

'City of the Future'

- the politics, pragmatics and aesthetics of the future in Astana, Kazakhstan

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Introduction: A hub for the future society?



'Kazakhstan in the new World': 'tradition' and 'hypermodernity' in Astana's street

The emerging new cityscape of Kazakhstan's capital, Astana is astounding. A 'city of the future' is growing upon a Soviet town amid the steppe.

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

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- 3 Buchli, V., 2007, 'Astana: Materiality and the city', in: C. Alexander et al. (eds.), *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia*, London: University College Press, pp. 40-69.
- 4 Wallman, S., 1992, 'Introduction: Contemporary Futures', in: S. Wallman (ed.), *Contemporary Futures: Perspectives from Social Anthropology*, London: Routledge, pp. 1-20.
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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.



A young couple watching the future city grow. These are bronze statues, but what kind of place will the new capital become when populated with a million of real people? This number is a target for 2030, but it is very likely to be reached much sooner. – Astana, 'Lovers' Park'

The need for a complete anthropological reflection on temporality, is particularly clear with regard to studies of the temporal aspects of lived environments. While anthropologists working on these matters have generally tended to privilege the past, modern(ist) cityscapes have been shaped by 'dehistoricized' visions of the future⁵. Hence in my project, as I consider temporality as materialized in the built environment, I acknowledge the tensions between the past and the future, both of which interact and constitute the texture of the present. Astana – a 'beachhead' of the future – is a particularly compelling setting for pursuing such research interests.

An ethnographic endeavour

A practice-based approach⁶ 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 intentionalities 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 Astanians, 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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