS, which has already contributed to increased inter-ministerial cooperation in the planning and heritage sectors (how this cooperation with weather the recent political leadership crisis remains to be seen). After project implementation over the course of 2015, results in the pilot towns will serve as examples to stimulate discussion regarding Georgia’s other historic towns facing similar development challenges. Ideally, the lessons learned from the COMUS project will provide a basis for identifying and suggesting legal and institutional reform.

Ultimately, I intend to carry my experiences with Transparency International and the Council of Europe into the heritage sector, which faces a critical lack of social justice-oriented professionals with practical advocacy experience. In order to rectify ongoing systems of cultural oppression (colonialism, appropriation, invisibility) and reexamine negative histories, a heritage advocate must be prepared to address unresponsive local governments with the appropriate methods. As a student of urban planning with experience and interest in the Caucasus, I am very grateful for the opportunity to critically examine both political planning and community responses in Georgia’s shifting civic climate.