The monumental and the miniature: imagining ‘modernity’ in Astana

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This article examines the elite nation-building project in post-independence Kazakhstan through an analysis of monumental architecture and miniature models in Astana. It considers the role of the country’s new capital as a modernist project, in which elite geopolitical imaginaries are multiply inscribed in the cityscape. Drawing on interdisciplinary literatures on modernity and authoritarian regime legitimation, the article considers modernity as a discursive trope employed in legitimating the Nazarbayev government, and one that has various material manifestations in the urban landscape of Astana. The research is based on fieldwork in Kazakhstan in Summer 2009, and examines architecture, monuments, and the 2009 Astana Day celebrations. Through a focus on the monumental and the miniature, it highlights their similar roles in transforming symbols of Kazakhstani independence and identity into objects of reverie outside the field of political contestation.

Key words: modernity, authoritarianism, monumentality, miniatures, urban landscape, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tselinograd (aka Aqmola) was an unremarkable industrial town in northern Kazakhstan. In the early years of independence, Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev was inspired by a vision to transform this small town into his newly sovereign state’s capital, giving it its new name, Astana, which means ‘capital’ in Kazakh. In preparation for the formal move in December 1997, construction for the capital’s new bureaucratic and transport infrastructure began as early as 1994 (Dzhaksybekov 2008). Grandiose new buildings now dot the urban landscape, visually (albeit not functionally) representing a complete rupture with Kazakhstan’s Soviet architectural heritage. In addition to inscribing this ‘modern’ image in Astana’s cityscape, President Nazarbayev has promoted his new capital’s strategic location at the ‘Heart of Eurasia’ (Nazarbayev 2003, 2005, 2006a). In this article, I explore this geopolitical imaginary in and of Astana, contributing to the work of geographers and other scholars, who have considered the role of state capitals in the inscription of national identity projects (J. Adams 2008; Anacker 2004; Beer 2008; Bell 1999; Ford 2008; Houston 2005; Knight 1977; Schatz 2004; Šír 2008; Vale 2008; van der Wusten 2000; Wagenaar 2000; Wolfel 2002). Capitals are a particularly important place to examine symbolic landscapes because they 'reflect the most prominent elite conceptions of the nation' (Forest and Johnson 2002: 529). They also play a central role in nation-building efforts to instill pride, serving as 'open-air museums of the nation' (Wagenaar 2000: 350).

Astana's new cityscape is clearly designed to stimulate such feelings of national pride and identity. It has been a focal point of ubiquitous nationalist propaganda, also designed to combat the challenges of nation-building given Kazakhstan's significant demographic diversity.[1] Most notable for a large ethnic Russian minority, this diversity has had a profound impact on the kind of identity promoted by the political elites since independence. Drawing on Soviet-style internationalist discourses (Schatz 2004: 130), the government has used the terms 'Eurasian' and 'Kazakhstani' to elide divisions between nationalities. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan's constitution refers to 'Kazakhs' as the 'primordial' inheritors of Kazakhstan's territory (Dave 2004: 129) and there are ongoing measures to 'nativize' the structures of power (Diener 2002; Sarsembayev 1999), such as laws requiring all public servants to pass a Kazakh language exam. These unifying discourses are thus often dismissed as merely rhetorical masks for the government's *de facto* privileging of ethnic, Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs over other groups. Despite (or perhaps because of) the ongoing 'Kazakhification' of society, President Nazarbayev's government appears to still have a vested interest in promoting its 'Eurasianist' identity project. The moving of the capital to Astana, and the vast funds lavished on developing its internationalist image, is one of the best illustrations of this. As this article demonstrates, the architectural style and symbols employed in creating Astana's image tend to be independent of nationalist attachments. Specifically, the notions of 'modernity' and 'progress' as inscribed in the cityscape are the most prominent examples of this effort to elide national differences.

Although many have noted Astana's dramatically monumental character, few have considered how images of it in miniature (e.g. photographs, models) have proliferated throughout Kazakhstan (for an exception, see Laszczkowski 2009). In this article, I argue that the 'monumental' and the 'miniature' presentations of Astana are an important element to the elite nation-building project in Kazakhstan, in which Kazakhstani identity is defined as forward-looking and 'modern.' To this end, I examine visual data collected in Kazakhstan from June to August 2009. Part of a larger project, it is informed by ethnographic and interview data conducted during this time, although these data are not explicitly presented here. Rather this paper lays a basis for continuing research on national identity and symbolic landscapes throughout Kazakhstan. Drawing on political and cultural geographic studies of landscapes as texts (e.g. Cosgrove 1998; Duncan 1990; Forest and Johnson 2002), I put these analyses in conversation with inter-disciplinary discussions about 'modernity.' I show how President Nazarbayev and ruling elites use the 'modern' urban landscape to legitimate their authoritarian control, contributing to recent studies of legitimacy of Central Asian regimes (Cummings 2005, 2009; March 2003; Matveeva 2009; Schatz 2006).[2]

Modernity, order, and the 'nation-state'

'Modernity' became a highly sensitive word in academia following a series of postcolonial critiques in the 1970s of the unilinear modernization theory, which presumed that 'developing countries' would 'progress' toward a European ideal with increasing economic growth. Postcolonial critiques have underlined the colonial origins of the concept of modernity, arguing that colonial encounters *produced* the binary between modernity and tradition (Dirks 1990: 28). While it may then be tempting to write off modernity as a colonial construct, this would neglect its important role in contemporary moral politics and its various (re)interpretations worldwide. Notably, 'modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness' (Rofel 1999: 3). Modernity as a discursive tool is used in complex ways in various contexts. Thus, the issue to attend to is 'who controls that which is signified as modern' (Ong 1999: 54).

Although modernity is often conceived of as an 'elsewhere' for many groups, Ferguson's (1999) foundational work on Zambia has decisively illustrated how modernity there came to be located in another time: in the prosperous past. Unlike his case study, however, temporal locations of modernity in the non-present are more typically placed in the future. The 'non-modern' is often coded as a certain 'backwardness' rooted in a historic past. Discursive constructions of modernity often employ it to mark a temporal break with this past and 'offer a way of possessing the future more immediately within that present itself' (Jameson 2002: 35). This paper explores how Kazakhstani elite conceptions of modernity locate it in the non-present, promising a utopian future temporality in the present.

Central to these elite claims of modernity is the idea that the 'nation-state' is quintessentially modern (Anderson 1983). Through a focus on territory, political geographers have challenged the naturalization of this 'nation-state' geopolitical order (Agnew 1995). In this article, I treat the 'nation-state' system as more a symptom of modernist thinking about space than a sign of modernity. Both the naturalization of the 'nation-state' 'order', and the territorialization that produces it, are acts of ‘enframing’, i.e. methods for dividing and containing space (Mitchell 1988: 44). Such a belief in the state’s capacity to impose order is indeed inherent in modernist projects (Holston 1989; Law 1994; Mitchell 1988; Scott 1998). The central irony of modernist ‘order’, however, is that it is nothing of the sort: it is merely an *appearance*, symptomatic of the privileging of the visual, stemming from Enlightenment-era Cartesian perspectivalism (Ó Tuathail 1996: 23). The order ostensibly offered by the state shares much colonial projects, with ‘modern statecraft’ curiously positioned as ‘a project of internal colonization, often glossed, as it is in imperial rhetoric, as a “civilizing mission”’ (Scott 1998: 82). With colonialism came the necessity that the colonized region ‘become readable’ (Mitchell 1988: 33), which also implies the necessity of a point of view. As this case study demonstrates, this point of view takes on special significance in Astana’s monumental cityscape and its miniature representations.

Articulating modernity in independent Kazakhstan

Before moving on to the specifics of the case study, it is necessary to consider that the concept of modernity has its own important colonial history in Central Asia. Imperial Russia justified colonial rule there via promises of bringing progress to its colonial subjects, while subsequent Soviet socialist ideology retained an emphasis on modernization and economic development. These development projects were central to political legitimation in the Soviet Union, and especially in Central Asia. A hallmark of ‘high modernism’ as an ideology is that it relies heavily ‘on visual images of heroic progress toward a totally transformed future’ (Scott 1998: 95). This ideology underpins Socialist realist art, in addition to socialist states’ five-year plans, with the idea that ‘the certainty of a better future justifies the many short-term sacrifices required to get there’ (Scott 1998: 95).

Elites in independent Kazakhstan, who are largely holdovers from the Soviet power apparatus, have inherited this Soviet legacy. March (2003: 30) has defined totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in Central Asia as ‘teleocracies’ because they ‘are organized and legitimated in relation to the realization of certain hallowed goals,’ which are defined by elites through alleging a ‘natural, pre-political consensus’ about the pursuit of progress in the form of economic development (March 2003: 332). Five-year plans are built into the grander ‘Kazakhstan-2030’ program, which defines the country’s path of development, projected to be achieved in 2030. The program is used as a ‘subtle legitimisation of the current restrictions it lays upon political freedoms in return for economic growth and prosperity in the future’ (Matveeva 2009: 1109). President Nazarbayev and his supporters have claimed that ‘modernization does not entail a radical discontinuity with tradition’ (Surucu 2002: 395), and have identified a particular ‘Kazakhstani Path’ (*Kazakhstanski Put’*) to development (Nazarbayev 2006a), which parallels discourses in Russia and China about state-controlled market ‘liberalization.’ In each of these cases, the post-socialist entry into the capitalist market has taken the form of what has been called ‘state-led capitalism’, in which central governments maintain control of major resources and industries, while simultaneously touting involvement in the ‘free market.’ In Kazakhstan, this is most acutely visible in the government’s monopolistic control of the oil and gas industry, and Nazarbayev’s systematic personal enrichment through its exploitation. The new seat of government and Kazakhstan’s fabulous new oil wealth, Astana’s bureaucratic heart (the ‘Left Bank’) reflects this intimate relationship, with a special place reserved for the grandiose KazMunaiGas headquarters to loom large over visitors—powerless and powerful alike.

No one is certain why President Nazarbayev elected to move the capital, although many have suspected nationalistic motives and concerns about Russian separatism in the north (Anacker 2004; Schatz 2004; Wolfel 2002). Citizens and scholars alike suggest that it was an attempt to de-center the political power of Almaty-based clans, while others suggest that it was because Almaty was too susceptible to invasion from China. Yet others reiterate official rationalizing, for example, that Almaty is earthquake-prone and that Astana's near central location in Kazakhstan makes it a natural location for the seat of the government (for more discussion, see Fauve 2009). While these may have all been important reasons, it is also plausible that Kazakhstan's state planners likely preferred a 'blank slate' for its nation-building project – where the population could be 'shocked' and would lack the 'social resources for resisting and refashioning the transformation planned for it' (Scott 1998: 256). In Almaty, 'the presence of so much past' threatened to get in the way 'of offering singular interpretations' (Agnew 1998: 237) of Kazakhstan's new symbols of statehood.

Although Astana plays an important role in elite political agendas, its development does not represent an ideologically coherent manifestation of elite power, nor does its successful construction necessarily entail the success of elite nation-building efforts (Agnew 1998). Rather, it reflects elite recognition of the resonance and popular appeal of modernist (oculocentric) imagery and economic development.[3] Like the symbolic landscape of Russia as described by Forest and Johnson (2002: 537), elite visions of Astana have a vested interest in appealing to popular opinion, 'but not to cede actual control' of its form to the public. Many geographers and scholars in related disciplines have examined the connection between symbolic landscapes (e.g.

memorials), elite identity projects, and national collective memory (Bell 1999; Denison 2009; Forest and Johnson 2002; Grant 2001; Holston 1989; Scott 1998; Till 1999, 2003). These studies consider landscapes as texts, a perspective that 'suggests how the symbolic meanings of both physical and represented landscapes are deliberately manipulated to advance political interests, and how one may interpret landscapes as a reflection of those interests' (Forest and Johnson 2002: 526). This approach is particularly salient in the case of Kazakhstan because conscious efforts to socialize people in public space was a hallmark of socialist states, meaning that the politicization of public space is intensified in the post-Soviet sphere (Denison 2009: 1171). Rather than focus specifically on formal monuments, this paper joins a growing literature on 'monumentality' in urban design in authoritarian contexts (J. Adams 2008; Agnew 1998; Ford 2008; Šír 2008; Smith 2008; Wagenaar 2000). Although Astana as a state capital is remarkably devoid of grandiose memorials, the government has favored monumentalist architectural projects, which themselves might be considered monuments to President Nazarbayev's utopian vision of modernity in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Astana appears to be the government's favorite showcase for the achievements of its 'Kazakhstan-2030' modernization project; so much so that President Nazarbayev has fused his own personality with the city. In fact, the national Astana Day holiday, celebrating the capital change, now coincides with his birthday on 6 July.[4] For President Nazarbayev, not only is Astana a proxy for his modernization project, it is also a proxy for his cult of personality (L. Adams and Rustemova 2009: 1270). Domestically, the value of a proxy lies in its ability to diversify the cult of the president, alleviating the monotony 'without diluting or threatening his personal authority' (Denison 2009: 1179; see also L. Adams and Rustemova 2009: 1270; Šír 2008). Internationally, the proxy can mask some of the most blatant elements of the authoritarian rule, while simultaneously serving the government's push to increase international recognition (Schatz 2006, 2008) and create a brand-like image for itself (Marat 2009).

Astana's development and its role in the state's legitimation practices is closely paralleled by the development of Brasília in the 1950s. Conceived of as a 'pole of development' (Holston 1989: 18), Brasília was supposed to be a source of progress to spread throughout Brazil's territory. The city's modernist architecture is marked by a utopian temporality, which 'presupposes to regenerate the present by means of an imagined future' (Holston 1989: 56). The past is thus seen as an impediment, while 'the present is the platform for launching plans for a better future' (Scott 1998: 95). Ultimately, this ideology stems from a worldview that hints at environmental determinism, insofar as it presumes the ability of the urban environment to create a new social order (Holston 1989). Like Brasília, which was seen as capable of 'propelling' Brazil into an idealized future, the urban landscape of Astana has rapidly become a central site for inscribing desired visions of the future in Kazakhstan.

This utopianism is most acutely visible in the miniature. Though Scott uses 'miniaturization' in a different sense than I do in this paper, his consideration of Brasília as a miniature of what all Brazil should look like in the imagined future also parallels Astana's perceived role in Kazakhstan. The city is thus 'a small, relatively self-contained, utopian space where high-modernist aspirations might more nearly be realized' (Scott 1998: 257).[5] These scalar narratives—not only of the miniature but also the monumental—are key to understanding the modernist project in Astana. To this end, the analysis that follows draws heavily on Susan Stewart's (1984) text, *On longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*. Even today, her reflections on the fetishization of certain scalar narratives remain among the most useful.

The monumental

As a monumentalist project, the ‘gigantic’ is omnipresent in Astana. This section addresses a handful of prominent examples of monumentality in the urban landscape: 1) government buildings on the ‘Left Bank’; 2) the Pyramid; and 3) the new national flag monument. These are just a few of the new structures in Astana’s cityscape since becoming Kazakhstan’s capital and, as such, cannot illustrate the massive scale of the city’s transformation in the last 15 years. It is notable that much of this change has been superficial: as a modernist “pool of order”, Astana’s cityscape is indeed illusory (Law 1994: 5). Many of the colorful new façades are literally just façades: one can walk around to the back of a building and see the old Soviet structure. Behind massive metal barricades along the city’s broad new avenues, one can find neighborhoods of decrepit shacks just like those found in the country’s provinces. Lofty skyscrapers and fancy new apartment complexes remain largely unoccupied because people cannot afford to rent them, or there is simply insufficient demand. This, combined with a popular discomfort with the city’s sterile environment or lack of organicism, has earned Astana the reputation of being a Potemkin village. All this notwithstanding, Astana’s new built environment serves important legitimizing and ideological functions for the state, which become particularly visible in its ‘gigantic’ manifestations.

For Stewart (1984), the city itself is an example of the gigantic; one can never gain an all-encompassing view and the gigantic in public space must be ‘situated above and over, [so] that the transcendent position be denied the viewer’ (Stewart 1984: 89). In contrast to the ‘miniature’ which makes the body feel gigantic, the gigantic makes the body feel miniature highlighting ‘the body’s ‘toylike’ and ‘insignificant’ aspects’ (Stewart 1984: 71). This very insignificance parallels the essentialized dichotomy between of the ‘state’ and its subjects. In authoritarian Kazakhstan, only the state has access to the privileged panoptic view, while average citizens are conceptually diminished in scale and significance. Authoritarian regimes tend to be the primary source of monumental urban landscapes, often because they have access to significant amounts of capital or the ability to expropriate land (J. Adams 2008; van der Wusten 2000; Wagenaar 2000). In Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev’s government has developed monumentalist landscapes not only because it can (thanks to vast natural gas and oil resources), but because his legitimation strategy has been founded on projecting an image of economic prosperity and modernity to both domestic and international audiences. I now turn to some examples of how this image has been constructed in Astana.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Left Bank

The most significant growth in Astana has been in a region referred to as the ‘Left Bank’ (i.e. of the Ishim River), which is now home to many state ministries, the Supreme Court, various embassies and palaces, KazMunaiGas (the state-owned gas company), and Baiterek Tower, amongst other things. The futuristic pastiche of shiny glass-covered buildings and ‘Eurasian’, domed buildings is just as surreal for European visitors as for local Kazakhs, if only for its enormous scale (Figure 1). This combination of buildings exemplifies the government’s preferred ‘Eurasian’ architecture style. A translation of its favorite metaphor of Kazakhstan as a bridge between East and West, the style is a fusion of ‘modern’ and ‘European’ order and technology with colorful ‘Eastern’ mosque-like domes. It is common for authoritarian leaders to impress their personal preferences on the aesthetics of their capitals (van der Wusten 2000: 131), and this style indeed bears Nazarbayev’s mark. As a proxy of President Nazarbayev’s personality cult, Astana's aesthetic dictates are an important element to 'symbolically underpinning' (Šír 2008: 220) his rule.

Beyond manifesting Nazarbayev's imagining of Kazakhstani identity as fusing East and West, the Left Bank architecture is an articulation of modernity writ large. Elite conceptions of modernity in Kazakhstan firmly locate it in the future – but the grandiose architectural project on the Left Bank strives to offer the future in the present. Like the fairy tale monuments in Moscow described by Grant (2001), the buildings 'precisely "buy time" for their political clients by invoking their own denial of coevalness with the life of the capital around them' (Grant 2001: 352). The future temporality of modernity here is simultaneously utopian and ideologically distorting in that it 'constitutes something of a spurious promise intended in the long run to displace and replace the Utopian one' (Jameson 2002: 35). The futuristic portrayal of Kazakhstani modernity inscribed in the Left Bank both imagines a particular future and creates it in so doing – while effectively preempting alternative envisionings of the future. Also like the Russian monuments described by Grant (2001), the Left Bank buildings have the monumental 'ability to preside over enormous urban squares, pacifying the swell of time and space around them' (Grant 2001: 351), and depoliticize Kazakhstan's path to modernity – or in Nazarbayev's (2006a: 305) words, Kazakhstan's 'path to the stars' (*doroga k zvezdam*).

The Pyramid

Many capital city restructuring, styling, or building efforts involve 'special projects' (van der Wusten 2000: 133). In Astana, one of the most prominent examples of this the establishment of a 'Congress of World and Traditional Religions.' One of Nazarbayev's pet projects, it factors into the elite national identity project constructing Kazakhstan as a crossroads of world religions.

Kazakhstan's geographic location is therefore construed as 'naturally' endowing the country with the unique ability 'to foster tranquility in a multi-confessional and multiethnic domestic society' (Schatz 2006: 274), and to foster inter-religious dialogue on the international scale. The first Congress was convened in Astana on September 2003, the second in September 2006, and the third in July 2009. In attendance at these conferences were representatives of a dozen major religions. At the first congress, President Nazarbayev promised to build a special palace – the Palace of Peace and Accord[6] – for future conferences. True to his word, the palace, designed by British architect Norman Foster, was ready for the second Congress (Figure 2). In the shape of pyramid (and indeed called 'the Pyramid' by locals), it is seen by the president as representing Kazakhstan's open embrace of 'all people of all nations and practicing different religions' (Nazarbayev 2006b).

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The Pyramid is an example of how an exhibition can 'become part of the capital cityscape' (van der Wusten 2000: 133). Exhibitions are an important opportunity to showcase the state capital, which is itself a showcase 'to convey a message of general attractivity, national identity, state strength, and also position themselves as privileged windows to the world' (van der Wusten 2000: 133). President Nazarbayev articulates precisely this concept with respect to the religious landscape in Astana:

> Cathedrals, Mosques, Churches, Temples, Pagodas were ones [sic] of the main architectural sightseeing places in the capitals of the world. We are not an exception. But inter-religious understanding should not remain as only words in the new millennium. It should be expressed in a material, architectural form. We think that there is no more important symbol than peace and accord in a human soul and between human souls. Astana demonstrates an example of such an architectural symbol, and we hope that Peace and Accord Palaces will be constructed in the capitals of countries, represented in Kazakhstan today by their spiritual leaders. (Nazarbayev 2006b)

In this excerpt from Nazarbayev's address at the second Congress, we see him not only articulating a national identity for Kazakhstan, but positioning the country within a geopolitical community that might seek to emulate Kazakhstan's modernity. This particular vision of Kazakhstani modernity must be understood as inherently political. At the international level, the trope is employed, as suggested above, as a means to claim power and respect on the global stage (Ong 1999: 35). Domestically, it serves as an element of the Astana-as-proxy for the president's personality cult: a fact that is readily obvious with the glorification of President Nazarbayev throughout the Congress website (www.religions-congress.org).

National flag

When considering the monumental, Susan Stewart (1984:84) reminds us: 'The appearance of the gigantic in the context of the city must be linked as well to the creation of public *spectacle*.' In 2009, the weekend preceding Astana Day was filled with spectacles: ceremonies, open-air theater, festivities around the city, and nightly fireworks shows. As with other major holidays, the weeks preceding the event were spent beautifying the city and completing various new projects. One of these projects was the transformation of the monument to the Victims of Political Repression (located in the southeast corner of the central City Park) into an enormous flagpole—set to hoist the world's largest national flag (Figure 3). Prior to its transformation, the previous monument was a tall metal obelisk on the top of a round hillock symbolizing an ancient burial mound, and commemorated those killed in the lead up to and during Soviet rule. This monument and all its symbolism was eliminated when the President decided to replace it with a flagpole, which rather in-coincidentally resembles a tall metal obelisk. This was a striking yet subtle official act, which served to undermine memories of the past in favor of a nationalism orientated toward the future. In stimulating such a ‘forward looking’ identity, the state does *not* fail to ‘undermine the past foundations,’ as Matveeva (2009: 1105) argues, but rather merely does so quietly.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The flag was raised on 4 July 2009, during a ceremony presided over by President Nazarbayev and attended by various regiments of the armed forces, including the venerated Presidential Guard. Spectators received miniature Kazakhstani flags, which seemed to be waved *en masse* in lieu of applause. In both monumental and miniature form, the Kazakhstani flag was acutely fetishized at the spectacle. Like the city’s monumental architecture and miniaturized representations of Astana discussed in the following section, ‘the spectacle in mass culture exists in a separateness which locates history outside lived reality’(Stewart 1984: 85), and thus outside the field of political discussion. As in Ley and Olds’ (1988) study, the spectacle in this case is used as a tool of imposing hegemonic notions of Kazakhstani independence on the depoliticized masses. The flag-raising ceremony served the unique purpose of simultaneously depoliticizing the transformation of the flagpole’s site, and reifying the flag’s symbolic value. In accordance with the elite aversion to democratic engagement, the spectacle set out Kazakhstan’s independence as an object of reverie, and little more.

The miniature

The pervasiveness of miniature models in Astana (and in all of Kazakhstan) is striking. Miniature images of the cityscape are ubiquitous – on billboards, inside the buildings they model, in shopping malls, the airport, museums, and hundreds fill the city’s 2.5 sq km miniature ‘map of Kazakhstan’ (*Atameken*). In this section, I examine two groupings of miniature presentations of Astana: 1) miscellaneous architectural models; 2) images of and from the Baiterek tower. Laszczkowski (2009) correctly situates miniatures in Astana as an element of the city's self-referential nature and stresses their decontextualizing power, but he does not consider their role in larger issues of power and expressions of Kazakhstan's elite identity project. Expanding on his discussion, I argue that the miniatures serve two particular ideological functions: 1) depoliticizing Astana's built landscape, and 2) creating an alternate temporality that underpins elite constructions of modernity.

Central to this argument is the fact that the miniature has a unique function of shutting down discourse. Its appeal lies primarily in its presentation of likeness; yet 'true likeness precludes imaginative variation' (Stewart 1984: 53). The miniature is thus a form of 'univocality' and 'absolute closure' (Stewart 1984: 53). In the miniatures examined below, this discursive closure means that the structures and spaces they represent are transformed from sites of political contestation into sites of fetishization of elite-defined modernity – and also instruments of ideological inculcation. Though miniaturization may be inherent in urban or architectural planning (Scott 1998: 57), I argue that it provides an important insight power dynamics in Kazakhstan.

Serving to detemporalize and dehistoricize their subjects, miniatures offer up an alternate temporality, which Stewart (1984) labels nostalgic. In the case of Kazakhstan, however, this might be more appropriately labeled utopian. The majority of miniatures in Astana represent new or planned structures, selectively portraying those especially futuristic and modern structures. In his analysis of 'Beautiful Indonesia'-in-Miniature Park, Pemberton (1994: 245) also points to the park's 'peculiar sense of temporality' and an 'obsession with connecting the past and future in the form of a present.' Anagnost (1997: 14) presents a similar analysis of the 'Splendid China' theme park, which constructs ‘the nation-space in miniature as a timeless, essentialized identity.’ Likewise, miniatures in Astana represent an essentialized image of Kazakhstan’s post-independence modernist national identity. They also serve the same function as with the Left Bank buildings, insofar as they ‘buy time’ for the government’s economic development program by offering an image of the future in the present. They create both a spatial and temporal transcendence that erases causality, and can also ‘erase their history [and] lose us within their presentness’ (Stewart 1984: 60).

Architectural models

While the gigantic miniaturizes its viewer, the miniature makes its viewer gigantic, assuming ‘an anthropocentric universe for its absolute sense of scale’ (Stewart 1984: 56). Whereas the monumentalist urban landscape of Astana projects a sense of insignificance onto the subjects of the state (which has exclusive access to the panoptic view), the miniature projects a false sense of empowerment onto its viewers by granting them this panoptic view. President Nazarbayev is frequently photographed with architectural models, authoritatively presiding over new city plans in three-dimensional miniature form. These models thus invite other viewers to share their leader’s panoptic view, to envision his vision for themselves. Yet the transcendent view it offers ‘is always within the standpoint of present lived reality and which thereby always nostalgically distances its object’ (Stewart 1984: 69). The miniatures are viewed in their pristine and contained form, but not open to negotiation. The president lays out his (political) envisioning of the form of structures and spaces in Astana, as if on a magical rug (Figure 4), for his subjects to consume but not debate: ‘The reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its 'use value' transformed into the infinite time of reverie' (Stewart 1984: 65). It is precisely this 'infinite time of reverie' that makes the miniatures so powerful – they create an alternate, utopian temporality.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

The utopian nature of the architectural models is most apparent when one examines them up close: they are never populated by figures or vehicles. The grit and grime of everyday life is entirely absent. Their surreal cleanliness presents an unobtainable image of order (Figure 5). The author of the miniature model is most successful if he or she chooses to expose only the best side of life, creating a fantasy world 'imbued with a happy precision' that makes them 'more dead than alive' (Stewart 1984: 65). This spatial ordering is an element of modernist ideology, which entails a privileging of visuals regarding 'what look[s] modern (tidy, rectilinear, uniform, concentrated, simplified, mechanized) and what look[s] primitive (irregular, dispersed, complicated, unmechanized)' (Scott 1998: 254). Reflecting the modernist belief in the state's capacity to impose order, the model's imposition of order on the disorderly parallels the state's goals of imposing 'modernity' on Kazakhstan. As with the miniature models, the modernist Left Bank region feels 'more dead than alive' to residents of Astana, who describe it as false, alien, empty, or sterile (Laszczkowski 2009). Nonetheless, this 'visual aesthetic of progress' (Scott 1998: 254) facilitates a technical approach that reinforces the 'pre-political' consensus about Kazakhstan's path to development in the future.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Perhaps the best example of miniature architectural models is found in the *Atameken* 'Ethno-Memorial Complex' in the southeast corner of Astana's central City Park. Constructed as a miniature 'map of Kazakhstan', it covers 2.5 sq km, making it a gigantic example of the miniature. The selectiveness of representations of Astana in *Atameken* is noteworthy. On a raised platform, the section dedicated to the city (Figure 6) focuses entirely on the Left Bank (Laszczkowski 2009: 6), while some other Astana buildings are represented below on the ground level. It is also notable that many of the buildings in the Astana exhibit are not yet built, furthering the ability of the miniature to 'allow for spatial decontextualization and temporal displacement' (Laszczkowski 2009: 4). This decontextualization and temporal displacement is central to the utopian alternate temporality that constitutes the elite vision of modernity in Astana. It is a fantasy world removed from political and historical contest. But its lack of organicism and its skewing of timespace creates a jarring experience for its inhabitants. The miniature, however, alleviates this discomfort by transforming its subject into a fetishized symbol of the desired ideal of modernity, in addition to temporarily offering viewers the empowering panoptic view. This is similar to Foucault's panopticon in that the privileged viewer is unseen and detached, granting them a position of power (Mitchell 1988: 26).

FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

The point of view is central to understanding the miniatures in *Atameken*. Like the 'bird's-eye view' of modern mapmaking (Anderson 1983), the miniature offers the same transcendental vision (Anagnost 1997: 162). The 'God's-eye view' of state legibility projects assumes a central viewer with synoptic vision – which is 'not afforded to those without authority' (Scott 1998: 79). This elevated view inherently miniaturizes the viewed object, making it bounded and offering 'total surveyability' (Anagnost 1997:163). Yet in turning this view into an 'exhibition', it functions to reify and essentialize the object. In *Atameken,* the nation itself becomes an object of reverie, via a 'fantastic landscape' that erases causality in the development of Kazakhstan's symbolic/built landscape.

Baiterek Tower

The panoptic view from the Baiterek tower on the Left Bank is the quintessential site for the public to gain access to this position of power. The Baiterek has become the most prominent symbol of independence in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. A tall, white base represents a tree ('Baiterek') from a Kazakh folktale, while the golden orb atop it represents a golden egg that a sacred bird ('Samruk') would lay in this tree. One of the few conventional monuments on the Left Bank, the tower has become a compulsory pilgrimage site for visitors to Astana. Although hundreds of examples may be found of the miniaturization of the Baiterek, this section focuses on the views offered from within the golden orb, which is open to the public (for a relatively steep entrance fee). Like the Eiffel Tower or the Statue of Liberty, the fact that visitors can climb inside the structure, 'simultaneously speaks to an abstract transcendence above and beyond the viewer and the possibility that the viewer can unveil the giant, can find the machinery hidden in the god and approach a transcendent view of the city himself or herself' (Stewart 1984: 90). Yet the act of reaching the top miniaturizes the gigantic, i.e. the city. Because the view necessarily remains 'a view from an elsewhere' (Stewart 1984: 79), the city is transformed into a object of reverie.

FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

Erasing the partial and fragmentary lived experience of the city, the view of Astana from the Baiterek becomes even more surreal thanks to the golden glass encapsulating visitors: it endows the entire city with a golden hue. The glass plays no small role in the enframing process. By dividing onlookers from the object, it endows it 'with the distance that is the source of [its very] objectness' (Mitchell 1988: 11), meanwhile suggesting an 'objective' gaze of the viewer

(Anagnost 1997: 165). The glass between spectators and the miniature plays an important role in maximizing the transcendent vision, eliminating 'the possibility of contagion, indeed of lived experience' (Stewart 1984: 68). The city therefore becomes 'like a picture' or a 'non-place' (Laszczkowski 2009: 3) to be consumed but not actively engaged with. There is a striking resemblance between the view of the city and the miniature model inside the Baiterek (Figure 7). Laszczkowski (2009: 7) notes that like the miniature models, 'The spatial organization, centered around the *axis mundi* of the Bayterek, is suggestive of a presumed perfect social order.' Kazakhstan's spatial ordering project is similar to Russia's post-independence urban transformation, which represented a strategic 'projection of tranquility for a fragmented country at odds over paths to political and economic improvement' (Grant 2001: 335). The view of Astana from the Baiterek, as a miniature, provides precisely the stillness that 'belies the economic upheaval going on "outside"' (Anagnost 1997: 165). Yet again, the discursive closure of the miniature serves particular ideological purposes, masking political contestation regarding ideas of modernity and economic development (in the form of state-controlled capitalism) in Kazakhstan.

Concluding remarks

Many of the successor states of the Soviet Union have been characterized by highly turbulent domestic politics since gaining their independence. Kazakhstan's transition to independence has been comparatively smooth, with President Nazarbayev retaining a firm, authoritarian hold on political power. Many observers have noted that the president is genuinely popular among the general population, largely because he has provided the stability and opportunities for economic growth of which their southern neighbors have been deprived. His efforts to increase international prestige and modernize the country have given rise to increasing feelings of patriotism in recent years.

The popularity of a markedly non-democratic regime is puzzling to many Western observers. But as I have illustrated in this article, elites have been actively engaged in a nation-building project that has facilitated this popularity and legitimated their rule. Much of this project is predicated on a vision of modernity that places modernity in the future, while simultaneously creating an alternate, utopian temporality in the development of Astana. Through examining the role of the monumental and the miniature in (re)presenting Astana, I have argued that these scalar narratives serve an important role in closing down dialogue about highly political uses of space. However, as Agnew (1998: 236) speculates, effective maintenance of political control in fascist Italy may have been due more to apathy and coercion, than effective manipulation of Rome's urban landscape. Anecdotally, it would seem that Astana has been used rather effectively to instill nationalist pride and identification – but to what extent requires further, systematic investigation. The shape of Astana's cityscape is clearly an elite project, but as Houston (2005: 103) reminds us, people always 'subvert, lucidly or practically, the intentions of states and their planners, and cities are partially constituted through the very resistance their built environments provoke.' It thus becomes necessary, as this research project goes forward, to consider popular perceptions of Astana's cityscape and to acknowledge the important role that 'readers play in the creation of its meaning' (Forest and Johnson 2002: 538).

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[1] Although the population balance has changed dramatically since 1991 (due to mass out-migration of ethnic Russians, Germans, and others), the 1999 census puts the ethnic distribution at: 53.4% Kazakh, 30% Russian, 3.7% Ukrainian, 2.5% Uzbek, 2.4% German, 1.7% Tatar, 1.4% Uygur, and 4.9% other (CIA 2009).

[2] Although I recognize that elites in Kazakhstan's government may have multiple and contradictory viewpoints, I cannot fully present the nuances within the scope of this paper. Surucu (2002) argues that there are two major camps within elite politics: the nationalists and the cosmopolitans. President Nazarbayev and his supporters fall into the nationalist camp, but have clearly co-opted many elements of the cosmopolitan's stated goals and values, meaning that their political positions are largely 'mutually constitutive' (Surucu 2002, 396).

[3] Citizens generally praise the Kazakhstan's government's ability to provide economic opportunities, especially in comparison to other Central Asian states.

[4] Astana Day was previously celebrated in December, but was moved in 2008.

[5] See also Tuan 1984: 165.

[6] Sometimes translated as the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation.

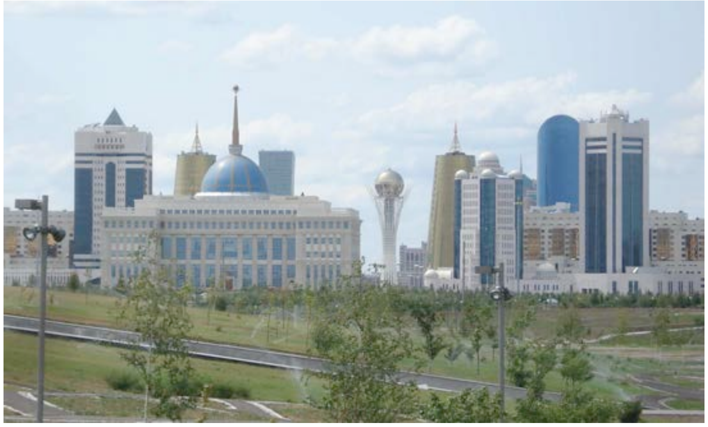

Figure 1. A view of the Left Bank, with the Presidential Palace (*Ak Orda*) in the fore and Baiterek tower in the center.

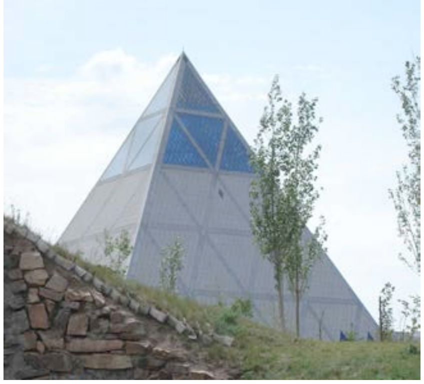

Figure 2. The Pyramid.

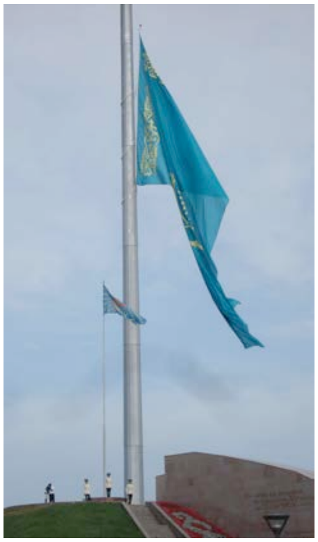

Figure 3. Flag being raised, here at half-mast

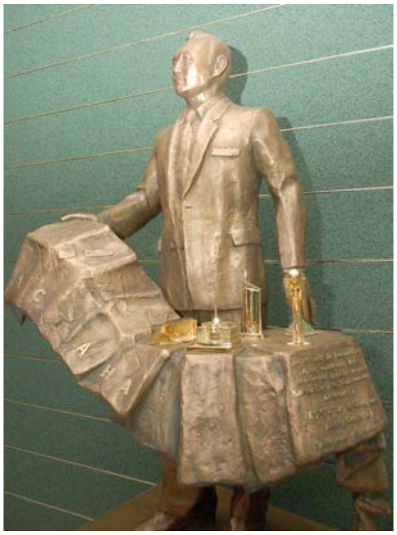

Figure 4. Miniature Nazarbayev with miniature models of Astana at the President's Cultural Center.

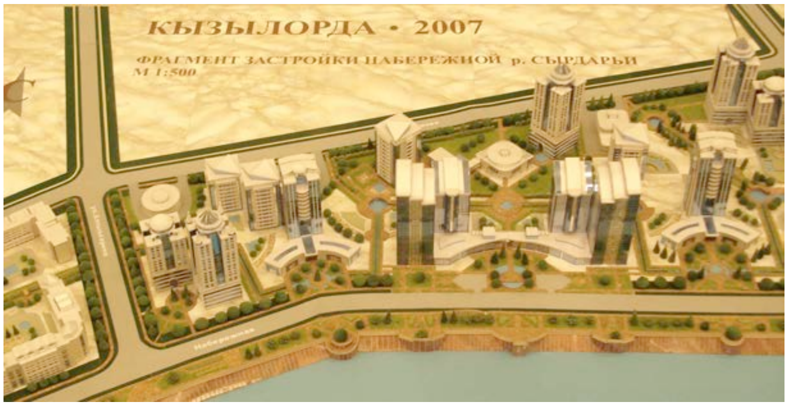
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Figure 5. Example miniature model at Astana's city planning forum (*Gorodstroitel'ny Forum* 2009).

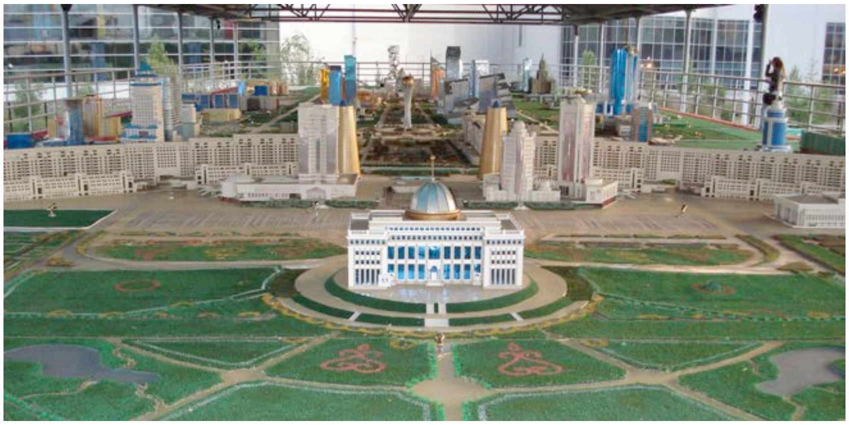

Figure 6. Astana miniature at *Atameken.*

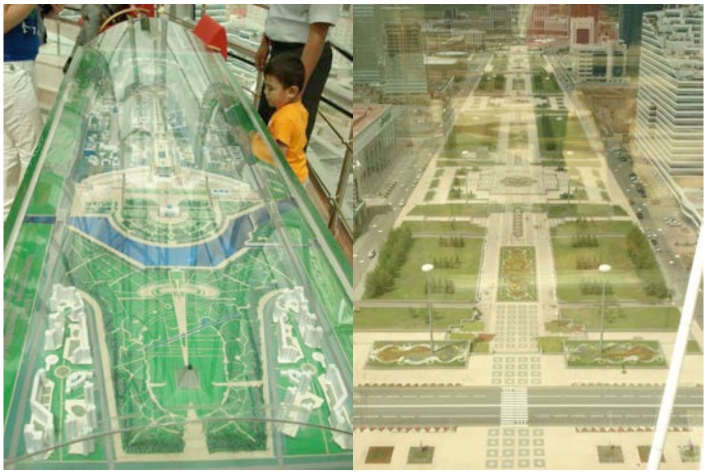

Figure 7. Miniature model of Astana in the Baiterek, and the real view of Astana from the Baiterek.