

**POST-SOCIALIST DREAMWORLDS: HOUSING BOOM AND URBAN
DEVELOPMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN**

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This dissertation is based on 26 months, between 2007 and 2010, of official non-continuous ethnographic fieldwork in real estate development in Kazakhstan. During this time, I investigated the institutionalization of new housing “dreamworlds” and new modes of being urban in relation to the practices of government bureaucracy, the practices of the construction industry, and the housing strategies of residents. Even before the commencement of my fieldwork, I had personally socialized with people who moved into and made their homes in the newly built housing complexes of Astana. Drawing on my participant observations, research, and personal engagements with policy-makers, businessmen, and residents, I have written what can be called an anthropology of the boom (an exploration into the socio-economic conditions and forces behind the recent housing boom in Kazakhstan) an anthropology of the emergence of a new material environment, as well as an anthropology of the new social configurations and normative framework arising from the new material conditions. I have also followed some of the institutional developments that took place during the period of my fieldwork and earlier – during the “boom” period of the first decade of the 21st century. These developments chiefly include the planning and building of the new capital, Astana, the housing boom and post-crisis management of the construction, the rise and fall of construction companies, and the trajectories of state housing policies of that period. After the financial crisis of 2008, much like the United States and countries in Europe, the state in Kazakhstan also had to deal with the excesses of the boom period having to play a particular role in mitigating the financial crisis – bailing out banks, companies, and individual home owners threatened by bankruptcy and foreclosure. The necessity to design effective yet socially acceptable anti-crisis policies opened up the political space in unexpected ways: during the recent crisis, questions of “moral economy,” moral legitimation of wealth, social value and social needs have been creeping back into the public discourse. Put bluntly, in a time of crisis, somebody has to lose, and often it is up to politics to assign moral blame and decide who should lose.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alima Bissenova was born in Astana (former Tselinograd) in 1974. She received her Bachelor's degree in Kazakh Language and Literature from the Karaganda State University in 1995 and her Master's degree in Middle East Studies from the American University in Cairo in 2005 where she wrote a thesis entitled "Islam and Nationalism in Kazakhstan." In her PhD dissertation and current research, she investigates the social implications of economic development fueled by foreign and internal investment through the prism of the changing environment of Kazakhstan's major cities and people's housing situations and attitudes.

To My Father Jumabay Muhamedjanuly Bissenov

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INTRODUCTION

In today's discourse of the construction of the new capital of Kazakhstan, Tselinograd, the regional center where I was born in 1974, is usually referred to as an ignoble background, a "dusty provincial town", out of which a much more beautiful and glamorous new capital, Astana, (Astana literally means "the capital city" in Kazakh) is emerging. The phrase "dusty provincial township" (*pyl'nyi provincial'nyi gorodok*) is almost an idiom in Russian and refers to the state of backward oblivion in which many Russian and Soviet provincial cities are perceived to be. As it happens, Tselinograd has always been and continues to remain dusty even as it is being meticulously crafted into Astana: the steppe zones of Kazakhstan are naturally dusty, with the thin fertile level of the ground vulnerable to wind erosion; and construction of any kind, of course, only exacerbates the problem of erosion and dust. To settle the dust in the summer, the municipality of Astana employs water sprinkling trucks for use on the roads and boulevards giving the city a feeling of freshness.

In the 1970s, my father and mother both came to Tselinograd *po raspredeleniiu* which translates from Russian as the "re-direction/re-distribution or transferal of specialists" (in the former Soviet Union specialists after graduation would be sent to fill existing jobs). My father, an ethnic Kazakh, was born and raised in the countryside of the Cheliabinsk region of the Russian Federation which is adjacent to the Kostanai region of Kazakhstan. Having completed his post-graduate studies in the Moscow Engineering Construction Institute (MISI), he came to Tselinograd as a first *kandidat nauk* (nowadays considered to be an equivalent to PhD) and a chair of the department to the newly opened engineering institute. My mother, who is half-Russian half-Kazakh, was born and raised in the southern region of Kazakhstan near the city of

Shimkent. She came to Tselinograd after graduating from the Kazakhstan National University (KazGU) in Almaty, the then capital of the republic of Kazakhstan, to work at the newly opened Tselinograd Medical Institute. My father worked as a professor at the Engineering Institute till his death in 1997 and my mother, having worked for more than a quarter of a century at the Medical Institute, accepted a new position as head of the microbiological lab in the newly opened National Clinical Research Center in 2001. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, all of my father's siblings and most of their children eventually settled in Tselinograd, moving from Russia proper to Kazakhstan partly following their relations and partly having some vague idea of re-settling in their ethnic homeland. Today, all of my father's generation –the generation which was born in the 1930s (my father was the youngest of his siblings and was born in 1937; my mother was born in 1949) –have passed away –the last of the four siblings to pass being my aunt who died in June of 2011. They are all buried in close proximity in the large Muslim-Christian cemetery along the *Kustanaiskaia trassa* – the North-Western highway which curiously leads to their birthplace in the Cheliabinsk region (opposite to the direction in which the new administration center is developing) and which 10 years ago used to be located on the outskirts of the city opening up to the steppe but which is now becoming enclosed by new housing developments. One of the extended family rituals nowadays is to go for a walk in this cemetery – which, like a park, has alleys and trees¹ --to sit and pray together at the “graves of our ancestors” (*mogily nashih predkov*). Their memory (especially of my father, uncle, and aunt²) is very important to me and this dissertation project. In some very intimate and emotional ways, it has a bearing on the theme of modernization –its promises and disappointments.

¹ Allotments of land for graves in Kazakhstan both for Christian and Muslim burials are usually much bigger than in the US and in Europe.

² I talk about my aunt in the third chapter.

Although the project of modernization has a well-documented linear history and a beginning, it sometimes seems that each generation has its own modernization project where it starts from scratch and develops only to fall into oblivion in the new wave of modernization³.

My father's generation – the children of the 1930s – were born in utter, abject poverty. To escape death from starvation after collectivization and the ensuing famine in 1932, my father's parents and his elder siblings had to leave their village in the Kostanai region to look for work on the railroad –really the road of life because the only food that could be delivered to the starving region would come by the railroad. In the life spans of my father and his brother and sisters, their material situation progressed from one of near starvation to the comparatively comfortable, though not luxurious, lifestyle that I remember in Tselinograd with all the basic needs and even beyond being addressed. The example of my father is particularly stunning. A boy who was born in a hut with a single window (my aunt used to tell me how my father would always occupy the place near the window to do his homework), he studied well in the school, went to work as a miner⁴, after which he studied at the country's flagship engineering institute in Moscow. When he married my mother and they were expecting the birth of their first child (myself), he was given a three-room apartment in the city center in the city's only 9-story apartment building (the most modern by the standards of the time), across from the *ObKom* –the regional communist party center. Eventually, his relatives came to live in Tselinograd as well but, unlike my father who was a more “valuable cadre” (*tsennyj kadr*) and was given priority in housing distribution, they had to wait several years to get their own apartments. My father helped

³ I am referring here to an ironic and almost historical parallel between my father coming from Moscow as a new cadre to the newly opened engineering institute and myself some 40 years later also getting ready for the newly opened Nazarbayev University to work as a new cadre.

⁴ In the Soviet division of labor, miners were the aristocracy of the proletariat. They had the highest salaries on par with university professors.

them with temporary housing arrangements in whatever way he could. In 1975 when I was a year old, for instance, my father exchanged our three-room apartment in the center of the city for a one-roomed and an additional two-roomed apartment giving the two-roomed residence to my uncle, who had a larger family, while we temporarily moved into the one-roomed apartment. Then in 1978, when my uncle got his own apartment from the ceramic factory where he had worked for three years, we again exchanged the two-roomed and one-roomed apartments for another three-roomed apartment also not far from the city center.

Today, in Astana, I have not just my immediate family (my mother and my sister) but also several cousins, their children and other relations, all of them from my father's side (my mother is an only child in her family).

Throughout the decade of the 1990s, study, work, and marriage took me to the two other largest cities in Kazakhstan – Almaty and Karaganda. I received my first degree at the university in Karaganda⁵, 200 kilometers or a 4 hour-drive from Astana, and worked for some time in Almaty. But Tselinograd has always remained the home base for me. After it became known (the rumors started circulating as early as 1993) that there would be a transfer of the capital to Tselinograd (then already renamed into its original name Akmola), I hoped there would always be a niche for me in the new capital if I returned.

The Problematic of “Anthropology at Home”

Since anthropological description is always mediated, I have provided this account of my relation to Astana and my roots there in order to help the reader better understand and to

⁵ During Soviet times, Kazakhstan had two well-established universities – one in Almaty (KazGU) and another in Karaganda (KarGU).

judge my own position in the socio-cultural phenomenon that I embark on documenting and analyzing in this dissertation.⁶

In the introduction to *Locating the Field: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology*, Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (2006) rightly note that the term “anthropology at home”—referring to anthropologists conducting fieldwork in their own language in their own culture—can mislead and obfuscate the cultural differences between anthropologists and their respective “host” society. For instance, anthropologists based in the West are not very much “at home” when they work on inner-city diasporas or working-class neighborhoods rather than middle-class suburbs—even though, to paraphrase the title of one of Joanne Passaro’s (1997) well-known works, such anthropologists “can take a subway to their fieldwork,” their fieldwork is still a cultural if not so much a spatial displacement (Coleman and Collins 2006:9). Similarly, the term “native anthropologist” can be misleading when used in opposition and as an antidote to a proverbial white male anthropologist who treks off to study distant non-European cultures. The fact that anthropologists are native might unfairly overshadow the fact that they are Western-educated and, in many instances, higher up in class and position than the “natives” being studied (as when well-educated and affluent urbanites conduct on-site research in village communities or among the urban poor). Thus, in certain ways, such “native” anthropology ends up reproducing the same colonial/ imperial power/ knowledge relations in which previous white male anthropologists were implicated.

Having said this, I still think that my position and experience in the field is best described as “anthropology at home.” This position of being “at home in the field” comes from my own subjective state of never feeling displaced, separated or “out of place” as well as from an

⁶ While I do have some informants who are based in Almaty whose housing strategies I am describing in the chapters 3 and 4, most of my informants are based in Astana.

understanding that, as Simon Coleman and Peter Collins stated, “Fields cannot be seen as disconnected—spatially, temporally or ethically—from the academy” (2006:11). The fieldwork I had to conduct for my dissertation including my work for the municipal planning office of AstanaGenPlan⁷ was not much different from the life and work I was previously living, and the life and work I am looking forward to being involved in after completing my dissertation and joining the university in Kazakhstan. In many ways, the fieldwork that I conducted for this dissertation was a continuation of my usual life: I remained in familiar places. In the field, I would often enter into the same kinds of discussions with my colleagues and friends as we would have at the academy.

Of course, because I was on a mission to collect information during my fieldwork, sometimes I had to pursue people and information that I would not have pursued otherwise. However, my engagement with the issues of economic development, social welfare, and nation-building in Kazakhstan goes far beyond the fieldwork for this dissertation. That is why, in this dissertation, I have often described observations and other events that took place not only during but also before and sometimes after the official fieldwork.

Because of my intimate connection to the structure and developments I am writing about, there is sometimes a slippage between the positions of actor and analyst or perhaps a merger of the two positions. This kind of slippage occurs in the first chapter where in several places I am speaking from the analytic point of view of “The 2008 Correction of the Master Plan,” a document that I co-authored with other employees at AstanaGenPlan. Slippage also

⁷ AstanaGenPlan is a governmental research institute (a branch of the municipal government) charged with developing and implementing urban-planning policies, regulations and norms in Astana. It has a high standing in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Several leading architects and urban planners from this office are members of the Architectural Council under the President. AstanaGenPlan has received several visits from the President (though not during my time there) and has also been a seat of the City Urban Planning Council, headed by the mayor. The council meets every month and makes decisions about land allocation for development projects, zoning, and the like.

occurs in the second chapter, where I discuss buying an apartment and undertaking a *remont* project (a remodeling project) for the newly purchased property. All of these events and activities, though not planned in advance, turned out to be extremely relevant to the thematic of this dissertation. It seems only fair that I myself as a native should also be an object of this study especially when my life-activity is so interpolated by the “native” structure and point of view and generally fits into the “boom” culture that I am describing. The collapse of the subject-object categories in this dissertation has many advantages such as flashing out the phenomenological aspect of anthropology as well as adding additional dynamics to it. If, metaphorically speaking, the object of my inquiry is the river, I, as a writer and an analyst, am not merely watching the river from the shore, I am swimming in it and I am swimming with the stream, not against it. The river here is the social structure to which I am thrown into and to which I belong by an accident of birth and upbringing.

One of the practical advantages of being already “in the river” or “within the structure” when starting the fieldwork is that I didn’t spend much time contemplating and planning how to access information.⁸ Usually, I just did my job, lived my life, interacted with my immediate and extended family, maintained my place in a circle of friends and colleagues, and kept my eyes, ears, and heart open to issues that were and are of importance to all of us. However, my “in the field” consciousness definitely pushed me to think more deeply about ordinary things such as my own “swimming with the stream,” like striving to improve my housing conditions.

I arrived at the site of my official fieldwork at the end of 2007 and started working at AstanaGenPlan at the beginning of 2008—amidst the financial meltdown, which some

⁸ I still had to negotiate my access to offices at AstanaGenPlan to obtain clearance for conducting research there, and to request permission to use dissertation-pertinent information that I came across when doing my job. Permission was kindly granted except in circumstances involving state and commercial “secrets.”

Kazakhstani analysts had predicted early on (see chapter 4).⁹ In many places in Astana and Almaty, private-sector construction either slowed down or ground to a halt. The crisis made its presence felt both at home and at work. With a 30-day notice, my sister learned that she was being laid off from her promising position with the international accounting company KPMG. My cousin's previously successful middle-size construction company was in shambles, his 200-unit housing project in Astana had frozen, and another project was being completed under extraordinary financial strains; to finance construction and to pay investors who wanted out of the frozen project, he not only drastically cut administrative expenditures but also sold his office building and his cottage, the house-warming party of which we had celebrated just three years earlier. At work, a colleague in my research department was trying to recover her family's 100,000 USD investment in a housing project that never took off. Another colleague, a lawyer, helped her initiate legal action—a complaint of criminal offense (fraud) through the district attorney's office—to scare the project managers into returning the investment to her. Several weeks after she submitted the complaint, the project managers returned her money in exchange for an affidavit stating that she would pursue no further grievances against them and that she would withdraw her complaint. Notably, they also required her not to inform other investors that she had recovered her money. With many troubled construction projects in Astana that came to a halt in 2008, there was often a possibility of eventually resuming and completing construction either independently or with help from the government, but this would only happen if a critical number of investors remained committed to the project, retaining their investment.¹⁰

⁹ Discussions about the “bubble” surfaced in Internet forums as early as 2005.

¹⁰ This resembles the situation with so-called “bank runs.” If everybody withdraws his/her deposit from the bank simultaneously the bank would collapse.

At AstanaGenPlan, my research department, where I worked alongside two lawyers, three translators, and an urban-planning specialist, was charged with drawing on urban-planning and urban-regulation expertise from several North American cities located in comparable climatic conditions: Toronto, Ottawa, Minneapolis, and Saskatoon. We were looking specifically for development plans and relevant building and municipal codes. In the fall of 2008, my superiors asked that I contribute to the development and writing of “The 2008 Correction to the Master Plan,” a short-term city-development plan for the three-year period from 2009 through 2011. The burst of the housing bubble and the flight of private investment from the construction sector necessitated a large-scale state intervention to prop up the construction market. The government could not afford to stay away from the unfinished construction projects for several reasons. First of all, the unfinished construction sites would be a powerful visual reminder of the failure of the state to deliver on its promise of modernization, secondly it would prompt a large number of the middle class and aspiring middle class who invested in these housing projects with the purpose of improving their housing conditions to mobilize against the state (see chapters three and four), and thirdly, it would leave thousands of migrants (rural-urban migrants but also migrants from other Central Asian countries) unemployed and potentially “harmful” to the social order. So, the government were obliged to intervene and such intervention required a new urban development plan that would emphasize a wide range of infrastructural projects (e.g., road–drainage, schools, daycare centers, hospitals) to compensate for the loss of pace in housing construction.

In *Locating the Field* (2006), Ulf Hannerz’ chapter entitled “Through, Backward, Forward, Early or Later, Away and at Home” encourages anthropologists to cultivate “an understanding of the connections between the kinds of relationships we study and the

relationships we ourselves have in the field” (35). Thinking of the relationships between centers of global expertise and national/local bureaucracies that I explore in the first chapter, I also reflect on my own position as a representative of a certain kind of “global” expertise the value of which is high and transferable at different “local” levels. My position as a middle class professional in the field was undoubtedly enhanced by the institutional cultural capital of a well-established American university. In some ways, I was perceived as a carrier of the kind of “legitimate” cultural capital that the state bureaucracy was actively seeking to possess and to accumulate. One should bear in mind my place and value as a “cultural broker” while considering my discussion of the problematic of the accumulation of cultural capital and the global hierarchy of expertise in chapter one. My subjective positionality as a middle class professional of recognizable intelligentsia background should also be considered in the second chapter when I describe and discuss the anxieties of spatial and social mobility and competing discourses about propriety and deserved-ness in the urban space. My position gives me access to the real field of people and their spaces and an insight into the discursive field of their moral claims and legitimation but it also highlights that I have my own claims for recognition and for legitimacy in the eyes of the people I describe. Like my informants, I don’t just have a presence, but am observed. In the stratum I am describing, each person strives to prove that he/she is deserving. He strives to prove that he deserves what he has and that he rightly occupies his class position; and this includes me, myself.

Delineation of the Research Topic

In a very general sense, this dissertation is about the project of modernizing nationalism unfolding in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. I operationalize modernizing nationalism here as a

phenomenon of collective aspiration, akin to what Tania Li (2007) calls a “will to improve,” which is “shared by many parties.” In my case studies, I particularly consider the two parties with apparently allied interests in this newest modernization project in Kazakhstan – the aspiring middle classes striving, among other things, to better their housing conditions, and the state/government promising improvement and designing policies to enhance the quality of life for its citizens.

Kazakhstan is not a newcomer to the project of modernization. In the 20th century, the people of Kazakhstan had sustained several waves of intervention the most infamous of which was the program of forced sedentarization and collectivization with confiscation of livestock under Stalin. The city that I grew up in, Tseliongrad, itself was a result of another later intervention by the state to improve and develop agriculture. In 1954, Khrushchev launched an agricultural campaign called *Tselina*, or “Virgin Lands.” The goal of the campaign was to open up a vast tract of steppe land in northern Kazakhstan for grain cultivation. The city of Akmolinsk happened to be in the center of this new wheat growing region and thus it was renamed Tselinograd. As a result of *Tselina* and earlier efforts aimed at the modernization of agriculture and the development of heavy industry (mainly ore-mining, coal mining, and steel-making in Central Kazakhstan) Kazakhstan could be considered the most successful case of socialism transplanted to an “Eastern People” (Lenin’s phrase). The Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic was the most advanced republic in Central Asia, with the highest degree of industrialization and urbanization. However, modernization came at an enormous human and cultural cost for the native population. During the forced collectivization and sedentarization of the late 1920s and the 1930s, about a third of the Kazakh population, many of whom were semi-nomadic herders, heavily dependant on their confiscated livestock, died of starvation (Pianciola

and Finnel 2004). The demography of Kazakhstan then changed dramatically with the influx of Slavic people as well as forcibly deported people who had belonged to “rogue” nations -- Chechens, Ingushes, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, and Koreans. By the 1950s, Kazakhs had become a minority in their titular republic, constituting only 30% of the population, and they gradually faced the threat of complete cultural Russification. Kazakhs’ bitter, suppressed memories of collectivization and a famine that ensued after collectivization in 1932-1933, as well as resistance against Russian cultural hegemony, surfaced during the time of *perestroika*, when in the wake of democracy and *glasnost*, nationalities of the USSR were allowed to voice their long-held grievances (Bissenova 2006). On the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kazakh Soviet Republic was the only “national” republic within the USSR where the segment of the republic’s population whose ethnicity was signified by the same word as in the name of the republic was a minority, constituting approximately 40% of the population, according to the 1989 census (Burkhanov 2010). Over the course of independence, the demographic balance has shifted, with ethnic Kazakhs making up 65% of the population as of 2011.

In my blog with the online daily *Internet-Gazeta ZonaKZ*, I have argued that even though, in the initial years of independence, the promise of addressing Kazakh cultural nationalist grievances (especially the revival of the language) served as a *raison d’être* for the Kazakh state, the Kazakh state eventually staked its own legitimation on the issues of renewed modernization, rather than the issues of ethnic revival and national homogenization (Bissenova 2009b). Of note is that the Kazakh state emerged by default as a result of the collapse of Soviet

ideology and dissent at the center of the Soviet Union,¹¹ not as a result of any local nationalist irredentist movement (Cummings 2005).

Ethnic relations, ethnic tensions, and ethnic identities have been a hot topic for scholars of nationalism since the fall of the Soviet Union, and perhaps justifiably so since the Soviet Union fell apart along ethnic-national lines, opening up not only the liberatory potential of post-colonial nationalism but also the Pandora's box of unmanageable ethnic strife and conflict within the formerly peaceful imperial borders (Brubaker 1996, Chinn and Kaiser 1996, Bessinger 2002, Suny 2004, Dave 2007). In this dissertation, however, I try to stay away from nationalism's ethnic dimensions, or what Jean and John Comaroff (2009) dubbed "ethno-talk," and to approach nationalism from the "good old" but now mostly discredited modernization perspective. The relatively stable inter-ethnic situation in Kazakhstan and my focus on the social implications of urban development and the construction boom make it possible to discuss nationalism without a primary focus on ethnicity.¹² By approaching the topic in this way, I am not trying to hide or avoid any questions relating to existing ethnic tensions, and admit that, although skillfully managed, they do inevitably transpire. They include, but are not limited to, the decreasing Russian European population, the state-driven revival of the Kazakh language,¹³ efforts to deal

¹¹ The *Belovezhskaya Pushcha* (Belovezha) Accord (1991, December 12), which de facto dissolved the Soviet Union, was signed by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia.

¹² I do discuss the questions of ethnicity as they relate to the issues of "national character in architecture" in the first chapter and a new "middle class" identity in the second chapter.

¹³ At AstanaGenPlan, three young people in my department—two Russians and one Kazakh—had to attend Kazakh language classes twice a week during the workday. The Kazakh language has the privileged status of being the "state" language; thus, the government has mandated knowledge of Kazakh for occupants of public-servant positions and positions in national companies. The Russian language, however, has the status of being the "official" language and continues to be a lingua franca in Kazakhstan (Dave 2007, Cumming 2005, Bissenova 2004). Most of the business at AstanaGenPlan was conducted in Russian, but every department had a Russian-Kazakh translator who would translate all the outgoing paperwork into Kazakh. Having proved my fluency in Kazakh (I have a diploma in Kazakh literature), I was exempt—as were two of my Kazakh-speaking colleagues—from having to attend Kazakh-language classes. Also, a senior colleague of mine who was an elderly Russian urban-planning specialist didn't attend the classes. I noticed that elderly Russian-speaking technocrats were spared from the state-

with the Russian and Soviet heritage, constructing one overarching national identity, and writing a history acceptable to all Kazakhstanis (Burkhanov 2010, Dave 2007, Cummings 2005, Schatz 2004b, Bissenova 2008, 2007, 2004). I do not debate the assertions either that Brubaker's (1996) "nationalizing nationalism" (i.e., the idea that the state would identify and promote the interests of the "core nation") is taking place in Kazakhstan or that this country's "nationalizing nationalism" is a project of inclusion and exclusion as well as social engineering.¹⁴ At the same time, I tend to agree with the scholars who characterize the Kazakh state's nationalism as a "nationalism by inertia," in which the ethnic nationalist component plays a notably symbolic role (Adams and Rustemova 2009, Dave 2007, Burkhanov 2010).

Following the above mentioned scholars, I also suggest in this dissertation that the core ideology of the nationalizing state in Kazakhstan is not about ethnicity but about material progress. I often use the term 'discourse of material progress' instead of the term 'ideology of material progress' because the theme to which I am referring is not just an ideology devised by ideologues at the top and then imposed upon a dormant and unsuspecting population through development programs like the presidential "Kazakhstan-2030" development strategy and other development strategies stemming from it. I maintain that this ideology is shared by the vast majority of the consumer-citizens in Kazakhstan regardless of their ethnic, religious, and even political affiliations. These consumer-citizens might disagree on many so-called identity issues: whether to refer to themselves as Kazakhs or Kazakhstanis, what language to speak in public or

induced efforts to learn Kazakh. My mother, who speaks only Russian and works as head of the microbiological lab with the National Clinical Research Center, also does not attend Kazakh language classes held at her Research Center. When I asked her how she had gained exemption from these classes, she said that she and colleagues who were roughly her age had "worked enough for the country" and that they were not seeking further career promotions.

¹⁴ In fact, the Master Plan of Astana, which I discuss in the first chapter, states that one of the rationales (the fifth) behind the relocation of the capital is "integration" and a "balancing out" of the ethnic composition of Kazakhstan, which is, of course, a euphemism for "Kazakhification" of the Russified North.

private settings, how to address questions of ethnicity and religion in the public sphere, whether to follow the democratic path of the West or follow the “Eastern tigers” model. Nevertheless, the consumer-citizens tend to agree with the premise that the primary purpose of the state is to ensure order and material well-being for all or at least for the majority of the population.

Two scholars in the field of Indian nationalism, William Mazzarella (2003) and Leela Fernandes (2008), argue that consumer-citizenship and consumer-nationalism emerged at a historical juncture when the issues of national development and political emancipation became linked to capitalist consumerism. Citizen consensus and solidarity then emerged from the politics of mass aspiration, rather than from democratic deliberation (Mazzarella 2003:71). Another scholar of Indian nationalism Mankekar Purnima (1999) also wrote how newly emerging middle classes are especially prone to “interpellation” by the nation-state and nationalism ideology and how the achievement of middle class status and respectability for these “barely middle classes” is closely linked with their positioning themselves as “citizen-subjects of the Indian nation” (1999:9). Following these scholars, I also suggest that there is a convergence of interest between the Kazakh state and aspiring middle classes in Kazakhstan based on the politics of mass aspiration which also stems from the people’s internalized drive and desire for modernization. In chapter two of this dissertation, I argue that mass engagement with the *remont* projects (finishing, re-modeling and customizing one’s apartment or house according to one’s own liking) is a manifestation of this internalized drive for modernization.

Development, economic growth, and material improvement still remains what Arturo Escobar (1995) calls a “magic formula” animating nationalism projects that want to be successful. As James Ferguson (2006) aptly observes, regarding the fate of nationalism in Africa,

“None of the impoverished nations of the world are truly ‘sovereign’ or ‘independent’” (65).¹⁵ Thus, from the point of view of the current nation-state’s survival, independence, and sovereignty, guiding the country on a successful modernization path is more important than the ability of the nationalizing state to establish some sort of a coherent national identity, a task at which the state is failing anyway (Burkhanov 2010). Not that cultural politics and identity issues are unimportant, but I would argue that they are not the issues of contention that would make or break state nationalism at this point while the ability of state nationalism to stay on the course of modernization and development can make or break the nation-state.

In this sense, Kazakhstan may be yet another “developmental state” (Castells 1998, Harvey 2005). However, in the post-modern era, this developmentalism in many ways differs from the statism of the “high modernism” epoch, when the state used its coercive and oppressive power for the “comprehensive planning of human settlement and production” (Scott 1998). In the post-modern era, “comprehensive” planning and vision are beyond the reach of any particular agency including the state, which is left to manage its population in ways that increase the state’s economic value and attract investment to the state—creating a good business climate (Ong 2000, Harvey 2005). In the “post-national” era of current nationalism, writes Ulrich Beck, “states long for nothing more than the invasion by the investors; they fear nothing more than their retreat” (2000:34). “National governments prostrate themselves before international finance,” writes Anna Tsing (2000:328). Drawing on her ethnographic study of “middle-range Asian states” (Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand), Aihwa Ong introduces the term “postdevelopmental state,” which refers to states that pursue the strategy of “producing and governing [a] middle class and forming links with global capital” (Ong 2000:57). The

¹⁵ This argument is reminiscent of Marx’s argument, regarding the Jewish question, that political emancipation is impossible without socio-economic emancipation (Marx 1978).

imperative of economic competition compels nations to adopt corporate strategies of development in which culture and identity are turned into questions of “branding” and citizens are regarded as stakeholders invested in the prosperity of the country and the development of corporate brands (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, Mattern 2008). Like corporate professionals having a vested interest in the development of their corporation, professional middle classes have their interests allied with those of the corporate-state. Commenting on Dubai, Ahmed Kanna (2011) notes that corporate culture permeates national loyalty and that the royal regime receives support from globalized multicultural professional elites, many of whom are of non-Emirati origin.

Like Aihwa Ong’s (2000) “mid-range Asian states,” Kazakhstan has declared a goal of becoming a “competitive nation” by 2030—placing it among the top fifty countries in the table of competitiveness published by the World Economic Forum, a Swiss-based organization (Nazarbayev 2006). In a similar vein, another of government’s goals is to make Astana one of the 30 most livable cities in the world. The only question left is to figure out what it means to be a livable city (see chapter 1) and whether or not a “competitive nation” is also a “happy nation.”

In *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (2006), Aihwa Ong describes how postdevelopmental states in Asia configure their territories into different zones which are then assigned a different status and follow different regulations (e.g., China’s special economic zones). Kazakhstan’s territory is also fragmented into multiple zones which receive differential treatment from the state and corporations and follow different logics of development. Thus my subject of the construction boom and the urban development in Astana does not extend outwards to encompass all of Kazakhstan. While there were booming economies in such areas as the new capital of Astana, the old capital of Almaty, oil-rich Atyrau, Aktau, and

some other regional centers, many other cities of varying sizes, especially small towns that had sprung up in the Soviet Union around factories, plants, and mines, were falling into depression and oblivion. In fact, one might say that the boom, migration, and urbanization of the aforementioned cities have occurred at the expense of de-urbanization and de-industrialization in so many places that had once followed the logic of Soviet industrial expansion. However, the phenomenon of the new type of urbanization I am describing relative to Kazakhstan is a world-wide phenomenon that followed the re-structuring of the economies not only in the former socialist countries but also in the West, a process all too familiar even to the rust-belt cities in the United States after the power shift from industrial centers to those of finance and service (Sassen 2002, 2006).

My dissertation is about urbanization understood, not simply as people's migration from rural areas into urban areas (although this is taking place too)¹⁶, but also as a transformation of the urban environment itself, a creation of a new urban environment and the rise of qualitatively new urban centers with new urban cultures. The boom is not an elite economic phenomenon unfolding in elite neighborhoods. Although it is a distinct minority of the population that can afford to buy newly built apartments in urban centers even now with all the post-crisis government subsidies and support, ownership of modern housing is an aspiration of a majority of the population—a “spirit of the times.” My dissertation is about the ideals of normalcy that this phenomenon is testing and establishing first within the middle class and then within the rest of society. I focus on the rationales and the politics of changing norms both in the popular imagination and in institutional-legal frameworks. For instance, in the Soviet Housing Code of Kazakhstan, the accepted norm of sufficient “living space” (*zhilaya ploshshad'*

¹⁶ In her sociological study of internal migration flows in Kazakhstan, Aigul Zabirowa (2002) found that city-to-city (from regional centers to Astana) rather than rural-to-urban migration is the predominant component in Astana's population growth.

excluding kitchen, bathroom, storage, etc.) was 12 square meters per person. In the new SNiP (*Stroitel'nye Normy i Pravila* 2007) of Astana, adopted in 2007, the minimum per capita norm for housing was set at 20 square meters, a dramatic increase from Soviet norms. Additional changes in building norms include regulations for built-in parking lots, whereas Soviet-era regulations of minimum spaces for laundry lines, children's playgrounds, and "common yards" in front of apartment buildings (see chapter 2) have now become obsolete and are no longer required.

The data I collected during my fieldwork reflect changing norms and values, and thus, in my dissertation, I attempt to focus on the formation of ideals that are both institutionalized visions and internalized dreams about "normal" housing and "modern" ways of being urban. I take my inspiration from Mike Davis (2002), Marco d'Eramo (2003), Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck (2000), and others who analyzed how an entire way of life based on home ownership of a single-family house came into being as an integral part of "the American dream." These ideals are both imaginary and material formations. They are material in the sense that they have been coming into being in specific historic conditions and are institutionalized through regulative frameworks, industrial development patterns, transportation systems, and so on—what some social scientists call path-dependence (Hanlon, Short, and Vicino 2010). They are also ideal in that they deal with the question of a socially mediated desire for a standard "normal" happy life.

Today a body of ethnographic studies deals with the issues of value transformation in post-socialist transitional economies.

Katherine Verdery's (1996, 2003) and Smoki Musaraj's (2011) discussions of the privatization and pyramid schemes in post-socialist Romania and Albania respectively provide

valuable theoretical insights for my research. Although construction and real estate investment is not a pure financial (often cash-based) pyramid scheme like Caritas in Romania, MMM in Russia, or Bollek in Albania, as Smoki Musraj writes in his “Tales from Alborado” (2011), construction booms have definite pyramid components in the sense that first-comers to the housing and real estate market capitalize at the expense of late-comers.¹⁷ In *Privatization of Poland* (2004), Elizabeth Dunn emphasizes the value transformation that takes place at sites of production: the transformation begins with an inculcation of neo-liberal practices of auditing, evaluation, and performance management into production and workplace relations. Both Caroline Humphrey (2002, 2003) in her research on post-Soviet urban transformation in Russia and Catherine Alexander (2004) in her research on privatization in Kazakhstan discuss the change from labor- and workplace-centered Soviet systems of value, in which people would derive social value from their workplace and the connections they would establish there, to the new system of value, which has centered on property and capital. By discussing cynical reason and entrepreneurial skills of the late-“Soviet generation” career-oriented former *komsomol* (young communist) leaders turned businessmen, Alexei Yurchak (1997, 2003, 2006) warns us against creating socialist-capitalist binaries and reminds us that both the socialist value system and the post-socialist value system have been ambivalent and contradiction-ridden. Otherwise, how would we explain the fact that people who had considered speculators to be reprobates and passive income (i.e., money earned without effort) to be “unearned money” (Verderi 1996) ended up participating in purely speculative pyramid schemes? In chapter three, I attempt to unravel the paradox of socialism and post-socialism formulated by Yurchak (2006): how was it that people who lived under socialism came to be prepared for capitalism?

¹⁷ In Kazakhstan, people who bought housing in the beginning of the 2000s saw the value of their housing increase several times.

Much of the literature on post-Soviet urban space is, in the words of Caroline Humphrey (1998), a “chronicle of the dismantling of the Soviet life.” The literature is usually about the collapse of social order, chaos, and decay, all of which can be summarized in the Russian word *bardak* (Nazpari 2002, Humphrey 2003). Part of this literature specifically addresses the issues of urban nostalgia for socialism (Grant 2010, Boym 2001). The emphasis on the dissolution, economic collapse, and “ruralization” of the cities (Alexander, Buchli, and Humphrey 2007) sometimes seems to suggest that, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the process of urbanization and modernization, generally, has come to a halt, which is not the case.¹⁸ In this dissertation, I make an argument that the project of modernization (and urbanization as a part of modernization) has re-surfaced from its shambles in the 1990s. My focus on the phenomenon of the real estate boom, which brought about new norms and values regarding housing and urban environments, sheds light on the nature of this newest rather “quotidian” modernization project and the new social order that has emerged in the post-Soviet urban space.

Attachments to Modernity

Following James Ferguson (1999, 2006), I argue that although theories of modernization, development, and progress have been discarded as fallacies and myths with the post-Cold War and the post-modern turn in history, people who are outside the first world and who reside in locations ranging from the global society’s “black hole,” Africa, to the now turbulent Middle East to booming China have very real and strong “affective attachments” to

¹⁸Needless to say, post-Soviet urbanization is a qualitatively different process from Soviet urbanization driven by industrial development. Soviet urbanization was a project of even spatial development implemented in building new settlements, controlling the growth of big cities, and investing in the infrastructure of medium and small-sized cities. In the post-Soviet period, this tendency was reversed with large cities becoming centers of uncontrolled migration from small and medium size cities (Zimovina 2009, Pivovarov 2007, Zabirova 2002).

these myths. As Ferguson writes in his *Global Shadows*, “The aspiration to modernity has been an aspiration to rise in the world in economic and political terms; to improve one’s way of life, one’s standing, one’s place in the world” (2006:32).

James Scott’s (1998) seminal book explained with rich ethnographic material how and why “certain schemes to improve human condition have failed” when put into the hands of the state machine, which simplifies and homogenizes complex reality on the ground and oppresses the people. But even though the history of failures in a long historical drive to improve human condition are more ubiquitous than the history of the progress achieved on this path (and there definitely has been some progress) the important thing is that the dream of improvement persists. As Tania Li (2007) puts it, the “will to improve” is “stubborn.”

People all over the world had what Ferguson calls “expectations of modernity” and in many places are still hopeful of attaining their desired place position on the path towards modernization. For many people, modernization is a question of global equality. Developing nations want to join the ranks of the developed world—to achieve living standards and conditions like those attributed to the West. Modernization theory has offered a ladder, “a global stairway leading from the ‘developing’ world to the ‘developed’,” whereby even people on lower rungs could get ahead and catch up with leaders. With the collapse of the state-driven modernization projects in Africa and many other places, the stairway has turned into an impassable wall between the first and third worlds (Ferguson 1999:236, 237). What was perceived as a temporal lag turned into a permanent collective failure, “no longer softened by the promise of the not yet” (Ferguson 2006:186). Zygmunt Bauman refers to people in the third world behind the wall as “failed consumers”: “those who have been properly seduced but are *unable* to act in the way the properly seduced are expected to act” (2007:129). Failed consumers

aspire to join the developed world and consumer society but cannot join it (for example, because of immigration laws).

“There is a real tragedy in the shattering of the dreams of modernity—of social utopia, historical progress, and material plenty for all,” writes Susan Buck-Morss in *Dreamworlds and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (2000:68). Nowhere is this tragedy felt more intensely than in the third world’s abrogated modernity projects and in the parts of the socialist world reduced to third world status. Even the parts of the socialist world that joined the first world in the European Union have experienced nostalgia for the loss of utopia (Boym 2001, Boyer 2006). I borrow the term “dreamworlds” in the title of this dissertation from Susan Buck-Morss (2006), who argued that both capitalist and socialist modernity, despite their binary juxtaposition during the Cold War, shared a common origin in the past and a common vision of the future. In this common industrial modernity, the private pursuit of happiness was part of the collective pursuit of a better society; there was a “collective dream” that gave people the courage “to imagine a social world in alliance with personal happiness” and which “promised...that its realization would be in harmony with the overcoming of scarcity for all” (Buck-Morss 2006: ix).

In the first decade of the post-Cold War period, post-Soviet states have abandoned the collective universal project so that only the private pursuit of happiness has remained: “Commodities have not ceased to crowd people’s private dreamworlds; they still have a utopian function on a personal level” (Buck-Morss 2006:x). But on the political level, Susan Buck-Morss (2006) writes, it is “no longer thought necessary to guarantee to the collective that which is pursued by the individual” (x). In my dissertation, I explore this transformation from “high modernism” to “quotidian modernism,” the (re-)emergence of the new private post-socialist dreamworlds, and their constellations with the political national project unfolding in Kazakhstan.

An “Exemplary Center” and the Return of Utopia

So, in the context of abrogated modernization and nostalgia for utopia, I consider the building of Astana and the housing and construction boom in Kazakhstan to be a manifestation of the post-modern return of utopia: symptoms of the people’s and the state’s desire to stay on the modernization path. Astana is a simulacra of the old socialist utopia in the sense that it is not so much an ideological but a materialistic vision, a promise of order and prosperity that can be seen, felt, and touched; a kind of a visual tactile testimony to urban material progress. In a post-ideological world, in order for the developmentalist state to sustain the hope of development and modernization (for those still offering it), the state has to stage what Abidin Kusno (2010) in his ethnography of Jakarta’s urban development calls “spectacles of order” through the creation of “exemplary spaces” and “exemplary centers.¹⁹” Kusno (2010) writes how, in 2004, the Indonesian state and governorship of Jakarta managed to launch a very efficient busway that now offers Jakartans the comforts of first world transportation and an opportunity to escape the traffic jams, crowd saturation, and unruliness of the city streets. The delivery of a new order in the provision of transportation had to be spectacularly enacted. Red and white barriers separated the bus lanes from other street lanes. Several ultramodern skywalk bus shelters were built throughout the city offering passengers a comfortable space to wait for the bus. The functioning of the busway has been turned into an exercise in “urban pedagogy” by state authorities, who have made an exceptional disciplinary effort to ensure that bus lanes are used by buses alone, that bus shelters are kept spotlessly clean, and that customers form orderly lines when boarding buses.

¹⁹ Abidin Kusno borrows the concept of “exemplary center” from Clifford Geertz’s (1980) *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*.

This vivid improvement in one branch of public transportation has helped restore the state's authority and legitimacy (especially in view of other government failures) in addition to ensuring public cooperation in the production of modern urban culture and behavior. "Through the busway, a social order that demands a particular mode of behavior is constituted," writes Abidin Kusto, and "such a demand comes less from the government and more from the people themselves who ask for more regulation" (2010:63). The people who ask for "more regulation" and generally have high stakes in asserting and maintaining civic order in the city are, of course, members of the middle class firmly allied with the government in the project of urban transformation (Fernandes 2006, Kusno 2010). Needless to say, the busway in Jakarta has not alleviated all the problems of the congested and overcrowded city, but the busway is publicly visible proof that improvements can be accomplished and modern conditions can be achieved with the imposition of order and the inculcation of discipline (Kusno 2010:47-70).

Kusno's concept of an "exemplary center" has its multiple predecessors in the era of so-called "high modernism," starting with Baron Hausman's renovation of Paris (Benjamin 1999, Scott 1999) and extending through Kubitschek's Brasilia, which was supposed to be both an "exemplar" and a "center" (Holston 1989). Brasilia was designed as a project of national integration and as a spatial configuration that would eliminate the class and regional differences between those who would come to inhabit the new capital (Holston 1989). In the last chapter of *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia*, entitled "Brazilianization of Brasilia," however, Holston shows how the rest of Brazil with its inequality, messiness, and class conventions finally caught up with the wannabe perfect "exemplary center" Brasilia, which found itself surrounded by shanty towns that the planners had just wanted to avoid (Holston 1989:290). I have never been to Brasilia, but in my little "fieldwork excursions" with Brazilian

students at Cornell, I heard that in many ways Brasilia remains an “exemplary center”—orderly, green, with spacious public spaces. “Brasilia is the only city where I can take a pedestrian pass being sure that I will not be run over by a car,” said Mario Jales, a fellow PhD student at Cornell, “the drivers in Brasilia are very respectful.” So the planned metropolis was not a complete failure. It managed to inculcate the notion of “how things ought to be” at least in some of Brasilia’s citizens.

Following Abidin Kusno’s “exemplary center” (and before him Holston’s concept), I argue that Astana has been planned, built, and run as one such “exemplary center” to give citizens a sense of positive social change and order and to reaffirm that the goals of development, modernization, and progress are still being pursued by the state (Mateusz Laszczkowski (2011b) in his recent article “Building the Future: Construction, Temporality, and Politics in Astana” also argues that people seek such affirmation from the state). Also helpful in this function is Astana’s role as the seat of central government, showcasing the “civilizing” power of government regulation. Astana’s achievements in managing traffic, disciplining drivers,²⁰ maintaining order in public places, and growing greenery²¹ in difficult climatic conditions are indeed supposed to set an example for the rest of the country. The message is that it is not an extraordinary

²⁰ A recent article in *The New Yorker* (“Nowheresville: How Kazakhstan is Building a Glittering New Capital from Scratch” from 2011, April 18) attests to the fact that drivers in Astana are the most disciplined in post-Soviet space.

²¹ Astana municipality pays special attention to cultivating green space inside and outside the city (the so-called artificial “green belt” around Astana). The soil of Astana is known to be difficult for growing trees because ground water is too close to the surface and the vegetation period is short. The commitment of Astana to uphold green standards despite the harsh climatic conditions of southern Siberia is comparable to other globally known green cities. As a point of comparison, Toronto city plants about 15-20,000 young trees a year through its Tree Advocacy Program. According to “Astana-Zelenstroj” municipal greening company, in 2006 and 2007 there were more than 38,000 trees planted each year in Astana. The company maintains a tree nursery of 700,000 trees located in the village of Hersonovka, 90 km south of Astana (I visited this tree-nursery during my fieldwork). Since the relocation of capital to Astana, the green space inside the city (this is not counting the “green belt” trees outside the city) has increased almost tenfold and has reached 660 hectares with 8 square meters of green space per resident of the city.

investment of capital that makes Astana beautiful but the right kind of governance, culture and discipline.

In the spring and the summer of 2008, when I was doing my fieldwork at the municipal office of AstanaGenPlan we had to leave our desks on Saturdays and head over to the adjacent park, where we would take part in *subbotniks*²²—the manual work of cleaning the streets and of gardening. The participation of the so-called “office plankton”²³ in cleaning and gardening in the city did little, in truth, to reduce public expenditures by the city government, which employs literally an army of street cleaners and gardeners. Our labor outside of the office was quite ineffective and could easily have been spared. However, it was important as a showcase of the public sector’s “love and care” for the city. The very revival of the tradition of *subbotnik* on the eve of the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the relocation of the capital to Astana is telling. These *subbotniks* have not been a voluntary community service²⁴; far from it, they have been organized through a top-down directive meant to inculcate a “love of the city” in the multitudes of office workers and public servants who inhabit Astana. In many ways, *subbotniks* have also manifested nostalgia for utopia, as though Astana wanted to borrow inspiration or some symbolic capital from the past epoch’s non-materialistic enthusiasm, when young communists (*komsomol’tsy*) were imagining and building a collective utopia in a sincere, sometimes even effervescent collective effort.

²² Subbotnik (from the Russian word *subбота*, meaning Saturday) is a tradition of volunteer community work that would take place on Saturdays and that first emerged following the October revolution in 1917.

²³ Office plankton (in Russian, *offisnyi plankton*) is a derogatory term for white-collar people who work in offices and are engaged in non-productive “pen-pushing” activities or “imitations of activity.” The term carries a negative connotation of passivity and uselessness. It describes the middle echelon of the new post-industrial economy: people working in management, sales, and advertisement and including chiefly technocrats and public servants. The phrase is used to mock this new middle class’ “average” way of thinking, materialistic goals, and meaningless (unproductive and even parasitic) existence. Astana is also often mocked as the “city of public servants” or the “city of *offisnyi plankton*.”

²⁴ During Soviet times, *subbotniks* were often involuntary attendees at these kinds of events. That is why they were cynically called “mandatory-voluntary events.”

“Fake It Until You Make It...”

The 10th anniversary of Astana in 2008 was marked by spectacular celebrations that included—among other forms of entertainment—Italian opera, Cuban ballet, a Turkic music festival, and a vast number of concerts featuring the participation of Russian and international celebrities. There was a conference organized by the National Library and Eurasian University and called “the Cultural Text of Astana,” where I presented my paper “The Global and the National in Astana.” Such celebrations of Astana as an exemplary city whose promise of prosperity and order constitute a precursor to the prosperity of the whole nation are usually met with skepticism from the opposition and opposition-oriented intellectuals. The criticism is usually that Astana is an image-driven project and that the city’s projected image is an inaccurate representation of the country as a whole. For instance, during the 2008 celebration, across the river from the skyscrapers was a tent city of several *yurts*—traditional nomadic tents. One local intellectual said that this image of nomadic tents side by side with the skyscrapers was incongruous, anachronistic, and, most important, not representative of the way of life of the majority of the population. He asked rhetorically, “Who lives in the *yurts* today? Hardly even one percent of the population.” He continued, “And who lives in the skyscrapers? Also one percent of the population.” He then went on to dismiss both skyscrapers and tents as exercises in ostentation. His comment was echoed by many foreign and local journalists and experts who argued that the city “has no Kazakh spirit” (Yuritsyn 2008).

Around this time, a colleague of mine, a sociologist from Harvard, was also visiting Astana to observe the celebrations. I conducted an interview with her for an online national daily and asked whether Astana struck her as being a “Potemkin village”: a city that was fake and

divorced from the reality of the rest of the country. Her answer was that Kazakhstan was trying to emerge as a “modern nation” and that, for this purpose, it was building “an exemplary modern city”; she went on to argue that even if it looked sometimes like a postcard city, it was ready for people to live in, and indeed, she noted an American saying for such a case: “fake it until you make it” (Adams 2008).

I think my colleague’s comment of “fake it until you make it” is insightful, regarding both the accumulation of cultural capital through mimicry and the realization of success in what Anna Tsing (2005) calls the modern “economy of appearances.” Astana is definitely a spectacle: a spectacle of architecture, a spectacle of order, even a spectacle of the symbiosis of “modern” and “traditional” Kazakh culture. But in today’s global economy, “image is everything” and “perception is reality”—or to be more precise, the perception of investors and consumers is everything. And if investors are ready to invest and consumers to consume, then the spectacle becomes a reality.

However, even if the spectacle turns out to be successful (believable) and brings investment, any accompanying anxiety and guilt about inauthenticity will likely remain palpable. In his chapter on Astana in *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia*, British anthropologist Victor Buchli points out to this anxiety and uncertainty about the surrounding material environment of Astana when people ask him “Does this look right?” (Buchli 2007). The dissertation by my colleague Zhanara Nauryzbayeva deals with Kazakhstani artists’ anxiety about producing art “for the market” –not out of inner artistic inspiration. The art produced solely for the market is viewed as inauthentic and as having questionable artistic and ethical quality (Nauryzbayeva 2011). Questions of authenticity/inauthenticity and one’s suitability for better (improved) material conditions arise in the second chapter of the current study when I describe the anxiety and the

desire of residents of newly built neighborhoods to prove that they are not just the “new rich”—that they deserve their position and have, beyond money, qualities of positive intrinsic value. In a curious way, this nouveau riche angst speaks to the post-colonial anxiety and desire for “recognition of cultural presence” (Bhabha 2004:12).

Methodology and Overview of Chapters

The data that have become the basis for this dissertation vary dramatically—from my own biographical episodes and participant observations during my fieldwork, to my informants’ stories of middle class “strivings,” to the press articles and the government documents to which I had access during my time at AstanaGenPlan. Earlier, I described my own position of “anthropologist at home” with all its practical advantages and potential pitfalls. There are rarely random people among my informants, most of them are connected to me in one way or another as friends, relations, colleagues—people whom I will hopefully continue to have contact with after the fieldwork. Although it was relatively easy for me to develop rapport with the people who can be roughly generally defined as belonging to my circle, I had to face some tough ethical questions after the fieldwork about what kind of information (about people’s personal finances, feelings and anxieties) I intended to reveal. I tried to maintain balance and retain the dignity of all of my informants, from those who remain anonymous (with pseudonyms) to my relatives, whom I name by identifying their relationship to me. The issues of the balance between revealing the details and maintaining dignity and privacy were re-iterated to me by my mother, who once said in passing, “Don’t write everything about me.” In addition to this very personal and delicate issue of maintaining the balance with the people around me, I also had to work my

way up, make myself presentable and likable, for so-called “studying up” – having access to the people in power and the information that only they can provide.

In the first chapter, I analyze the Kazakh state’s strategy of extensively borrowing expertise (cultural capital) from the established brands and centers of urbanism: a strategy whose objective has been to achieve the status of a “global” and “modern” city for Astana. Although, according to Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital is both an outreach and a disguise of economic capital, I argue that transformation of financial capital into cultural capital is not to be taken for granted, especially in the view of both established global hierarchies and interests in the durability and global transferability of certain kinds of cultural capital. This chapter is based on my fieldwork at the AstanaGenPlan office, in particular my interactions and interviews with leading architects and my in-depth research of the three documents – Master Plans for the development of the city of Astana adopted in 2001 (The Japanese Master Plan), 2005 (first correction to the Master Plan), and 2008 (second correction to the Master Plan). I had access to these and other supporting documents when I was asked by a leading architect Amanzhol Chikanayev and a deputy head of AstanaGenPlan Galymzhan Kasymov to help them write the justification for the development of the new correction to the Master Plan in 2008.

The second chapter also deals with the accumulation of cultural and social capital, although on a different level. What does it take for a member of the nouveau riche or just an aspiring urbanite to become a proper member of the bourgeoisie? During my fieldwork in the newly built housing complexes (I describe the location and the physical environment of these in chapter two) and my life encounters with the representatives of the Kazakh bourgeoisie and aspiring middle classes, I found the outlines of what can be called a bourgeois ownership society with some traces of the Soviet intelligentsia’s ethos of distinction, cultured-ness, and urban

sophistication. The process of embourgeoisement through which this still-amorphous stratum of urban residents has been fostered has involved such institutions as condominiums and *sobraniia sobstvennikov kvartir* (meetings of apartment owners). Drawing on my participant observation of these emergent institutions (I attended several of meetings and talked to participants afterwards), I argue that newly built neighborhoods of Astana represent not just spaces of consumption and material accumulation but also spaces of a qualitatively new type of sociality that are forged through property-based rights, responsibilities, and legal procedures rather than extensive social attachments.

In the third chapter, I compare different life strategies that individuals use to deal with “solid” and “liquid” modernity (Bauman 2000, 2007). I argue that with the fall of the Soviet Union (particularly in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s), a long-term perspective and a progressive vision of the future have disappeared. People lacking a long-term perspective cannot devise long-term economic plans; thus, they inevitably concentrate on needs, consumption, and gratification in the present. This short-term mentality, a “tyranny of the moment,” and anxiety about the future create social restlessness that in turn becomes a fertile ground for speculative developments. This chapter is based on my interviews and conversations with people who can roughly be described as middle class or “aspiring middle class” and who invested into newly built apartment complexes in Astana and Almaty in 2004-2008.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss how the Kazakh state and Kazakh society have been dealing with the excesses of the boom period. If during the boom times, the imperative of accumulation and possession seemed to be overwhelming, in the times of the crisis, the questions of “moral economy,” moral legitimation of wealth, social value, and social needs have been creeping back into the public discourse. Put bluntly, in a time of crisis, somebody has to lose,

and, often, it is a matter of politics to assign moral blame and then to decide who should lose (for instance, speculative investors in apartments, bankers, construction companies). The moral blame game then becomes an opportunity for a political discussion about how to differentiate between stable sustainable development, which addresses real human needs, and speculative “bubbles,” which feed on a combination of predatory financial schemes and groundless expectations. This chapter is based partly on my conversations and interviews (sometimes with the same people with whom I spoke in the second and third chapters), partly on my following several media stories and public discussions of bankruptcies, bail-outs, and conflicts concerning already built or yet-to-be-built housing.

CHAPTER 1.
**THE MASTER PLAN OF ASTANA: BETWEEN THE “ART OF GOVERNMENT” AND
THE “ART OF BEING GLOBAL”**

Political scientists, sociologists, and urban theorists have long pointed to the changing function of the state in planning and regulating urban development in the neo-liberal market economy (Harvey 1989, 2000; Caldeira & Holston 2005). Although, from its inception, urban planning emerged as an “art of government” exercised by the modern interventionist state, under neo-liberal conditions, the urban planning capacity of the state has often been disrupted by the imperative to accommodate the interests of capital. This accommodation can range from short-term strategies guaranteeing a return on investment in one-time projects to long-term strategies of making the city “attractive” so that capital keeps returning and circulating in the city scape. The technologies of marketing the city to investors and consumer-citizens are often produced by a multitude of international institutions and organizations outside the state urban-planning apparatus. The problematic of governance in this situation is thus: what happens to the power relations between the international centers that produce urban planning and architectural technologies and the national governments that engage them? What are the terms of their cooperation? Can it be that the state itself –despite being a traditional holder of power—has now become subject to the global regime of “soft power” which determines, in Flyvbjerg’s words, “what counts as knowledge,” what counts as legitimate cultural capital, and what counts as valid expertise (Flyvbjerg 1998, Lukes 2005). In order to maintain and increase its political power, the state then attempts to acquire those forms of cultural capital and expertise that “work” and bring success on a global scale in what Anna Tsing (2005) calls the “economy of appearances” where “image is everything” and “perception is reality.”

In this chapter, I will attempt to explore these questions by analyzing the politics that have underscored the enunciation, elaboration, and implementation of the master plans for the development of Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan. In particular, I will analyze the Kazakh officials'²⁵ strategy of extensively borrowing expertise (cultural capital) from the established brands and centers of urbanism: a strategy whose objective has been to achieve, for Astana, the status of a “global” and “modern” city. According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital is both an outreach and a disguise of economic capital. I argue, however, that the conversion of economic capital into legitimate cultural capital, when it is attributed not just to people but to institutions, is much more difficult and is not to be taken for granted, especially, in the view of both established global hierarchies and interests in the durability and global transferability of certain kinds of cultural capital, representing what Bourdieu would call “legitimate culture.”

Saskia Sassen (2000, 2002, 2003) has often argued that globalization is embedded in national territory both geographically and institutionally and that economic processes that we call globalization do not necessarily weaken the state. Complementarities of the nation-building and globalization processes have been particularly evident in the ethos of building the new capital of Kazakhstan, which curiously blends statist nationalism with neo-liberal market ideology. On the one hand, the construction of Astana has been a state project; on the other, it has resulted in a gateway for national and foreign investment, as well for the global markets of construction, urban planning, and architectural finesse. In my research, I follow Ulrich Beck, who argues that “there is no need to investigate the global totally globally” (2000:24), and Doreen Massey, for

²⁵ I am referring here to the officials at the AstanaGenPlan – a governmental research institute (a branch of the municipal government) charged with developing and implementing urban-planning policies, regulations, and norms in Astana. It has high standing in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Several leading architects and urban planners from this office are members of the Architectural Council under the President. AstanaGenPlan has received several visits from the President (though not during my time there) and also has been a seat of the City Urban Planning Council, headed by the mayor. The council meets every month and makes decisions about land allocation for development projects, zoning, and the like.

whom the “global” is always encountered in a local site and any site is a “product of interrelations –connections and disconnections –and their (combinatory) effects” (2005:67). We can often find the global and cosmopolitan behind an institution or a phenomenon that is manifested as local and national. Following Beck’s argument of “internalized globalization,” I show how in Kazakhstan’s urban governance (particularly at the municipal planning office of AstanaGenPlan, where I conducted my fieldwork), the “global” practice and expertise of “How they do it there” morphs into a constant frame of reference for national policy-making and planning.

Since the relocation of the capital to Astana, the Kazakh government has adopted the strategy of inviting and contracting well-known urban planners and architects. Landmark buildings by celebrity architects in Astana include a palace in the shape of a pyramid, and a shopping mall in the shape of a transparent tent designed by Norman Foster, a concert hall by the Italian Architect Manfredo Nicoletti, and an airport by Kisho Kurokawa, who is also considered to be the author of the Master Plan for the whole city. These are the buildings which become part of “post-card Astana” in promotions locally and abroad²⁶. Astana’s experiments with international sources of architectural and urban planning expertise reveal the aspirations of the Kazakh state and its people to acquire a cultural and symbolic capital that would enable them to ascend the ladder of established hierarchy and to catch up with modern cities in the developed world. At the same time, extensive borrowing and opening up to the creative potential of architects with different visions from various parts of the world has made Astana susceptible to the criticism that it is merely imitative, that there is nothing unique or authentic about it, and that it is, therefore, devoid of its own cultural merit. As Homi Bhabha

²⁶ It is worth noting, however, that the majority of the landmark government and residential buildings in Astana have been designed by local architects.

(2004) noted, “the West carries and exploits what Bourdieu would call its symbolic capital” (31). Following Bhabha (2004) and making Bourdieu’s theory (1984) of cultural/symbolic capital work on a larger scale—to sustain the global hierarchies of modernity—I argue that the Kazakh state with its petro-dollars is akin to a member of the *nouveau riche* who, having come into money, has now diligently set about acquiring and displaying status symbols²⁷. The *nouveau riche* also hires international experts (Bourdieu’s “cultural aristocracy”) in order to become “cultured” before he can enter the “high society” of modern nations.

Enunciation of the Master Plan

When the government made the decision to relocate the capital of Kazakhstan from Almaty to Astana in 1997, the first bid for the design of the new capital was announced among Soviet-trained Kazakh architects. The winner of this bid was a group headed by the famous Kazakh architect Kaldybay Montakhaev, renowned in Kazakhstan and the wider region for his design of the Republican Square in Almaty. However, there had been concern as to whether any Kazakh architect’s vision and performance would allow the capital to benefit from “cutting-edge” developments in contemporary international urban planning. So, in 1998, another international bid was announced (in which Kazakh architects were also encouraged to take part) for the conceptual design (*e’skiz-ideia*) of the new capital., 27 projects in total were submitted for this bid, and, in 1999, the jury of experts, consisting of internationally acclaimed architects from the United States, Russia, and Turkey, as well as Kazakh government officials, chose a

²⁷ According to the Kazakhstan National Statistics Agency, the cumulative output of Kazakhstan’s oil and gas sector constituted about 25% of the national GDP in 2009. It has steadily grown over the recent years from under 15 % in 2002.

winner—a Japanese concept for the new city presented by the late Kisho Kurokawa²⁸ and his team. In September 1999, Kurokawa came to Astana to discuss the plan with the Kazakh urban-planning officials and the president, and, in October 2001, a contract was signed between the *Akimat* (municipality) of Astana and the Japan International Cooperation Agency for the development of the Master Plan. A team of Japanese experts, represented by the International Development Center of Japan, “Kisho Kurokawa Architect & Associates,” the Nippon Koei Co. Ltd., and the Japan International Cooperation Agency then commenced a study to produce a comprehensive development plan for the City of Astana and its surroundings. Of the 36 experts listed as the authors and consultants of the study of the Astana Master Plan, only three had Kazakhstani names.²⁹ The plan was completed in 18 months, and, in June 2001, four nicely bound, hard-covered volumes were presented to the municipality of Astana and the president. The Master Plan, which had been designed as a long-term 30-year plan tied to President Nazarbayev’s “2030” national development program, was approved as a blue-print for the city’s development.

During 8 months of fieldwork in 2008 in the municipal office of AstanaGenPlan, where, among other things, I contributed to the “2008 Correction to the Master Plan” (the second correction to the 2001 Japanese Master Plan), I came to learn of several reasons as to why the Japanese project had been selected and which factors influenced the jury decision.

Firstly, the Japanese project tied in loosely to the Japanese government’s forthcoming grants and loans to Kazakhstan, and the Kazakh government chose (or rather influenced the

²⁸ Kisho Kurokawa died in October 2007. He was a leading Japanese architect and one of the founders of the Metabolist movement in architecture and urban planning, which emphasizes the symbiosis between technology, culture, and nature.

²⁹ These were urban planner Serik Rustambekov, ecologist Arkadii Fisenko, and forestry expert Victor Gribov.

decision to choose) Kisho Kurokawa's bid in order to secure these loans. It is worth noting that the Japan International Cooperation Agency provided the 60 million USD grant for the development of the Master Plan, and, in 2002, extended a loan of 200 million USD to Kazakhstan for the development of sewage and drainage systems on the left bank of Astana. In one of the conversations I had with the officials involved in the bid they indicated that at the time there were more investments "in the picture."

The second reason for the selection of the Japanese Master Plan is what I call the discursive affinity between Kurokawa's philosophy and the Kazakh government's general vision for the capital. The government of Kazakhstan thought that adopting what was considered the best international planning expertise was crucial for the international recognition and future development of Astana; in other words, the government's hope was that this project could help Kazakhstan's capital achieve the status of a global city and help Kazakhstan as a nation to overcome provincialism. The government also intended that the new capital would symbolize a break of the state with its Soviet legacy and emphasize the birth of the new nation in a new city, which would be conceived, planned, and built by the new Kazakh government—not Russian or Soviet authorities. Edward Schatz writes, "The Astana move was symbolically to counter the criticism that Kazakhstan was fundamentally unprepared for independent statehood..." (2004:128). So, in order to create and present a new Kazakh modernity to the world the state wanted to build a city that would be radically different from "old" Soviet cities and, at the same time, would be recognized as modern and global. Ironically, "global" expertise was needed for legitimating such a project.

British anthropologist and architectural critic Victor Buchli (2007) has pointed out that Kisho Kurokawa's own philosophy was a perfect ideological fit for the unfolding national

project in Kazakhstan. Kurokawa had a pronounced post-modernist take on architecture and urban planning and a very critical perspective on so-called modernist European architecture. In his own writings, Kurokawa repudiated the principles of the modernist architecture and urban planning formulated by the prominent modernist architect Le Corbusier, particularly the idea of the town or the house “as a machine for living in” (French 1995:43). He writes,

The architecture and arts of the age of the machine have employed analysis, structuring, and organization to achieve a universal synthesis. This closely resembles the process of creating a machine, in which parts are assembled to perform a certain function. Ambiguity, the intervention of foreign elements, accident and multivalent elements cannot be permitted in a machine. (Kurokawa 1999:23)

In opposition to the modernist architecture and urban planning of “the age of the machine,” Kurokawa proposed architecture that, in his words, “heralds the age of life.” In an interview with the Russian journal *Proekt Rossia* (2003), Kurokawa maintained that his philosophy of symbiosis is “the antithesis of the 20th century, the century of Western hegemony” (23).

Theoretically, what Kurokawa’s Metabolist movement in architecture and philosophy of symbiosis professes is a call of sorts for the decolonization of the imagination. Partha Chatterjee (1996) famously asserted that for post-colonial subjects, there is nothing left to imagine in the sphere of the material; they are “only consumers of modernity” and can attempt to create their own modernity only in the sphere of the spiritual. Kurokawa, on the other hand, claimed to be able to produce a new kind of materiality and a new kind of material-built environment that, rather than follow Eurocentric logic and universal standards “of the machine,” expresses both difference (regarding national or cultural identity)³⁰ and the plurality of life.

³⁰ In the spirit of non-Western materiality and technology, Kurokawa, for instance, suggested that when devising its energy policy, India should not simply follow the West and Western models but should also build on its own

Although the claims of discontinuity between the urban planning technologies of “the age of life” and those of “the age of the machine” are debatable, there is no doubt that Kazakhstan’s government found Kurokawa’s philosophy and vision well-suited to their goals and understanding of Kazakhstan’s new place in the world.

The plan itself explains in great length the importance of the new capital for the Kazakh nation-building project. Quoting President Nazarbayev’s speech “New Capital—New State—New Society” from June 10, 1999, the Master Plan states that the planned capital must be “Eurasian” in character, represent national tradition and history and, simultaneously, embody the future that Kazakhstan wants for itself (GP 2001: Vol. II, Chapter 3, 9).³¹

Apart from the ideological reasons that made Kurokawa’s philosophy attractive to the developing nation’s potential self-image, another factor in Kazakhstan’s decision was the ability of the Japanese experts to present the relocation of Astana as an economically viable business plan. Although, in relocating the capital, the government used the Soviet rhetoric of raising a “garden city” (“Gorod-Sad”)³², in the midst of the steppe, it realized that in a post-Soviet age, the bare exercise of political will and enthusiasm was no longer enough to inspire such construction to be carried out.

traditions (e.g., using cow dung as fuel). He wrote, “As [with] Indian energy policy, would it not be best to combine the use of atomic energy, hydroelectric power, and cow dung in the most efficient combination?” (1994:25).

³¹ I will be using the abbreviation GP (*General’nyi Plan*) to indicate both the Master Plan and the ensuing corrections to the Master Plan:

GP 2001 will stand for “The Master Plan for the Development of the City of Astana” produced by the Japanese experts headed by Kurokawa in 2001.

GP 2005 will stand for “The Correction to the Master Plan for the Development of the City of Astana” produced by a group of authors at the AstanaGenPlan headed by N. Tokayev

GP 2008 will stand for “The Correction of the 1st Phase of the Master Plan” produced by the collective of the AstanaGenPlan.

³² Gorod-Sad here refers not to the garden-city concept and urban planning movement per se but to the popular metaphor and rhetoric in the Soviet urbanization and industrialization ethos. The saga of raising a new city in the midst of a distant wilderness or steppe resounded well into the 1980s through Soviet high and popular culture (e.g., The famous poem by Mayakovskii “*Gorod-Sad*”).

The Kazakh government needed to justify the new capital's development project first and foremost as capital investment and to "sell it" as such to the country's public, as well as to foreign investors. So in terms of the logic of its conceptualization, Astana can be compared not only to political projects like Ankara and Brasilia, but also to capital investment projects like Las Vegas and Dubai. The Japanese Master Plan for Astana explains in detail that investment spent on the relocation of Kazakhstan's national capital and the development of the relocated capital's infrastructure would be economically feasible. The Master Plan's chapter devoted to the estimation of the costs and benefits of the new capital's construction declares,

The overall EIRR [economic internal rate of return] was estimated to be 11%. The capital transfer is considered to be economically viable.... Unlike the rather widespread speculation that large scale public undertakings such as transfer of a nation's capital leads to wastage of resources, the economic analysis clearly indicates the economic justification of the capital transfer over a 30 year planning horizon. (GP 2001: Vol. II, Chapter 2, 27-28)

Since the relocation of the capital, the project of building in Astana has been widely criticized on the grounds that it is improperly lavish. Many in the political opposition argued that it would have been better to spread resources over various social programs across the country rather than spend so much money in one place.³³ It then became important for the Kazakh government to enlist the help of prominent foreign experts to prove to local opponents of the Astana-development plan that, first, Astana would be able to attract private investment and, second, that public investment made in Astana would create wealth in the whole region (the predicted benefits for the Akmola and Karaganda regions were particularly well illustrated in the Japanese Master Plan). In its analysis of the development of the new capital, the Master Plan

³³ For instance, an article entitled "Astana on the 'needle' of subsidies" contended that it is unfair that Astana enjoys unprecedented tax breaks and spends three times as much as the old capital Almaty per capita citizen – 74,000 tenge (about 500 dollars in today's money) while at the same time contributing very little to the republican budget (Askarov 2000).

identified three types of projects (highly profitable, moderately profitable, and non-profitable), and made a case that the government would have to invest only in non-profitable projects (creating such infrastructure as roads, bridges, public zones, and industrial zones) while the development of residential areas, entertainment districts, and shopping centers would rely entirely on private investors.

In retrospect, despite the initial marriage of interests and visions between the Kazakh government and Kisho Kurokawa's team, a contradiction would inevitably emerge between the modernizing state's desire to create an "orderly" city, following an "exemplary center" model (see introduction), and Kurokawa's post-modern urbanist vision of a city which embodies and makes peace with a certain degree of chaos. However, the purpose of this chapter is not just to explore the disagreements that emerged between Kurokawa's group and the local bureaucrats, and the gap between the plan and its implementation. More important is the exploration of how the Kazakh government adapted the Japanese Master Plan to its own vision (especially evident in "Corrections to the Master Plan" from 2005 and 2008) and what kind of material forms and effects as well as ideological critiques surfaced in the process of adaptation of the Master Plan to local realities.

Elaboration of Kurokawa's Principles

The major principles that Kurokawa advanced in his conceptualization of Astana are the principles of *symbiosis*, *metabolism* or the "*metabolistic city*," and *abstract symbolism* (GP 2001: Vol. II, Chapter 3, 14-20).

The principle of symbiosis is the antithesis of high modernism's principle of "creative destruction." If critics considered modernist architecture and urban planning to be an attack on

nature and tradition, Kurokawa contended that a newly built Astana could co-exist in harmony with nature, history, and even with the region's national nomadic traditions. A symbiosis could be created between the city and nature, tradition and modernity, and also, importantly, between the "old" city on the right bank of the Ishim River and the newly built city on its left. The ideal of symbiosis between the "old city" and the "new city" was particularly important for Astana which, despite the rhetoric of building "Gorod-Sad" in the steppe, was not being built in an empty place. The builders of the new capital arrived in the city, which was already a regional center and had a population of 270,000 in 1997 (which had actually shrunk from almost 300,000 in 1992). So the harmonious incorporation of the "old city," built under Khrushchev in the 1960s, into the new city would be a desirable outcome for the city as a whole.

The second principle—the principle of metabolism—suggests that buildings and towns could always be in a dynamic process of growth and change, like living organisms. So the Master Plan's proposal was that Astana should be "an evolving" linear (as opposed to concentrated) city that, if needed, would stretch "naturally" in a linear pattern (GP 2001: Vol. II, Chapter 3, 15). Kurokawa's implementation of the ideal of metabolism in architecture is rare; one such case can be found in his Nakagin Capsule Tower which he designed and had built in 1972. The building has a permanent central structure, but capsules that are tagged onto the central structure can be changed when they wear out. Kurokawa's plan for the building was that the old capsules would be replaced in the future with new, more advanced ones, an event that unfortunately did not take place: the building is now scheduled for demolition.

The third principle—the principle of "abstract symbolism"—was Kurokawa's attempt at the "re-invention" of Kazakh tradition in architecture. He proposed that the architectural style of Astana should follow "simple discernable geometric figures which would express traditional

cultural symbols of Kazakhstan” (GP 2001: Vol. II, Chapter 3, 18). According to Kurokawa, such simple figures like triangles, cones, and crescents, which characterize the traditional ornaments and traditional clothes of the nomadic people, would enable the capital city to express the cultural heritage of Kazakhs and would also help create a modern harmonious landscape (GP 2001: Vol. II, Chapter 3, 19).

By 2005, however, all of these principles had attracted a certain degree of skepticism (although not outright hostility) from leading Kazakh architects. Some problems with the implementation of the principle of metabolism and a linear city model became clear almost as soon as the government accepted the conceptual project. Already at that early stage, consultations with local urban planners led Kurokawa to modify the linear model suggested in the initial concept. Below, figure 1 presents the city plan’s sketch submitted for the Astana international bid in 1998, and figure 2 presents the post-modification plan ultimately adopted by Kurokawa and his group. The first plan is distinctly linear; the second plan is already more “concentrated” and compact.

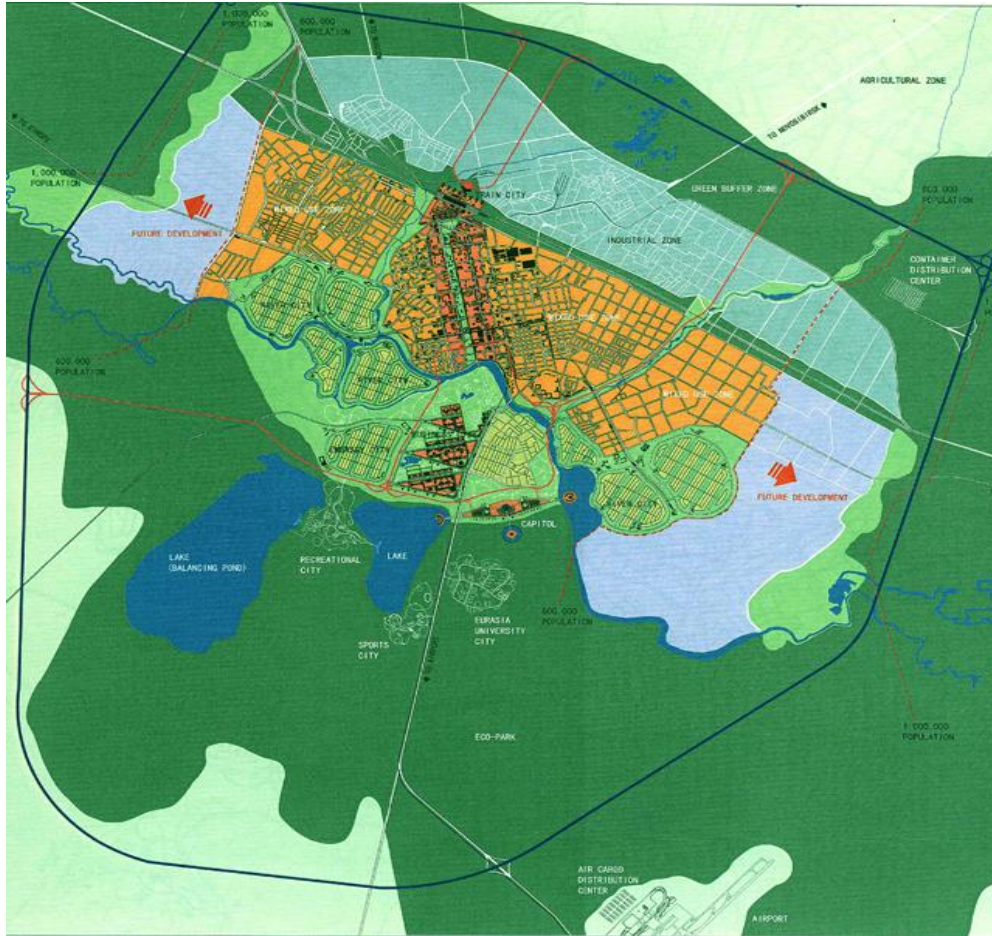


Figure 1. The initial Kurokawa plan for Astana presented for the international bid in 1998. The red arrows show the directions in which the city would grow. Picture courtesy of the AstanaGenPlan.

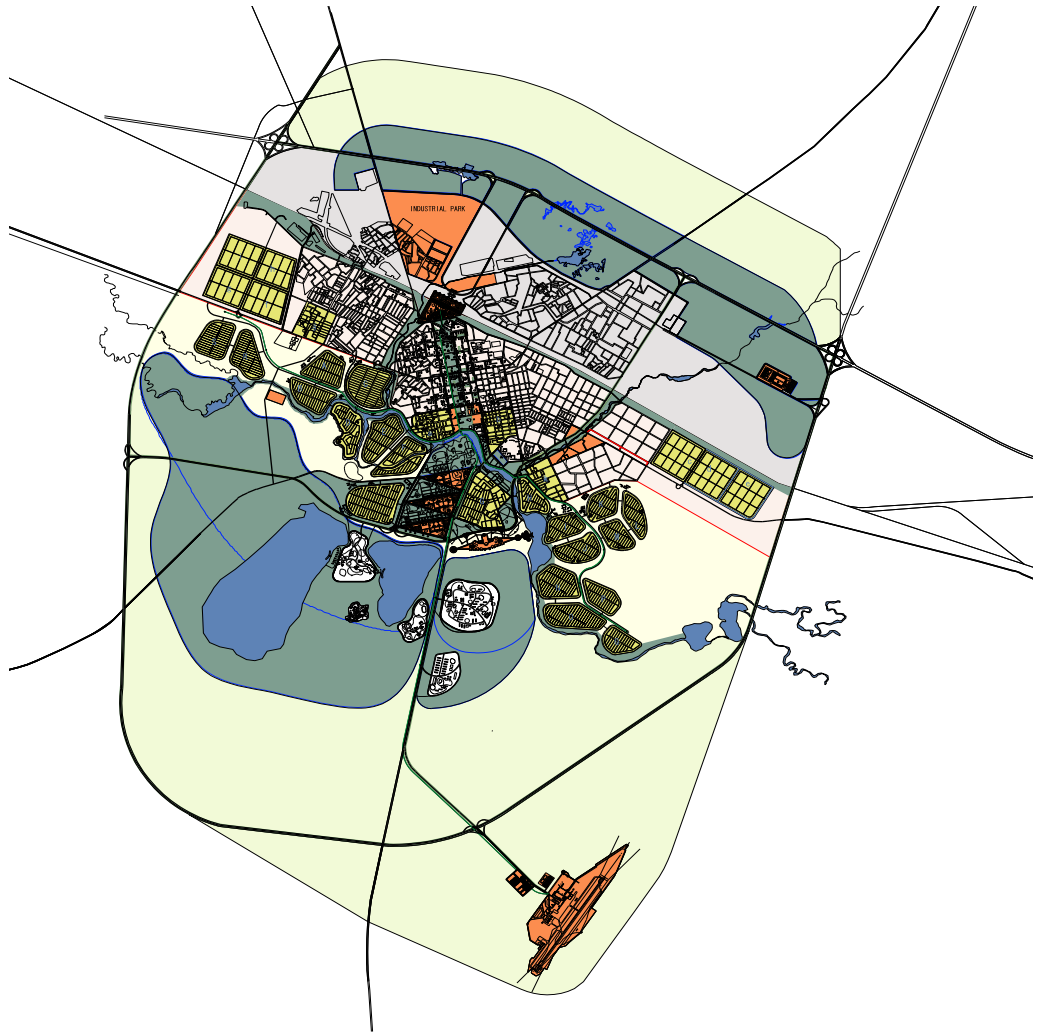


Figure 2. The General Plan of Astana modified by Kisho Kurokawa after consultations with Kazakh urban planners. Picture courtesy of the AstanaGenPlan

In 2005, the government adopted the Correction to the Master Plan, which was authored by the local architect N. Tokayev and which clearly stated that, for transportation-logistical reasons, the city would have to develop in a radial pattern around an identified “core open circle” containing all the business and residential quarters and contained in the loose frame of the K-2 second ring road. According to the modified plan, “the basis for the city’s architectural-spatial composition should be the system of the city roads” (GP 2005: Vol. II, 55).

When the correction of the Master Plan went back to the concept of the radial “concentrated” city, it was essentially reverting to the old Soviet urban-planning goals of “a limited city size” and a “limited journey to work” (French 1995: 47). However, in order to counter Kurokawa’s declared preference for a “symbiosis with nature,” Kazakh architects characterized their preference for a radial, concentrated city not as a return to “good old Soviet planning,” but as a layout that operates in accordance with nature and with the Kazakh historical tradition of settlement (Kazakh nomadic encampment) (GP 2005).

The head of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of Astana, the chief architect of the city, and member of the Architectural Council under the president Sarsembek Zhunusov said, in an interview to the Moscow daily *Vechernyaya Moskva*, that the harsh climatic conditions of Astana dictate this kind of concentration. “What do penguins do when they are freezing? They crowd close to one another,” he pointed out. “In the construction of Astana we are following the same method—building offices, residences, schools, and entertainment-shopping centers within a walkable distance from each other” (Avyazova 2008).

Amanzhol Chikanayev, another leading architect and member of the Architectural Council under the president, also pointed out in many of his works and interviews (including interviews we had in November 2008 and March 2010) that the concept of symbiosis does not necessarily mean peaceful and harmonious co-existence even in natural conditions. “There are many parasites in nature that live off their host, eventually killing it to their own detriment,” he explained.

To an extent, this idea of parasitic co-existence can be applied to the so-called symbiosis, proposed by Kurokawa, between the city and the river. In Kurokawa’s re-conceptualization of Astana as a “river-city” (the Japanese experts found that the Ishim River

dividing the city today had formerly been underutilized), the river was designated to be a “center of life,” the center of the city and of the new residential district. In a 2003 interview, Kurokawa said, “In the future Astana will stand on the banks of a wide river which, like the Seine in Paris or the Thames in London, will flow through the center of the capital. The Ishim will unite nature and civilization, creating a symbiosis between the city and landscape...” (22).

From the residents’ and local experts’ perspective, however, the river had always been the center of life in the town. It was a water source for irrigation; there were parks, beaches, and other public facilities on both riversides. In fact, in the 1962 Soviet Master Plan of Tselinograd (Astana’s former name), which was authored by a group of Leningrad architects under the supervision of the well-known architect G. Gladshtein, the territory around the river was labeled a recreation zone (*zona otdyha*), which amounted to an open public place and natural park on the edge of the city, separate from the residential zone.

The Japanese Master Plan’s language of making Ishim into the “center of life” and the center of residential neighborhoods essentially meant that this space was up for large-scale development. As a result of the implementation of this vision of “symbiosis,” the right riverside has already become what many local experts argue is a high-density, overdeveloped residential area that takes a destructive toll on the river (see figure 3, 4). Even if, according to the plan, the river has a buffer green zone in the form of a 300-m “eco-corridor,” the water for irrigation of the greenery in this eco-corridor and in the rest of the city is now being taken from the Ishim River itself, which, unlike the Seine or the Thames, is a small steppe river and has a limited capacity. Curiously, Soviet modernist urban planning, criticized for its mechanistic treatment of nature, left the river mostly to nature, while the attempt to create a symbiosis between the urban landscape and the river has made it into a commodity.



Figure 3. Overdeveloped (in terms of the density of population) residential areas on the right bank of the river.



Figure 4. A riverside beach and skyscrapers in Astana, the mixture of residential and recreational areas.

The Implementation of the Master Plan

The principles of “symbiosis” and “metabolism,” although criticized and significantly revised by local experts, are still considered to have worthwhile value and have been reworked and developed in the new corrections to the Master Plan, first, in 2005, by a group of architects under the supervision of the local architect N. Tokayev and then, in 2008, by the collective of the AstanaGenPlan. In Kurokawa’s urban-planning philosophy for Astana, the most controversial aspect of the implementation of the three principles turned out to be the principle of abstract

symbolism (see figure 5). Going beyond Kurokawa and his vision, the controversy ultimately rests on the core question of “Will Astana be a ‘Kazakh’ city?” (as formulated by Tokayev in his 2005 correction to the Master Plan) and, perhaps more important, the central question of “What does it mean to be a Kazakh city?” with which officials and architects have to grapple. The whole problematic of the “expression of national identity” has become an easy target of criticism and more than an annoyance for architects and architectural bureaucrats. During my fieldwork at AstanaGenPlan, I once overheard the head of AstanaGenPlan respond with irritation to a Reuter’s journalist’s question on national architecture by declaring, “There is no such thing as national architecture.... We can only talk about regional architecture, not national” (*o regional’noi arhitektura, ne nacional’noi*). The regional in this context meant something larger than national, something that would include all of Central Asia, Russia and even wider areas, thus the architect was claiming the right to borrow cultural forms outside the territory of Kazakhstan and project a more cosmopolitan taste in developing Astana which also happens to be in accordance with the ideology of Eurasianism. The 2008 correction to the Master Plan dismissed abstract symbolism’s culturalist claims: the authors argued that simple geometric figures, which Kurokawa characterized as a supposed expression of Kazakh national identity, are present in the art, architecture, and ornaments of many cultures and are not in any sense unique to the Kazakh nomadic tradition. The authors further stated that the adherence to an abstract symbolism approach would promote “stereotypes” and “superficial understanding of national culture” and would prove itself to be ultimately unproductive (GP 2008:29, 30).

In his contribution to the 2008 Correction to the Master Plan, chief architect Sarsembek Zhunusov justified the retreat from abstract symbolism by arguing that many architects from different parts of the world should enjoy the freedom to exercise their creative potential in

working in Astana. “We shouldn’t constrain them by requiring adherence to one particular style,” he wrote. “Astana should follow the Eurasian style—the synthesis of the best, which has been accumulated in contemporary urban planning and architecture” (Zhunusov 2008). Zhunusov further argued that openness to different styles and different ideas creates an environment in which Kazakh architects could work on developing their own school and tradition. He wrote, “Only in cooperation and in competition with the great architects of modern times can daring and creative Kazakh architects emerge...creating something that will make Kazakhstan famous and make the ‘Kazakh style’ recognizable in the world” (Zhunusov 2008). The mixture of styles in Astana is thus supposed to indicate the multicultural, international face of the city, underscoring that it is open to the interplay of culture, ideas, and the spirit of creativity as a modern Eurasian city should be (see figure 6). Of course, it also indicates the diversity of investors working in Astana and their tastes as well since architects are strongly tied to their investors/developers. Another opinion on the philosophical and psychological undercurrents of eclecticism in Astana comes from the architectural critic and philosopher Kul’shat Medeuova (2007) who writes that the development of Astana manifests an “absence” or “lack” of historical roots which doesn’t necessarily mean an actual absence of “roots” rather than a conscious choice of freedom from, and rupture with, history. Astana is, both temporally and spatially, flat, as Amanzhol Chikanayev emphasized. “We are in the steppe, we are circumscribed neither by landscape nor by historical tradition,” he told me in one of our interviews, “in this sense we are different from many of the modern-day historical capitals and even from the former capital of Almaty, in the construction of which architects have to consider the *Alatau* mountains.”



Figure 5. Kurokawa’s “abstract symbolism” concept, according to which all buildings in the city should follow a style of simple geometrical form that, in an abstract way, would express national culture and identity. Picture courtesy of the AstanaGenPlan.



Figure 6. View of the left bank in February 2010. Photo courtesy of Regis Gente.

It needs to be emphasized, however, that bureaucrats from the municipal-architecture and urban-planning offices (most of them architects themselves) have had to formulate their own justification of the architectural eclecticism and their own “official” position on the “national tradition” in architecture in response to mounting criticism from local intellectuals and opposition leaders, as well as criticism from visiting foreign journalists and foreign experts, all of whom assert generally that Astana has no cultural merit of its own. In the words of a BBC reporter, the new development is just an “oriental extravaganza” of a “petro-state.” An article in *Der Spiegel*, tellingly titled “The Kazakhstan Klondike,” was even more condescending in its criticism of Astana, declaring “The images depict a Kazakh Disneyland, but what they fail to

show is a sense of proportionality and good taste. Indeed, megalomania is the name of the game in Astana” (Neef 2006). The charge of tastelessness and inauthenticity is echoed in the local opposition press. In a series of articles published at the online newspaper zonakz.net and devoted to developing “the brand of Kazakhstan”, author Arman Khasenov rhetorically asked, “Where is the uniqueness.... Where is innovation in Astana?” The conclusion was descriptive: “It is all ... tinted glass windows, Turkish tiles and ‘the blue domes of Samarkand³⁴” (2005). The critic seemed to imply that even the blue dome present in several government buildings in Astana and most obviously in the presidential palace itself is not a “native” architectural form but is yet another example of “mindless” borrowing.

Indeed, for some people, the mixture of the buildings of different styles in close proximity to each other, like on Millennium Alley, the axis stretching from the Presidential Palace Ak Orda to Khan Shatyr (see figure 7), produce a sense of “uncanniness” and disorder, and perhaps go against some cultural sensibilities. Should an egg-shaped national archive be in an ensemble of structures including a neo-classical national library? Should a blue-domed presidential palace be flanked by two futuristic buildings in the shape of spherical cylinders (see figure 8)? Can the funnel-shaped Khan Shatyr stand next to the neo-classical oval-shaped KazMunaiGaz building (see figure 9)? But who can pronounce an ultimate aesthetical judgement? And what kind of “global hierarchy of values,” to borrow Michael Herzfield’s term, would be implicit in such a judgement? The discourse about taste versus tastelessness and beauty versus ugliness in Astana’s urban-scape thus can both reinforce and undermine relentless promotional efforts by the government to make Astana global and modern (Foucault 1990:100-101)

³⁴ “The blue domes of Samarkand” (*golubye kupola Samarkanda*) is also a refrain in several songs and poems in Russian and Kazakh.

When asked by a Kazakh interlocutor if the new buildings in Astana “look right,” British anthropologist Victor Buchli (2007) experienced a moment of uneasiness as he considered pronouncing a judgement that would “validate” the new buildings in Astana. “Does it look right?” his companion asked him. In his chapter on Astana in the *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia*, Buchli recollected the interchange: “He wanted to know what I made of these structures that were supposed to be Western and modern.” Buchli continued, “He simply had no experience with these new forms.” Buchli seemed to admit that, as a general formula, a society needs to accumulate certain experiences and to undergo a certain degree of acculturation before it can be sufficiently certain of its own capacity to be modern (particularly the capacity to possess modern tastes) and certain of its own “normality” in the context of modernity (64-66).



Figure 7. The Millennium Alley axis. Photo courtesy of Vladimir Kurilov.



Figure 8. The blue-domed Presidential Palace flanked by the two futuristic towers in the shape of spherical cylinders. Photo courtesy of Vladimir Kurilov.

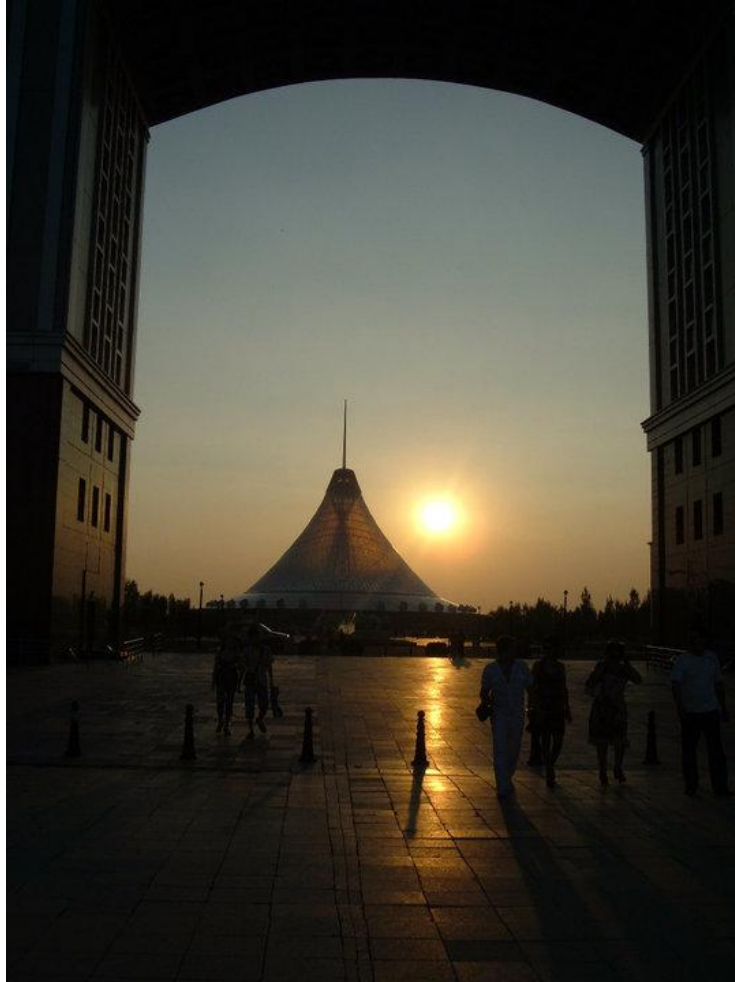


Figure 9. The View on Khan Shatyr from the neoclassical arch of the KazMunayGaz Building.

This theme of the necessity of acculturation and experience with new urban forms harkens back to Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of cultural legitimation and “cultural capital,” which along with the economic capital of the bourgeoisie sustains the status quo and the hierarchies of the bourgeois order. In the current world, these hierarchies exist not only in one society, but also across the globe, making “modernity” a goal that can be achieved only with the “right” kind of modern and global “cultural competence.” The requirement of the acquisition of “cultural capital” for the project of modernity, then, can be extrapolated from individuals to organizations, bureaucracies, and even states.

The kind of criticism that Astana is facing today—criticism of its pretentiousness, its inappropriateness, its lack of a self-specific cultural and even functional logic (as a city built to impress, not to live in)—has been characteristically employed against other “spectacular” non-Western cities, most notably against Dubai and Beijing (Adams 2010). Since I started following architectural developments of booming cities, I have been unable to refrain from noticing the subtle contempt that architectural critics have expressed for the modernist pose of many arriviste non-European and non-American cities.

For instance, on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, the *New Yorker's* architectural columnist Paul Goldberger wrote, “This is an Olympics driven by image, not by sensitive urban planning.” He continued, “The city, however, has yet to build a public space as inventive as that of post-Olympics Barcelona, or to think of the impact of the Olympics in terms as sophisticated as pre-Olympics London...”(2008).

In a similar vein, Goldberger questioned the very motivation behind the newest tallest building in the world—Dubai’s Burj Khalifa Tower:

...almost everything in Dubai is a kind of visual spectacle intended to make you gawk. But that’s nothing new.... *That’s just what Asian and Middle Eastern countries are trying to do now.* [my emphasis] You don’t build this kind of skyscraper to house people, or to give tourists a view, or even, necessarily to make a profit. You do it to make sure the world knows who you are. (Goldberger 2010)

A recent overall positive *New Yorker* article on Astana echoes Goldberger’s view that it is another “wannabe” city (the article is meaningfully called “Nowheresville”) mindlessly following the fashion of modernist skyscrapers: “In Manhattan, the buildings get higher and higher because there is no room; in Astana, situated in one of the most sparsely populated areas on the planet, the buildings get higher and higher just because” (Gessen 2010). This

condescending assumption that Dubai or Astana, though surrounded by abundant developable space, build skyscrapers “just because” is quite wrong. The logic behind erecting high-rises in Dubai or Astana follows a single rule of the thumb—“location, location, location.” Yes, Astana has a vast “steppe” stretching out in all directions, but land on the waterfront or the dwellings within view of the presidential palace is limited; thus, the value of this land is high, in turn justifying the construction of high-rises.

This sometimes flagrant, sometimes subtle contempt for Dubai, Beijing, and Astana’s modernist aspirations of “becoming” underline the fact that the achievement of economic modernization and the improvement of the material environment does not yet guarantee the achievement of “modernity,” which requires modern cultural “sophistication” and “sensitivity”; thus, transformation of financial capital into cultural capital should not be taken for granted, especially in the view of established global hierarchies and interests in the durability and global transferability of certain kinds of cultural capital.

Apart from issues surrounding Kurokawa’s philosophical principles and his architectural vision, the implementation of the Master Plan of Astana has illustrated once again the discrepancies between planned development of urban growth and concrete realities on the ground. The Master Plan’s timeframe was tied to the president’s “2030” program, so the plan had stated short-term development objectives for the period of 10 years leading up to 2010, and long-term objectives for the period of 20 years leading up to 2020, and “prospective long-term” objectives leading up to 2030.

By 2005, however, only 5 years within the short-term period, a huge gap appeared between the projected plan and the reality on the ground. The pace of Astana’s development had turned out to be much swifter than envisioned in the Master Plan. The plan had greatly

underestimated population growth, growth in the number of cars, as well as the level of capital investment in the city. The plan projected that the population of the city would reach 800,000 by 2030. However, Astana already had 500,000 residents by 2005 and 616,000 by 2008 (GP 2005, GP 2008). This serious underestimation in the projection of the population growth stemmed from international experts' decision to base Astana's growth on Almaty's in the Soviet years, in addition to comparing and adjusting Almaty's growth with that of Ankara and Canberra after these two cities became new national capitals. However, Ankara and Canberra became capitals in different socio-economic conditions in countries already possessing several nodal points for industrialization-driven migration. Almaty, on the other hand, grew under the Soviet conditions of urban management and population control, which differ drastically from the conditions of neo-liberal market economies and the rapid de-industrialization experienced in the regions around Astana in the 1990s.

Thus, by the end of 2004, because of the gap between the Astana's projected growth and the reality on the ground, the Japanese plan was considered outdated and unworkable as a blueprint for city development (in addition to all the other criticisms of the plan's major urbanist principles). In 2005, based on a new population-projection study conducted by a group from the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP), a new bid was announced by the government for the Correction to the Master Plan. After reviewing various bids, the government selected the one submitted by a group of architects headed by Nurmakhan Tokayev. As noted earlier, the new plan changed the linear pattern of the city envisioned by Kurokawa into a radial pattern, which was seen as more desirable for the city for transportation- and communication-related reasons and also as more in accordance with natural conditions and traditional patterns of Kazakh settlements. Arguing that it is not functional to continuously

“stretch” Astana, the correction to the Master Plan introduced by Tokayev’s team defined the territorial limits of the city, which could fit from 1.2 to 2 million people. The international evaluation of the 2005 Correction to the Master Plan contended that it was not just a mere “correction,” but a “new Master Plan,” a new conceptual vision of the city, which would now follow not an “organic symbiotic linear development along the riverbed as suggested by Dr. Kurokawa...but the development along the proposed perimeter” (*E’kspetnoe Zakliuchenie* 2005). According to the evaluation, the radial pattern will “artificially” tighten the “natural” territorial growth like a hoop (*E’kspetnoe Zakliuchenie* 2005). So, in the eyes of many experts, the Tokayev group’s corrections to the Master Plan amounted to a drastic revision and a de facto new Master Plan. However, to save everybody’s face and to show appreciation to the Japanese counterparts, the group labeled and the government adopted these revisions diplomatically –as “Correction to the General Plan.”

Conclusion

The continued reworking of the Japanese Master Plan for Astana has jeopardized the authority of global experts in the eyes of the Kazakh community of experts and bureaucrats, and has raised questions about the transferability and the value of global expertise vis-a-vis local knowledge.

In these regards, a high-ranking planning official at the AstanaGenPlan told me, “The problem is that, apart from philosophers-demagogues, there are very few good urban planners in the world.” Comparing local urban-planning expertise with foreign urban-planning expertise, he noted, “The Soviet Union was building more than 10,000 new settlements each year, but most of the foreign experts, including Kurokawa, who come to teach us have never planned new cities.”

In the recently published book *Architectural Symphony of the Steppe* (2008), the AstanaGenPlan authors publicly expressed some cautious and tactful criticism of the Japanese experts' approaches to designing the Master Plan of Astana. The authors revealed, in particular, the dichotomy between the rhetoric of the post-modern philosophy of architecture and the methodology of real planning on the ground. "A declaration of principles is not enough," they wrote. "Unfortunately, in the study produced by the Japanese experts, we could not discern a coherent methodology that would lead to the achievement of declared goals." (114).

Despite this criticism, the place and the value of foreign expertise in burgeoning construction and real estate markets around the world remain intact not in the least because of the global hierarchy of knowledge, "cultural capital," and "brand politics." One of the reasons for this continued appreciation of global expertise and devaluation of the local is that the circuits of the knowledge economy, of which architectural and urban planning are part, are linked to the circuits of funding and foreign direct investment. According to Manuel Castells (1996) and Saskia Sassen (2000), the global informational economy is concentrated in certain locales, so-called "thick places," which also happen to be financial centers of the global economy. These networks of international expertise, in addition to providing knowledge and technologies to governments, provide what Sassen calls "the infrastructure of global connectivity." The accumulation of knowledge, money, and power is structurally intertwined. It is not that there is always a direct conditional link between expertise and investment, but there exists a cultural and structural configuration of globalization that connects international experts and the expertise that they provide to investment opportunities. Because international experts are culturally closer to investors than are local experts, international investors can better read the scripts and calculations produced by them.

By hiring celebrity architects and designers, the Kazakh government has not only mobilized their expertise, for which it has been widely recognized, but has also hooked into financial circuits that usually help underwrite these kinds of creative productions. As a certain Kazakh official told a Kazakh architect whose Astana hotel design proposal had been rejected by the tender organizers, “It is not that our architectural projects are worse than foreign ones; it is just that we need projects that will attract investment.” So if, in David Harvey’s words, “urban processes under capitalism are shaped by the logic of capital circulation and accumulation” (1989:3), any countries’ continuing use of global expertise can be considered a strategy of the entrepreneurial state to accommodate the interests of capital.

The Kazakh government’s experiment with the Japanese Master Plan and with other sources of expertise also indicates a different kind of “accumulation” process—the accumulation of cultural capital. And, in this sense, to compare a developing oil-rich state to a member of the nouveau riche who is learning from the established “cultural aristocracy” can be very productive. Even in today’s post-boom and (perhaps temporarily) post-crisis situation, when the Kazakh state is no longer as dependent on foreign investment as it was at the end of the 1990s and when it can now launch its own sizable investment projects, the problem of transforming financial capital into cultural capital and creating a “Kazakhstan brand” remains high on the state agenda. During my time with AstanaGenPlan, I was engaged in several projects in which the government sought to “borrow” urban-planning expertise from the municipal plans and the regulatory-normative documents belonging to North American cities that were deemed closest to the climatic conditions of Astana (e.g., Toronto and Minneapolis). In order to achieve the goals of “progressive” urban planning, urban regulation, and gentrification, Kazakh bureaucrats were motivated to learn and apply the “best standards” of the “best cities” in the developed world to

Astana. I was also asked to study city ratings to find out what makes cities rank highly on the “liveability” scale and how these rankings are produced. Bureaucrats were somewhat dissatisfied to find out that most of the ratings rested on “subjective” criteria such as polling the city dwellers regarding their opinions on the given city’s “stability,” “culture & environment,” “education,” and so on. The bureaucrats wanted something tangible against which to measure the quality of life in Astana—some clear, objective goals, such as “how many trees are planted annually in Toronto, and how many square meters of greenery do Torontonians have per person?” “What is the per capita living space in Ottawa or Minneapolis?” “What are the curb-making, asphalt-laying, or snow-cleaning procedures and regulations in these places?” One result of the knowledge-transmission process from the “developed” world, however, is that while this extensive borrowing is taking place, important elements within the borrowing state’s bureaucratic apparatus grow resistant to international expertise, which comes across not as superior to local capital but as just “beautifully packaged” rhetoric. “We didn’t learn any useful urban-planning technologies per se,” admitted a high-ranking planning official about the Master Plan developed by Japanese experts. “What we did is we borrowed from their brand.”

This kind of “brand borrowing” strategy was recently re-iterated to me by the administration at Astana’s newly opened international Nazarbayev University, the schools and colleges within which are being set up as partnerships with well-established Western schools. “We need to borrow from their brands in order to establish our own brand” one of the administrators said. “But, of course, there is always a danger in such a transfer, a danger that instead of developing our own brand we will be throwing more money at their brand.”

Indeed, there is only a certain degree to which “cultural capital” and somebody else’s brand can be borrowed for one’s own image-making. The government created an image of

Astana, delivering a spectacular visual and physical landscape. But this image is ambiguous, contested, and even mis-recognized. “Cultural is continuously interpenetrated by the political and is thereby transformed into ideology,” wrote Abner Cohen (1993:8). In a sense, construction of Astana can be seen as a sort of architectural-cultural performance for the public aimed at pursuing political power (Parkin 1996). In their attempt to justify Astana’s eclecticism and mixture of style, official bureaucrats entered the field of struggle not just for cultural but also for political legitimation, and in turn, they have come under fire not just for their taste but also for their ability to create an order. Thus the charges of tastelessness easily become charges of an inability to execute effective practices requisite of strong modern states. Perhaps, as the Romans said, there is no point in arguing about taste, but a government should establish its cultural competency in order to prove its political efficacy.

CHAPTER 2.
**FROM “COMMON YARD” TO CONDOMINIUM: THE TRIALS OF THE
EMERGENCE OF THE NEW OWNERSHIP SOCIETY IN KAZAKHSTAN**

In this chapter, I explore the social implications of the economic boom in Kazakhstan through the prism of a changing urban environment and changing housing conditions in Astana. The relocation of the capital to this city in 1998 jump-started a fully-fledged housing boom driven by both public and private investment. As a result, about two hundred thousand people ranging from recent migrants to long established locals moved into new apartments.³⁵ In 2003, my family upgraded from a *khrushchevka* built in the beginning of the 1970s to a newly built apartment block, and, between 2003 and 2009, I followed the housing progress of several other people, who moved into other various newly built Astana housing complexes. On the basis of my observations and their stories, I here make an attempt to discern some new social configurations that have arisen from the new material environment—particularly the social configuration of a newly emerging bourgeois “ownership” society. My investigation into the processes underlying the emergence of a new class ethos and a new set of class distinctions begins with the fact that there has appeared a new segment of urban dwellers who have improved their housing conditions (in terms of square footage and amenities) in the post-Soviet years, particularly in the booming 2000s. Without presuming that the relative class position of the inhabitants of the newly built apartments has considerably improved in comparison with their situation in the Soviet era, I attempt to trace the transformation of the Soviet-era urban intelligentsia into a middle class belonging to a new Kazakh nation in new socio-economic conditions. Because it is difficult to weigh the newly emerging class configurations vis-à-vis the less visible but nevertheless

³⁵ More than 250,000 people are registered now as living in the new apartment complexes built after the relocation of the capital to Astana in 1998. As of February 1, 2011, the overall population of Astana was 705,000.

ubiquitous hierarchies that existed during the Soviet era despite the official egalitarian ideology, my point of departure into examining the processes of class formation is simply the fact that these people now live in housing conditions considered to be better than their previous conditions.³⁶ These people have achieved the private success formula of late socialism to have “an apartment, a summer house, and a car” (*kvartira, dacha i mashina*).³⁷ However, whereas in late socialism all of these material achievements would have permanently anchored the achievers in Soviet modernity, nowadays the same material accumulations appear to be ever more uncertain, transient or, to borrow Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000) term, ever more “liquid.”

Kazakhstan’s new capital, Astana, provides a unique opportunity for studying this new segment of Kazakhstani society. Although the recent construction boom affected the urban landscape of many cities in Kazakhstan (most notably Almaty and the oil-rich cities of Atyrau and Aktau), Astana stands out. It was there that the amount of housing built after the dissolution of the Soviet Union first exceeded the amount of housing built under socialism.

The Astana constituency also presents an interesting melting-pot case which is quite reflective of Kazakh nation-building and middle-class building efforts. Since the relocation of the capital to Astana, the city has grown from 275,300 in 1998 to 705,000 in 2011. More than a half of the population have relocated to the capital from other regions adding to the already wide-ranging social, ethnic, and regional background of Astana citizenry. Astana has been a magnet attracting all kinds of people seeking employment and social mobility –from construction workers to highly-paid professionals. Ambitious young people from other regional cities flock to

³⁶The argument can be made that some of the elite Soviet housing was larger and of better quality than more common Soviet housing. But this kind of elite housing is usually found only in the capital of the republic.

³⁷ In most cases, the summer house has ceded place to summertime vacations abroad and to other recreational activities.

Astana to fill government jobs and those available in the medical, service, and education sectors. All of them aspire to live the new modern way of life that Astana symbolizes. Astana professional yuppie (*ofisnyi plankton*) folklore is saturated with jokes about 50 attributes of representatives of different regions and cities in Astana – these jokes are usually called: “50 attributes of a person from Shymkent in Astana,” “50 attributes of a person from Almaty in Astana,” “50 attributes of a person from Karaganda in Astana” and so on. In some ways, these jokes indicate the patterns of internal migration in Kazakhstan and the culture and disposition of migrants from different regions.³⁸ For example, one joke about Karaganda says that migrants from Karaganda have occupied all the middle management government positions in Astana which is, in fact, close to the truth. Jokes about people from Chymkent hint to their perceived backwardness and proneness to corruption; one joke, for instance, says that only a Chymkent person knows that road patrols in Astana take bribes (implying that a Chymkent person gave a bribe and that is how he knows). For the young people who come to “make it” in Astana these jokes are like stories of origin and becoming. But, in a way, this folklore supports an official narrative of Astana as a “melting pot” of a nation and as a city of opportunity for all Kazakhstanis.

From my experience in Astana, I too think that for many it has turned into a city of opportunity. In my research department at the AstanaGenPlan, a 70-year old urban planning specialist and myself were the only ones who lived in Astana/Tselinograd before the relocation of the capital. Everyone else in the department came from other regional cities: two lawyers, an ethnic German and Russian, former classmates, came from the nearby regional city of Atbasar; three translators, all young Kazakh women, were from the cities of Karaganda, Pavlodar, and

³⁸ These “migration” jokes are not restricted to Astana. There are jokes similarly about migrants to Almaty and to Western Kazakhstan’s oil-booming cities of Atyrau and Aktau.

Almaty respectively. From among a dozen leading architects creating the image of Astana today only one –Amanzhol Chikanayev was originally from Tselinograd. Between two thirds to a half of the office of the KPMG international auditing company where my sister worked came from Karaganda.

All of the above mentioned and dozens of thousands of other professionals who migrated to Astana arrived anticipating improvements in their social status and economic and housing conditions. They had previously been accustomed to standard Soviet housing the style, structure, and quality of which didn't vary much from city to city (with perhaps the exception of the republican center in Almaty).

The majority of the old housing stock of Astana, as well as many other cities of Kazakhstan, consisted of so-called *khrushchevkas*, the 5-story standardized panel apartment buildings spatially organized in *dvors* (i.e., blocks) of 3-4 apartment houses that make a rectangle with all their entrances facing the common area in the middle. Today, the Astana cityscape is unique in the sense that the new urban classes' new post-socialist aspirations for modernity are set against the material background of the “old” Soviet modernity. The new elite residential houses are often erected in the vicinity of old Soviet residential houses turning the latter into an uncanny reminder of the modernity that has been left behind. The residents of the newly built houses have to gaze into their materially embodied past (see figure 10), into how they used to live before moving into the new houses.



Figure 10. A view of some *khrushchevka* behind several newly built housing complexes.

This juxtaposition of the new and the old way of being modern and urban sometimes produces an uncanny feeling, almost offending “new modern” sensibilities. One young woman who lived in a newly built apartment block across the road from a *khrushchevka* told me, “I dream of the day when this *khrushchevka* is demolished.” This inexplicable desire by the newly affluent to erase *khrushchevkas* “out of sight – out of mind”³⁹ speaks of the high aspirations and stakes in the new global modernity which, for some reason, seems to be incommensurable or even colliding with the old Soviet version of modernity that *khrushchevkas* represent.

³⁹ The most vivid example of this “out of sight –out of mind” attitude towards *khrushchevkas* is planned demolition of the *khrushchevka* housing stock in Moscow between 2002-2012 (Sulimina 2011)

The Soviet Predecessors of Post-Soviet Desires: The Housing Question during and after Socialism

In the Soviet discourse, housing usually figured either as a “housing problem” or as a “program to solve the housing problem” (*zhilishchnaia problema* or *programma po resheniu zhilishchnoi problemy*). Despite some inequalities and ill practices that existed in the socialist distribution of housing, its overarching tendency and its major goal were to achieve adequate and equitable housing conditions for the whole of the population. Thus, housing was strictly rationed according to set norms, which grew from six square meters per person under Stalin to twelve square meters per person by the end of the 1980s.⁴⁰ As Ivan Szelenyj wrote in his book *Urban Inequalities under State Socialism* (1983), the very fact that housing presented itself as a prominent “social problem” in Soviet society’s ideological discourse spoke to the Soviet Union’s high prioritization of equal access to housing in the hierarchy of societal goals and values (1983:26).

In the Soviet-built housing stock, there are big differences in the design and the quality of the houses built in the Stalin era, houses built in the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev era, and houses built later. Although providing housing was never the first priority of Stalin’s government, the few residential complexes built during his rule turned out to be of much higher quality (with higher ceilings, more spaciousness, and better construction materials and decoration) than were the residential complexes built after Stalin’s rule. So the neo-classical Stalinist architecture, despite its totalitarian baggage (much of the construction came from the forced manual labor of incarcerated felons and POWs) still carries an aura of prestige and desirability, which is often emulated in the new construction. In Astana, one of the most popular

⁴⁰ The category of “responsible workers” (*apparatchiks*, technocratic elites) and some members of the intelligentsia were exempted from these norms and allowed to have up to 20 square meters of “living space” in excess of the norms (the so-called study-room allowance). Also, separate elite housing existed to accommodate the wants of the top stratum of Soviet society.

elite housing complexes built in 2004 was copied from the famous Stalinist skyscrapers in Moscow (see figure 11). Several other new housing complexes in Astana were also built in the pseudo-classical style reminiscent of Stalinist constructions.

Having refuted the Stalinist legacy of “architectural excesses,”⁴¹ Khrushchev pushed architects and builders to develop economical standardized designs, the best known of which is the previously mentioned *khrushchevka*: 5-story apartment blocks notorious for their tiny “useful spaces” (bathrooms, kitchens, and corridors), their low 2.5-meter ceilings, and their cheap construction materials. Through standardizing and economizing, Khrushchev’s campaign aimed to accelerate the construction of residential housing and provide private housing for millions of the Soviet citizens who were crammed into communal apartments and barracks without plumbing and other amenities.

⁴¹ This refers to the infamous resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of Ministers from 1955 “About Eliminating Excesses in Design and Construction.”



Figure 11. The housing complex “Triumph of Astana” (in the center) emulating Stalinist sky-scrapers rises high above the surrounding residential area. Photo courtesy of Vladimir Kurilov.

The acceleration of the building process was also achieved through the implementation of such “assembly line” techniques and materials as pre-fabricated cement blocks that could be put together within 12 days. The average cycle of building a *khrushchevka* would take 45 days in theory: 15 days for the mounting of cement panel blocks and 30 days for the finishing. Despite the initial revolutionary role of *khrushchevka* in Soviet urbanization and this construction method’s role in creating “the best possible conditions of life for the largest number of people” (Reid 2005:290), eventually the very mass-production quality of these houses diminished their value as ideal or even as desirable housing.

Provision of housing continued to be a high priority of the Soviet government in the Brezhnev era, as well. In fact, Kazakhstan witnessed more residential construction during the

1980s (about 8 million square meters a year) than in the recent construction boom years of 2006 and 2007. However, the housing question was never solved even by the standard norms set by the state. In addition, the authoritative distribution and the exclusive access to housing through organizational allegiance – “the tyranny of the allocation process” (Morton 1980:242) had been a source of popular frustration with the socialist approach to housing question and a subject of literary and cinematic satire. Bulgakov’s famous line from *Master and Margarita* is that “the housing question has warped the Muscovites.”⁴²

In the Soviet system, people would receive their housing (apartments) from their workplace or their municipality, usually after a long period of waiting. Most housing belonged to a nebulous category which was de facto but not de jure private property. People didn’t own houses; they were just registered (*propisany*) as living in them. Thus, although citizens could not buy or sell housing, they could exchange and, more important, inherit it. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most (98%) of the housing in Kazakhstan was privatized, yet the privatization of residences didn’t result in the stability often associated with home ownership. During Soviet times, people lived in one place for decades even though they didn’t own it, and their unique residential situation supported intimate sociality around “common yards.” Because the “common yard” was a perfect panopticon space (i.e., space in the middle surrounded by apartment blocks from three and sometimes all four sides) children as young as 4-years old could play there unsupervised –in full view of all the neighbors as well as *babushkas* sitting on the benches in front of building entrances (*pod’ezd*). In the common yards women would also hang out laundry and beat the carpets. Whoever stepped out into the common yard would be in the immediate

⁴² The plot of *Master and Margarita* develops around the phantasmagoric event of the Devil’s (Woland’s) visit to Stalin’s Moscow. The Devil with his entourage comes to Moscow to discover that Muscovites are spiritless, narrow-minded, and greedy people obsessed with material things and, most of all, with housing. The novel satirizes people’s strategies to manipulate the system to get access to housing or to improve their housing conditions.

view of all the neighbors whose windows faced the yard. I remember I used to look out of the window to see if my friends were playing in the yard and if they were I would go out to join them.

The privatization and the commoditization of real estate had a tremendous effect on people's mobility and attitude toward housing, which they came to see not just as a place to live and as a marker of social status but also as an investment. Left to their own devices to solve their individual housing question, people could now make choices about where and how to live and how to manage or capitalize on their property. They could buy and sell it, they could rent it out or use it as collateral, and they could undertake all kinds of *remont*. People were in constant motion trying to improve and upgrade their housing situations. At the same time, the emergence and conspicuous display of new kinds of luxurious housing unimaginable under socialism unleashed not only new desires to buy and consume⁴³ but also a feeling of relative deprivation (if these desires could not be immediately fulfilled). In the new capital of Astana, soviet style mass-produced housing (*khrushchevkas*) shrank in popular perception from a "house to a hut," to use Marx's metaphor for the social construction of desire.

There is much discussion in anthropological literature about the breath-taking materialism and almost insatiable consumption desires that emerged in post-socialist space after the fall of communism. The discussion revolves around the question of how and when these desires were unleashed: were they cultivated by the Soviet system itself during Soviet times and/or have former Soviet citizens been initiated into the consumer society after the collapse of the Soviet Union through the circulation of images, celebration of new kinds of values, media

⁴³ In the next chapter, which focuses on the housing boom, I argue that Soviet desires were fostered by long-term objectives outlined by the Soviet ideology and system, whereas the logic of post-Soviet desire is oriented toward instant or short-term gratification without the mechanism of deferral.

personalities, and the deliberate seduction of people to buy, invest and take loans through advertising on television (Bronstein 1999, Mandel 2002). In the *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss (2001) writes that starting from the Khrushchev-Nixon “kitchen debate” the Soviet Union and the West were effectively locked not only in the arms race but also in a contest for creating the best possible conditions for the largest number of people. In *The Disintegration of the Monolith* (1992), Boris Kagarlitsky writes that the ideology of constant material progress, “the pledges of steady increases in living standards,” was an important part of communist utopia and the major cause of its demise: “It is not surprising that a generation later many people in our country, raised entirely in the spirit of Communist propaganda, not only see this ideal in the West, but conclude in all seriousness that ‘real socialism’ has already been built in the United States or Canada” (17-18). So, according to Kagarlitsky (1992), as well as Borneman (1991) and many other scholars, socialism collapsed because socialist ideology inculcated in people a kind of desire to desire, leaving them perpetually unsatisfied with the material conditions of their life. Eventually, the nascent socialist consumer society exploded out of the constraints of the deficit economy and the ideology of permanent deferral. Russian sociologist Zinov’ev (2002) puts it bluntly when he declares that “the Soviet Union fell apart because of the toilet paper” (21). In pointing to toilet paper, Zinov’ev (2002) suggests that people in the late Soviet Union exhibited an unsatisfied thirst for private daily-life consumption and that this unsatisfied desire eventually helped bring down the country and the socialist order. There was a popular taste for often unavailable small things (chiefly, consumer goods), while the more lofty things—government-funded primary education, free higher education, public social services, affordable utilities, free summer camps for children, and, most important, social coherence—were taken for granted (Zinov’ev 2002:51). One key point is worth reiterating: contrary to the assertion that the Soviet

subject was not materialist and consumer-oriented (Boym 1996:157), the Soviet system itself instilled in the Soviet subject various aspirations for material improvement. The Soviet project first promised communism with its super-abundance and then “developed socialism,” in which “developed” meant that there would be more material items to go around – larger apartments, more cars, more consumer goods. Modernism in the Soviet sense meant material improvement. As regards post-Soviet patterns of housing consumption in Kazakhstan, although I show that seemingly insatiable desires for consumption of more spacious apartments find their roots in the Soviet period, I also argue that the logic of desires under socialism differed from that of new desires that were unleashed during the recent boom. In the third chapter, which focuses on the housing boom, through my excursion into the ideology behind the Oscar-winning movie “*Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears*” (1980), I attempt to explain that the Soviet system cultivated a certain kind of disciplined consumer who would be ready to sacrifice immediate gratification for the promise of a long-lasting and socially approved gratification in the future. Soviet desires were fostered by long-term objectives aligned with the Soviet ideology and system.

Further in this chapter, I argue that housing consumption is closely connected with the socially constructed conceptions of the normal and normalcy. These ideals of normalcy – what is normal, what kind of consumption is normal, what kind of desires are normal-- have shifted not only with the circulation of stories and images (e.g. of how people live in the West) but with the very materially embodied display of how people (usually the elite) can live here and now.

“Moving up”—and out of Soviet Housing

In the spring of 2003, I started to look for a new apartment for my family. We (that is my mother, my sister, and I) wanted to move out of our residence of twenty-nine years, a 3-room

khrushchevka, as we felt that we too were being left behind in the old Soviet housing. My mother would constantly tell me stories about her friends and colleagues who had bought apartments in the newly built residential areas on the riverside in gated communities with private parking spaces and security. I also felt that by staying in our old place, my family and I were losing status, and I wondered how all these things that had previously held little or no importance and which included a district's prestige, a dwelling's proximity to a river, a residential building's security system, and the availability of nearby parking spaces had come to be so important.

The price of the apartment in our newly built project was calculated at 620 USD per square meter or about 60,000 USD in total. Since we lacked the funds to pay up front, I had to apply to the *TuranAlem* bank for a home loan and took out a mortgage of 25,000 USD. The loan was for a period of twenty years, but I was planning to pay it in full as soon as I sold our old apartment⁴⁴ and as soon as the bank would accept full payment (one year after the formalization of the mortgage). Meanwhile, I calculated that with the 16% interest rate on my loan (in 2003, 16% was the average mortgage rate in Kazakhstan's commercial banks), I would be paying more than 70,000 USD back to the bank for a 25,000 USD loan if I repaid according to a 20-year plan. This calculation included substantial annual payments for house and life insurance to the insurance company affiliated with the bank. Fortunately, we rid ourselves of the bank "yoke" after a year, as soon as the bank allowed it, but having lost about four thousand dollars just in the transaction with the bank, my family vowed never to deal with home loans again. From a financial standpoint, though, buying that apartment relatively early in the boom was a smart decision. I bought the place for \$60,000 and spent some \$20,000 on *remont* as well as on kitchen and bathroom amenities. In 2007, when my sister was buying her own separate apartment and

⁴⁴ I sold our "old" (it was built in the beginning of the 1970s) 3-room *Khrushchevka* apartment to a family who hailed from the southern city of Shymkent and who bought it for their student-children attending universities in Astana.

wanted to use our family apartment as collateral, it was assessed by the real estate appraisal agency at a worth of \$147,000.

Remont, Remont, Remont...

In contemporary Russian, the word '*remont*' no longer means just a "repair" or "renovation." *Remont* is rather the finishing work, the decoration that is done to a house or an apartment to personalize it. In fact, as a noun, '*remont*' is now less connected with its original meaning and has come to mean the making of an interior. One can ask, "*Kakoi ty sobiraesh'sia delat' remont v svoei kvartire*" ("What kinds of decoration [what kind of interior design] are you going to have in your apartment")?

Homeowners undertake *remont* not only to old housing but to a brand new house or apartment, as well. In fact, *remont* has become so important for the personalization of space and the expression of one's individual identity that new housing, which is now built in Kazakhstan, is usually sold unfinished with just bare walls—not even a light switch. In Russian, this is called *chernovaia otdelka*. '*Chernovoi*' means the draft version of something. So the new housing is sold in draft form, enabling anybody to finish the residence according to his or her own liking. Carrying out *remont* requires a lot of energy; it is a time- and money-consuming process. However, in the post-Soviet context, everybody with a small extra fund is eager to undertake *remont*, because in this way, one can exercise Kazakhstan's newly acquired property rights, improve one's property, and change the housing according to one's individual whims. The national obsession with *remont* has been one of the most visible signs of social restlessness accompanying the construction boom in Kazakhstan.

Because of the deficit of both construction materials and short-term labor for hire during Soviet times, *remont* was something one could not do with such a range of choices during

the Soviet times. Today, however, *remont* has become a miniature but full-fledged production site, a reflection of the large-scale construction going on in Astana and Almaty on a unit-by-unit, personalized level. So, there is a curious parallel between the state as an agency planning and implementing urban development in Astana and an individual or a family planning and implementing *remont* in their apartment. If the relocation and building of Astana shows the state capacity for development and its ambition to progress, *remont* shows an individual's capacity to improve his own conditions and realize his ambitions to succeed.

The apartment that I bought for my family in 2003 also had *chernovaya otdelka*, and I spent the summer undertaking a *remont* project. To an outsider, a cross-section of the whole building might have looked like an ant farm because almost everybody in the 9-story apartment block consisting of 32 apartments was undertaking *remont* projects at the same time. They were all carrying something (tiles, doors, toilets, sinks, and the like) into their apartment, measuring, calculating, and negotiating with workers, and so on. The owners of the apartments would visit each other's apartments to evaluate each other's *remont* and share their varying levels of *remont* expertise, including tips on how to plan and design, where to buy, and whom to hire. The crews of workers (usually from three to six people) whom the homeowners had hired to do most of the *remont*-related labor were usually paid under the table by mutual agreement, and would also go back and forth between apartments to complete several jobs at the same time. The crew that I hired consisted of two men and two women—all ethnic Kazakhs, although there were also Uzbek *remont* crews operating in our apartment block.⁴⁵ The men were originally from the small mining town, Kentau, in the southern Jambul region and the women from former collective

⁴⁵ The crews hired for *remont* are usually of mixed genders. The men would do the physically demanding work, such as flooring, tiling, installing bathroom amenities, and hanging doors. The women would white wash walls and ceilings and put up wallpaper.

farms in the outlying region.⁴⁶ Both of the men had university diplomas and one of them had worked as a music instructor at the town's Palace of Culture (*Dvorec Kul'tury*).

Before I embarked on my own *remont* project, I read Russian decoration journals and went to see several other friends and relatives' newly decorated housing to learn from them. After finishing my *remont*, I in turn invited friends and relatives to show off what I had accomplished. I felt as though my personal value among relatives and friends had increased after I had proven my ability to pull off the *remont* in our apartment.

Shortly after the completion of our *remont*, my mother invited her colleagues and friends over for a housewarming party. Everybody, she said, was eager to see her new place. Unlike standardized Soviet housing, where you knew what to expect in terms of the arrangement and the size of the rooms, the new housing offers a great variety of designs; thus, it is always interesting to see various apartments' configurations. And because the improvement of housing conditions is on everybody's minds and lips, it makes sense to seize every opportunity to view different housing schemes to learn what options are out there on the market. Particular interest is paid to the sizes of kitchens (kitchens are for eating as well as cooking), bathrooms, and hallways, which in the Soviet housing were usually very cramped, in accordance with the categorization of useful spaces (*poleznaia*) and non-living spaces (*zhilaia*). So a large kitchen, a big bathroom, and an additional half bathroom have become signs of good-quality housing. Whereas the kitchen size of the *khrushchevka* where I spent most of my childhood was about 8 square meters (only three people could comfortably fit in there for a meal together), the kitchen in the new apartment was 15 square meters (which despite being almost twice as large as the previous kitchen, was considered only a medium-size kitchen in Kazakhstan's recent housing

⁴⁶ During and since Soviet times, Astana had been the center of an agricultural region in Kazakhstan.

trends). My mother told me that the new kitchen belonging to a colleague who also threw a housewarming party in 2005 was a staggering 20 square meters.

Although the commonly used, post-Soviet term *evroremont* generally means joining the living room and the kitchen⁴⁷ by demolishing the corridor wall separating the two spaces, I noticed that most of the Kazakh families who had been moving into newly built apartments were leaving their kitchens intact. “You know us Kazakhs, always cooking, always having guests,” a neighbor told me when we were sharing our *remont* plans. “This joining of the kitchen and living room is not for us. What kind of a home is it without a kitchen?”

Of my neighbors, the only one who joined his living room to a kitchen was a world lifting champion (he died in a car crash in 2008), an ethnic Russian and original Tselinograd citizen, who owned an apartment just above mine. He told me that he asked the construction company to change his apartment layout and to bring the water pipes into the living room when the apartment building was still under construction. He had a three-room (one living room, and two bedrooms) apartment similar to ours but decided to turn his 15 square meter kitchen into another bedroom. “I have a daughter and a son and I wanted each of them to have a separate bedroom,” he said.

The kitchen in our new place quickly became the most “used” and favorite space in the house. One of the advantages of having a nice big kitchen from the point of view of me and my mother was that whenever friends or relatives visited us, we could all (up to 8 people) have tea or a meal in the kitchen (i.e., the person who was making the tea, serving, and so on would not have to be excluded or separated from the general conversation).

⁴⁷ Krisztina Fehervary (2002) wrote an article in which she discussed the fashion of “American kitchens”—kitchens open to the living area.

During our housewarming party, one of the women present congratulated my mother on the new apartment, declaring that the residence had the air of a “*shikarnaia kvartira*” (luxurious apartment). My mother’s former colleague, who had worked for most of her life as vice-president of the medical institute and had at one time headed the institute’s communist party organization, quickly corrected her: “this is not luxurious, this is *normal*; this is how we [people of our status, education, level of contribution to society] should live *normally*.”

The Middle Class and the Discourse of the Normal

Many social scientists (Ehrenreich 1989, Miller 1995, Liechty 2003, Fehervary 2002) have defined the middle class as a universal class insofar as this class, despite being a distinct minority, sets the norm for the rest of society on how to live. To paraphrase Barbara Ehrenreich, who authored *Fear of Falling: the Inner Life of the Middle Class*, a prominent book on the American middle class (1989), the middle class lifestyle has become the way *we all ought to live*.

The formation of the normative image of a comfortably modern urban life is both a material and ideological process. It is material in the sense that it comes into being in specific historic conditions and is institutionalized through regulative frameworks, industry-development patterns, transportation systems, and so on—what some social scientists call path-dependence. It is also ideal in the sense that it deals with the deeper question of a socially mediated desire and a social standard governing what it means to lead a normal, happy life. This social standard of normal life should depend, however, on a material base, which defines “sufficiency” and “normalcy.” In the Soviet Union, it was “normal” to have 12 square meters per person of “living space” (excluding the kitchen, the bathroom, storage areas, and any other non-living space). Not that everybody ever necessarily achieved this expanse of space, but it had been the norm

institutionalized in the late Soviet Housing Codex, the norm that was set for the majority of the population.

Krisztina Fehervary (2003) and Li Zhang (2010), who studied housing in post-socialist Hungary and (arguably) post-socialist China respectively, note how the ideal of “normal housing” in Hungary and in China has been based on references to perceptions of Western norms, which were beyond the reach of the majority of the population and outside the immediate local historical-cultural context in these countries. According to Fehervary,

Hungarians aspiring to middle-class status who had lived most of their lives in one- or two-room apartments, proudly showed me around newly constructed, detached family houses with spacious living rooms, high-tech kitchens, multiple baths, and extra rooms for laundry and hobbies—often built at a cost far above their means. Others displayed renovations of their newly privatized socialist-era apartments, arched doorways, and open spaces created by tearing down walls, [installing] new tiles in the hallway and in the modernized bathroom, and [financing the construction of] the coveted “American kitchen” (amerikai konyha), meaning a kitchen open to the living area. (2003:370)

However, in her latest article entitled “The Materiality of the New Family House in Hungary: Post-Socialist Fad or Middle-class Ideal.” (2011), Fehervary revises her earlier argument and suggests that the newly emerging single family houses in suburban areas in Hungary is not just an imitation of American suburbia but “a unique material and aesthetic form that, in the Hungarian context, is aligned with the values of its rural precedents while at the same time distinguished from them as “middle class” (18). So, according to Fehervary (2011), Hungarian single family houses represent not just an “American dream” re-planted on Hungarian soil but an important reference both to “authentic” Hungarian-ness of the distant past associated with landed peasantry and gentry and to the recent socialist past, when the state allowed some private construction on the outskirts of the cities to alleviate housing shortages in the country.

In my research, I found that in Kazakhstan, unlike in Hungary, a single family house has not emerged as a domain of the middle class –particularly the professionals and technocrats whom I observed. Although in Soviet times, private housing construction was pursued throughout Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics despite the lack of construction materials and in defiance of the (initially) imposed modernity of the “socialist city,”⁴⁸ it has never been the social space of urban intelligentsia according to the general image, of which I further argue, the new middle class is being shaped. Interestingly, Tselonograd had a large section of private housing both on the outskirts of the city, where for instance my aunt and her family lived (see chapter three), and in the very center of the city around the bazaar area, where the only Kazakh-language school, which I attended for a year, was located. The bazaar area was always associated with backwardness and the supposed criminality (after all bazaar was a black market outside the socialist distribution system) of local bazaar traders and suppliers (usually from the South of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian Republics), but it was also one of the few places where the Kazakh language was dominant and the reason why the only Kazakh school remained in the area after all other Kazakh schools were closed down in the 1960s because of the lack of demand⁴⁹. When my parents sent me to study at this Kazakh school (because it was the only place where I could develop the native language competency) they made sure that I was put in a class with boarding students from the country-side, perceived as gentle and uncorrupted “pure” Kazakh, and not with the local bazaar area children (three quarters of the students in the Kazakh school were from the outlying villages and only one quarter were local bazaar

⁴⁸ Paul Stronski (2010) in his recent book on Soviet Tashkent writes about the proliferation of private construction after World War II and the native population’s preference for privately constructed houses on the land.

⁴⁹ In her article “Routes and Roots” of *Kazakh Identity: Urban Migration in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan* (2005), Saulesh Yessenova discusses the place of the Almaty bazaar in the construction of urban identity of the recent village migrants in the end of the 1990s.

children).⁵⁰ In a curious parallel with some of the themes of this dissertation, bazaar people had money but they could not convert it to cultural capital because of the hegemonic structure which devalued both their labor (petty-trading) and their skills (knowing Kazakh helped them to communicate with Kazakhs and other Turkic-speaking suppliers of fruits and vegetables from the South) as irrelevant to the progress of society.

From Intelligentsia to Middle Class?

Both Vera Dunham in her seminal book, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (1976) on the Soviet intelligentsia and, more recently, Michele Rivkin-Fish in her article, “Tracing Landscapes of the Past in Class Subjectivity: Practices of Memory and Distinction in Marketizing Russia” (2009) regarding traces of the Soviet past in the newly emerging class subjectivities, argue that Soviet professional (managerial-professorial) classes (the intelligentsia) possessed middle-class values and underwent a process of embourgeoisement fostered under what Vera Dunham called the post-war “Big Deal” between the Soviet state and educated white-collar classes.⁵¹ To a great extent, according to Dunham and Rivkin-Fish, self-identification of the intelligentsia, with its emphasis on taste, erudition, and moral dignity, emerged in opposition to the identity of the “backward” urban working classes and villagers and thus to the official Soviet ideology of egalitarianism. Through brilliant literary excursion into the enduring popularity of Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog*, the novel and the movie, and its continuing invocation by members of former intelligentsia, Rivkin-Fish (2009) unravels a deep-seated aversion of

⁵¹ Worth noting is Vera Dunham’s assertion that workers and villagers were excluded from this tacit “Big Deal” social accommodation (1976:15-17).

Soviet intelligentsia to being set on a par with the working classes. *Heart of a Dog* depicts a conflict between the quintessential member of the intelligentsia, Professor Preobrazhenskii, and Sharikov, literally a half-man whose moral depravity coupled with unchecked ambition threatens the “normal” state of things (which by default requires social hierarchy). In the ethos of the Soviet intelligentsia, of which *Heart of a Dog* had become an inherent part, it was the “abnormal” Soviet system where the likes of Sharikov and Shvonders (the communist head of the housing committee) could reign unchecked and where the intelligentsia were unable to achieve “normal” material, as well as non-material, existences (read: Western bourgeois lifestyles). So, according to Rivkin-Fish, during Soviet times, the intelligentsia experienced a sense of “perpetually unfulfilled” entitlement to better living standards (Rivkin-Fish 2009:83). However, in an ironic twist of history, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a significant portion of the intelligentsia (particularly so-called “mass intelligentsia”⁵² consisting of medical doctors, schoolteachers, and engineers) ceased to fall under the category of “middle class” citizen and found themselves left to survive adrift in the stormy waters of “shock therapy” and of the concurrent market devaluation of the Soviet educational and cultural systems. At the same time, former members of the intelligentsia who had managed to enter the new Russian middle class referred to the market’s recognition of their “cultural capital” and educational entitlement in justifying their newly found economic power over their dispossessed Russian compatriots (Rivkin-Fish 2009). In her book *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class* (2008), Jenifer Patico, who studied schoolteachers struggling with downward mobility in Saint Petersburg in the 1998-1999, writes of the contradictory relation of her informants to the new

⁵² In his article on social inequalities in post-communist Russia Vladimir Shlapentoch (1999) differentiates between “mass intelligentsia” and more privileged “scientific and creative” intelligentsia (*nauchnaia i tvorcheskaia intelligentsia*)

Russian realities. She writes, “the teachers tended to be both eager consumers and vociferous critics of the Russian market economy” (Patico 2008:16). As Patico points out, when teachers criticized the vulgarity of the new Russian businessmen they often did so from the perspective of their *kul'turnost'*. But at the same time, they were never critical of the rising levels of consumption per se –only of the unfair and unequal distribution of consumption prowess. As Patico notes, “through their references to *kul'turnost'*, teachers marked themselves as worthy subjects of ...respectable consumption” (2008:81). So, intelligentsia’s claims to cultured-ness and cultural capital can be used both ways: as a critique of the presumably uncultured new rich who gained wealth unduly and if the former intelligentsia members themselves managed to become wealthy –as a justification of their own new position in the new economy.

This dual usage of the cultural capital argument often works in Kazakhstan as well. It revealed itself to me during my encounters with the family of a recently exiled Kazakh oligarch. In Soviet times, he was a member of the “scientific and creative” intelligentsia (*nauchno-tvorcheskaia intelligentsia*). After independence and before his exile in 2008, he occupied several highest ranking positions in the government and was known as a well-connected successful businessman. I knew some members of his family before his exile. However, in our socialization with members of the family after the exile, I, and perhaps they too, were dreading the moment when we would have to “talk politics” and be forced to make judgments and/or take sides. This moment inevitably arrived with the news of the suit against yet another embezzled official in Kazakhstan –incidentally a Harvard graduate. The former oligarch’s wife (who herself was a graduate of the Moscow State University, had an advanced degree, and educated her children in the most prestigious private schools and universities in the world) said that it was a sad situation that, in Kazakhstan, officials and other well educated businessmen, who had

achieved their positions through brain power alone, are now being prosecuted. I disagreed and countered that, in the particular case of the Harvard educated official embroiled in the suit, a degree from Harvard should not serve as an *indulgencia* from the charges of embezzlement.

In my participant observation concerning people who had moved to newly built apartment buildings in Astana, I discovered a similar ethos of status competition between those who associated themselves with the former Soviet intelligentsia⁵³ (i.e., thinking of themselves as entitled to better material conditions in continuity with the Soviet intelligentsia paradigm of cultured-ness and service to society) and people whom former members of the intelligentsia deemed the “new rich” and “undeservedly” enjoying the same or even better material conditions than erstwhile intelligentsia. In the book, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (2003), Mark Liechty discusses the tendency of the Nepalese middle classes to self-identify as independent of class conflict, as “neither workers nor capitalists,” and as a “moralizing” class that excludes both the rich and poor from the moral universe they are constructing. Likewise, the emerging middle classes in Kazakhstan see themselves as opposed to the so-called oligarchs and high ranking officials, who, in their view, undeservedly climbed the social ladder usually through social connections and family ties—backward methods of achieving distinction. Former intelligentsia inhabitants of the new apartment blocks in Astana regard the riches and the positions of oligarchs and high-ranking officials as a result of luck and

⁵³ Soviet-era intelligentsia tended to be educators, researchers, doctors, technocrats—“people of mental labor.” In the Soviet ideological discourse, intelligentsia were considered a “stratum” (not a separate class) with a duty of cultural leadership (Stein 283). This put intelligentsia in a position of moral authority. In *Heart of a Dog*, professor Preobrazhenskii exercises exactly this kind of authority over Sharikov. Not all of the members of the Soviet intelligentsia made it to the post-Soviet middle or upper class. A great number of teachers, doctors, and researchers—professionals whose livelihood depended on the welfare state—were, in the 1990s, impoverished and reeling from their lost status. Some members of the intelligentsia, however, managed to refurbish their cultural capital and join a new post-Soviet class of “professionals” occupying positions in the domestic private sector, multinational companies, NGOs, and so on. In the middle of the 2000s, however, the welfare state started to bounce back, and many struggling teachers, doctors, and researchers who had been impoverished in the 1990s began to climb the social ladder in their new setting.

fortune, while regarding their own position in the social hierarchy as steady and deserved owing to their professional and educational qualifications.

During my fieldwork, I often encountered older members of the intelligentsia criticizing their neighbors in newly built apartments for a variety of cultural shortcomings—poor child-rearing practices (e.g., letting children roller-skate in the common areas), possessing gauche social skills (e.g., failing to greet neighbors properly or at all), being inconsiderate of other people’s space (e.g., occupying more than one’s allotted parking space, to the disadvantage of neighbors). These instances of Preobrazhenskii-style tirades against the “destruction and disorder that start in the mind”⁵⁴ might be dismissed as just the usual cantankerousness of older people; however, one should note that this criticism expressed itself not so much as criticism of a particular individual as that of a social type—a person who, in the view of many intelligentsia, was uncultured and untutored in the modern ways of urban living.

In the middle of the 2000s, I heard on several occasions the story about an underage son of Kazakhstan’s acting Attorney General whom a high-ranking official had caught urinating near his elite housing complex. The story, based on real events and widely covered in the media, was re-told time and again to the point of becoming a proverbial example of the lack of discipline and propriety among members of the post-Soviet Kazakhstan’s highest echelon of the ruling elite: a group of people, which is in the views of the middle class, was undeservedly enjoying the highest level of modern material comforts.⁵⁵ It is worth noting that teenagers’ late-night antics, including urinating in public spaces, although disagreeable at best, is not something completely

⁵⁴ “*Razruha nachinaetsia v golovah*”: this statement, made by Professor Preobrazhenskii in *Heart of a Dog*, became a popular saying, meaning essentially that all material destruction starts from a lack of culture and irresponsible attitudes.

⁵⁵ Of note is that in his tirade on the “destruction which starts in the heads” professor Preobrazhenskii says that “destruction in the head” coupled with “destruction in the restroom” starts from “missing the toilet” while urinating.

extraordinary in Kazakhstan or, for that matter, in parts of the world thought to be highly cultured, and people who were narrating this story must have heard or even witnessed such acts of petty hooliganism elsewhere numerous times. However, the main lesson to be learned from the enduring sensationalist interest in the story of the “peeing boy” (*pisaiushii mal’chik*) has been that such acts should be unthinkable in an elite neighborhood. So, from the perspective of the middle class’s narrative, the problem of contemporary society was not the growing gap or the loosening segregation between the rich and poor but the fact that a “wrong” kind of people had become rich and had come to live in elite housing complexes, which, ideally, should have been occupied by the deserving and disciplined intelligentsia (people like Preobrazhenskii), not by arriviste delinquents like Sharikov.

In *Suitably Modern* (2005), Leichty writes that the anthropological emphasis on narrativity and performativity rather than on the sociological markers of class puts us in the middle of a “production” of class ideology and helps us to crystallize “class as a cultural process” of constructing identity and meaning (21). Thus the narratives about what kind of behaviors should be “suitable” for what kind of material environments and who should belong (or not) to the Kazakhstani elite indicate not only the dynamics of status competition within the class or envy of the elite by the middle classes but the formation of a distinct class ethos and an ideology that naturalizes class privileges.

The people who are being criticized for lacking appropriate cultural sensibilities in the new city scape of Astana are, of course, not only the people “on top of” and “above” the critics. In the article entitled “Routes and Roots” of Kazakh identity: Urban Migration in Postsocialist Kazakhstan,” Saulesh Yessenova (2005) writes about a negative attitude towards recent rural-urban migrants in Almaty prevailing both among Kazakh and Russian second or third generation

urbanites. Saulesh Yessenova (2005) suggests that this attitude follows the logic of Soviet colonial difference, which presumed there was a hierarchy of peoples with some leading and others being led on the path towards progress. But who is being led and who is leading the quest for modernity in post-Soviet urbanization? In his remarkable article on public encounters in Astana's Mega mall, Mateusz Laszczkowski (2011a), who conducted his fieldwork concurrently with me in Astana, suggests that the meaning of urbanity is contested and negotiated. He writes,

All these categories of people meet and mix in Astana, where they are forced more strongly than elsewhere to negotiate through everyday practice the meaning of urbanity, nationality, modernity; and the conditions of belonging. The Mega mall is a place where these encounters are especially intense; within its confined space, fundamental political processes of meaning-making are catalyzed. (2011:96)

Citing Saulesh Yessenova (2005) and Bhavna Dave (2007), Laszczkowski (2011a), also reiterates that in the Soviet times, urbanity in Kazakhstan was associated with Russian-ness while rurality was associated with Kazakh-ness. He further notes, however, that this "picture was thoroughly shaken by a sequence of changes over the last two decades" (87). While generally agreeing that during Soviet times the majority of Russians lived in the cities while the majority of Kazakhs lived in rural areas, this supposed perfect equilibrium should be complicated by the presence of a strong national and often nationalist-oriented urban intelligentsia whose very legitimacy as the national-cultural elite depended upon their ties with their ethnic brethren in the rural areas. Thus, even though Kazakhs were a minority of the population in a city such as Tselinograd (and many other regional cities), the majority of the Kazakhs who did live in Tselinograd belonged to the Soviet-made intelligentsia, i.e. what Vera Dunham and others would call the Soviet middle class. It was often noted in the literature on Kazakhstan that, as a result of the Soviet nationality politics, which promoted *natsional'nye kadry* (national cadre), the majority

of the academic and cultural intelligentsia in the republic were recruited from the members of the “titular” nation (Cummings 2005, Dave 2007).

During my life and my fieldwork in the newly built housing complex in Astana, I noticed that people who belong to, or identify themselves as, the intelligentsia often took upon themselves the role of “ordering” the mess in the material and social worlds around them produced respectively by the new construction and the influx and mixture of people of different backgrounds. For instance, a professor from the Eurasian University told me that her mother-in-law, who lives on the first floor of the newly built building where everybody quite expectedly is making the usual move-in *remont*, hanged the big photography piece on the wall near the entrance door to her apartment in the common hall. She said that her rationale for hanging the photography was to remind the neighbors about “culture” so that people would not leave sacks of cement and other construction debris near her door and would start beautifying the space in the common hall. In my own apartment building, a few members of intelligentsia or just “old urbanite” background formed an “initiative group” (*initsiativnaia gruppya*) to collect money for the *remont* in the common hall and for the installation of an intercom system. It is important to note that within these grassroots initiative groups there usually emerge some people of recognizable authority (for example, our late neighbor Khrapatyi was a world champion and a known community leader) who can convincingly explain to all the neighbors the rules of *obshchezhitie* (living together). Often these initiative groups tutor people into “community” both legally and culturally (further in this chapter I will discuss initiative groups in other apartment complexes trying to solve a number of legal issues). For instance, the members of our apartment block’s initiative group used to print out leaflets instructing apartment residents to ensure that

their children behave properly in common areas, because it is “our common property” which has to be taken care of and maintained.

So, in this dissertation I propose an argument that the new middle class which is emerging in the newly built apartment blocks in Astana is being formed through spontaneous leadership of established urbanite professionals and under the influence of the intelligentsia discourse with its Soviet-inherited norms of cultured-ness, propriety, and even labor.

The Labor of the Middle Class

At the AAA panel devoted to the rise of the global middle classes, Mark Liechty (2011) said that while the last two decades’ literature on the middle classes has emphasized consumption and the ability to consume as a major class-making factor, the fact that the middle class continues to be, in a Weberian fashion, about effort and cultivation has been somewhat understudied. Some labor is involved in projecting and making oneself into the middle class even it is not necessarily labor of a material kind.

In Kazakhstan, in particular, the narratives of entitlement to class and status, in a curious way, overlap with and bear traces of the old Soviet moral order, which emphasized the social value of labor. *Remont*, i.e. re-making one’s own space, can definitely be viewed as one type of such middle class self- making labor. Perhaps, here we see some differences between the Kazakh middle class and middle classes in other developing countries. For instance, Li Zhang (2010) and Donna Goldstein (2003) in their discussions of class segregation and demarcation in China and Brazil, respectively, show how some households’ capacity to hire domestic servants serves as a marker of middle-class identity. Domestic servants are thus seen as a necessary attribute of the middle-class lifestyle, as they allow middle-class youth to concentrate on their

education and middle-class parents to focus on professional and cultural development. In my observation of the newly built apartment blocks in Kazakhstan, the distance from domestic manual labor has not emerged as a distinctive characteristic of the Kazakh middle classes. In contrast, on several occasions I heard people disapprove of the “new Kazakh” wives who, though not working outside the home, hired nannies and other helpers to do household chores. These wives were often characterized specifically as spoiled brats for leading idle lifestyles and for avoiding labor that was their duty to perform, according to the critics. Not a few of the older female intelligentsia whom I observed would contrast this new type of wife with “their times,” when they had “managed everything” (*vse uspevali*), taking care of the household, raising the children, and working a full-time job.

The stigma attached to the outsourcing of domestic labor to hired help once touched me. On one occasion, I invited my old school and “common yard” friends over to my place and, while also doing some cooking myself, hired somebody else to cook the main course, *manty*, steamed dumplings consisting of a spiced meat mixture in a dough wrapper. The old school chums were all professional women by then, living in the newly built apartment blocks in different parts of the city. We hadn’t seen each other for many years, so I had invited them to my mother’s new place to catch up on recent events and to reminisce about old times. Over the course of the dinner, the usual questions came up: “Did you cook this or did your mother cook this?” I told them that the main course had been cooked by *tyotyа* (auntie) Roza, an acquaintance who would cook for people from her home. “She is an aunt of my sister’s colleague, and whenever they have celebrations at the office, they hire her to cook for them,” I explained. “She is a housewife and likes to cook, so I asked her to cook *manty* this time for us too.” After we got up from the table, one of my friends said jokingly, “Well, everything was very delicious. Many

thanks to you and many thanks to Auntie Roza.” This humorous remark contained more than a hint that the absence of my labor in some of the cooking for my guests devalued my hospitality. It seemed that the intimacy of the ceremony of having my friends over at my home was contaminated by hiring outside labor. Perhaps it would have been acceptable if my mother or my sister had cooked, but there was the intimation that my decision to hire a complete outsider was unsavory. In other words, my outsourcing of a portion of the household labor was “faking” the accepted mode of exchange between guest and host; it was definitely not “classy.”

Efforts to grasp the story of “inauthentic” and “narcissistic” hospitality, although not involving any foreigners, refugees, or any “others”⁵⁶ per se, can benefit from Derrida’s (2000) insight into the construction of identity, moral community, and the moral self in the moment of offering hospitality. My friends were somewhat disappointed by my failure to be a “proper” host, and if by offering my hospitality, I sought belonging and recognition in the moral community of my friends, by failing to perform expected “community labor” (this is what labor, when performed for guests, perhaps amounts to), I was losing my claims to community.

One type of domestic labor whose presence is visible and approved of in the new middle-class neighborhoods centers on *nyani* (nannies, governesses). It is worth noting, however, that nannies are not marked as belonging to a lower, inferior class. In fact, nannies are usually cultured and professional-looking young women who, along with *babushki* and *apashki* (grandmothers), help to maintain the sociality of the house by, for example, going out with children and playing with them at the playground. One of my interlocutors jokingly referred to the communicative, connecting function of nannies in the neighborhood as follows: “If you want to get to know the whole *dvor* and the whole *dvor* to know what is going in your family – hire a *nyanya*.”

⁵⁶ My friends were ethnic Russians and Kazakhs.

From “Common Yard” to Condominium

So what happens to the social fabric of the urban community after a significant number of people have improved their living standards and have acquired long sought after material affluence? What kind of social networks and associations, if any, are forged in a new material environment? In her book on urban development in Kunming (China’s fourth largest city), Li Zhang (2010) argues that people who gained entrance into China’s gated upscale communities often experience atomization and social alienation. The absence of social life in “fortress-like neighborhoods” is contrasted with the lively environment of poorer neighborhoods, where older men gather around in public spaces to play Chinese chess, women sing opera, and the youth read books at community centers (Zhang 2010:118). Daniel Miller (2001), however, notes that anthropologists are often prone to idealizing working-class neighborhoods or villages as having “authentic” communities while underestimating community-making efforts in more affluent places.

In my research in Kazakhstan, I found that the hyper-mobility associated with ownership of property⁵⁷ had negatively affected a vast spectrum of urban communities, both rich and poor.

During Soviet times, people lived in one place for decades even though they might not own the place; consequently, their unique residential situation would support intimate sociality around common yards. The attachments forged from socializing in common yards often continued throughout people’s lives, and many people today still introduce their friends by

⁵⁷ In Astana, there are no shanty-towns insofar as all the landed property, however poorly constructed or dilapidated, is registered, is a legal entity, and thus can be sold or bought as a part of the real estate market.

declaring, “We lived in the same common yard.” With the privatization of housing and the freedom to own property without using it, citizens also gained freedom from their social ties and various responsibilities associated with urban co-habitation. Some of the problems that the situations of “absentee landlord”-ism and hyper-mobility, as well as the legal ownership framework, have created for community-making are exemplified in the story of the newly built elite apartment complex “Izumrud,” which found itself in a legal stalemate over heating services.

“Izumrud” housing complex is located in the very center of the city. Although geographically, it is situated on the so-called “left bank,” it is just across the river from the “right bank,” just across the road from the Mega mall, across the same road from the Duman oceanarium and from the old city park. Mega mall, oceanarium, and the park are on the one side and “Izumrud” is on the other (quite in a distance from the road and behind the boulevard tree fence and a parking lot) of the new six lane road which connects the new administrative center with the railroad station in the old city. In the real estate appraisals, the prestige of the location of “Izumrud” is marked as 5 on the 1 to 5 scale.⁵⁸ In April of 2009 (the month of April in the cold climate of Astana requires that households continue to use their heating systems), residents of the newly built “Izumrud” housing complex (see figure 12), which consists of 123 apartments, were left with neither heat nor hot water.

⁵⁸ The apartment which I bought for my family in 2003 and where I made a *remont* was marked as 4 on the scale of the district and the building prestige –*prestizhnost’ raiona i prestizhnost’ doma* (the scale is from 1 to 5).



Figure 12. The “Izumrud” housing complex

It was later revealed that, prior to the discontinuation of the heating, one of the block’s residents had written a complaint to the anti-trust committee (*Comitet po Regulirovaniuu Estestvennyh Monopolii*) that the apartments’ management-and-maintenance company SEZ Astana’s heating services were “unreasonably expensive.” SEZ Astana is a subsidiary of the well-established construction company Bazis-A,⁵⁹ which had built the complex. The government subsequently revoked the operating license belonging to the company, which, among other things, also ran a small autonomous power station. The revocation of the license led, thereafter, to the end of the provision of heating. The residents of the apartment building organized a meeting where, after a heated impasse over the issue of who was to blame for the situation, it was decided that residents had three options before them: either to start the process of renewing the license for SEZ Astana with the anti-trust committee or to negotiate with the municipality to

⁵⁹ For information on Bazis-A and the list of housing complexes it has built, see www.bazis.kz.

try to get their homes connected to the central municipal heating system. The second option would have been preferable to the first because the heat from the state's central coal-burning power station cost 75 US¢ per square meter—half the cost of the heat provided by the small on-site, diesel-burning power station run by SEZ Astana. Meanwhile, CEZ Astana announced that the residents of the building owed it 150,000 USD for heating and maintenance services dating from the first move-ins, four years earlier.⁶⁰ The company made a list of the debtors' names and surnames and hung them in commons hallways (*pod'ezdy*) in order to publicly shame the individuals and to encourage them to pay off their debts. One of my acquaintances in the building told me, "I knew some of these people who owe SEZ Astana for utilities. One of them is a head of the regional cosmetics distribution system; some have well-paying jobs at KazMunayGaz (national oil company). These people should be ashamed of themselves." My acquaintance added, "The richer the people, the greedier they are" (*U nas chem bogache – tem zhadnee*).

At the residents' meeting an initiative group consisting of six people was elected. Of the elected was an elderly oil company manager to whom everybody referred with respect by the first and middle name in Russian or/and as *agha* (elder brother) in Kazakh, a lawyer whose company owned six apartments in the block, and a young American-educated woman who worked in the bank (my informant). All of the members of the group knew how to walk the corridors of bureaucracy in Astana. It started to negotiate with the municipality for a possible provision of public heating, and it became clear that the municipal office would not start laying heating pipes toward the building unless several buildings down the road also wanted to connect to the public heating system. Residents' negotiations with other buildings down the road

⁶⁰ The central heating system (through radiators) cannot be turned off in any individual apartment, even if unoccupied.

remained inconclusive, so they started to gravitate toward the first option of renewing the license of their old management company and negotiating a new contract with it. However, according to new housing legislation, which went into effect in early 2007,⁶¹ in order for an apartment complex to have their own management and maintenance company with the license for heating provision, the apartment complex had to be recognized as a condominium – an incorporated entity (*iuridicheskoe litso*) which could then legally own all the facilities and areas adjacent to the building including a small power station. “Incorporation” of the apartment block into a condominium would require the signatures of two-thirds of the owners but it was clear after several meetings that not even a simple majority could be obtained as it was impossible to track down all the owners who either didn’t live in their apartment or rented it to third parties. Absent landlords in the elite housing complex was a corollary of the construction boom, when people invested in housing for different (often speculative) purposes without the intention of actually living in their property.

After failing to establish condominium status, the initiative group then resorted to negotiating with the authorities, particularly with the national and the regional anti-trust committee, so that the committee would let the SEZ-Astana company renew the license for heating provision “as an exception” (*v kachestve iskliucheniia*) and the company would continue to provide heating to the apartment block even though it was not yet recognized as a separate entity (condominium). Meanwhile, during the summer of 2009, after SEZ-Astana terminated provision of hot water to the building, most of the residents installed boilers in their apartments to provide themselves with hot water.

⁶¹ This legislation consists of amendments to the “Law on Housing Relations” (*Zakon o Zhilishchnyh Otnosheniiah*) concerning the establishment and management of condominiums.

If the above experience of the “Izumrud” housing complex shows the failure of residents to come together and organize in defense of their own interests, the experience of the “Titanic” housing complex of 196 apartments can be called a “success story” of residents organizing and fighting for the improvement of their common amenities. “Titanic” is one of the “oldest” new apartment buildings in Astana. It was built in 1999 to house just re-located government officials. Since then most of the officials have privatized and sold their apartments. The name “Titanic” is actually a nickname that the public gave the housing complex because of its proximity to river and its size. It used to be a waterfront property before another more elite housing project was built in front of it. It is located on the “right bank” very close to the river in the densely developed river-front district. The prestige of the apartment building and the district in the real estate gradation is 4 on the 1 to 5 scale.

After its registration as a condominium in 2008, the “Titanic” apartment block successfully won back the non-residential ground floor spaces that their management cooperative (“Turmys”) had rented or even sold to third parties, which ended up using the real estate as grocery stores, a carwash, a computer club, and similar franchises. The success of the residents of the “Titanic” apartment complex in collectively protecting their ownership rights can be explained not only by the fact that they had had more time on their hands to get their act together, but also by the fact that many apartments in Titanic were allocated to public servants, who subsequently privatized their apartments, and who, perhaps, felt more comfortable navigating newly created legislative frameworks for condominiums.

In *In Search of Paradise: Middle Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (2010), Li Zhang discusses the “spatialization of class” regarding specifically the ability of China’s middle class to reap the fruits of the construction boom in China by moving into secluded gated

neighborhoods. She describes the so-called “double movement” that has animated newly emerging middle classes and that involves “the search for a private paradise and seclusion, and the engagement in public activism to defend this paradise” (10). More than just an example of failed or successful collective action for narrow group gain (to defend their private paradise), my study of the engagement of residents of the new neighborhoods with authorities and with each other in an effort to improve their common welfare showed the ongoing tension between the ideals of individualism and communality that animates the production of middle-class-ness in Kazakhstan.

In the course of my fieldwork, I came to witness several failed efforts of “grass roots”-level collective mobilization to improve housing amenities. The most wide-spread problem involved the so-called *haliavshshiki* (free-riders) – the apartment owners who were unwilling to pay for the maintenance of common amenities. A good example of the free-riders to whom I refer in this paper are the absentee landlords of “Izumrud,” who didn’t pay their management company for the provision of heating. One of my interlocutors told me that he had to move out from one newly built housing complex, in which he had lived for five years, in search of a “better community” after he failed to persuade apartment owners at his first residence to collect money to make *remont* in their *pod’ezd* (common hall). This reluctance to invest in the *remont* of the common halls appears to be in a stark contrast to the continuous investment people make in the *remont* of their private apartments.

In another instance of self-organization and self-management, the residents of the newly built housing complex “Sary Arka,” located next to the earlier discussed “Titanic” in the densely developed and populated riverfront district, devoid of an attached or built in parking lot (the government regulation requiring that developers provide built-in parking garages came into

effect in 2004, after their apartment block had already been built), collectively decided to turn their *dvor* in front of their apartment building into a parking lot, leaving just a small island of land in the middle for a playground. They gated their *dvor* and put a security checkpoint at the gates (see figure 13) so that only registered residents' cars could enter the *dvor* and park there.



Figure 13. The ad hoc parking organized by the residents of the “Sary Arka” housing complex.

However, a few residents refused to pay monthly fees covering the costs of hiring the security guards, who would not only look after the vehicles in the parking lot but clear the *dvor* of snow, as well. When other residents confronted one of the free-riders at a meeting of residents, he—incidentally a lawyer—reasoned that because their apartment building was not

registered as a condominium, the space around the building was still considered “public” (*obshchestvennaia privileiushchaia territoria*): nobody could force him to pay for the right to park in a “public space.” The residents, although outraged by his “free-rider” use of the organized parking space at everybody else’s expense, were helpless to make him pay his dues for the maintenance of the parking lot. One of the neighbors told me indignantly, “I would understand if he was an old retiree with an old Volga. We would then pay for him without saying a word,” he continued, “but this guy and his wife both have cars, and they know that organized securitized parking nowadays comes with a cost; these people are shameless!”

The above-mentioned trials of the “Izumrud,” the “Titanic,” and the “Sary Arka” apartment buildings underscore the importance of the role that infrastructure plays in community- and civil society-building. According to Caroline Humphrey (2003), the very organization of the Soviet economy and way of life fostered an attitude that “infrastructure has no cost” since the state used to be the sole actor overseeing it. Thus, the provision and maintenance of infrastructure in the Soviet Union were not directly related to community politics and did not require a grassroots public sphere. Now, however, in lieu of the state, some public collective agency has to emerge to deal with all the quotidian infrastructural issues. These issues are clearly not only of material and financial significance but also of social character: the private paradise in the difficult climatic conditions of Astana is never guaranteed without both a certain “economy of regard” and a certain social connectedness that money cannot buy. Collective action on behalf of infrastructure requires cultural agreement among actors about “what is wrong and what is right” from the community’s point of view as well as the sacrifice of certain individual entitlements for the sake of collective coherence and comfort.

Looking for private solutions to social problems has its limits and has its costs. For instance, many residents of “Izumrud” lamented that while they were already overpaying for the autonomous provision of heat and hot water, after the utility company stopped providing hot water, they had to face an even more expensive solution—buying and installing boilers in their individual apartments. So, although people found themselves in an unfamiliar context, including a new legal framework, they realized that they were paying for their lack of social agreement and the lack of social cohesion among themselves. As anthropologists of the post-Soviet space have noted, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, citizens retreated to their private spaces while the state retreated from “common places” and from formerly “public” services (Humphrey 2002, 2003; Alexander 2004). So now, communities have to organize anew to create new rules of engagement among themselves and with the state for the management and maintenance of common places while, in the process, creating a new public sphere. In some sense, this emergent public sphere is a result of an extension of apartment owners’ concerns about their private property. The people who raise the issue of *remont* in their *pod’ezd* have already undertaken a *remont* project in their respective apartments, so their social investment in the maintenance of the public amenities is a continuation of their private investment in their properties. At the same time, residents of apartment blocks have been coming out of their shells to attend meetings of owners (*sobranie sobstvennikov*). These meetings are the local equivalent of town hall meetings, and function to solve quotidian problems. By engaging in these meetings, the residents unwittingly create a Habermasian-style democratic forum, almost “an ideal speech situation” (Habermas 1989) where everybody who owns an apartment has a voice. In order for the owners to assume and use the powers that the Law on Housing Relations gives them through *sobranie sobstvennikov*, the owners must establish a quorum and achieve consensus about the course of

action they want to take. In addition, to gain the recognition of municipal authorities and have a legally binding status, the meetings must follow certain formulae and protocols. So, as residents and owners of the newly built apartment complexes in Astana strive to achieve the ideal of “modern urban life” with modern infrastructure and facilities, they find themselves having to engage in ground-level associational politics—to connect with one another and to act out their visions of how common spaces should be organized and managed.

CHAPTER 3. THE DISCOURSE OF MATERIAL PROGRESS AND THE HOUSING BOOM

As I wrote in the second chapter, on the emergence of the new urban middle class, the Soviet system itself instilled in its subjects the expectation of both collective and individual material improvement. In his article “Building the Future: Construction, Temporality, and Politics in Astana,” Mateusz Laszczkowski (2011b) writes how people see the construction of Astana as an “epitome of positive social change.” He writes, “This effect is largely based on the circulation of images and a kind of collective wishful thinking; nonetheless, it has real social consequences” (2011b:78). In this chapter, I argue that the construction boom, particularly in its more market-driven phase between 2002-2008 fed partly on the continued “expectations of modernity” –expectations of material and housing improvement which broad population segments in Kazakhstan share. If, in the 1990s, the general mood was that utopia had been cancelled and societal progress had been frozen, in the 2000s, with the construction of Astana and urban development projects taking off in Almaty, Atyrau and other cities, people felt compelled to instantly jump onto this wagon propelling everybody into the future because, as one of my informants put it, it might be “the last wagon” (*poslednii vagon poslednego poezda* – “the last car of the last train”).

The Ideology of Deferral of Gratification: “Moscow Was Not Built At Once...”

The historico-cultural continuities of the “expectations of modernity” from the Soviet era to the post-Soviet era and the corresponding paradox—as formulated by Yurchak (2006)—wherein people living under socialism came to prepare for capitalism have led me to ponder the character of Lyudmila (played by Irina Muravyova) in the Oscar-winning movie *Moscow*

Doesn't Believe in Tears (1980). A supporting character in the movie, almost an anti-hero, Lyudmila nevertheless comes across as a more salient, colorful, and credible character than the heroine, Katia, who is framed as a Soviet Cinderella. Without any vestiges of an ascetic communist morality, Lyudmila personifies the consumerist desires and aspirations of the Soviet youth. Perhaps because of her non-ideological positioning in the movie, many viewers sympathize with Lyudmila more than with any other character. Many of Lyudmila's one-liners have become a part of both the Soviet and the post-Soviet vernacular. "*Ne uchite menia zhit', luchshe pomogite material'no*" ("Don't teach me how to live; instead help me to improve my material conditions") is one of her most popular phrases.

The storyline of the movie is as follows. In the first part of the movie, set in the "thaw" period of the late 1950s, three girls, having recently arrived in Moscow, work manual jobs at a factory and share a room in a dorm. Of the three heroines, Lyudmila is the most entrepreneurial. Hypersensitive to her low status as a worker living in the dorm, she wants to get out of her dormitory and into the privileged life of Moscow's intelligentsia. So, relying on only her youth and her looks, she aims at upward social mobility through a strategic marriage. She never goes out with the guys from her workplace. To meet a successful or potentially successful husband, Lyudmila even takes on different, prestigious social roles. For instance, in order to make the acquaintance of young men from Moscow's intelligentsia, she often sits in the library and pretends to be a female graduate student. When the heroine, Katia, is asked by a distant relative to housesit his spacious apartment located in the center of Moscow in the Stalinist sky-scraper on *Ploshchad' Vosstaniia*, Lyudmila convinces Katia that they should seize this opportunity and invite young men up to the pad while impersonating two Muscovite girls, the daughters of the professor for whom they are housesitting. While playing this role, Katia starts an affair with a

young Muscovite man, Rudolf, and gets herself pregnant. When Rudolf finds out that Katia is in fact a factory worker without *zhilploshchad'* (living space) in Moscow, he opts out of any possible marriage. The second part of the movie takes place twenty years later, in late-1970s Moscow. Katia has now become a manager of a factory, and she lives in a nice two-room apartment; the only thing missing in her life is a “real” man near whom she could be feminine. This gap is subsequently filled by Gosha, a simple proletarian man with a big heart.

Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears (1980) is about love, friendship, and family. However, the ideological message of material progress underpins it on many levels. The movie encourages viewers to conclude that material success will eventually come to the majority of Soviet people, particularly those who play by the rules, don't desire everything at once, and work their way through the system like the main heroine Katia.

Even the words of a song to the movie repeatedly declare, “*Moskva ne srazu stroilas', ne srazu vse ustroilos'*” (“Moscow was not built at once; everything was not fixed at once”). The movie vividly depicts how the economic conditions of most Soviet households had improved over the twenty-year period. One of the episodes in the first part of the movie takes us to the yet unfinished *dacha* (summer house) of the fiancé of one of the girls, Tonia. While Tonia, her bridegroom, and her father-in-law-to-be discuss what they are going to plant on their allotment of land, Lyudmila remarks to Katia that Tonia's life after marriage is going to be predictably boring. “They are going to save first for a television set, after that for a laundry machine, after that for a refrigerator.... Their life is planned in advance as though by the *Genplan*. How boring,” she continues, “why do we put yokes on our necks...when Moscow is like a lottery, you can win everything at once.” Then, in the second part of the movie twenty years later, we visit the same *dacha* and see all the improvements; the house has been built, the trees have grown,

Tonia and her husband are glad to share the vegetables and fruits of the *dacha* garden with their friends. Notably, Tonia's husband drives the same car he had driven twenty years earlier and gets into an argument with Lyudmila when she ridicules his attachment to that car and asks when he is going to get rid of it. "It will serve my grandchildren.... If you treat it right, this car can last for 100 years," he retorts. "Nothing lasts 100 years," contends Lyudmila.

In the beginning of the movie, the heroines occupy an unprivileged social position: they belong to the newly urbanized proletariat. By the end, however, they have come to be on par with other Muscovites and have achieved material success: they have their own apartments, cars, and dachas. Lyudmila, however, has been punished for not playing by the rules and for wanting everything instantly through her plans of strategic marriage. She has an apartment of her own in Moscow but her social-mobility scheme of seducing a famous hockey player did not exactly work out, as he eventually stopped playing hockey and turned to drink. But Lyudmila does not despair; she still plans her "get it all" schemes aiming at upward social mobility and material improvement. Being a perfect profit-maximizing enterprising subject, ready for capitalism, the character of Lyudmila serves as a key to answering Yurchak's question as to why socialism collapsed and how people were prepared for what came next.

With the collapse of the Soviet order, people's endurance of short-term deprivation in exchange for long-term success stopped paying off as an individual life strategy. When the communist utopia ceased to exert an influence over most people, there was a related collapse of pre-scripted long-term oriented approaches to life --like the pursuit of gradual life achievements akin to Katia's and the pursuit of moderately stable satisfaction akin to Tonia's. Both Katia's and Tonia's life strategies were characteristic of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2007) calls the "solid modern society of producers." In the solid modernity of past societies, Bauman argues,

“gratification resided primarily in the promise of long-term security, not in the immediate enjoyment of pleasures” (2007:30). Solid modernity (Bauman 2000, 2007) offered realistic life projects, but more importantly it inculcated in many of its modern subjects a sense of contentment with what had been achieved on the path to modernity.

Lyudmila with her opportunism, on the other hand, symbolizes the spirit of Bauman’s liquid modernity. Her desire is always in excess of what is being offered at the moment, and her life strategy is to seize on the opportunity of today (like the scheme to use the professor’s apartment for realizing various fanciful goals) regardless of potential long-term problems or threats to security. If, in Soviet times, she was an anti-system rebel refusing to tame her momentary desires as prescribed by the ruling ideology, in the post-Soviet era, she would be a commonplace figure.

The economic crisis and social disintegration of the 1990s but, perhaps most importantly, the cancellation of the promise of the “bright future” (*svetloe budushchee*) proved detrimental to the ideology of the deferral of gratification.⁶² After the fall of the Soviet Union, material improvement for the society as a whole was no longer guaranteed; indeed, the future had the unnerving potential to bring about a strikingly rapid deterioration of material conditions. Like the residents of the de-industrializing Zambian Copperbelt in Ferguson’s *Expectations of Modernity* (1999), many citizens of the former Soviet Union experienced the abrogation or even reversal of the modernity project. The “post-Soviet chaos” (Nazpari 2002) in Kazakhstan, the hardship of the initial years of independence (the so-called *tiazhelye devianostye*) was perceived as a set-back to the population’s modernist expectations and aspirations—as a time of disarray and socio-economic destruction, when people could think only of day-to-day survival

⁶² In *Shoveling Smoke* (2006), William Mazzarella describes the withering of the ideology of the deferral of gratification in post-Ghandian India with the advancement of new advertising and marketing practices.

(*vyzhivanie*), of keeping afloat (Ries 2009). Then, in the early 2000s, with the influx of oil revenues and foreign investment, it seemed that at last the country had returned to a growth paradigm and was back on the track of modernity. However, the new growth was not like the linear gradual growth of before. The new growth was experienced as a boom, or as it is more accurately identified now, a ‘bubble.’ During the 1980s, there was more housing built annually in Kazakhstan (about 8 million square meters a year) than in the recent peak “boom” years of 2006 and 2007 (6.2 million and 6.7 million square meters respectively) (Shibutov 2009). Despite the greater volume of construction at the time, there was no ‘boom,’ which is to say that the society, on the whole, did not perceive the growth in construction to be a boom. Coinciding with the “stagnation” period in Soviet history, growth in the construction sector gave people the impression of a planned, highly bureaucratized even development where nobody could reap huge profits; it yielded no get-rich-quick outcomes. No “animal spirits” (Akerlof and Shiller 2009) animated it. If you qualified for housing improvement, you were put on the list and waited for the benevolence of the master-state to provide you with the housing you were entitled to have.⁶³

In times of solid modernity, writes Bauman, hopefulness about the future devalues the present:

The “present” had to be demoted to the role of second fiddle to the “future,” thereby giving away its meaning as a hostage to the as yet undisclosed turns of history believed to be tamed, conquered and controlled precisely through the knowledge of its laws and surrender to their demands. The “present” was just a means to an end, that is to a happiness that was always in the future, always “not yet.” (Bauman 2006:69)

In the liquid modernity of post-Soviet societies, present needs and desires have become much more ubiquitous. There is no “future” for many people; the concept of a long-term future is unthinkable from the perspective of people’s day-to-day struggles. The impoverishment of the

⁶³ You could try to navigate its byzantine housing bureaucracy to expedite the process, but in any case you had to prove to the state that you needed the housing, that what you were asking for was not in excess but fair.

future, however, is not just a function of material impoverishment. The nouveau riche are also poor if they cannot imagine and then build their long-term future. And the long-term future cannot be imagined without what Bauman calls “institutional foundations of order” –confidence in the rules of the game (Bauman 2000:166). His definition of order can be useful for our understanding why long-term future-oriented thinking needs ideological institutional foundations:

‘Order,’ let me explain, means monotony, regularity, repetitiveness and predictability; we call a setting orderly if and only if some events are considerably more likely to happen in it than their alternatives, while some other events are highly unlikely to occur or are altogether out of question. This means by the same token that someone somewhere (a personal or impersonal Supreme Being) must interfere with the probabilities, manipulate them and load the dice, seeing to it that events do not occur at random. (55)

“*Zhivut zhe liudi!*” (“Look at them living it up!”)

In the absence of clear future prospects the “tyranny of the moment” sometimes becomes unbearable. A former colleague of mine, who had left her junior faculty position at the Eurasian University in Astana for a public-relations position with a foreign company in 2002, recounted to me how a department chair at the university had tried to dissuade her from leaving. “[In Kazakh] He was promising me a speedy defense of my *kandidatskii* dissertation, he was promising me all kinds of benefits in the future—that there would be a rise in my salary after the university’s elevation to the rank of national university. But how could I be sure, and how long would I have to live on \$200 a month?” she continued “And you know what irritated me the most? When he started pulling this patriotic speech on me, that I had to be patient for the sake of the country (*elmen birge sabyr qylu kerek*). And this is a person who’d landed a new apartment

from the state after relocating to Astana.⁶⁴ Why should I have to shoulder the burden of patriotic patience?”⁶⁵ The increasingly rushing pace of life doesn't encourage patience. The main message in *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears*—“*Moskva ne srazu stroilas', ne srazu vse ustroilos'*” (“Moscow was not built at once; everything was not fixed at once”)—seems to be lost in the post-Soviet circumstances of Astana’s dramatic material development.

To unravel this situation of the post-Soviet “ideological vacuum,” in which the future cannot be imagined, I compare my friend’s resentment of her chair’s privileged access to a subsidized apartment in Astana with a similar situation in *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears*, when Lyudmila and Katia encounter the different world of Professor Tihomirov and other privileged Soviet citizens. The professor lives in a spacious three-room apartment in a Stalinist skyscraper while three proletarian girls share a room in the dorm (and this is the supposed dictatorship of the proletariat!). The movie underscores the different residential locations, the different construction and décor standards, and the admiration with which the girls, especially Lyudmila, marvel at the “luxuries” of the apartment. After house-sitting for a month, however, they return to their dormitory and wait many years for a “bright future” and gradual material improvements.

In today’s booming Kazakhstan, it is difficult to imagine this kind of prudence and endurance. Perhaps these qualities don’t even make sense in the absence of structures that would elicit from the people both an appreciation for and a trust in them. As previously mentioned, Katia’s strategy of gradual life achievement and Tonia’s strategy of contentment with stability

⁶⁴ With the relocation of the capitol to Astana, many public servants (including high-profile university professors with PhDs) received apartments financed by the state budget. These apartments were then privatized.

⁶⁵ By the beginning of my fieldwork in 2008, the situation at the public universities had changed for the better and one of the incentives for the faculty to work there was the opportunity to have access to subsidized housing.

would not make sense today, and even more counter-intuitive would be the strategy of staying put (and becoming poor) while others get rich.

Post-Socialist Dreamworlds

Today, the big players—for example, the banks—are often blamed for playing a major role in inflating the housing bubble through aggressive and predatory lending practices. Without acquitting the big players of the responsibility that they should bear (and we will discuss cases of structural conspiracies in the next chapter), I should note that, much as in the United States, Kazakhstan has acquired a neo-liberal social vision and a set of personal dreamworlds (not unlike “the American Dream”) that, together, have been a culprit in, and have significantly contributed to, the creation of the housing bubble and the ensuing meltdown. The popular vision of success—racing ahead of the curve, getting rich quickly, improving your housing situation—has captivated people’s hearts and minds and also fed into the 2000s boom. As a popular social phenomenon, the boom mentality is a pinnacle of liquid modernity’s “nowist” life, where, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, “each time point is now believed to be pregnant with the chance of another ‘big bang’” (2006:32). The boom mentality teaches an important lesson: people who fail to seize the current moment and to follow up on an opportunity that is offered today will be “left behind” forever. One of my interlocutors articulated this lesson to me after talking to some real estate agents: “they sell you on it [a piece of property] like it’s a ticket for a place on the last car of the last train (*bilet v poslednii vagon uhodyashchego poezda*) to the future. If you don’t get on the train, you’ll be left behind forever.”

Today, in Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan, the newly popular public places are closely integrated with expensive real estate projects, such as the ones built on the riverside,

around New Republic Square, and around Millennium Alley (see figures 14, 15). On the riverside, which is featured on many postcards of Astana, there is a strip of publicly accessible waterfront promenade just before the waterfront residential properties, many of which are gated. Susan Buck-Morss (1989, 1986) and David Harvey (2006) describe how, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, the haute-bourgeois public's display of consumption (e.g., consumption of products and services in the arcades and at Parisian cafés) became an integral part of the French boulevard's public spaces in Charles Baudelaire's and Walter Benjamin's Paris. Baudelaire's "The Eyes of the Poor" poetically depicts just such an encounter between the poor on the street and the bourgeois public behind the glittering glass in the café:

On the street directly in front of us, a worthy man of about forty, with tired face and graying beard, was standing holding a small boy by the hand and carrying on his arm another little thing, still too weak to walk. He was playing nurse-maid, taking the children for an evening stroll. They were in rags. The three faces were extraordinarily serious, and those six eyes stared fixedly at the new café with admiration, equal in degree but differing in kind to their ages. The eyes of the father said: How beautiful it is! How beautiful it is! All the gold of the poor world must have found its way onto those walls." The eyes of the little boy: "How beautiful it is! How beautiful it is! But it is a house where people who are not like us can go." As for the baby, he was much too fascinated to express anything but joy—utterly stupid and profound. (Baudelaire quoted in Harvey 2006)



Figure 14. Residential Property and Public Space on the Riverside.
Picture is courtesy of Vladimir Ivanovich Kurilov.

Like Baudelaire's bourgeois public spectacle, which amounted to an intentional display of exclusive consumption, visual contact with expensive real estate in Astana's public places produces anxiety and a sense of relative deprivation in the onlookers. Marx aptly described the psychological hardship of being relatively deprived:

A house may be large or small; as long as the surrounding houses are equally small it satisfies all the social demands for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut. The little

house shows now that its owner has only very slight or no demands to make; and however high it may shoot up in the course of civilization, if the neighboring palace grows to an equal or even greater extent, the occupant of the relatively small house will feel more and more uncomfortable, dissatisfied and cramped within its four walls. (Marx 1935:40)

This is exactly what has happened in Kazakhstan: the emergence of new kinds of housing unimaginable under socialism has changed the previous social norms about housing, and has created a feeling of relative deprivation for the rest of the city dwellers.

At first, the newly built housing which sprang up on the riverbank (see figure 15) just next to the public promenade was distributed among the elites who worked for the government and/or national companies. So, the elites initiated the market. Then, because of its association with the elites, its public display in the very center of the public place and its striking visual difference from the usual drab Soviet housing, the new apartment buildings become part of the image and picture of a “beautiful life” (*krasivaia zhizn*), a “must have” which had to be attained by the aspiring middle classes. It has to be noted that quite often, the image of the “beautiful life” failed to correspond to the “lived experience.” As we learned from the “Izumrud” apartment building’s trials in the second chapter, it might well be that residents of the expensive business class housing have been left without heating during the cold season or without hot water during the summer. But these often unexciting and dull realities of expensive new housing were not evident because of the aura of exclusivity cast upon them. For example, the three apartment complexes on the riverbank (the red buildings on the left, see figure 15) which appear to be of the highest quality were gated leaving everybody else walking on the promenade feeling “left out” and “deprived” of the good quality life going on behind the buildings’ gates.



Figure 15. Expensive real estate on the river bank in Astana. Picture is courtesy of Vladimir Ivanovich Kurilov.

Although this deprivation might be relative and subjective, it is acutely felt and perceived as a gap and a lack; yet capitalism supposedly gives everybody an opportunity to “make it”—to bridge the gap of social injustice in terms of consumption and living standards. For instance, in the United States, the now infamous Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae federally supported mortgage agencies loosened their conditions of lending under pressure from the government, which was convinced that large groups of the population, particularly racialized minorities, were being structurally left out of the American dream of home ownership through rigid credit requirements. So, on the one hand, by lowering lending standards, the government was, apparently, trying to do a beneficial act—let many more people pursue their “American dream”, while on the other hand, however, the “good intentions” of promoting affordable

housing attracted investors and lenders eager to capitalize on Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae issued loans and securities ⁶⁶ (Goldfarb 2008, Oedel 2008)

The same thing happened in Kazakhstan with the spread of the *ipoteka* (home loans) and other credits inviting the relatively deprived to overcome their stringent financial circumstances, live “here and now” and pay later.

Thus, under capitalism, existing social injustices and material inequalities can fuel an economic boom/bubble. The frontier of consumption pushes ahead, and the relatively deprived must struggle endlessly to attempt to reach it. Constant improvement becomes a social pressure—one must move to a better neighborhood, reside in a larger home, buy a new car, or (if those upgrades are outside financial reach) at least re-decorate one’s current home. In these ways, one can display a personal effort, a personal struggle to make improvements using whatever limited resources are available. Those who don’t improve their material world don’t move ahead and are “left behind.” Stability in consumption is rejected as stagnation. Maintaining one’s status through consumption requires constant change/newness and constant mobility. You have to buy today, not tomorrow; consume now, not later. If you don’t have hard cash now, buy on credit. During an economic boom, the desire for consumption seems insatiable. In Kazakhstan, the speculative investment in housing has depended upon this voracious desire and demand to live well (*zhit’ kak liudi*), to keep up with the Joneses.

A friend of mine bought a new car –a Land Cruiser. When congratulating him on the purchase, I improvised a Kazakh omen for new clothes “*ozin kiip, ozin tozdyr*” (“enjoy and wear it out by using”) into “*ozin zhurgizip, ozin tozdyr*” –“wear it out by driving.” Someone else, who was present during the encounter, corrected me, saying that “*ozin tozdyr*” (wear it out) –is not a

⁶⁶ Of course, one could argue that social equality cannot be achieved by making poor people take credit and buy things.

very good omen nowadays. He asked, “Are you wishing him to wear it out [i.e. suggesting he should use it for a long time]? –this cannot be a good thing.” He added, “You have to wish that he buys a brand new car, before this one gets old.” Apparently, one is not encouraged to enjoy the same car for very long.

In 2008, my cousin’s 24 year old son took an auto-credit (*avtokredit*) of 26,000 USD from the bank to buy a new Hyundai Sonata sedan. Having recently graduated with an MA from the Technical University in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk (Russia), he returned to Astana and started working as a telecommunications specialist with the local telecom company. The payments on his car accounted for more than half of his starting salary – 600 USD. When my aunt (the grandmother of the young man) pointed to the unnecessary profligacy of such a purchase, his mother defended him. “He is a smart, well-educated boy...he is not asking any money from us, he will pay for it with his own salary,” she said, adding, “he is not worse than any other young man (*eshkimnen kem emes*) [in Kazakh].” The three generations of the family (my aunt and uncle, my cousin and his wife, and their two grown-up children), like many families in Kazakhstan, were living together in the same house and the conversation took place in their old kitchen.

My aunt then went on to blame the new rich who, through their conspicuous consumption, set a bad example for the youth. Young people, she said, wanting to follow the ways of the rich, take out loans from the banks and falls into entrapment of debt. “The wicked children of the rich (*bailardyn kuturgan balalary*) [in Kazakh] throw money around (*aqsha shashyp*) and break the hearts of the youth (*zhastardyn konilin buzady*), who then go and take credits to wear fancy clothes and drive nice cars.” So, in my late elderly aunt’s view⁶⁷, the excessive desire to “catch up” and to be “like others” leads to debt and increasing wretchedness.

⁶⁷ My aunt died on June 26, 2011 at the age of 78.

This narrative connection between untamed desire and the depravity of debt is similar to the connection, constructed by Liechty's (2003) Nepali middle class interlocutors, between the desire to join the world of "fashion" and prostitution. As Liechty's middle class informants continuously pointed out to him, lower class women fall into prostitution because they want to buy nice clothes and "do fashion" (Liechty 2003).

Working/lower class boys' and girls' daydreaming about the world of the rich also found its way into the popular culture. The two most popular music videos in 2005 featured stories of young working class men impersonating the new rich or just dreaming about the world of the rich.

The first is by the Russian group "Zveri," in which a young worker in an auto-repairs shop is asked by his manager to test-drive a client's expensive car (Bentley). During the drive he comes across a girl in the city trying to haul a cab/car to get a ride. He gives the girl a ride and, pretending to be the car owner, invites her out for a date. He borrows money from a friend to pay for a dinner in an expensive restaurant. Then, by chance, the girl comes to the shop to pick up her own car (in the reversal of "Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears" motive) and finds out that the guy is just an auto-mechanic (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWmfe5wEK5E>).

The second, a Kazakh produced video, is a satirical parody of Shakira's song played with a Kazakh national instrument *dombyra* featuring a young man living a "dream life" of an obnoxious and carefree rich boy – riding a limousine with girls and going to restaurants (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2z9DXo3cCA0>). The video produces this uncanny feeling of being an unglamorous mimicry of mimicry. The boy has acquired the trappings of a Kazakh nouveau riche who has acquired the trapping of American (gangster) and discotheque culture.

However, there is a rude awakening for the boy in the end when he awakens from his dream to face his reality as a poor construction worker riding a junky dirty car.

Housing Strategies

It is hard to live through a depression, a recession, or any financial crisis in general, but psychologically it might be just as difficult to live through an economic boom. In Kazakhstan, I have heard and witnessed many stories of personal struggles during the upswing in the economy: struggles to buy and own a home, to maintain the status of one's family through material gain, to achieve (impossible) stability in the face of surreal spikes in housing prices accompanied by uncertainty and seemingly unstoppable conspicuous consumption.

Housing Case 1. I start the series of housing cases from the field that I present in the third and the fourth chapters with a story of my aunt's family. My recently deceased aunt and her husband, originally came from the Cheliabinsk region of the Russian Federation and belonged to the generation of the 1930s (see introduction). The life activity of my aunt's husband was connected to agriculture throughout his life. They relocated to the Tselinograd region in the middle of the 1970s. My uncle got a job in the nearby *sovhoz* (collective farm), first as deputy director and subsequently as director. After they retired at the end of the 1980s, they bought a private house in the city and moved in with their son and his family. For twenty years (till 2010), the extended family of my aunt (my aunt and her husband, my cousin and his wife and two children) lived in a small one story cottage house without plumbing in the suburbs of Astana (within the city limit and with access to public transportation), which allowed them to keep livestock – cows, sheep, chicken and ducks. My cousin served in the internal military forces (he retired in 2003 as a lieutenant colonel) and received a two-room apartment from the state in a 5-

story building in the beginning of the 1990s. The family, however, continued to live together in the house in the suburbs and rent out their city apartment. In her article on the normalization of single family houses as a middle class practice in modern Hungary, Fehervary (2011) notes that under socialism having private house often allowed people to have a “second economy” outside of the state control. In the second chapter, I also write about the private housing sector around the bazaar, which allowed people to engage in bazaar activities and use their private houses as production sites (e.g. to store materials, to sort fruit and vegetables, to slaughter animals whose meat was to be sold at the bazaar). So, during Soviet times, my aunt’s house on the outskirts of Astana was an asset, which allowed their family to integrate the modern life of the city with the somewhat more traditional way of life without experiencing any encroaching “clash of civilizations.” For example, my father, my uncle and my aunts and all of their families never needed to buy any meat from Soviet supermarkets. In the beginning of winter, my uncle and my father would chip in together, buy a horse and cow, slaughter them in my aunt’s backyard and divide the horsemeat and the cow-meat between our families. This practice of slaughtering an animal in the winter and consuming its meat till the spring/summer is called *sogym* in Kazakh. Needless to say, because of access to the second economy, my aunt’s family was much better off financially than many families who lived a purely urban way of life. After the relocation of the capital to Astana, however, the presence of cows and other livestock in the vicinity of the city became a liability on the image of Astana as the modern capital city. In 2006, the municipality issued a ban on keeping livestock in the district of my aunt; the summer pasture was also closed off. This reflected on the devaluation of the price of their house because the value of such houses, even without plumbing, hot water, and central heating came with the opportunity to keep livestock and engage in subsistent agriculture. In 2005, my cousin and his wife sold their two-

room apartment for 35,000 USD and invested in a new housing project which was to be completed in 2008 but, because of the crisis, was frozen. My cousin's wife invested, through a "shareholding participation" scheme (*dolevoe uchastie*), in a three-roomed apartment (for her husband, herself and their children) and in one-roomed place for my aunt and her husband. The two apartments were to be on the same floor of the same building. However, the 35,000 USD was only a down-payment and was not enough to cover the whole price. So the question of first taking out credit to buy an apartment but then eventually selling the house to cover the credit inevitably arose. But even though the house devalued in price, it had yet to do so in the mind of my aunt and her husband, who owned it. So they were very hesitant to sell. As my cousin's wife who was now very eager to move out of their 20-years' residence confided: "One day they want to sell the house, one day they don't." The problem was also that there was no way that my cousin and his wife could pay for the new apartments in full without selling the house. My cousin was a retired officer and, even though he took jobs in private security and his wife worked as an accountant in a private firm, their funds were always short mainly because they were paying university tuition fees for both of their children. My cousin's children had grown up and become weary of having to live in "village" conditions. So, in 2008, when I arrived from the US to do my fieldwork, my aunt's family's financial situation was unnervingly precarious. My cousin and his wife had invested their money in the apartment complex which was as yet unfinished (eventually in August of 2010 the company with which they invested, provided them with a four-roomed place in a different apartment complex), they had to make payments on their credit, and their house which my aunt and her husband had reluctantly put up for sale was not selling.

Housing Case 2. In the spring of 2006, when housing prices had almost reached their peak, an acquaintance of mine, Ainur, who edited economic-news segments for national TV channels, shared her frustrations with me about her inability to afford an apartment in Almaty despite a good salary:

My husband and I together are making about \$3,500 a month. Our salary is comparable to Central European levels, and we cannot afford to buy an adequate apartment in Almaty.⁶⁸ Today we rent a two-room apartment not far from the center of the city for \$700. The market price of this apartment built some 20 years ago is \$150,000! Can you imagine?! Even if I could get the cheapest annual 12 percent mortgage loan from *Kazkommersbank* with a down-payment of \$15,000 for a period of twenty years, I would have to pay the bank \$1,400 each month for the first ten years to service this loan. And this is not even the center of the city and not my dream apartment! If the prices go down and this apartment is devalued, I'll be stuck with the \$135,000 in loans for the rest of my life. I am not going to submit myself to such a rip off—I am better off renting. The situation in the housing market is unacceptable, even for the people who are making good money. What about the people [majority] who don't earn as much as we do?

Ainur's strategy in 2006 was to rent and stay away from the housing bubble, even if it meant that she and her husband would not have a place of their own for a while, that is, would not achieve the aspired-to normalcy of home ownership. However, many more people who took loans and bought housing in the middle of the bubble did so because, like Ainur, they wanted property of their own, as well as the stability and status associated with it.

Housing Case 3. In 2006, my interlocutors Nurlan and Gul'mira put a down-payment of \$20,000 and took a loan from the *KhalykBank* to pay for the purchase of an apartment in the planned residential project *Sayran* spearheaded by the now bankrupt *Kuat* national company (see figure 16).

⁶⁸ At the peak of the housing bubble in Kazakhstan, housing in Almaty was about twice as expensive as in Astana because of the prevalence in the market of "elite" housing.

The housing project, according to their contract, was to be completed by the end of 2008. Nurlan and Gul'mira, both originally from eastern Kazakhstan, had been married for five years and had a three-year old daughter. At the time of our interview, they were renting a one-bedroom apartment. Nurlan, who had studied in the United States on a government fellowship, was working for a government agency in Almaty. His wife, Gul'mira, was working as a lawyer in a real estate agency. Their cumulative family income was about \$1,500 a month, and the monthly rent for the apartment was \$500. The housing investment that Nurlan and Gul'mira engaged in was called "shareholding participation" (*dolevoe uchastie*) and was very popular in Kazakhstan at the time; it allowed people to buy prospective housing supposedly below the market price. The downside of this method, however, was that the housing was usually only "under construction" and buyers had to wait for two or three years for their house to be completed. The housing project where Nurlan and Gul'mira hoped to live had acquired the nickname "Manhattan," giving a hint of its enormous size and prospective overpopulation. It was planned as a complex of eight 20-story apartment buildings and two 18-story apartment buildings along with a supermarket, child-care center, and other facilities.



Figure 16. “Sairan” housing project by construction company KUAT, the would-to-be residence of Gulmira and Nurlan. Almaty

Because the prices of such residential properties had continued to rise throughout the year after Gul'mira's investment with *Kuat*, she was convinced that she and her family had made a smart decision by taking out a loan for investment in a home. “The price per square meter in that area of the city had reached \$2,000, and we bought it for only \$870!” she told me in 2007. In 2008-2009 however, the *Sayran* project came to a halt. Although the largest Kazakhstani construction company had been overseeing the project, its top managers were facing multiple lawsuits in court. Finally, in 2010, construction restarted with an injection of \$100 million from the National Wealth Fund. In table 1, I have made a calculation of the future value attributable to

Gul'mira and Nurlan's investment (an analysis that businesses usually make to evaluate opportunities in real estate) and found that, from an investment perspective, Gul'mira and Nurlan would have been better off financially if, instead of taking out a 12-year loan for the purchase of an apartment with that credit money, they had put their down-payment in a savings account and had continued to rent.

Asset cost	\$ 70,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FV (1) of monthly deposit payments= • $\Sigma 600 * (1+12.5\%)^{144} = \\$198,550.18$ • <i>FV of monthly rent payments (starting from March 06 till Dec 08) = $\Sigma 500 * (1+12.5\%)^{34} = \\$20,274.46$ (We should not incorporate this cost into the cost of purchasing an apartment as sunk cost, because they would bear it regardless whether or not to buy an apartment)</i> • FV (2) of deposit of 20,000= • $20,000 * (1+12.5\%)^{144} = \\$88,941.03$ • Total FV (3) of purchasing an apartment = FV of monthly deposit payments & and initial deposit of 20,000= FV (1)+ FV (2) • $FV (3) = 20,000 * (1+12.5\%)^{144} + \Sigma 600 * (1+12.5\%)^{144} = \\$88,941.03 + \\$198,550.18 = \\$287,491.21$ • <u>Decision: To justify purchase, it should cost in 12 years at least FV (3)= \$287,491.21</u> • <u>FV (4) of monthly rent payment = $\Sigma 500 * (1+12.5\%)^{144} = \\$165,458.48$</u>
Down-payment	\$ 20,000	
Loan principal	\$ 30,000	
Interest rate	12.50%	
Loan term (years)	12	
Months in a year	12	
Lease rental payments	\$ 600	
Rent payments	\$ 500	
Estimated number of pmts until moving to the apt (starting from March 06 till Dec 08)	34	
Monthly income	\$ 1,500	

Table 1. The Future Value of Investment.

When I shared my findings with Gul'mira, she seemed to dislike my questioning her rationale. "Of course, I know about these kinds of calculations," she said, "but this isn't just

about money. We have a family. Are you suggesting that we rent for the rest of our lives?” A relative of mine propounded the same argument when she ventured into a “shareholding participation” project, although she and her family already lived in a sufficiently large home located in a new housing project. When I asked her why she was taking the risk of investing in the yet-to-be-built property she said that she was thinking of her children’s future. “You know, the children are growing fast,” she noted. “Soon, I will have to marry them off, and who knows what the situation will be then; at least they will have a place to live.”

Before the crisis, people like Nurlan and Gul’mira considered “shareholding participation schemes” a way to acquire a place of their own for what they thought were reasonable, below-market values; for other people, however, it was also an investment in the future (for children, etc.) and a speculation instrument. There are no statistics on how many people invested their money in new-construction projects in order to resell the property upon completion of the construction. But, undoubtedly, for several years preceding the burst of the construction bubble, with housing prices growing 50-60 percent a year, real estate had been the most lucrative investment market in Kazakhstan. Some economists have argued that, in Kazakhstan, the attractiveness of housing as an investment has stemmed from the lack of other viable investment opportunities in the country. If Kazakhstan had possessed a developed stock market, these economists argue, people would have invested in it—however, I would disagree with that assessment for the following reasons.

To many people around the world, housing investment is psychologically comforting. And, of course, it must be psychologically comforting for people who endured permanent housing shortages and rationing in the former Soviet Union. Unlike investing in the stock market, where money breeds more money in some mysterious way, investing in something

tangible and literally grounded makes sense to people on an intuitive level, especially in our “virtual” economy. It is something for the present as well as for the future, something stable in our unstable world.

It is ironic, however, that this desire for security and stability through the acquisition of real (tangible) estate has been capitalized on and to some extent also virtualized. It is no coincidence that the real estate bubble in the United States followed the dot.com bubble of the 2000s. The credit agreement that Gul’mira and many others signed as shareholders investing in their future housing was not a mortgage agreement but a cession agreement; they were not buying actually existing real estate but acquiring credit to purchase a projected property while creating the possibility that they would cede to the bank their future ownership rights.

A word needs to be said about the notion of housing ownership and its normalization as a middle class practice, as a settling down, as putting down of roots. People who own nothing of substance are perceived as—and perceive themselves as—uprooted, unstable, even untrustworthy. Investing in housing is not just about making money: it is about other matters of considerable importance such as the human need and desire to have shelter, to live with one’s kin as a family, and to maintain one’s identity, privacy, and social status. The ownership of housing has acquired economic (opportunity to capitalize), cultural (as a marker of class), and even political (as a residency status and a sign of “good” citizenship) importance. For example, when I go to the American embassy in Astana, I show the title to my apartment as evidence of my ties to my country. Kazakh students who are awarded presidential study-abroad fellowships (*Bolashak*) cannot actually depart for the foreign country unless they first leave their house as collateral, helping ensure that they return to the Motherland and their property.

The stability associated with real estate has been an illusion. In many cases I have heard and recorded, acquiring real estate led to little of the much desired nested-ness and rooted-ness so assuredly promised in various socio-economic narratives. Despite having invested so much energy in acquiring a piece of real estate and doing *remont*, many people hesitate little to put the property up for sale so that they can move on to a different, more expensive property within the same city. In residential real estate, there are always new “frontiers.” The housing then becomes just like any other commodity with some “cultural patina” (Appadurai 1997) – a personal touch of *remont* and a desired status of ownership.

This tension between required mobility and desired stability animates people’s current predicament: the paradox of having to be mobile to achieve stability. Consumer society first and foremost is about “being on the move” (Bauman 2007:98). Many of my interlocutors who relocated to Astana from Karaganda, Almaty, and Jambul managed to move at least once from a home that they owned. “All in all, ‘being ahead’ augurs a chance of security, certainty and the certainty of security—precisely the kinds of experience which the consuming life most conspicuously and painfully misses, in spite of being guided by the desire to acquire it” (Bauman 2007:83).

When I asked some of my informants in Astana why they think that people in Astana move around and change apartments they own so often, I often heard in response, even from intellectuals, that it is a “nomadic spirit” of the Kazakhs which manifests itself in new conditions. Being an anti-essentialist anthropologist, I, of course, have been extremely skeptical of the “nomadic spirit” persisting through centuries. One of my informants, however, suggested more practically that people move because they have to do *remont* (renovation) anyway which, according to this informant’s estimates, costs between 20,000-30,000 USD. So it then makes

sense to use this money not just for *remont* but in order to upgrade their housing situation altogether. So, if people have to endure the drastic change of environment through *remont anyway*, they might as well change the environment (place) completely.

This paradox of people wanting to be stable but keeping on moving, perhaps, helps explain why, in the post-crisis period, the Kazakhstan government has been devising a plan to keep people tied to one residence: imposing high taxes on the re-sale of any home within a year of purchase and advocating rent-to-buy schemes, which take residential property out of circulation for up to 12 years. These strategies serve to keep people nested and pacified; and perhaps these strategies also reveal the state's choice of stability over mobility. In his works, David Harvey has consistently pointed out the convergence of interests between the state and capital in urban environment arguing that the state, through its territorialization practices –space planning, zoning and regulating, creates conditions for “spatial fixes” of capital in built environment and guarantees the return of the profit (Harvey 1999, 2003, 2006). Kazakhstan's post-crisis experience (discussed in chapter four), however, shows that at a certain point too big and rapid circulation of capital might go against the best interest of the state and the territorialized order that it wants to impose. Ultimately, the state wants the dust to be settled, construction finished and to have a clear view over its territory and population.

The Boom without Confidence

In *Animal Spirits* (2009), Akerlof and Shiller explain that the housing bubble in the United States stemmed from, among other factors, home buyers' “beyond rational” confidence in their own prospects as well as the prospects of the economy as a whole. “When people are confident, they go out and buy; when they are unconfident, they withdraw, and they sell,” the

authors wrote. “When people make significant investment decisions, they must depend on confidence” (13). Hence, we often hear the terms ‘consumer confidence’ or ‘investor confidence’.

If, in the United States, the recent housing bubble rested on over-confidence (Akerlof and Shiller 2009, Shiller 2005), Kazakhstan’s housing bubble in 2002-2008, I believe, rested on the exact opposite: a lack of faith and confidence in the future fueled by the excesses of the boom period. In Soviet times, people believed in the gradual ascent toward communism or at least developed socialism, and this belief was not just “blind faith” in a “bright future.” There were signs of progress in everyday material life indicating that there indeed would be a better future. One who believes in the future can sacrifice present gratification for the sake of future gratification. One can tolerate life in a dormitory, or *kommunalka* (communal apartment) for many years while waiting for an opportunity to live in one’s own apartment (as is the case with the heroine of *Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears*), while diligently saving for several years to buy a car, and while tolerating a low-ranking position at work in the hope of landing a future promotion.

On top of the collapse of the previous social order and its promises, two other factors—the overall economic collapse and the related currency devaluations in 1992 and 1998—helped erase any remaining trust that many Kazakhstanis had in the current system. Because a great degree of trust is required for thinking and saving long-term, and because this trust suffered its own collapse of sorts, Kazakhstan law has prohibited people who are under retirement age from withdrawing money from their pension funds, which subsist on a mandated percentage of each individual’s paycheck. If access to pensions were more flexible, many people would use up their pension funds long before retirement. In contrast to Keynesian economics, in which market

uncertainty justifies individuals' hoarding of liquidity, the turbulence of the current financial and money markets has prevented people in Kazakhstan from engaging in long-term savings of liquid assets. In reference to this matter, one interlocutor shared with me her experiences:

If you have your money in a deposit [savings account], it is a headache. You always have to be on alert. You save in a *tenge* deposit, but then it gets devalued. You save in dollars, but then the *tenge* grows strong, and you lose again when exchanging currencies. I initially had a dollar account but then lost out when the dollar depreciated from 140 to 120 *tenge* in 2003. You have to save partly in dollars, partly in euros, partly in *tenge*. Money is a hassle⁶⁹.

Thus, in a situation where the future seems imponderable and where the present is a mix of market turbulence and limited information, it makes sense that the Keynesian “spontaneous urge to action” be directed toward the accumulation and the consumption of such tangible wealth as housing and automobiles. If one cannot be reasonably sure of one's long-term future, then perhaps one should follow the old Kazakh saying: “*Bir toyghan – shala baylyq*,” which means “To be full in the present is half-wealth.” Over-consumption, conspicuous consumption, and so-called *kazahskie pony* (an ostentatious display as a part of a national character) have become a spirit of the times in Kazakhstan. Curiously, this picture of the world fits into the old Marxist paradigm of “wild capitalism,” “primitive accumulation,” and e'poha nakopleniya (a time of accumulation). Many people I have spoken too repeated the phrase “we have wild capitalism” (*U nas dikii capitalism*). These are popular terms with which the media and laypeople have described the predicament of the housing market's boom and collapse – as a problem of the stage of development. The logic of popular sentiment suggests that transition from socialism to capitalism requires that society start from the first stage of primitive accumulation and wild capitalism.

⁶⁹ In a curious parallel to this very personal account, the sovereign National Wealth Fund (also called Oil Fund) of Kazakhstan also has to keep its assets in as many as 15 currencies.

The student of Chinese post-socialism, Kevin Latham (2002), wrote of a similar frame of mind popular in reform-era China before the Asian Financial crisis of 1997, a time when consumption served as a social palliative. Following Ci Jiwei's 1994 book, *The Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*, Latham argues that "post-Mao consumption and materialism is taken to ameliorate the 'anxieties' arising from the demise of utopianism" (221). Over-consumption and the strategy of short-term material gain, which has characterized the post-Soviet ethos described by the Russian word *hapat'* (to get something while you can), stems from a deep-seated anxiety about uncertainty and the absence of what Pier Vitebsky (2002) termed a "prescribed future."

A part of this anxiety comes from the structural position of Kazakhstan in the world economy. The country is said—with cynicism—to be "sitting on the pipe" (*sidet' na trube*); that is, to be pumping oil for the world market⁷⁰. The Marxist theory of value, upon which Soviet moral economy was built, posits that real value and material abundance should come from production and labor, not from exchange, circulation or rent. In the *Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (2002), Caroline Humphrey describes how traditional Russian workers detest "new Russians" because their new-found wealth appears to rest on something other than production (177). Indeed, in late capitalism, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) wrote, sites of production can be completely separated from sites of consumption, and this differentiation is becoming the norm. It is a strange feeling to witness the consumption of imported goods, beautiful new cars, and improved housing and yet to discern no production behind these improvements. Perhaps construction has actually become a substitute for missing sites of domestic production in this de-industrialized economy "sitting on the pipe." Construction

⁷⁰ According to the Kazakhstan National Statistics Agency, the cumulative output of Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector constituted about 25% of the national GDP in 2009. It has steadily grown over the recent years from under 15 % in 2002.

is something that Kazakhstan, rather than import, visibly produces for its people, for its economy, and for its own national well-being.

Construction's importance as an example of domestic production in Kazakhstan helps explain why the Kazakh state initially supported and created conditions for construction and investment in construction, and now, after the bust, is re-financing and bailing out construction companies and individual mortgage takers. The government hoped that the construction boom could become a locomotive for the country's development improving people's living and housing standards, creating jobs and even stimulating industrial output in related spheres such as construction-materials production.⁷¹ All of these hopes, however, were jeopardized because of the volatile connection that construction had with short- and medium-term speculative capital.

⁷¹ In the techno-industrial zone of Astana, the government allocated free land and issued loans to construction-materials businesses through the national Damu (Development) Innovation-Industrial Fund. These businesses used the allocated land to create construction-materials production sites and used the loans to finance factories that produced bricks, cement, finishing materials, and other materials for domestic construction.

CHAPTER 4.
THE BOOM, THE BUST AND THE MEDIATING STATE: HOUSING BAIL-OUTS
AND THE DISCOURSE OF FAIRNESS IN THE WAKE OF FINANCIAL CRISIS IN
KAZAKHSTAN

“The Smell of Money”

“These cities smell of money” is a phrase visitors from other more impoverished Central Asian republics often used to describe the urban boom in Kazakhstan’s two major cities – Almaty and Astana. Following the financial liberalization of the economy and the privatization of housing stock in the 1990s, Astana and Almaty (as well as several other cities in Kazakhstan) have seen a spectacular construction boom and an inflation of real estate assets, driven by internal and external investment. The country has boasted the highest per capita foreign investment and the most developed banking system in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). From 1999 to 2007, the economy displayed steady GDP growth of about 10 percent per year. However, when the crisis hit in 2008, in the words of financial analysts, Kazakhstan’s banking system became a “victim of its own success in attracting foreign capital” (*Interfax-Kazakhstan* 2008, July 8). It was accused of overheating the economy and creating the housing bubble through extensive external borrowing and aggressive lending policies. The government then moved to restructure and recapitalize private commercial banks from its National Oil Fund. The largest bank, BTA (Bank TuranAlem), with foreign liabilities of over 15 billion USD, was taken over by the government and the three next largest banks have received “stimulus” packages worth 3 billion USD. By the end of 2008, Kazakhstan's foreign debt reached 100.6 billion USD and has equaled the same year’s GDP. According to the Kazakh National Central Bank, the increase in the country's external debt during previous years (from 2002 to 2008) was mainly due to the banking sector's borrowing which, by the end of 2008,

totaled 40 billion USD. Most of this money ended up in the hands of Kazakh citizens as home, consumer, and SME (small and medium enterprise) loans. Economists argue that the proliferation of mortgage loans and high oil prices have caused the skyrocketing of real estate prices and construction industry growth. Even before the global financial crisis struck, the government had voiced a concern about the “over-heated” state of the economy and recommended restricting foreign loan taking by commercial banks. As Aslan Musin, then deputy prime-minister, explained the move in the cabinet meeting on February 13, 2007, “there are significant funds that don't go toward modernizing the economy, but mainly go to inflating the 'bubble' on the real-estate market" (*Kazakhstan Today* 2007, February 13). A significant part of capital invested in construction came from the international financial institutions, which had been lending money to Kazakh commercial banks, which, in turn, had been lending it to construction companies as well as to potential buyers through the *ipoteka* (home loans) program. By 2008, Kazakh citizens owed 4.5 billion USD in home loans.

“The Bubble Talk” –Popular Discourses about the Bubble and Structural Conspiracy

The degree of popular awareness of the real estate “bubble” in Kazakhstan was very high. People, especially those who lived in the southern capital of Almaty, where the price of housing had reached a staggering 7000 USD per sq meter in the city center (the center of the city was dubbed in popular vernacular the “golden quarter” (*zolotoi kvadrat*), and 3000 USD in the suburbs, acutely perceived themselves to be in the midst of the real estate bubble. Many citizens actively sought information on real estate tendencies. Newspapers hired economists who produced weekly analytics of real estate and construction trends. Government officials formulated recommendations and regularly explained their policies and positions in televised

addresses to the population. The general conclusion from all this enormous amount of talk was that the prices had gone mad and this madness could not continue for long. Everybody seemed to be sure that real estate prices would eventually fall; the only question was “when?” and “how far?”

In fact, for people’s housing strategies the question “when” was the most crucial because, depending on the answer to this question, they would make decisions whether to rent or buy, sell their property (if the prices were going to fall) or wait (if the prices went even higher). An acquaintance of mine, Ainur, (housing case 2 in chapter three) opted to wait out till the prices fall. By the end of 2007, she was exhausted from waiting. “When will the bubble finally burst?” she said, “I am tired of waiting and renting.” The popular opinion about the real estate market starting from 2005 was that it was surreal and irrational. People believed that the prices were artificially maintained and protected through the conspiracies of the banks, real estate agents⁷², and construction companies, who allegedly also paid the media to “misrepresent” the situation and to mislead people into thinking that the prices would continue to grow, so that people would continue to take out loans and buy real estate for the benefit of the banks, estate agencies, and construction companies. Rumors circulated that some of the newly built elite housing projects actually remained unsold and vacant while companies were falsifying their sales information and even hiring people to turn on lights at night to create an illusion of occupancy for the public. The bubble depended on the spectacle of high (insatiable) demand for housing.

In the midst of the real estate bubble and controversy, some activist journalists, evaluation experts, and economists warned people and predicted that the real estate pyramid

⁷² During my fieldwork I often noticed a very hostile attitude towards real estate agents, who were frequently depicted as degraded human beings, making money on the backs of the working public.

would collapse very soon. For example, a journalist covering economic news block for the national weekly *Liter* published results of his journalistic investigation of the most popular real estate www.krysha.kz web site, sponsored by one of the largest real estate agencies, in which he discovered that as of March 2007 the supply of housing outweighed demand by the ratio of 20 to 1 (Nevolin 2007). He arrived at this conclusion by conducting what he called “crude real estate market fieldwork” –counting selling and buying listings at www.krysha.kz and placing his own hoax advertisements to check the reaction of the market.

At another popular middle class internet forum *Centr Tiazhesti*⁷³, in 2007, users created a sub-forum “Real/Factual Prices [of the real estate] of Sales” (*Fakticheskaiia Tsena Kupli-Prodazhi*). The idea behind this forum was to create an alternative information network to share information about the *real* prices of actual transactions that had taken place (as opposed to the prices advertised in the media). The messages at the forum were usually as follows: “My neighbor sold his apartment for 200,000 USD, while it was listed in the classifieds of real estate for \$ 300,000 USD” or, “A friend of a friend sold an apartment in “Titanic” [the name of the apartment building] for 1,500 USD per sq meter, while the seller was initially asking 2000 USD.”

Some of the conspiracy theories circulating during the bubble were not without foundation –particularly a theory on conspiracy between the banks and construction companies to entice people to take on home loans in planned (i.e., unfinished and sometimes not even started) housing projects. During the boom, construction companies would sign so-called “cooperation agreements” (*dogovory o sotrudnichestve*) with the banks stipulating that the latter would finance not only the construction per se but also the people who wanted to buy apartments in these not-yet-built housing projects. As the lawyer of the bank explained to me, “It was a

⁷³ It used to be at bb.ct.kz and now has moved to www.vse.kz

mutually beneficial deal: the companies would sell apartments, the banks would get their percentage [interest] both from the construction company and individual *ipoteka* borrowers, and the people would get the apartments they wanted [the last is of course under a big question mark].” For instance, such agreements existed between the largest construction company KUAT and the three largest Kazakh banks – Khalyk Bank, BTA, and KazkommertzBank, all of which financed the *Sairan* housing project –the largest housing project bailed out by the state today.

Housing Case 4. In May of 2006, Almas, without any down-payment took out a credit of 50,000 USD for a 56 sq meter-apartment in the KUAT’s planned housing project *Sairan* in Almaty–the same project that Gul’mira invested in (see chapter three). His apartment block was supposed to be finished in May 2008. Almas’ home loan was so-called annuity credit when you start with paying the interest rate and, only after having paid all the interest, begin paying the principal loan. Almas said that in three years he paid 20,000 USD to the bank only 3,000 USD of which went to cover his principal loan. The rest of it was the bank’s interest. In 2009, his apartment was not yet ready, so he stopped paying the bank and is now being sued by the bank for the cession right of his yet-to-be-built apartment.

The Return of the State to the Housing Distribution

The local character of the real estate and construction boom in Kazakhstan in 2002-2007 consisted of mass popular investment in so-called “share-holding participation” (*dolevoe uchastie*) agreements in housing projects that were to be built in the period of 1 to 2 years after the initial investment (like Gul’mira’s, Almas’ and my aunt’s cases above). When, however, the financial crisis hit Kazakhstan at the end of 2008 many of these investors/buyers were left with unfinished housing as construction companies went bankrupt before completing their projects.

The government has, subsequently, had to urgently design mechanisms to bail out the construction industry and complete the unfinished housing projects. The government could not afford to stay away from the construction market for several reasons. First of all, the unfinished construction sites would be a powerful visual reminder of the failure of the state to deliver on its promise of modernization, secondly it would prompt a large number of the middle classes who invested in these housing projects to mobilize against the state, and thirdly, it would leave thousands of migrants (rural-urban migrants but also migrants from other Central Asian countries) unemployed and potentially “harmful” to the social order. Also helpful for state intervention was the fact that by 2008 a sizable 40 billion dollars cushion has been accumulated in the National Wealth Fund (also called Oil Fund) because of growing oil prices and the decision by the government to divert part of the oil revenues away from the budget to the Fund.

So, much like in the US and in many other countries around the world, in today’s Kazakhstan the state has a particular role to play in mitigating the financial crisis – bailing out banks, companies, and individual home owners threatened by bankruptcy and foreclosure. In November 2008, the government stepped in with an initial \$10 billion anti-crisis plan, including a \$3 billion plan to prop up the real estate and construction markets and \$1 billion to develop infrastructure projects throughout the country. But it soon became clear that more money from the National Oil Fund was required to stabilize the housing market, to solve the housing question for hundreds of thousands of aspiring middle class people, and to keep workers from being laid off from construction sites.

The \$3 billion allocated initially for stabilizing the real estate market once again showed the importance of the “housing question” for both markets and social well-being. The program was intended to complete all unfinished construction, let municipal authorities and

national companies⁷⁴ buy surplus housing, and refinance struggling home owners. Given the importance of Astana as an “exemplary center” (see introduction) the campaign to re-invigorate the housing market through public spending was the most effective here. The concept of social need and the welfare state addressing and solving social need was fully mobilized to avoid the collapse of the housing market. According to government estimations in 2008, two thirds of the unfinished housing under construction was to be completed with different forms of government subsidies⁷⁵ (*Kazakhstan Today* 2008, February 12). In Astana, tens of thousands of families were moving into new apartments during the crisis years of 2008, 2009 and 2010.⁷⁶ Many of my informants in Astana, so-called *biudzhetniki*, people working in the government and the public sector – teachers, doctors, low-level and middle-level technocrats, were getting subsidized housing through the municipality (state program) or through their workplace.

The state housing program (*gosudarstvennaia zhilishchnaia programma*) allows certain categories of citizens – workers employed in the public sector, young families (under 29 years old) with children, and single parents to get low interest (4%) mortgages to buy subsidized housing for 350 USD per square meter. In 2008, KazZhilStroiBank (Kazakh Housing Bank) received a 400 million USD credit from the government to lend money to the citizens under the state-subsidized housing program. In total, 430,000 families in Kazakhstan were expected to get apartments through the state program between 2008 and 2011.

⁷⁴ In Kazakhstan, national companies have a separate entity status from the government even though the government owns their shares. Several national companies in popular vernacular are known as “fat cats” because of the great benefits and high salaries that are allegedly paid in these institutions. These are KazAgroFinance (National Agricultural Financial Company), KazMunaiGaz (National Oil and Gas Company), KazakhTeleCom (National Telecom Company), Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (National Railroad Company)

⁷⁵ To deal with the issues of overseeing the completion of construction projects and allocation of housing a Committee on Construction within the Ministry of Industry and Trade was upgraded to the status of a separate Republican Agency for Construction, Housing, and Utilities.

⁷⁶ In his speech in the spring of 2011, President Nazarbayev said that between 2011-2014 about 350,000 of Kazakhstani families will be moving to the new housing each year. “This is unprecedented, he said, our housing programs are addressing the needs of each Kazakhstani” (<http://www.astana.kz/ru/node/30147>)

In 2008, in my department in AstanaGenPlan, a 26 year old colleague of mine and mother of two was collecting documents to apply to the municipality for a subsidized housing loan. Since the pool of applicants was several times larger than the allocated quotas for state-subsidized housing in Astana, people had to “compete” with each other according to “points of qualification.”

For each child in the family, the applicant would get 3 points; if an applicant was pregnant at the moment of application she would get an additional three points, if the applicant was currently employed in the “social” sector (*sotsial’naia sfera*) he/she would get 10 points, if the applicant was employed in the “social sector” in the past for more than a year he/she would get 5 points. Points for the husband and wife’s employment were combinable. Then, the municipal committee would select people with the highest number of points and the list of the lucky applicants would be published on the municipal web site www.astana.kz. The system of point allocation allows us to make a demographic portrait of the applicants favored by the state program – young workers of the public sphere (teachers, doctors, street cleaners), married quite early, with children (the more children the better). The applicants would still have to buy their apartment with cash or take a low 4% loan from KazZhilStroiBank and would still have to have a cumulative monthly income of no less than 250 USD for the smallest 40 sq meter one-room. The largest apartment one could get under the state program was 80 sq meters which required an income of 500 USD (*Pamiatka dlia Uchastnikov Gosudarstvennoi Programmy*⁷⁷ 2008). The relatives of the applicants (brothers, sisters, parents, etc.) could be co-signers on the loan and could add their income towards the cumulative income of the applicant.

If the acceleration of the state housing program in the post-crisis period allowed hundreds of thousands of families excluded from the expensive real estate market to buy

⁷⁷ Application to the State Housing Program

apartments, housing through the workplace scheme emerged as another quite successful public-private partnership in the housing provision. Initially, in the beginning of the 2000s only the rich national companies (which, although being owned by the government are technically considered “private” sector) could provide housing to their workers by buying it on the market. However, by the middle of 2000s, hospitals, universities, research institutes, and other public and private organizations were engaged in subsidized housing projects. During my fieldwork I often heard that one of the incentives for the faculty to work at public universities in Astana was the opportunity to have access to subsidized housing.

The subsidized part of it worked as follows: an organization (e.g., hospital or university) would ask the municipality for a lot of public land and then contract a company to build housing on the allocated land. A portion of the apartments in the house would go to the workers of the organization, and another portion would go on the market to be sold on at market price. For instance, more than 150 doctors, nurses, and laboratory workers from the Republican Clinic received apartments under the subsidized 350 USD per square meter price in the housing complex “Enlik,” located about a mile from the clinic itself. About 200 apartments in the same house were sold on the market at 1000 USD per square meter.

Housing case 5. In the fall of 2008, I had a varicose vein removed in the Republican Clinic. That is when I first met Kunsulu, an inventory-nurse (*sestra-hoziaika*) working in the clinic, who told me the story of her housing situation in Astana.

My son and I came to Astana in 2001 from Taldy-Korgan [a city in the South-East of Kazakhstan] and have been renting different places, first a room, then a former *dacha* without any amenities. Thank God, we have good conditions for workers here in the clinic, so I would take a shower and even wash some of my bedding here because we didn’t have hot water. In fact, we didn’t have any running water at all. When the clinic trade union organized this project in 2005, my son and I, with the help of the family back home, were able to scramble 5,000 dollars for a down payment, and then the clinic wrote a letter

for me to the bank... and with my son as a co-signer I was able to get a 10 percent loan for 10 years for the rest of the 13,000 dollars. You know our *misernyi* (small) nurses' salaries. Even with overtime I get only 300 dollars [per month].

The housing of the clinic was also a share-holding participation project. As with many other similar projects, its completion was delayed for a year and half, and the house had many initial defects and problems. In the nine-story house, the elevators didn't work for two years (the rationale was that the managing company was waiting until people finished making *remont* in their apartments). For a year, there was no hot water. However, by the end of 2010, all the amenities in the house finally started functioning. The territory around it was gentrified. Kunsulu told me that many doctors and administrative workers from the clinic who bought apartments with their own savings (i.e., without being bound by loans) sold them almost instantly for the market price ranging from USD 800 to 1000 USD. I also met a doctor from the same clinic who invested in the same housing with Kunsulu. The doctor bought a three-room place for about 40,000 USD but then in 2010 sold her apartment for 120,000 USD and moved to another place. She said that living in the same apartment building with a hundred of her colleagues from the clinic felt like a dormitory.

The “shareholding participation” projects through one's workplace appear to be a hybrid of the Soviet housing allocation system through the workplace, where your access to housing depended on your workplace position and status, and the market system where you are free to sell the accommodation you received from the workplace immediately and to make a profit from the transaction. However, the “shareholding participation” with the organization also serves as a risk management mechanism and provides the sense of security in the turbulent construction market: since several public agencies (in this case, municipality of Astana and

Ministry of Healthcare) are involved in the organization of this public-private partnership, if things go wrong, you won't be alone against the unknown construction market players. In fact, you will be "within the system" – with the already organized system of collective bargaining working on your behalf.

After the Bust: Assigning the Blame and Designating the Losers

Of course, the burst of the housing bubble could not pass without losers, and struggles and conflicts over who should and who should not lose. Several heads of construction companies were indicted for defrauding investors in "shareholding participation" housing projects. The debts and portfolios of several banks had to be restructured with the several billion dollars injection from the National Wealth Fund/Oil Fund (part of which also went to refinancing mortgages). The chairman of the board and several high-ranking managers of the largest Kazakh Bank, BankTuranAlem, accused of defrauding lenders and giving out credits to affiliated companies escaped to London protesting that they were victims of a "hostile take-over" by the government, which doesn't respect essential liberal freedoms.

Once a Kazakh success story with an annual turnover of more than \$1 billion, construction company KUAT has built some of the country's most recognizable landmarks, including the House of Ministries and a complex of blue-glass sky-scrappers on the riverside in Astana (see figure 4). Today, however, with several housing projects of gargantuan proportion unfinished while litigation suits from individual investors mount, KUAT epitomizes (and through its development projects visually provides a constant reminder of) not only the boom and bust cycle of the fortunes made in real estate but also the failure of personal and national dreams based on unsustainable growth. To indicate the scale of public money channeled to save

KUAT and other housing sector projects, consider this example: more than 85 million USD of public funds went into finishing just one housing project started by the KUAT company in Astana (“Grand Astana”) and 134 million USD to KUAT’s “Sairan”⁷⁸ project in Almaty (see figure 16 in the third chapter).

The most vocal group in defending their interests and bargaining with the state turned out not to be the super-rich elites – the bankers and heads of construction holdings, but middle class groups who invested in “share-holding participation” but who didn’t make it to any bail-out category. The government devised the criteria for mortgage refinancing and bail out of individual home owners based on differentiation between the people who had a “real need” to buy an apartment and use it for their own consumption, and the people who used newly purchased homes for personal investment, rent seeking, and, possibly, speculation purposes. This kind of public policy is not at all surprising if we take into account the moral heritage of socialism under which housing was distributed based on need and merit and not for capitalization. Notably, the government pledged to refinance home loans of qualifying mortgage borrowers who owned only a house or an apartment smaller than 120 sq meters. Additionally, on April 1 2010, the government adopted a controversial resolution (*postanovlenie*) no. 277, which stated that people who invested in the housing complexes that need to be finished with governmental funding (i.e. additional investment by the government into the so-called “assets under stress”) would be allowed to retain the property rights to one apartment only. This meant that the state would “nationalize” any apartment beyond the “real” need in apartment buildings which were completed with the assistance of public funds. The second or third apartment would become the property of the state which then could be sold, rented or allocated to those who qualify for the

⁷⁸ The municipality of Almaty has recently announced that “Sairan” might require additional 19.3 billion tenge (about 130 million USD of public funds) to be finished (KazTAG 21 June, 2011).

public housing program. “Why should the state pay for somebody who invested money in 2-3 or even whole blocks (*tem kto pokupal zhil'e celymi pod'ezdami*)? How would the rest of the society look at it?” reasoned the head of the National Wealth Fund, Samruk-Kazna⁷⁹ Kayrat Aytkenov (Serdalina 2010). The issue of an “extra apartment” has become a subject of the litigation in court with some home investors suing the government for unlawfully “confiscating” their apartments. The General Attorney Office stated that in order to have a case, investors must provide proof that they bought “extra” apartments not for the purpose of “reselling” but for “improving their housing conditions.” Thus, the old Stalinist discourse of “speculyanty” (speculators) and the stigma attached to it resurfaced in the post-crisis housing mitigation and recovery process. In order for the litigants (who have a contract with bankrupt construction companies) to claim their apartments, they must prove that they needed an additional apartment. For example, they might have wanted to “keep” these apartments for their coming of age children. In online public forums that discuss housing issues, the litigants are often called “*spekulyanty*” (speculators), “*barygi*” (grabbers), “*zhuliki*” (crooks) – the people who had some “easy money” to invest and wanted to capitalize on growing real estate prices. As one commentator who left his opinion about resolution no. 277 said⁸⁰:

They were engaged in the business of “shareholding participation” (*dolevoe uchastie*) with the contractors and in the business there are risks, there is a time to profit and a time to lose profits. They lost their investment, which is unfortunate for anybody, and the government at least gave them something – a place to live. But they want more – a complete recuperation of their losses. This is beyond reasonable. This is pure greed. There are many more people out there who need housing. It is the fault of this kind of people who invested in 3-4 apartments at a time that a “bubble” in the housing market formed in the

⁷⁹ Samruk-Kazna Wealth Fund is responsible for channeling money to bail-out programs, refinancing, and managing state shares in joint stock companies.

⁸⁰ See comments to the articles at <http://www.time.kz/index.php?newsid=6881>, <http://www.time.kz/index.php?newsid=6881>

first place. These are not ordinary people in need of housing. The ordinary people could not afford to buy even one apartment with these prices.

The investors and borrowers, who bought more than one apartment, however, went on several highly publicized hunger-strikes and protests putting their claims to housing sometimes in the language of the socialist entitlement to housing and sometimes in the language of “fight against lawlessness and corruption” (*proizvola i bezzakonia*). Their plight has been taken by some opposition leaders, such as Zauresh Battalova, who in 2008 organized “Leave Housing to the People” non-governmental organization (Kuzhekov 2010). In her interview to *Radio Azattyk*, Zauresh Battalova during the protest action charged that the government’s resolution no. 277 was unconstitutional. One of the women strikers said, during the same protest, that “if in the civilized world what we did is called investment and protected, in our country it is called speculation” (Kuzhekov 2011).

Meanwhile, municipalities of Astana and Almaty in their effort to discredit the national “Leave Housing to the People” protestors and hunger-strikers as speculators publicized their previous housing dealing and properties. According to the deputy mayor of Almaty, Serik Seidumanov, one of the protestors in the course of 4 years came to own 17 apartments, others also owned several apartments. The then leader of the organization, Elmira Iskakova, took out a credit of 37 million dollars and founded “Nur-Estate Realty, Ltd.” “Don’t confuse these protestors with people in need,” said Serik Seidumanov in the press-conference devoted to the issues of bail-outs, “they are businessmen who were in the business of buying and selling housing...and now they lost” (Imaeva 2009).

Another organization called “Citizens’ Right to Housing” (which branched out from the mentioned above “Leave Housing to the People”) concentrated its advocacy on the passing of the new individual (*fizicheskoe litso*) bankruptcy law which would allow an individual declaring

bankruptcy to retain his/her one apartment or house even if he had forgone his home loan. A commentator at the *Internet-Gazeta ZonaKZ*, however, noted some hidden nuances in such a seemingly justified claim: “There is a home and there is a home. Somebody has a one-room apartment and somebody has a mansion. And, accordingly their loans are different... If the banks are required to leave some sort of home for a bankrupt person... it should be a simple low-cost housing.”⁸¹ Another commentator joked, “Then banks would stop giving home loans for the first and only apartment, because everybody would declare bankruptcy after taking out the loan!” (Yuritsyn 2011)

My friend, a lawyer at the bank, supported the government’s cutting off the financing after the first apartment, “I understand them *po-chelovecheski* [as a human being],” she said. “They lost their money. But everybody cannot be helped, it is pure economics. We should agree on and uphold a concept of what is considered ‘basic housing needs.’”

So in the post-crisis situation, the state is left to manage the losses of both the public and the construction industry. But with limited resources, it is impossible to meet everybody’s demands. Therefore, the state has to return to the old socialist concept of need – “to everybody according to his need.”

After the Bubble: Some Practical and Theoretical Issues

The housing boom and bust in Kazakhstan was a clear case of market inefficiency. After the bubble’s burst, there was a surplus of housing, on the one hand, and a demand/need for housing, on the other. And despite of what might seem logical, the surplus on one side did not

⁸¹ The full comment in Russian is: “Вообще, жилье жилью рознь. У кого-то однокомнатная квартира, а у кого то особняк. Также и сами долги разные по размеру. Мне кажется банк надо, если он лишает жилья, обязать обеспечить жильем, но с меньшей (пороговой) рыночной стоимостью. Полученная разница пойдет на гашение основного долга. А там уже банк сам будет решать надо ему забирать квартиру или нет. Таким образом, будет обеспечена социальная ответственность банка...” see <http://www.zonakz.net/articles/35041>

meet the demands of the other. As Agnes Heller wrote in *The Theory of Need in Marx* (1976), “It has long been generally recognized... that market forces alone will never meet the housing need, or the health need, of large sectors of the population working in even the most successful market economies”(13). So, the state had to step in as a “rational agent” of a more efficient housing allocation which would take into account real social needs, correct market’s irrationalities (such as, for example, the oversupply of the elite-class housing in Almaty), and tame speculation. By stepping into the housing market with the state-subsidized housing programs, the state was also acting as mediator between the construction companies (which also employ quite a great number of construction workers), investors who invested in the housing projects, as well as the people who were in need of housing. Potentially, in Kazakhstan, a volatile situation seems to have been avoided, save in the case of several oligarchs (the fate of whom bothers almost nobody) and some investors who, from the point of view of the state and a significant number of the public, invested “in excess” of their housing needs and who are now engaged in the process of bargaining with the state for recuperation of their losses.

As the Kazakh government and people reckon with the excesses of the boom period, the question of how to differentiate between real development, addressing real human needs, and speculative “bubbles” feeding on a combination of predatory financial schemes and groundless expectations, becomes increasingly important for scholars, policy-makers, and the wider global public.

On the theoretical front, the recent global credit and housing crisis considerably shattered the “efficient market hypothesis” and market fundamentalism that characterized our recent neo-liberal history. In the wake of the failure of mainstream economics to explain or predict recent turbulences, behavioral economics have come to the fore as a salient theoretical

school. According to their theory of the crisis, inefficiencies and fluctuations such as the boom and bust cycles of the market stem from the irrational “animal spirits” of the individual market players. As Akerlof and Shiller write:

Keynes appreciated that most economic activity resulted from rational economic motivations – but also that much economic activity is governed by *animal spirits*. People have non-economic motives. And they are not always rational in pursuit of their economic interests. In Keynes’ view these animal spirits are the main cause for why the economy fluctuates as it does. (ix)

So, to put it crudely, if the mainstream economics argued that the markets work because men are rational, now behavioral economics is saying that the problems in the market arise from the irrational urges of market players – in the words of Shiller, those “crazy home buyers buying just about anything to stay ahead of the curve” (2005:16).

From the anthropological perspective (see chapter two and three), during the boom period people were not doing anything entirely irrational or crazy. They were doing what was considered normal within their social structure. They were trying to achieve normalcy, however this ideal is understood in their society – a single family house for US households or a “normal” spacious apartment for Kazakhstani households. Here, again, we face a fundamental question of how we understand rationality. Isn’t it a rational market strategy to stay ahead of the curve – to maximize one’s benefit? Isn’t it rational in Kazakhstan to have a short-term strategy of consumption and maximize one’s utility (present gratification) when one doesn’t know what lies ahead and, fundamentally, doesn’t believe in the system? Perhaps, the market doesn’t bring out the best qualities in people.

In the *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997), Don Slater formulates the problem even more fundamentally from the anthropological perspective. The problem, he says, is that economics is concerned with formal rather than substantive rationality, with “*how* individuals

may pursue their desires,” not about “*what* desires they pursue” (34). Today it seems that not only economics but politics, too, concerns itself only with the “how” question leaving only religion to deal with what it is that people should or should not desire. So, from the perspective of substantive rationality, the fundamental problem for policy-makers would not be how to deliver the American dream to most of the American households but why the American dream? Is this dreamworld justified? Is this desire innocent? Is it sustainable for the majority of the population? That is what democratic deliberation should be about. In Kazakhstan, it seems that the state’s top-down decision not to extend its helping hand beyond 120 square meters apartment provoked just these kinds of debates with investors who invested in housing projects trying to justify their desires not by an individual consumer whim but by a socially acceptable need. These kinds of debates might infringe on the autonomy of the individual consumer but they also invigorate the public sphere with the issues of substantive rationality and bring the economic man in alliance with social man.

CONCLUSION

On Whether Attachments to Modernity Have Anything to do with Attachments to Authoritarianism?

In my dissertation, devoted to the construction boom and bust, urban development, and the emergence of the middle class (along with the transformation of the Soviet urban intelligentsia into a new Kazakh middle class) in new urban spaces in Kazakhstan, I omitted discussion of an important issue –quite an elephant in the room from the position of existing scholarship regarding post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Many things have changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new independent state in Kazakhstan. The country lived through the hardships of the 1990s, then through the boom of the 2000s (in certain territories), and now we are witnessing the return of the welfare state throughout the country. One thing, however, remained unchanged –the figure of President Nazarbayev, who has been leading the country since his time as a first secretary of the communist party in what was then a national republic in the Soviet Union. The kind of system established by President Nazarbayev is usually referred to in scholarship as a personal autocratic regime. However, even critics and opponents of Nazarbayev admit that he is, despite his real or perceived authoritarianism, immensely popular (Schatz 2009, Laszczkowski 2010, 2011b). The broad political appeal, popularity, and endurance of his regime have been a stunning success.

Edward Schatz (2009), Laura Adams and Assel Rustemova (2008) introduced an important distinction to the mainstream scholarship on authoritarian regimes in Central Asia by showing that the “regime” in Kazakhstan governs by incentive rather than coercion, in fact the

coercion apparatus remains very limited.⁸² In other words, Kazakhstan is quite removed from a conventional authoritarian state (Schatz 2009). The regime, Laura Adams and Assel Rustamova (2008) write, “has a forward looking, development-oriented telos” constructing a national citizenship narrative in which a nation is bound together not by its past (common history, ethnicity, etc.) but by its future, the foundation for which is being laid by the government through ensuring order, inter-ethnic peace, and stability. In his recent article, Mateusz Laszczkowski, a native of Poland, who conducted his fieldwork concurrently with me in Astana, suggests that construction is “used extensively in the regime’s rhetoric as indices of societal change”(2011b:80). So, construction ideology, he suggests, actually precludes political change. Construction, he writes, is a “convenient metaphor” for the regime. While construction is “used” by the regime, it is also desired by the people. As Laszczkowski writes: “I argue that the construction of Astana is perceived by many citizens to restore cohesive, progressive, and future oriented social order in which they see themselves meaningfully and actively engaged.” (2011:78). So, the question then becomes how do the people on the ground view political change (which is usually quite narrowly understood as change of the regime) vis-à-vis “progressive and future-oriented order.” What kind of change do they want? Apart from the obvious distinction that not all change is progress, the more important distinction is what kinds of things should

⁸² As I was making final touches to this dissertation the media reported an outbreak of violence in a small oil town of Zhanaozen in Western Kazakhstan. The riots and subsequent clashes with the police happened on December 16, 2011, the Independence Day of Kazakhstan. Prior to the riots the laid off oil workers had been “occupying” the main town square for six months demanding first a rise in wages and then, after the strikers were fired, their re-installment at their positions with the national oil company KazMunaiGaz. It is difficult to re-establish the full sequence of the events on that day. We know that the riots started from the square where police officers had been attacked, the Christmas and vehicles burnt. After this the rioters set several buildings alight, while the police regrouped and used live bullets to disperse the rioters. 16 people were confirmed to have been killed in the clashes and ensued violence (http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/204846/). The police claim that they have been shot at and there was a danger to their and other citizens’ lives and safety. The situation has been subsequently pacified with the President arriving at the scene of the clashes and promising that the families of the killed regardless of how and when they were killed will be paid retributions of about 6,700 USD and the oil workers will be re-employed in other oil towns (to which they have not yet agreed). The roots of the problem are manifold but the one on which almost all experts seem to agree is the rising claims to the “oil pie.” The wages of oil workers are already highest in Kazakhstan starting from 1000-1200 USD.

change and what kinds of things should remain as part of social order. This reminds me of Prince Salina's Nietzschean line from the classical Italian movie, "Leopard",⁸³ –"Some things had to change, so that everything could remain the same," which in the Kazakh situation can loosely be translated as "the regime has to *change some things* (or perhaps even many things) *in order to stay the same.*"

Edward Schatz' (2009) insightful article "The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit" on what he terms 'soft-authoritarian' regimes of Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) also explores the question of what makes Kazakh authoritarian regime function so successfully. While agreeing in principle with the premises of the article, I would slightly modify this question so as to again shift emphasis from the regime and its Machiavellian logic of rule (the pursuit of power) to the social contract that it has with the people. So, I would rather ask the following question: *what makes the regime popular or why popular authoritarianism?*

Based on my research in Kazakhstan during the construction boom, bust and crisis mitigation period, I would say that the politics of aspiration –the alliance between the regime and aspiring middle classes lies at the core of the regime's endurance. The regime promises and importantly delivers on its promise to broaden and entrench the aspiring middle classed in the urban space. In fact, the nation-building project in Kazakhstan is to a great extent an urban middle-class building project. Like in India or in China, this project is at the core of the state-led urban transformation (Fernandes 2006, Wu 2009). Young aspiring people from other regional cities flock to Astana (they also continue to flock to the former capital of Almaty) to live the new modern way of life that Astana symbolizes. But the middle class building project requires not

⁸³ *The Leopard*. Dir. Luchino Visconti. Perf. Burt Lancaster, Claudia Cardinale, Alain Delon, Paolo Stoppa. Italy, France, 1963. Visconti's masterpiece movie is set in 1860s' Sicily, the time of the *Risorgimento*. It depicts members of the aristocracy trying to adapt to the new realities of a new Italian nation, particularly by making a pact with the rising bourgeoisie.

just the mobilization of the young and bright from all over the country, it requires accumulation of cultural capital in urban space which happens both on the level of the state (chapter one) and on the level of a household and middle class neighborhood (chapter two)⁸⁴. I also argue that Kazakh urban intelligentsia which emerged in the wake of Soviet urbanization and modernization of national republics is instrumental in initiating the new urban social contract and cultivating modern urban sensibilities, thus often taking upon itself the role of cultural leadership to which it was accustomed in the Soviet times. At the same time, the experience of living in newly built neighborhoods clearly shows the desired modern urban order is not easy to achieve and is not to be taken for granted. So, in this sense, the middle class realizes its dependence on the state as an ultimate guarantor of the order upon which all other middle class values—first and foremost stability and upward mobility—can be built. So, for the aspiring middle classes, the state is not just a source of housing subsidies, it is also a source of “moral order.” The “moral order” is something intangible (but which has tangible and material effects) which has to be created and maintained by those with recognizable cultural capital and authority (including the state and the authoritarian leader). Thus we witness the drive by the state, the elites and the middle classes to accumulate cultural capital. The erosion of cultural capital threatens the position of the elites and the rule of government.

Despite some opinion – or more accurately, perhaps, media representation, that Astana, particularly its newly built part, is “artificial” and “lifeless”, my research has shown that there is a nascent public sphere, new forms of politics and new forms of negotiation between the citizens themselves and between the citizens and the state that are emerging in the newly built neighborhoods in Astana. While these forms of politics at the level of *pod'ezd* (common hall)

⁸⁴ Mateusz Laszczkowski (2011a) also indicates that the process of becoming modern in Astana happens through the consumption of space.

and apartment blocks are very quotidian and almost unnoticeable to the “naked eye,” they are very important in cultivating “moral citizenship” attitudes which can have far-reaching repercussions through the political system.

About political inclinations of the Kazakhstani urban public my colleague Mateusz Laszczkowski observed

Largely taken, the Kazakhstanis are not interested in political participation. A change of the current power arrangements is what few people desire or care about. With just a few exceptions, in conversations throughout my fieldwork, friends, acquaintances and one-time interlocutors all fervently expressed hope that things stay as they are for as long as possible. They don't want change; indeed they fear change. Nazarbayev is commonly seen as a sole guarantor of peace and stability. While stability must not necessarily be a good thing, here it is primarily perceived as prerequisite for development –as unimpressive as it may turn out for the average citizen, yet always better than havoc such as people remember from the 1990s (cf. Nazpary 2002, Humphrey 2002), or the media reported cities and upheavals that have occurred in several other post-Soviet countries over the recent years (Laszczkowski 2010:7).

I think it is a very insightful observation by a colleague of mine, one that deconstructs a commonly held view of the freedom desiring people fighting against backward authoritarian regimes (like the media spectacle of the unfolding of the world spirit in the Arab spring events which has recently glued us to TV-sets). I just wanted to add a little nuance to this observation. First of all, investment in the current status quo and desire of the continuation of the status quo is also a political stance, however backward, regressive, and conservative it might seem. Secondly, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, people are not afraid of change per se, they actively pursue economic change – improvement of material conditions, in fact economic improvement is considered a must on both personal and political levels. It is a certain kind of change that people are afraid of – abrogation of the collective project of modernization and dissolution of the social order that former Soviet citizens experienced in the 1990s. Most people feel that democratic

change should not come at the expense of jeopardizing security or diminishing the quality of life which happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The emphasis on material improvement over, perhaps corresponding improvement in the democratic and political sphere (although, as I show in chapter two, there are improvements in this sphere as well) stems from the humiliation the citizens of the former USSR had experienced after the fall of the iron curtain and the realization that material abundance that was supposed to have been part of the socialist project had already been reached in the “rotten” and decadent West (chapter two). At the time of perestroika and the first years of independence, the feelings and the expectation were that if we follow “their ways” of enterprising individualism we would reach the same material abundance. But, following Western liberal and neo-liberal advisors didn’t exactly work for the former Soviet Union, of which the experience of the 1998 Russian default under the nose of the IMF quarters in Moscow is the most vivid illustration. Notably, in this recent crisis, neither Russia nor Kazakhstan appealed to the IMF. Instead, Kazakhstan took several loans from China (Bissenova 2009).

The Asian (and Russian) crisis of 1998 and the recent global financial crisis have shattered the belief in the superiority of the Western ideological and financial system. In her article “Graduated Sovereignty in South East Asia” (2000), Aihwa Ong writes how, after the Asian financial crisis of 1998, Malaysia (in contrast to Indonesia and Thailand) resisted IMF impositions; Malaysia’s Prime-Minister Mahathir went on to blame the international finance system and ultimately refused to follow IMF prescriptions. Similarly, after the crisis of 2008, President Nazarbayev, who is usually perceived as a Western-friendly president, also blamed dollar-based global finance (in which global currency dollar is issued and flows without any

accountability) and their Kazakh collaborators –bankers (some of whom came from the President’s entourage) for pumping money into real estate.

One of the most read books by the Kazakhstani policy-makers today is Kishore Mahbubani’s⁸⁵ *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (2008). It has a chapter on De-Westernization (ideological disillusion with Western ideals and double-standards); it also argues that China (and Asia at large) has learned from what happened to the former Soviet Union when the latter decided to do away with its socialist heritage and follow Western ways. The book (2008) argues that the notion of Western competence must be “demystified” and advocates that, although Asia may borrow from the West, it should do so selectively, importing knowledge of science and technology rather than ideology. Curiously, after the financial crisis, the Kazakh government which had been funding students to study economics, political science, public affairs, and journalism in Western universities since the 1990s, changed its policy in favor of accumulating expertise in the hard sciences and engineering moreover curtailing funding for students in the social sciences and public affairs.

Although I think Kazakhstan’s soft authoritarianism should be definitely considered in the light of the global rise of Asia, which is real and which writers and ideologies like Mahbubani champion, I also don’t want to slide into banalities and build dichotomies between East and West, Asian values of collectivism versus Western individualism and democracy. My chapters in this dissertation have shown quite a range of individual life strategies by Kazakhstanis in Kazakhstan which could have been happening in any Western developed country context.

⁸⁵ The dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore

However, I do think there is a link between the attachments to modernization that I am following and attachment to a certain degree of authoritarianism. I think the (incomplete) project of modernization in people's minds entails the necessity of a strong state to guide, to plan and, most importantly, to lay a system which doesn't clash with the individual's rights and freedoms as long as they belong to a higher social order. The state and even authoritarianism in this vision is not seen as a mechanism of repression of individual rights and autonomy but as a mechanism of enabling these rights and entitlements. Negotiations, concessions, appeals to the president around housing issues show that there is a use for a strong authoritarian state in certain situations⁸⁶. We live in a turbulent world, what Ulrich Beck (1992) termed "risk society," where all kinds of things can go wrong starting from a market failure to natural disaster to inter-ethnic conflict. If you think of it, in these situations when many things can go wrong, it is very important to have an authority you have a right to appeal to, the authority which takes some responsibility for the risks that modern life entails. To a degree, it is not a question of culture, but a question of rational choice.

⁸⁶ Perhaps, President Nazarbayev could not evade responsibility for the failures of housing market precisely because he was in power during this period.

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