Introduction: A hub for the future society?

The emerging new cityscape of Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana is astounding. A ‘city of the future’ is growing upon a Soviet town amid the steppes. This futuristic project corresponds to the ‘radiant future’ discourse of the Kazakhstani state. By raising its utopian capital the regime aims to create a beachhead of future society under its rule. However, it is the hundreds of thousands of Astana’s old and new inhabitants who truly imbue this milieu with life and determine its dynamics. Living in such a ‘Disneyesque’ city must be a peculiar experience. Hence, my research project explores a nexus of politics, pragmatics and aesthetics of the future, embodied in a living city.

Politics / Pragmatics / Aesthetics

By ‘politics of the future’, I refer to the ways ‘the future’ is used to maintain, legitimize and indeed exercise power. Those strategies, however, can be challenged by individuals who exercise their agency by relating to what they are presented with and by crafting futures for themselves. This does not necessarily imply resistance, for one’s agency can also be exercised by succumbing to enchantment or simply taking the advantages of accommodation. With my emphasis on the ‘city-users’ end1, the politics blends into the ‘pragmatics of the future’.

Walking dogs is strictly forbidden: regulations for using the city to make it look right

A third key-term must be aesthetics, for it is by making powerful aesthetic impressions that Astana’s architecture acts politically. I take ‘aesthetics’ as referring to sensual experience of the world which guides human action and judgment2. The anxiety over the cityscape’s work of legitimating the political order is epitomized in a preoccupation with aesthetic impressions: ‘Does it look right?’ 3.

References


Theorizing the future

Anthropologists have long struggled to prevent the future from slipping out of their focus4. But the future seems especially relevant for research in the former Soviet area, for the nostalgia for ‘things Soviet’ so often described, is largely a longing for the promises of a ‘radiant future’. Moreover, while the bulk of ‘transition studies’ emphasizes the legacy of the past, anthropology has known since Van Gennep that ‘transition’ is a ‘future-oriented’ process.

An ethnographic endeavour

A practice-based approach5 requires that the future should be thought of as embedded in the agencies of multiple actors, rather than solely in abstract representations.

During fieldwork I will investigate political and architectural intentions driving Astana by:

- interviewing architects and city planners;
- analyzing media accounts and political discourses;
- analyzing ‘philosophy’ statements by key architects.

Against this background, I will explore the ‘social life of the future’ by:

- interviewing Astanaians, including recent migrants, about the city and about their dreams, hopes, expectations and fears of the future;
- participant observation;
- focus-site surveys.

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