The violence of spectacle: Statist schemes to green the desert and constructing Astana and Ashgabat as urban oases

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Abstract. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have been home to the most impressive urban development projects in the entire post-Soviet world. Their capitals, Astana and Ashgabat, now boast uniquely monumental architecture and local leaders have invested heavily in 'green belt' projects to surround the cities with lush vegetation, as well as developing green and water-laden public spaces. In doing so, elites have drawn on Soviet-era 'garden city' idealism, as well as more recent environmental sustainability narratives. Yet these schemes are anything but sustainable. Unfolding on the arid Central Asian steppe, they depend on heavy irrigation, with water diverted from rivers that already fail to meet regional demands. Employing a comparative approach, I ask why and with what effect state planners have sought to craft Astana and Ashgabat as spectacularly green 'urban oases,' when their local climates should defy the logic of sustainability. In so doing, I consider urban greening in the two countries as part of a wider phenomenon of statist schemes to green the desert, which have a long and diverse history. Extending the literature on desert greening, I argue that the structural violence they manifest and perpetuate is best understood by attending to how they operate as a form of *spectacle.*

Keywords: capital city; urban greening; desert greening; spectacle; Kazakhstan; Turkmenistan

Introduction

Astana's Soviet-trained master-plan chief, Amanzhol Chikanayev once explained to me that, with the rise of megacities, contemporary approaches to urban sustainability are no longer sufficient: 'The old idea of a city is that it should be comfortable, nice, green. There was an idea that one had to preserve (*sokhronit'*) the environment. But in the 21st century, there is a new philosophy, and it is recognized that this simply isn't enough. We need to build nature at the same time as we build a city – together' (author's interview, 2011). As Chikanayev's statement suggests, this idea of 'building' nature is taken seriously by urban planners in Kazakhstan, as well as in neighboring Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat. In both of these formerly Soviet Central Asian states, the governments have invested millions of dollars into urban greening projects, ranging from mass planting campaigns and park development. In the arid steppe environment, these projects can only be sustained through large quantities of water, which is supplied either through irrigation, sprinkler systems, or by a water truck and a man with a hose. Explicitly seeking to create an image of their cities as 'urban oases,' planners have also harnessed water, diverted from neighboring rivers and channeled to the cities' ubiquitous fountains adorning public spaces. In Kazakhstan, an entire river was even diverted to run through the heart of Astana, since the country's longtime leader Nursultan Nazarbayev (2006: 335) has confessed, 'I have always liked when a city has a river.' The image of transforming Astana and Ashgabat into 'green oases' in the center of a barren steppe is spectacular. As *spectacle*, I shall argue, elites strategically employ these greening projects to cultivate a parallel image of state power and magnanimity, while effacing the structural violence that they simultaneously depend on and deepen.

What makes developments in these two cities even more remarkable is that planners have sought to narrate and justify them as something done in the interest of the environment, frequently drawing directly on the language of urban or environmental 'sustainability.' Like other urban greening efforts that I and others have explored in the Arab Gulf states, where the environmental sustainability discourse is turned on its head (Gardner 2014; Koch 2014; Ouis 2002), the campaigns to 'green' the arid steppe cities of Astana and Ashgabat are categorically unsustainable. They depend on huge quantities of water, which is diverted from regional rivers, near and far, which are part of the Aral Sea basin. Both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have inherited the many legacies of the Soviet's monumental irrigation projects in Central Asia, including a dense network of mostly-unlined canals, through which this water

flows to the independent states' opulent new capitals. Not only is there substantial water loss through seepage and evaporation along the way, but the very fact that the water no longer reaches the Aral Sea has led to the sea's continued desiccation, which has been among the region's most serious environmental challenges for decades.

And yet the impact of planners deciding to use this water to fill fountains and irrigate evergreens is spatially and temporally removed from their experience in the capital cities, unfolding instead in the country's hinterlands and being elongated in time as a form of structural, 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011). By contrast, the greening projects in the cities are unequivocally spectacular – rapid, dazzling, and exceptional. As I argue here, it is precisely this disjuncture – between slow environmental degradation and rapid city greening – that makes projects such as those in Astana and Ashgabat so appealing to state planners, who seek rapid returns and are keen to appropriate the awe induced by greening the desert, by 'building' nature and bending it to their will. This is, of course, an old tale. Part of a long and geographically diverse trend, these recent developments in Central Asia's newly independent states are among the most recent examples of statist schemes to green the desert, which have marked history for ages. While scholars have considered desert greening from many angles, they have given far less attention to the spatial and temporal dimensions of spectacle, on which they hinge. Accordingly, in this comparative study drawing primarily on textual analysis, but supplemented with mixed-methods qualitative fieldwork in the region from 2009-2014, I demonstrate how state-based actors have strategically coordinated 'nature' to create a form of spectacle in the planning of Astana and Ashgabat, and how this statist spectacle is inherently violent.

Spectacle, violence, and statist schemes to green the desert
Spectacle and structural violence

Spectacles, by the very nature of their scale and temporal manifestations, can only ever directly benefit a small number of individuals. For the remainder, their 'outputs' are of negligible value or essentially immaterial (e.g. a sense of pride in one's nation or hometown). The Russian government's allocation of $51 billion to host the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi is an example of this *par excellence*: a handful of well-connected individuals profited immensely, whereas ordinary Russians were simply to be made proud of their country's performance in hosting and competing in the Games. Paul Veyne (1990) has expertly analyzed this phenomenon through his study of 'bread and circuses' in ancient Greece and Rome ('euergetism,' or socially-prescribed acts of giving). Spectacles then, as now, were not intended to perform a redistributive function; if they did redistribute wealth, this was only ever a partial or secondary function (Veyne 1990: 95). Rather, spectacles are designed to impress 'not so much by […] actual substance but through pageantry, fanfare and show' (Kong and Yeoh 1997: 216).

Spectacular projects do, however, have far-reaching social implications. Most typically, the uneven politics of spectacle results in what has been termed 'structural violence,' whereby no direct exercise of violence is readily *visible*, but which results from the injustice of broader social structures:

> Personal violence *shows*. The object of personal violence perceives the violence, usually, and may complain - the object of structural violence may be persuaded not to perceive this at all. Personal violence represents change and dynamism - not only ripples on waves, but waves on otherwise tranquil waters. Structural violence is silent, it does not show – it is essentially static, it *is* the tranquil waters. In a *static* society, personal violence will be registered, whereas structural violence may be seen as about as natural as the air around us. (Galtung 1969: 173)

Especially in authoritarian settings – but arguably wherever statist spectacle is employed – this structural violence derives from the fact that state-scale actors prioritize investing state monies in these elitist productions, rather than in other agendas that could have more diffuse material and social

benefits. This is the violence of Russia's $51-billion Olympic Games, and the very same dynamic is at work in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, where state elites have poured state funds into developing grandiose new capital cities, while the huge segments of their populations live in (relative) poverty. The spectacular urban landscapes that I analyze here are but one lens for understanding the operation of such structural violence, for, as geographers Nancy and James Duncan have argued, aesthetically-pleasing landscapes obscure 'the exclusion as well as the exploitation that produces them' (Duncan and Duncan 2004: 26).

As with desert greening projects at a larger territorial scale, urban greening projects entail the aesthetic production of landscapes that act 'as a subtle but highly effective mechanism of exclusion' (Duncan and Duncan 2004: 7). This exclusion is not just of people as in Duncan and Duncan's understanding, but of certain *political questions* about the 'state' and 'nation's' priorities and who benefits from the way 'nature' is harnessed (produced) in one fashion versus another. In this respect, spectacle operates as a metaphor, which fixes the gaze on one aspect of a concept, and 'keeps us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 10). So the projects I consider here are intended to metaphorically index the state's alleged power, benevolence, and environmentalist leanings. As with all metaphors, which organize experience, spectacle in these capital city projects works to establish certain cognitive frames that guide daily experiences and imaginaries (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). By highlighting the impressively green and water-filled landscapes of their capital cities, elites in Astana and Ashgabat seek to cultivate a benevolent and powerful image of the state, which draws its force from 'its semiotic capacity to make inequality enchant' (Geertz 1980: 123). But of course, it is a selective view.

The spectacle of desert greening

The spectacle of humans 'conquering' the forces of the natural world has a long and wide-ranging history. Although it is often linked with modernist thought, it is also a phenomenon that has been intimately bound up with state- and nation-building projects from Maoist China (Shapiro 2001) to the United States (Adas 2006; Forest and Forest 2012), Europe (Adas 1989; Hecht 1998), and the Soviet Union (Farish and Lackenbauer 2009; Josephson 2002, 2013; Kotkin 1995; Rezun 1996; Scott 1998; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). Efforts to green ostensibly barren lands are best understood as one subset of these large-scale modernist projects. Indeed, as Molle et al. (2009: 329) argue: 'Many of the most powerful and grand empires of ancient times, such as the Chinese, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or Maya empires, are famous for their success in controlling river systems and developing large-scale irrigated areas and agricultural production, which supported and sustained their might and glory.' The Soviet Union under Stalin was no exception, with monumental projects ranging from large-scale afforestation efforts throughout the country (Brain 2011), to the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the Siberian River reversal plans, and Stalin's 1948 'Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature' (Josephson 2002).

But since the mid-twentieth century and the 'de-Stalinization' of the Soviet Union, most *statist* mass-greening efforts (i.e. at the scale of a whole country or large section of its territory) have been found in the Middle East, e.g. in Israel (Zerubavel 2009), the United Arab Emirates (Ouis 2002), and Saudi Arabia (Jones 2010).[i] The social and cultural motives for such projects are extensive, but as Molle et al. (2009) emphasize, political and economic rationales are also key to explaining why state-scale actors undertake such projects. They argue that state water bureaucracies can play a crucial role 'in state formation and the centralisation of power' (Molle et al. 2009: 329), but they are also the product of contrasting agendas and interests of politicians, construction companies, landed elites, and development banks (Molle 2008). These actors 'are often tightly associated in "synergetic relationships" whereby the ways the flows of water are created or modified by water infrastructure are intertwined with flows of power and influence, often manifested in the form of political or financial benefits, whether private or collective' (Molle et al. 2009: 336). While I support Molle et al.'s (2009: 343) call for

more actor-centered research on these intertwining flows of water and power, it is also important to consider the semiotic dimensions of these projects. Their symbolic construction is far from apolitical, and it provides essential insights into why elites prioritize spectacular greening schemes *in specific contexts*.

Taking a comparative case study approach to recent urban greening projects in Astana and Ashgabat, I consider how and with what effect planners have recently emphasized the 'natural' dimensions of their capital cities' urban landscapes. With populations of about 18 and 5 million respectively, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are strongly authoritarian states, dominated by a small circle of elites around the presidential administration. Since gaining independence in 1991, these elites have profited immensely from the state's large-scale investments in developing the urban environment of their capitals. This political-economic configuration must be understood as a condition of possibility for the recent greening efforts in both cities. But even though these projects, like capital city development schemes more generally, revolve around elite economic and political interests, they are also *ideological* insofar as they draw upon and materialize nationalist discourses (Koch 2013c). The academic work on capital cities has clearly made this connection with nationalism (e.g. Vale 1992) and it has, in fact, been an important focus of the literature on Ashgabat (Denison 2009; Šír 2008)[ii] and Astana (Bissenova 2013; Buchli 2007; Danzer 2009; Köppen 2013; Laszczkowski 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Meuser 2010; Yacher 2011).

But as Kyle Evered (2014: 477) points out in the case of Ankara, the question of nature has been systematically overlooked in the literature on the city, 'with research having focused instead on the built and human (as contrasted with the natural or physical) landscape.' Indeed, with the exception of the literature on 'garden cities' (discussed below), the vast majority of scholarship on capitals, monuments, and built landscapes tends to detach the built components for analysis, separate from their natural settings, which are presumed to be less important backdrops (e.g. Agnew 1998; Forest and Johnson 2002, 2011; Vale 1992).[iii] However, I contend that the contemporary shape of nation- and state-building in both countries is better understood if we also consider how elites have strategically coordinated 'nature' in the planning of Astana and Ashgabat. Water and greenery are essential dimensions of these two cities' aesthetic landscapes and can be just as important as the built structures and monuments they surround and aim to accentuate. By cultivating an image of these cities as oases, planners seek to dazzle spectators – ranging from top-ranking elites to ordinary citizens to foreign visitors.

'Building nature' and constructing Astana and Ashgabat as urban oases
Urban greening and capital cities in the Soviet era

The idea of desert greening is an important trope characterizing how the capitals in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are imagined relative to the rest of the entire countries' territory, but the place of water and green spaces in the city itself has also been a subject of attention in non-desert settings, as well. Thus it is important to note that in their current urban greening efforts, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan's urban planners, and the elites who fancy themselves as such (e.g. President Berdymukhamedov holds the title of 'Distinguished Architect of Turkmenistan'), are drawing upon this wide set of historically- and culturally-contextual modes of conceptualizing the place of nature in the city. Accordingly, in this section, I seek to provide additional background to these greening efforts, heeding Evered's (2014: 478) injunction to historicize the various dimensions of urban development projects, lest the 'analysis inadvertently *restate* the very statist narratives that [it claims] to scrutinize.'

Gardens held a special place for Russia's urban elites during tsarist times (Floryan 1996; Schönle 2007), as well as for Soviet-era elites.[iv] 'Kuntsevskaya,' Stalin's dacha complex, for example, was located in one of the cleanest areas of the city and consisted of over 100 hectares of forested land, where over 70,000 trees were planted over 20 years 'to make the object as inconspicuous as possible' (Blinnikov et al. 2006: 69). Leaving aside these (in)conspicuous elitist projects of the Soviet times, most scholarship on urban planning traces the greening efforts to the Garden City movement, initiated by the 1898

publication of Sir Ebeneezer Howard's *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (later reissued under the better-known title of *Garden Cities of To-morrow*; Howard 1945).

Howard's ideas were widely influential internationally and, in Russia, they were already being discussed before the Bolshevik Revolution—primarily introduced through Vladimir Semionov's 1912 book *The public servicing of towns*, which 'became the canonical work of Russian and early Soviet planning' (Cooke 1978: 356). Pre-revolutionary Russian 'gardenists' included not only socialists, but also 'Tolstoyans, religious groups, and even vegetarians, who linked healthy diet with healthy environment, open space, and modified residence patterns' (Stites 1989: 193). Central to Semionov's arguments was the issue of national uniqueness and the need to adapt Howard's Garden City principles to Russia's 'special conditions' (Cooke 1978: 356). Importantly, Semionov felt that deploying the model in Russia would be especially effective in confirming the 'rightness and vitality' of Howard's ideas, particularly in the development of Siberia and Central Asia where his 'principles could be applied to town projects which do have all the right pre-conditions for such development, being active centres of whole new provinces, effectively colonising virgin regions' (quoted in Cooke 1978: 357).

In the early years of the new Soviet system, the garden city became 'the unchallengeable model of the ideal to planners and public alike,' and the model Soviet town came to be equated with a garden city (Cooke 1978: 358). But Howard's ideas later became the subject of extensive debate between two schools of thought that dominated city planning discussions – the 'Urbanists' and the 'Disurbanists' – both of which 'grew out of anti-urban sentiments and traditions' (Stites 1989: 193). The latter held cities in particularly low regard, considering them to be both clusters of 'concretized social evil' and 'reminders of uneven growth,' which needed to be eliminated completely – interestingly, not just through depopulation, but also through their regreening as parks (Stites 1989: 194-5; see also Cooke 1978: 361). In contrast, the Urbanists did not call for abandoning cities, but were vocal advocates of the Garden City principles as a means to overcome the perceived ills of urban life and to bridge the 'town-country' divide (Cooke 1978; Miliùtin 1974; Stites 1989). As understood by the Urbanists, this mode of urban development involved extensive planning so as to increase the amount of green space, reduce crowding, and keep commute times low through strategic residential and industrial zoning. Though the implications of the Urbanist-Disurbanist debates were many (see Cooke 1978: 361-2), the eventual outcome was that cities remained – planned in line with many of the garden city principles, as well as various other socialist ideals and technologies. After all, Lenin had written in 1913 that 'cities are the centers of economic, political, and intellectual or spiritual life of a people and constitute the chief promoters of progress' (quoted in Stites 1989: 197). Soviet planning obviously changed dramatically over time – gradually, but also in spurts, around certain pivotal moments like the death of Stalin in 1954 and Moscow's hosting of the 1980 Summer Olympics.

As the capital, Moscow held a privileged role in the urban hierarchy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The city was understood to function as a 'propagandistic shopwindow' and the center of the worldwide communist movement (Gritsai and van der Wusten 2000: 39). At its height under Stalin, Moscow became a central site for elite visionaries to, quite literally, monumentalize the Soviet Union's superpower status. From his skyscrapers to the Moscow metro, Stalin's megaprojects projected this image with the intent to instill pride in the Soviet masses, and fear in Soviet rivals (DeHaan 2013; Rylkin 2003). Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) capitals served a rather different, if secondary, purpose in the Soviet system. These cities did not receive the lavish attention of Moscow, but they were nonetheless adorned according to their status. In Central Asia, Tashkent stood apart from the norm. As the capital of the Uzbek SSR, the region's most populous republic, the city was treated as a symbol of the Soviet state's ability to 'civilize' the entire region. Planners were also keen to use the city and regional advances more generally as 'the showpiece of Soviet developmental efficiency in Middle Asia' (Giese 1979: 155), where 'socialism could be adapted beyond its original European roots to assist

"less developed" or even "backward" societies in advancing out of poverty and colonialism' (Stronski 2010: 234).

The civilizational rhetoric had material implications for Central Asia's urban landscapes. In Tashkent, "uncapital-like' (*nestolicnnyi*) buildings, streets, or tramlines were removed from the city center to provide it with a more modern look' (Stronski 2010: 238). Natural landscapes were also deemed of central importance – especially under Stalin, when planners placed a strong focus on developing Tashkent as one of the 'greenest' cities in the world, including extensive fountains and even an artificial lake in the Stalin Park of Culture (Stronski 2010: 66-8). Not only was the city understood to be an important advertisement to the outside world, but the labor of transforming the city – and the new social spaces it arranged – was approached as an important means of molding 'modern' Soviet citizens (Stronski 2010). This focus on urban natural landscapes was common across Soviet cities, as well as in neighboring Kazakhstan, with Almaty's local historian Iosif Malyar writing in 1974: 'Huge parks, wide streets, houses drowning in greenery: all of this turns Alma-Ata into a garden city which was built in accordance with social political directions for the creation of healthy conditions for the bright and happy life of human beings' (quoted in Alexander 2009: 152). It is in this context that we must understand the contemporary developments in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Urban oases as metaphors of social and moral order

Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan both gained independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Whereas Ashgabat was the capital of the Turkmen SSR, and remained so in the newly independent state, Almaty was the capital of the Kazakh SSR and Astana only became independent Kazakhstan's capital in 1997. The capital change is significant because, in the first years (and still somewhat today), many elites and bureaucrats were unhappy about leaving behind their beloved Almaty – a frustration consistently noted in President Nazarbayev's extensive speeches and writing on the move to Astana (e.g. Nazarbayev 2006). Constructing the new capital as green (rhetorically and materially) became of heightened importance because, in the popular imagination, Astana was seen as comparatively barren, as contrasted with Almaty's tree-lined streets (many of them apple trees from which the city takes its name). These trees have long been a source of affection among residents – and a point of pride during the Soviet times. Catherine Alexander (2009: 152) recounts that during her fieldwork in 2000, Almaty locals often proclaimed with pride: "We were the third greenest city in the Soviet Union!' The past tense, as Alexander notes, is significant.

In the early years following the USSR's dissolution, or the '*dislokatsiya*' as it is frequently called in the region, there truly was a great deal of social dislocation. Around the post-Soviet world, people denounced the collapsed social and moral order in myriad ways, including the much-decried assault on public green spaces (Alexander 2009; Blinnikov et al. 2006; Ter-Ghazaryan 2010, 2013). In Almaty, locals frequently reference the bygone days of the city's 'aesthetic of natural abundance and greenness.' These nostalgic narratives create the image of a 'lost' city, and set up a binary whereby the new urban order is characterized by 'obfuscation in the place of clarity, illness in the place of health, dirt, stagnation and shadows in the place of clean, free-flowing openness' (Alexander 2009: 152-153). At issue in these imaginaries is not simply public order and cleanliness; they are but metaphors for social and moral order. If, as in the Soviet urban ideology, the city is understood as a means to initiate, as in Howard's vision, a 'global transformation to a *novyi byt*, a whole new way of life' (Cooke 1978: 362), then what did the decay of its most wholesome places signal for the new order? This perceived decay is precisely the anxiety that leaders in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have sought to assuage through their various greening projects. Furthermore, by preserving and promoting these oases of nature in their cities, elites have been able to point to their own effective leadership in preventing such moral backsliding that their destruction is understood to entail.

The efforts to transform Astana and Ashgabat into urban oases are thus frequently explained in the official discourse as key to instilling national pride and shaping the minds and bodies of citizens. As explained by Kazakhstan's president in the closing lines of his book on Astana: 'We founded a new capital. But in the end, the city-dream (*gorod-mechta*) will be embodied in the life of our descendants. Of young Kazakhstanis. Of those who today only look at the river banks and parks of Astana, fall in love with her fountains and dream of the future. This is their city' (Nazarbayev 2006: 358). This emotive invocation directly parallels Petrone's (2000: 6) discussion of Soviet-era spectacle, which sought 'to create legitimacy through emotional appeals and mobilize citizens through apolitical gaiety.' But here the fountains and the parks are a 'natural' form of spectacle (melodious soundscapes of bubbling water and chirping birds included) to make citizens *feel* their love for their homeland and thus dare to dream of its future. They are, in Nazarbayev's vision, the foundation of a healthy state and Kazakhstan's ability to prosper for generations to come: 'Looking at all these plans, I always imagine people behind them (*za nimi*). For all these plans in themselves mean nothing without people, ready to incarnate (*voplashchat'*) them' (Nazarbayev 2006: 358).

The Kazakhstani president's emphasis on natural landscapes illustrates his commitment to a 'wholesome' urban aesthetic, which is both rooted in Soviet-era discourses about garden cities, as well as more contemporary environmental norms about urban sustainability and city greening: 'Today, Astana is distinctive not only for its architecture. It is progressively turning into a garden city […]. Astana is transforming into a green oasis in the centre of a large steppe region, a template of an ecologically clean megapolis' (Nazarbayev 2010: 53). The thematic intermingling of green spaces, the homeland, and a vigorous citizenry for generations to come is also readily apparent in the official language used to describe Turkmenistan's recent tree planting campaigns: 'These plants carry out the invaluable duty of cleaning the summer air. Changing our homeland to a flowering garden is essential for the health of humanity, the core of society, and is a key precondition for the healthy growth and the life of future generations' (Täze oba 2014).

These projects depart little from the typical modernist pairing of a clean or sanitary environment and a productive or vigorous nation, evidenced in discourses from Egypt (Sowers 2011) to Turkey (Evered 2014; Evered and Evered 2012) and countless other contexts around the world. This link is also found in statist programs to promote mass sport, which were especially common in the Soviet Union. In fact, many parks in the USSR centered around various sporting facilities (Blinnikov et al. 2006: 68), including in Soviet Central Asia:
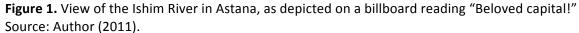
> In Tashkent's Komsomol Park, sports and recreation facilities were intended to improve the physical health of all Tashkenters, while cultural institutions would help mold their minds. […] Officially, Komsomol Lake represented great Soviet technological achievement and its potential to reorder nature. It created a desegregated urban area for the rest and relaxation of the multiethnic Tashkent population, all in the name of showing care for the mental and physical health of the Soviet citizen. (Stronski 2010: 67)

This same concern with molding the minds of citizens through molding their bodies is manifested in contemporary efforts in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to promote healthy pastimes, which are directly linked with their urban greening projects. In Ashgabat, for example, Niyazov initiated the development of the 'Path of Health,' which is an 8-kilometer (concrete) trail through the hills of Ashgabat's outskirts, which have been a central site for the government's ongoing 'green belt' planting campaign.

The concern for cleanliness and health is also expressed in the capital change discourse in Kazakhstan, where Nazarbayev has also initiated a green belt project. For example, in challenging the criticism of Astana's environmentally-suspect location, Nazarbayev explained that, in fact, 'Astana is located in environmentally clean area surrounded by lakes and rivers' :

But despite all of that we have started to develop a greenery belt around Astana. According to the special program by the year of 2005, area of 25 000 hectares around the city will be planted with young trees, by 2010 the greenery belt will be complete. A lot is being done to plant more greenery within the city itself. (Nazarbayev 2005b)

I will discuss the two green belt projects at length below, but for now, it is important to note the way that Nazarbayev shores up his decision to relocate the capital through illustrating that 'we' intend to actively improve its natural setting. This idea of actively constructing nature in the city and its surroundings came out much more clearly during my interview with Astana's master-plan chief Amanzhol Chikanayev, whom I quoted at the outset of this article. In addition to developing green spaces in and around Astana, another dimension of this active 'building' of nature has involved developing extensive water fountains, as well as engineering the presence of water through a much more ambitious undertaking: diverting and altering the flow of the Ishim River to run through the heart of the city (see **Figures 1-2**).

Figure 1. View of the Ishim River in Astana, as depicted on a billboard reading "Beloved capital!" Source: Author (2011).
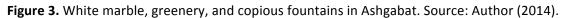

Although Ashgabat does not have such a river running nearby, the city receives plentiful water (for now) from the Amu Darya River, diverted via the Karakum Canal. The late President Saparmurat Niyazov (d. 2006) famously set out to beautify Ashgabat by promoting the large-scale construction of buildings with white marble facades, and adorned its public spaces with many new monuments (often including statues of himself). In the case of the white marble buildings, these are uniformly surrounded by lush green vegetation, whereas the monuments are overwhelmingly accompanied by a water feature (see **Figure 3**). These spectacular projects in the capital have changed somewhat under Turkmenistan's new president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, but as I discuss below, planners have extended this effort to create an image of Ashgabat as an oasis under his leadership. By positioning these efforts as a form of spectacle, planners in both cities strategically obscure the structural violence that they represent. Even if the population is made proud by the beautiful fountains and parks linking the shiny, new structures of their capital cities, these glimmering landscapes are far more exclusive than inclusive, and certainly do not open up any substantive material opportunities for ordinary citizens to improve their living conditions and quality of life.

Figure 2. Extensive park development in the newly-developed parts of Astana. Source: Author (2011).

Figure 3. White marble, greenery, and copious fountains in Ashgabat. Source: Author (2014).

Sovereign states and stately sovereigns

There is a recurring theme in both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, in which the country's leading political personality – the president – is held up as a nature-lover and as the visionary behind the effort to develop the capital's luxurious natural landscapes. Given the character of such personality-centered politics, it is never clear where the presidents' actual visions end and where those of their eager-to-please retinues begin. In any case, these leaders are clearly understood to have a special voice in determining the appearance of their capitals. Imagined to be the pinnacle of the territory's politico-spatial hierarchy, the capital is only suited to the supreme leader, who must be the 'sole *patronus* of his City' (Veyne 1990: 389) as in the imperial Roman monarch's relationship with Rome, which was '*urbs sua*, the city that was wholly devoted to the Emperor, wholly his' (Veyne 1990: 384). It was the most important venue for the sovereign to display his benevolence and generosity. Although spectacles and free bread (reserved for Rome's citizens alone) provided a certain 'material satisfaction,' they were largely about allowing the sovereign 'to prove to his capital that he shared popular feelings (*popularis esse*)' (Veyne 1990: 398) and 'was not contemptuous of the plebs' (Veyne 1990: 403).

Sovereigns throughout history and all over the world have used spectacle – built and performed – to illustrate their imagined benevolence to the general population, but the power dynamics they manifest and materialize are more immediately about elite patronage, recognition, and jockeying for status. Laura Adams (2010: 180) amply illustrates how this operates in Uzbekistan, where local elites, desiring to impress the national leadership, were heavily invested in the production of state spectacles. The constant invocation of pleasing the leader ('this is how Karimov wants it') was a fixture of cultural elites' appeals to legitimacy in their decision-making (Adams 2010: 181). Often, this desire to please the leader was more of an effort 'to please themselves' (Adams 2010: 188), resulting in a self-reinforcing cycle of one-upmanship. But lacking external references for legitimacy (e.g. upholding constitutional principles), pleasing the leader is essential to elite career prospects in rigidly centralized (authoritarian) political settings.

In authoritarian contexts, given the lack of transparency, it is often difficult to discern who is most responsible for any given policy decision. However, by embracing the fuzziness inherent in these circular power plays, we can nonetheless learn a great deal from considering the official and popular modes of attributing decision-making powers. In Turkmenistan, for example, a popular (i.e. unofficial) narrative accounts for why the leadership has been planting *evergreen* trees, rather than other species that one might expect to thrive in the country's predominantly desert ecosystem (the Karakum Desert covers 80 percent of its territory). The late President Niyazov, I was told, was once preparing to visit a village and his official apparatus arrived in advance to confirm that all was in order for his travels. At the hotel reserved for his stay, the owners had recently planted cherry trees, which were intended to blossom in time for his arrival. But they had not yet blossomed and their branches were barren. The presidential team was not pleased because they thought this sullied the image of the place – there should be greenery! – and ordered them to be cut down. And 'from that day forward,' it became imperative to plant evergreens, so that the country and its trees are *always* green. The 'truth' of this story is not overly relevant, for its significance lies first, in how it normalizes and explains elite decisions with reference to the agenda of pleasing the leader, and second, how it illustrates a particular popular understanding of how nature should be arranged as an aesthetic to accomplish precisely this.

Of course, the stately sovereigns in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have their own tastes and actually *do* have a disproportionate ability to impose their aesthetic visions vis-à-vis other actors in their lands. As illustrated by the examples I discuss below, Presidents Nazarbayev and Berdymukhamedov (and Niyazov before him) aim not only to satisfy themselves in the moment, but also have an eye to their future 'legacy.' Returning to Veyne's discussion of classical Rome, we find more parallels:

> When [the Emperor] raises triumphal arches he wants, first and foremost, to leave to posterity monuments of himself, in the face of heaven. Far from engaging in 'Imperial

propaganda', he is ready to proclaim his own glory even if nobody is listening. Let us give the name 'expression' to this irrational ostentation, this narcissism, or at any rate this need to speak on his own behalf. (Veyne 1990: 380)

The ascription of the capital city projects as 'narcissistic' is commonplace in Western media coverage of places like Ashgabat and Astana (Koch 2012), but most relevant here is idea of the leader speaking 'on his own behalf' – and to an imagined posterity. The idea of leaving a legacy is central not just to the leaders' own agendas and their understanding of their role as sovereigns,[v] but also to how their retinues seek to please. Establishing a new capital city in Kazakhstan is one such example of this focus on leaving a legacy, with presidential cronies already talking about renaming Astana (meaning simply 'capital') to 'Nursultan' (Nazarbayev's first name) after he passes. The capital city in Kazakhstan functions as one such monument to Nazarbayev, even if he has not populated the city with actual monuments of himself, as Niyazov once did in Ashgabat.

As in Astana, Ashgabat's urban planners have been especially preoccupied with gaining international recognition for the city's developments – but there, this has primarily taken the form of gaining certification from the Guinness Book of World Records for their miscellaneous urban icons (and other projects). These have included the world's highest concentration of buildings lined with white marble, the world's largest architectural star, and the world's largest indoor Ferris wheel. The fact that these structures have been acknowledged in the Guinness Book of World Records is said to prove 'that the Turkmen people's architectural art has been raised up to the top level' (Mämmedow and Aşyrmämmedow 2013: 32). The Ashgabat Fountain is discussed at length in a tri-lingual text, available on the official Ashgabat website, about those endeavors that have been acknowledged by the Guinness commission (Mämmedow and Aşyrmämmedow 2013). At the center of the Ashgabat Fountain is a statue of Oguz Khan, and is surrounded by statues of his sons – legendary founders of the Turkmen nation. Constructed in 2008 by the Turkish company, Polimeks, it covers about 15 hectares and is located on the road from the airport to the city center. Synchronized lights are accompanied by 'national' melodies to accentuate the 'skillful sculptors' wisdom and they impress everybody who comes there' (Mämmedow and Aşyrmämmedow 2013: 32). Indeed, the Guinness recognition is said to illustrate the country's success in 'attracting the world society's attention,' and that international onlookers 'highly appreciate the Great Architect of the time, the esteemed President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov's initiatives' (Mämmedow and Aşyrmämmedow 2013: 33)

Though these material inscriptions of the leader's greatness in the built landscape can often feel quite permanent, they are far from it. This has been nowhere more apparent than in the widespread (if patchy) de-Sovietization of built landscapes throughout the post-communist world, but more recently, in the slow removal of Niyazov's name and likeness from Turkmenistan since he died in 2006 (EurasiaNet 2013a; Sadykov 2013). Many monuments erected in his honor have either been removed or relocated to the city's periphery (e.g. to a newly constructed 'Memorial Complex'), while others remaining in place have lost their symbolic importance in the performance of public rituals, and/or experience outright neglect. **Figure 4** shows a monument to Niyazov, which is located near his mausoleum in Kipchak (his birthplace on the outskirts of Ashgabat), where the site is in disrepair and the water has been turned off – a sure symbolic blow to the leader for whom water was a true hallmark of power. Equally, in the afforestation and urban greening projects I discuss below, there is a threat of the water being turned off, but Niyazov's successor, Berdymukhamedov, has looked upon these more favorably.

Figure 4. Niyazov monument in his birthplace Kipchack (Ashgabat outskirts),
with the water turned off. Source: Author (2014).

Forested legacies and green belts as a branding exercise?

In recent years, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan's governments have invested heavily in afforestation projects, and their presidents clearly see them as important means of 'leaving a legacy' – literally living and breathing, and inscribed on the land for future generations to bear witness. In both Astana and Ashgabat, this has taken the form of developing a 'green belt' around the capitals, but planners have initiated extensive greening projects within the city limits, as well. In the last years, Nazarbayev has made an annual visit to the green belt development sites, after which he makes a brief remark about the importance of the undertaking. Two examples follow:

> **2012:** Forests around Astana have become the new brand of our capital. We have built a wonderful city that makes every Kazakhstani proud. It astonishes our guests from neighboring countries and beyond. The 'green belt' around Astana has been developed on my instruction. Despite doubts and skepticism, 65 thousand ha of forest now encompasses Astana, including 14 thousand ha in the city. (quoted in MEWR 2012)

> **2013:** Everybody thought that forest will never grow in this steppe. Even scientists said that the soil is not suitable and the forest will not grow, that it will cost very much. Of course it costs much, but the forest is growing already. There are 65,000 hectares of forest: 14,000 out of them are in the city's territory. They protect from dust in summer and snowstorms in winter. (quoted in Kazakh TV 2013).

Several themes emerge in these formulaic statements. First is the idea of the green belt being part of Astana's new 'brand.' And indeed, this green image is something Nazarbayev and his apparatus appear keen to promote for international consumption in recent years – apparent from the recent framing of
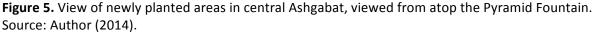
the EXPO-2017 around this image of green 'future energy,' as well as the recent language being used to introduce the city on the Presidential website:

> Nowadays Astana besides differing by its refined architecture is also turning into a garden city. The city's 'green belt' is getting wider and accordingly Astana is becoming a green oasis in the centre of huge steppes, being a model of non-polluting megacity. Astana's mission is to become a cultural and intellectual centre of the Eurasian space and to play a role of the main generator of Kazakhstan's sustainable development. (Akorda 2014)

Though Astana's development has been unsustainable in so many respects, the use of sustainability rhetoric is rather an issue of strategic political positioning than of material practice. Regardless of the facts on the ground, elites show a clear awareness of how to deploy the globally-hegemonic sustainability discourse as a means to 'brand' one's country – and thus legitimate rather ostentatious projects that might otherwise be more closely scrutinized or critiqued.[vi]

Second, as with the discourse about the capital change in general, Nazarbayev here consistently emphasizes the supposed improbability of his brainchild (i.e. developing Astana on the 'barren' steppe): 'that here, on the steppe, it is practically impossible to build a modern city' (Nazarbayev 2006: 336) or in the well-scripted words of the Chairman of the Kyzylzhar forest district Yernazar Serikbayev during Nazarbayev's 2013 visit, '5 years ago even high qualified specialists did not believe that it is possible to grow a forest even in the worst climatic conditions' (quoted in Kazakh TV 2013). The trope of conquering natural challenges is important, but there is also a special stress on proving wrong the naysayers: of prevailing and pushing on where others – even scientists! – would give up. This framing belies the fact that Astana was not built on a *tabula rasa*, as it is often said, but rather on the site of a run-down Soviet-era city, Tselinograd, which was actually the capital of the Soviet Virgin Land's campaign (Koch 2013b). The triumphalism of this narrative also strategically overlooks the untoward costs of such a scheme, which is funded by the state and thus necessarily comes at the expense of alternative social spending choices.

Indeed, the third notable theme is Nazarbayev's quick dismissal of the cost of the green belt project. As part of the 'Zhasyl damu' ['Green development'] state program, Kazakhstan's government is reported to have spent US $3.2 million on afforestation efforts in 2012, compared to US $2.8 million in the previous year (B News 2013). These numbers seem large, but other sources suggest that the entire budget for the project (running from 2010-2014) exceeds US $41 million (Satayeva 2011). In this context, Nazarbayev's effort to justify such largesse hinges on the argument that the project is being undertaken for the good of the country's posterity – and Chairman Serikbayev again has the approved line in hand for Kazakh TV (2013): 'Of course, we are proud of it. It will remain for our children and grandchildren.' Nazarbayev also positions Astana's green belt project as part of a broader agenda, aiming to extend it to the farthest reaches of the country: 'We do a very good thing for our nature. The area of Kazakhstan is about 3 million square kilometers, but the forests take only just 8-10% of the territory. So, if we do it in all the regions, we will turn Kazakhstan into a green country' (quoted in Kazakh TV 2013). Nazarbayev has made this point on several occasions, sometimes even suggesting the need to mobilize students all around the country 'to work during their summer break in the residential construction industry, and to take part in the 'Zhasyl el' ['Green nation'] program of planting greenery in the country, both noble causes that should attract our students' (Nazarbayev 2005a).

Figure 5. View of newly planted areas in central Ashgabat, viewed from atop the Pyramid Fountain. Source: Author (2014).

Indeed, in Turkmenistan, mobilizing students for various state projects is a common tactic, and they have there been drawn into various planting campaigns on a scale unknown in Kazakhstan (**Figure 5**). Turkmenistan's government has recently initiated an 'Afforestation Festival,' which includes a 'grand greening action,' allegedly involving 465,000 people (or about 10 percent of the country's entire population) to realize Berdymukhamedov's 2013 decree ordering the planting of 3 million trees (EurasiaNet 2013b). Replicating the event in March of the previous year, the 15 March 2014 event was presided over by the president and attended by all his cabinet members and various dignitaries and diplomats (MOFA 2014). 'By tradition,' it was reported, 'the Turkmen leader planted a tree starting the national planting campaign. This time it was Pseudotsuga - an evergreen coniferous tree well adaptable to the urban conditions that is planted in our country for the first time' (TDH 2014). All those present at the opening ceremony then followed Berdymukhamedov's example. Also an exercise for general population, thousands of citizens from around the country took part in the campaign, planting 771,000 saplings of young deciduous, coniferous and fruit trees (TDH 2014) – a massive undertaking to which photographs of dutiful, uniformed students planting bear witness around the country.

Comparable to Nazarbayev's yearly remarks above about Kazakhstan's green belt project, official reporting on the Afforestation Festival in Turkmenistan draws on the tropes of homeland and the leader's environmentally-minded erudition:

> **2013:** In the current era of power and happiness, Turkmenistan will become a land of lush gardens and fields, green oases, fabulous parks and dense forests, heralding growth and renewal. (*Neutralnyi Turkmenistan* newspaper, quoted EurasiaNet 2013b)

> **2014:** The planting of green trees under the guidance of our beloved leader is one of the most important tasks in the conditions of our sunny, waterless and constantly arid Homeland. Regarding these conditions our Hero Arkadag ['The Protector,' i.e. Berdymukhamedov] tirelessly urges planting trees, which should kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, the wholesome work enriches the plant world of our paradise region and our land gives off the nice smell of tulips and basil. Secondly, planting millions of plants keeps the water in the soil and improves the air and water conditions. (Täze oba 2014)

The planting campaign's title and slogans all utilize the general metaphor of the homeland as a 'blossoming' or 'flowering' garden: 'Turkmenistan is a region of blossoming, our Fatherland is a necklace of gardens!' Or, alternatively, 'Turkmenistan – flowering garden, Motherland – blooming flower' (Täze oba 2014). This theme is also loudly proclaimed on billboards around the country – 'Long live the homeland – Independent state, flowering state' – not just in Turkmenistan, but also in Kazakhstan, which is enjoined to 'blossom!' on billboards around the country (**Figure 6**). In both cases, the imagery of a flowering homeland is consistently connected with the theme of independence, i.e. the newly sovereign status of the Turkmen and Kazakh 'homelands.' As with the tropes of construction that Mateusz Laszczkowski (2013) has skillfully deconstructed in Astana, the blossoming state is a *new* state, and its material greening operates as a metaphor for its 'rebirth' and its future growth, health, and prosperity.

Figure 6. Billboard in Oskemen, Kazakhstan, which reads
"Flourish, Kazakhstan!". Source: Author (2009).

Like the image of Astana's unlikely success in the 'harsh' environment of the steppe, the afforestation projects strategically operate through the spectacle of creating an oasis in the middle of the inauspicious arid environment – of making the desert bloom. This is especially relevant when we consider that the cities of Astana and Ashgabat actually were not so barren as the leaders of independent Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan make them out to be. The post-1991 development in both capitals has been undertaken on the site of existing urban layers, which have notably included extensive green spaces cultivated under Soviet rule. Both cities' Soviet sectors were all remarkably green already – and continue to be so today. But in their efforts to create spectacular new capitals, state planners have prioritized expanding into undeveloped land beyond the existing city boundaries – places that were indeed comparatively barren. These new developments are synecdochically imagined to be representative of the *entire* city's transformation and, thus, the greening efforts there are framed as

projects to green the entire city. Centrally, though, in this imaginary, it is the *independence-era* government that takes responsibility for these opulent and impressive changes to the capitals, effectively shifting the gaze away from the Soviet areas of the cities to the new expressions of the new leadership's supposed benevolence and visionary perspicacity.

All of this may be logical at the rhetorical level, but the natural world is of course less easily tamed than local elites want to prove to their audiences (or perhaps more accurately, to themselves). Central Asia's limited water resources present a major problem for the viability of these projects and Turkmenistan, for example, already faces chronic water shortages (Annayev 2013). Even where they can maintain supplies, the political and financial sustainability of these greening efforts will be a serious question for the future generations they are imagined to benefit. While Kazakhstan's planners appear to have put comparatively more thought into introducing species that might thrive in the area's environment and thus have some notion of the longer term (see Satayeva 2011), Turkmenistan's seem to have little foresight for the plants' survival prospects, as they depend on heavy irrigation to keep them alive. But even with irrigation, largely because of its unsuitability for the local climate, new vegetation throughout the country is dying at an alarming rate – including even trees planted by visiting dignitaries in the special plot at the National Independence Monument. Perhaps predictably, the tree former Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich planted in 2009 is not green, but brown and sickly.

Conclusion

As I have sought to illustrate, planners in Astana and Ashgabat have prioritized making their cities water-laden and lush with greenery, when local conditions defy their prospects for sustainability, for a wide range of reasons. First, elites are operating on the basis of a historically- and geographically-pervasive fetish for, in the words of Astana master planner Chikanayev, 'building nature' – for creating oases in the desert and making it bloom – what Molle and Floch (2008) actually term the 'desert bloom syndrome.' The greening processes are locally framed as hallmarks of powerful and healthy states – an image (if not a reality) that the ruling elites find important to broadcast to their citizens. But in many respects, the environmental problems wrought by statist schemes to green Astana and Ashgabat – and the slow, structural violence they represent – are an allegory of the political challenges of the authoritarian systems that have defined post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Rather than investing state funds in social welfare agendas, which might result in more diffuse and concrete improvements for the population's living conditions, elites have been enticed by their own spectacles. In their schemes to develop Astana and Ashgabat as urban oases, they have sought rapid, dazzling rewards, while externalizing, spatially and temporally, the impact of these decisions.

Indeed, spectacles seduce. Though some ordinary citizens may be drawn in and awed by the spectacle of the urban oasis, most people in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are far too wise to be convinced of the sensibleness of these agendas – even if their political context proscribes their ability to expressly say so. Rather, and this is the second reason we see such projects persist, elites in these markedly authoritarian contexts are caught up in a politics of one-upmanship, whereby through a intermingling system of 'sticks' and 'carrots' (see Adams 2010, 169), they seek to please the leader. The leaders themselves have their own interests, which are just as financial as they are political, symbolic, and aesthetic. I have neither the data nor the capacity to write an exposé of the dubious monetary circuits involved in these projects – attempting to do so would be too risky, not only for the prospects of my future research, but far more. As Ingrid Nelson argues, although scholars are also often seduced by spectacle and can feel pressured to emphasize coercive and illicit activities in their research, more insight can often be achieved by considering less sensational practices with political implications 'far beyond the more obvious violence and illegality' (Nelson 2013, 420-421).

Like so many statist schemes to green the desert before them, the developments I have explored in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan simultaneously represent an intense idealism and an intense

brutality – the latter being obscured by the temporal and spatial disjuncture between spectacle and slow violence. The leaders in both countries have sought to 'build' nature in an effort to instruct the citizenry on the imagined benevolence, might, and sagacity of the state – and to instill a love of the homeland in both their spirits and their embodied experiences of the capital cities. In this sense, we see that on a rhetorical plane, these oddly-fashioned 'garden cities' have departed little from Howard's hope of marrying town and country, the 'joyous union' of which 'will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization' (Howard 1945: 48). Yet, in effecting the material 'blossoming' of Astana and Ashgabat and the newly-independent states of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the new social configurations are not the idyll of equality and justice envisioned by Howard. Rather, various elite actors – many of which I could not consider here (e.g. presidential advisors, water and customs officials, the foreign companies exporting trees, etc.) – have managed to co-opt this vision for their personal benefit. But these two countries' broader political contexts are intensely '*static*,' as in Galtung's (1969: 173) use of the word, and many live in fear of the 'chaos' (*bardak*) that characterized the early years of independence (Nazpary 2002). The 'tranquil waters' of this staticity are welcomed by many (Koch 2013a), but this does not make the violence less real, or less painful, even where it lacks a clear 'subject-action-object relation' (Galtung 1969: 171). This is equally true of the structural violence to people as to the land. This is the violence of spectacle.

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[i] Though the US Southwest is certain a case of the fetish for 'greening the desert,' this transformation has been far more diffuse than the statist efforts I aim to consider here. Sowers (2011) argues that this is equally true of Egypt.

[ii] To be fair, there is overall extremely limited academic work on Turkmenistan, but for a recent overview of the country's history and politics, see Peyrouse (2012).

[iii] There are of course some notable exceptions (e.g. Stronski 2010; Till 1999).

iv For broad treatments of Russian/Soviet cities, see Cracraft and Rowland 2003; DeHaan 2013; Hamm 1976; Kopp 1970; Miliùtin 1974. Unfortunately, there is little historical work available about the effort to green Central Asian cities prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. This is not to say that urban greening in the region only started under the Soviets, but rather that this is where most of the historical research on the subject begins. However, on the issue of tsarist and pre-tsarist water and irrigation policies in Central Asia, see Shioya 2014.

v On this point, see Veyne's (1997: 157-158) particularly insightful discussion of variable practices of government under centralized authorities like monarchs and autocrats.

vi There is insufficient space to address this properly here, but I have analyzed this phenomenon at length in the case of Qatar, where we see essentially the same the dynamics of using urban greening projects and the sustainability rhetoric as a branding opportunity (Koch 2014).