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Chapter 10, Urban Life

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Walking long distances in Central Asia's major cities can be a rewarding experience, but most of the time you will end up with dirty shoes. Frequently, there are no sidewalks, and pedestrians have to walk either in the road itself or in the roadside dreck. Air and noise pollution can be severe, and in some places like Nur-Sultan, harsh steppe winds can be cutting in the winter and cover one with dust in the summer. As one recent arrival in Nur-Sultan told me, "That's what I hate about this city—you walk outside and immediately you are dirty. You have to change your clothes all the time, and you cannot even wear nice shoes!" Most cities in Central Asia still lack a metro system—although Tashkent's opened in 1977, and after twenty-three years of construction, Almaty opened a short first line in 2011. Many do have extensive public bus and *marshrutka* networks, but as nearly any urbanite will point out, these vehicles are often dirty, poorly maintained, and unpredictable. The Soviet-era tram lines are nearly extinct in most cities, and the few that remain are the source of endless frightful encounters with daredevil drivers who commandeer their tracks as "suicide lanes" to be used in either direction. Traveling by bicycle can require equally dangerous leanings. But perhaps the biggest challenge of all for any would-be pedestrian, cyclist, or bus rider is the negative social stigma often attached to any means of transportation other than a personal car, which is largely preferred by increasingly affluent residents across the region.

Many people do not immediately think of transportation as a significant issue in approaching "urban life." Usually other things such as housing, neighborhoods, crime, and green space are the first to come to mind. But transportation networks have always been the foundation of urbanism, defining the shape and extent of any city and its residents' choices about where to live and work and how to structure their days. Soviet urban planners were keenly aware of this and designed their cities and transportation infrastructures around communist ideals. This meant, first of all, limiting the population size of cities to ensure that all residents had equal access to municipal services—enforced through the *propiska* system of residential registration. It also meant planning worker housing within close proximity of major factories, often separated from the factories only by a green belt or other shaded paths, so that workers could simply walk to work in a clean environment rather than spending long hours commuting in cramped and unhealthy spaces. Last, institutionalizing these values during the USSR period meant heavy investment in mass transport combined with actively discouraging personal car ownership, which was seen as symbolizing (if not actively promoting) individualism. Not only were cities designed around mass transit rather than cars, but cars were extremely difficult to obtain during Soviet times. Soviet domestic automobile production only began in the 1970s and even then, wait periods for ordinary citizens lasted upward of ten years.

Although these urban design principles are today seeing something of a revival among "sustainable urbanism" promoters in many Western countries, when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 they were quickly abandoned in much of Central Asia. Urbanites with means wanted to live in new and larger homes and in elite neighborhoods rather than close to a factory or other polluting industrial site. They wanted their own cars. And with the lifting or loosening of certain propiska-style residency restrictions, combined with the collapse of many collective farms in Central Asia's countryside, rural migrants flooded into the cities. At both ends of the spectrum, from the already urban nouveau riche to the poor new arrivals, their new aspirations and consumption patterns brought immediate impacts for urban life in Central Asia. Cities grew outward and upward. New prestige districts and makeshift shantytowns at the edges of cities meant more and longer commuting for both the elite and the poor. Tram lines fell into disrepair and other modes of moving about the city became subordinated to the car; city streets became clogged with traffic to an extent never seen before in the region. And with all the new cars on the roads, the air became harder to breathe.

Of course, not all cities in Central Asia have witnessed these transformations since independence to the same extent and in the same manner. While Soviet central planning aimed to unify the urban experience across the vast reaches of the country's territory, the five Central Asian republics have all plotted different trajectories with respect to how their governments and citizens understand the role of cities, both practically and symbolically. Equally, internal differences such as north/south divides mean that urban life can vary dramatically within each of the countries and their constituent regions. To add yet another layer

of complexity to this story of spatial diversity, new and exaggerated social divides across the region mean that individuals of different social classes and backgrounds experience urban life in starkly different ways even within the same city. In short, understanding urban life in Central Asia today is an exercise in geography.

Overall, we can understand this geography and the nature of recent changes in urban life through considering the shifting ways in which people "code" the urban landscape, its built forms, and local residents. These codes have many forms, but the most pervasive in the region, and perhaps globally, is the modern/backward binary. It is important to note that drawing the border between these two categorizes can never be correct or incorrect. Rather, any "modern" or "backward" designation is a thoroughly subjective way of interpreting people, things, ideas, and so on. So, rather than seeing "modernity" as a fixed category, scholars have shown that the divide is always in flux, contested, and subjective. The act of labeling something or someone modern or not is an act that will vary based on an individual's personal affinities, life experiences, and personal resources. As a result, the modern/backward divide can be extremely politically charged.

Claims to modernity are also manifested materially—built into the design of new consumer spaces and environments, architectural designs, and methods of policing how certain individuals use and move through urban space. In examining how people and planners navigate this divide, we see that each country, city, and citizen has a different way of relating to the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present. This is important because all of Central Asia's cities continue to be defined, to some extent, by their Soviet inheritance. Even outright rejection of the Soviet past—as in efforts to demolish old *khrushchevki* housing blocks to make way for new high-rise apartment complexes, for example, or transferring the country's capital to a new city (as in Nur-Sultan)—are ways of negotiating this history and narrating new identities in the era of independence. Although my own research focus is on Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, in this chapter I aim to illustrate how these identity claims work by examining the contrasting ways in which people and their governments have come to relate to this Soviet past. The geography of urbanism in Central Asia thus begins with the multiple scaled spaces where citizens craft their everyday lives.

Monumental Urbanism

In 1913 Lenin claimed that cities are the "centers of economic, political, and intellectual or spiritual life of a people and constitute the chief promoters of progress." Through Soviet times, cities were thus seen as having a special role in "civilizing" the social and territorial peripheries of the USSR. On the eve of the Bolshevik revolution, the Central Asian territories were comparatively recently incorporated into Russian imperial control, and state power remained quite tenuous (to understate the matter). But this region was also characterized by extremely low levels of urbanization. Except in the region of Fergana Valley, where people had long been sedentary, most of the republic's territories were sparsely populated and largely inhabited by nomadic groups. City building in Central Asia therefore assumed an especially potent role in the Soviet discourses about modernizing these "backward" territories.

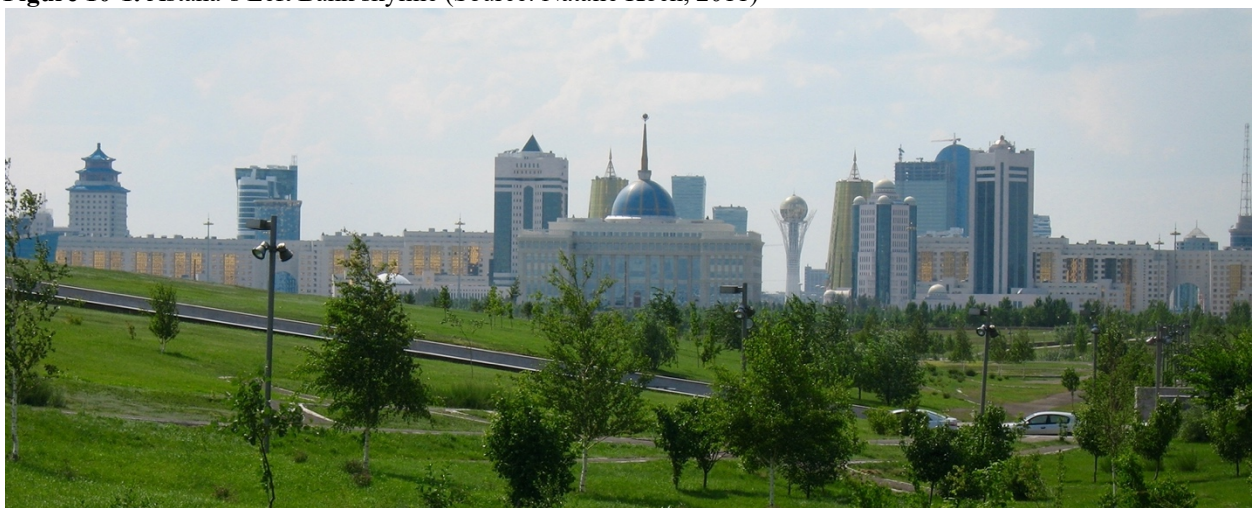
Each of the five Soviet republics in Central Asia had its own capital: Almaty in Kazakhstan, Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, Dushanbe in Tajikistan, and Tashkent in Uzbekistan. As republican capitals, these cities received more planning attention and adornment than other urban hubs in the region. Tashkent, in particular, received even more attention than the others. As the capital of the Uzbek SSR, Central Asia's most populous republic, the city was treated as a symbol of the state's ability to "civilize" the entire region. But Tashkent also seemed to be iconic of an older urban form that the Soviets wished to erase. Planners fixated on the city's "backward" or "primitive" form of organic development, with "disorderly" winding streets and cramped, "unhealthy" dwellings. In short, Tashkent lacked the modernist order of gridded streets and monumental buildings that Soviet developers considered to be the signs of progress. At every opportunity they were afforded, leaders across Central Asia tried to obliterate this old urban morphology. And occasionally they were helped along by devastating earthquakes such as those in Ashgabat in 1948 and Tashkent in 1966, which allowed them to transform the cities significantly.

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, the capital of each of the five Central Asian republics became the capital of the new country. All around the world, capital cities are accorded a special symbolic

role as the seat of government, and leaders often try to shape the city's outward appearance to reflect national values. For example, as the capital of the USSR, Moscow was seen as a "propagandistic shopwindow" to advertise the country's communist ideology. After 1991 Central Asian states were no longer advertising communism, but state and urban planners retained the idea that the capital city should be a "shopwindow" to display their country's new ideological orientation and geopolitical alignment. As capitals of sovereign states, these cities became not only the apex of their countries' urban hierarchies but their symbolic centers. Not all the countries had the resources to reshape their capitals around their new nationalist ideologies, but the two resource-rich states of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan certainly do, and their capitals have undergone massive transformations in the era of independence. In the case of Kazakhstan, the capital was moved to an entirely different city.

In 1997 Nur-Sultan replaced Almaty as the capital of Kazakhstan. At the time of the move, the new capital was known as Akmola. Between 1998-2019 the town was called Astana and in 2019 the name was changed again to Nur-Sultan, after the country's first president Nursultan Nazarbayev who frequently referred to Nur-Sultan as the "face of the country" (*litso strany*) or its "business card" (*visitnaya kartochka*). The government's development scheme there is one of the most vivid examples of how planners inscribe identity narratives in the built environment. In addition to being moved closer to the center of Kazakhstan, the capital city has been a focal point of ubiquitous nationalist propaganda—proclaiming Nur-Sultan and Kazakhstan more generally as the "geopolitical center" or the "heart" of Eurasia. The new government center, in the city's Left Bank area, is defined by monumental architecture and a potpourri of styles, colors, and shapes that the government refers to as an eclectic "Eurasian" style (see figure 10-1). Although built on the site of a Soviet-era town (Tselinograd), Nur-Sultan is portrayed as marking a clean break from the Soviet past and as representing all that is modern and forward-looking about the independent state of Kazakhstan. Pushing the city ever further into the surrounding steppe, new iconic buildings have been developed to craft the city's skyline as a colorful pastiche and to symbolize the state's ability to "domesticate" the best of global standards. For example, the government's much acclaimed Khan Shatyr shopping mall was designed by the world-renowned architect Norman Foster and symbolizes Kazakhstan's new consumerist orientation (figure 10-2). Established in 2010, Nur-Sultan's Nazarbayev University also symbolizes the government's effort to promote elite education locally. It largely serves as a monument to Nazarbayev's vision of shaping the country around a "knowledge economy" in the future. As icons, these individual structures and the image of Nur-Sultan as a whole is perhaps more symbolic than "real," in that the values and wealth they represent are not widely available to the vast majority of citizens. This notwithstanding, many people in Kazakhstan look positively on the city's development as a source of renewed pride in their homeland and as a symbol of hope for a better future to come.

Figure 10-1. Astana's Left Bank skyline (Source: Natalie Koch, 2011)



In Ashgabat, monumental urban planning has taken a rather different form than in Nur-Sultan. President Nazarbayev openly criticized Soviet architecture for its uniformity, but Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov (aka Turkmenbashi) desired precisely this. Specifically, he wanted Ashgabat's buildings all to be clad in white marble, standardizing them around this image of opulence and lending the city a truly dramatic feel. Perhaps the most dramatic element of the city, however, is the degree of abandonment contrasting with the scope of the development—nearly everywhere in the city's newest quarters, it is devoid of the "chaos" of pedestrianized movement. Like Nur-Sultan, enormous distances between major buildings and broad multi-lane avenues mark Ashgabat as a car-oriented city, where pedestrians are not welcome. Of course, there are large areas that do not conform with the monumental image that is usually projected of both cities. Having some of the liveliness of the "unplanned" city, these spaces are coded not as part of the new or "modern" Nur-Sultan and Ashgabat but, rather, as the "old," "unofficial," or "Soviet-era" parts of the city. But these are the spaces that most ordinary citizens inhabit in their day-to-day life. The monumental landscapes of Nur-Sultan and Ashgabat are largely reserved for the political elites. And yet, by defining the shining new spaces and structures as icons of the "modern" Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan, political elites use the very language of modernity to destigmatize the practice of exclusion and to transform elite desires into popular desires.

Figure 10-2. Chuy Avenue in Bishkek (Source: Natalie Koch, 2015)

The other capitals of Central Asia have also undergone significant changes in the independence era. However, as capitals of countries that do not have access to as much resource wealth and the various international patronage networks this opens up, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Tashkent have not been reconfigured so completely nor in such a monumental fashion. Much of these cities' built environment retains their Soviet character, as shown in the arcades along Chuy Avenue, a major east–west artery in Bishkek (see figure 10-2). Pedestrian spaces have not been overtaken by monumental new boulevards as in

Nur-Sultan and Ashgabat, but the sidewalks even in the very heart of the city can be in complete disrepair. Dushanbe also retains much of its Soviet flavor, though government officials have been pushing with mounting force to implement a master plan to "reinvent" the capital. In 2015, for example, authorities announced plans to destroy a number of major Soviet-era structures, including the city's Rokhat teahouse, two theaters, the former presidential administration, the mayor's office, and the parliament building. The resulting public outcry has largely focused on government corruption and dubious construction company ties, but it also relates to broader identity narratives concerning respect for the Soviet past. An anti-demolition petition, for example, calls on officials to preserve the buildings that "symbolize the Motherland" and that were "built with love by our ancestors." So, although Central Asia's cities have retained many Soviet-era architectural landmarks, housing complexes, and other infrastructures, broader efforts to de-Sovietize symbolic landscapes remain a contentious issue across the region.

Symbolic Sites and Community Spaces

Most of Central Asia's cities witnessed rapid changes in their symbolic landscapes, which were "re-coded" in the independence era. This has involved the renaming of streets and squares and the removal or reconfiguring of many Soviet-era monuments. "Lenin Street" became something like "Independence Street," and Lenin statues were replaced with Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, or Uzbek national heroes. Pervasive as this de-Sovietization of the urban landscape was, it did not happen everywhere or to the same extent. The changes have been slower in some places and faster in others. In some cases, these symbols remain because local opposition to their removal is too strong—as for one iconic Pushkin statue in Nur-Sultan (figure 10-3), which the government tried to remove, but outspoken popular criticism led to his return, albeit in a less central part of the city.

Figure 10-3. Pushkin statue in Astana, with large Soviet-era apartment blocks in the background (Source: Natalie Koch, 2011)

Figure 10-4. Soviet-era mosaic on the side of an apartment block in Petropavl (Source: Natalie Koch, 2009)

In other cases, Soviet public art or monuments have remained because they reflect deep-seated values that went unchanged with the collapse of the USSR. For instance, all over the region, Second World War memorials still dot the urban landscape, as people's patriotic reverence for veterans has largely persisted. Sometimes the message of Soviet symbolic landscapes still aligns with the independent states' identity narratives, as in parts of Kazakhstan where elaborate mosaics with the theme of "friendship of the peoples" sometimes remain on the edges of large city blocks (figure 10-4). Soviet-era mosaics have been removed from public surfaces elsewhere in the country, but the message of interethnic harmony and tolerance is one that Kazakhstan's official rhetoric emphasizes, particularly in the northern parts of the country where there are higher concentrations of ethnic Russians. Concerned about alienating the Russian and other minority populations in the independence era, political elites in Kazakhstan have largely retained Soviet-era symbols that promoted the notion of "friendship of the peoples."

Elsewhere in Central Asia, where the states' demographic composition is much less diverse than in Kazakhstan, this has been less of a concern. But even in Ashgabat, for example, the government has kept its Lenin statue—according to my government guide because it was the first statue of Lenin outside of Russia, built in 1927 (figure 10-5). In this case, Turkmenistan's leaders' penchant for superlatives triumphed over their otherwise wide-reaching de-Sovietization campaigns. Turkmenistan's cities, like those of neighboring republics, not only have seen the widespread removal of Soviet icons since 1991 but are increasingly populated with monuments to local heroes. This has taken a somewhat exceptional form in Turkmenistan, though, because President Niyazov, who headed the government until his sudden death in 2006, also had a penchant for gold statues of himself (figure 10-6). Elsewhere, urban leaders have focused more on commissioning statues of historical figures, such as pre-Soviet khans, *bai*s, and cultural icons. For example, in 2004, a towering statue of the famous Kyrgyz strongman and wrestler Kojomkol (1889–1955) was erected outside of Bishkek's Soviet-era sports palace (figure 10-7).

Figure 10-5. Lenin monument in central Ashgabat, built in 1927 (Source: Natalie Koch, 2014)

Figure 10-6. Gold Niyazov statue in central Ashgabat (Source: Natalie Koch, 2014)

Figure 10-7. Sport Palace in Bishkek, with Kojomkol statue in the foreground (Source: Natalie Koch, 2015)

Spaces for sports and exercise have long been important aspects of urban life in Central Asia, promoted by Soviet planners as a way to strengthen the bodies and minds of the masses. Sports palaces (*Dvoretz Sporta* or *Sports Sarai*) were a staple of Soviet cities and were typically located in or near parks. Green spaces themselves were similarly seen by Soviet planners as playing a central role in strengthening citizens both physically and spiritually and as a way to overcome the unhealthy aspects of urban life. Green space was considered an important aesthetic element of the city. Especially under Stalin, who was known for his appreciation of attractive cities, Soviet urban planners aimed to beautify Central Asia's cities by "greening" them. From Tashkent to Almaty to Ashgabat, planners supervised the development of extensive new urban parks and encouraged citizens to plant trees in their neighborhoods and all over their cities. Soviet citizens came to view green spaces as bastions of healthfulness and moral order in the city. This attitude remains today, even if contemporary urban planners have overseen the disappearance of much of their greenery to widen roads or develop new lands. Nonetheless, many of the region's sporting facilities and green spaces do remain, albeit adapted and reconfigured as contemporary purposes dictate—as in the case of a Soviet-era park in Ashgabat with refurbished tennis courts, or the park with the newest games and snacks made available to young families and youth gathered on a summer evening in Aral, Kazakhstan.

Religious sites are also important symbolic sites and community spaces that have been reconfigured in the post-Soviet era, and again, this has taken contrasting forms in Central Asia's many cities. Broadly speaking, though, many new places of worship have been constructed across the whole region, such as the Mashkhur Jusup in Pavlodar, completed in 2001 (figure 10-8). In the 1990s and into the early 2000s, foreign governments from Turkey to Qatar poured funds into Central Asia to develop new mosques. The trend has tapered off significantly in recent years, as regional governments have become increasingly suspicious of religious groups, especially those with foreign ties. Some political leaders have preferred to revamp their

existing religious structures, especially those with the greatest historical significance such as Samarkand's fifteenth-century Bibi-Khanym Mosque, Bukhara's sixteenth-century Kalân Mosque in Uzbekistan, and the stunning Russian Zenkov Cathedral completed in 1907 in Almaty. Functioning more as tourist destinations than as central sites of religious life, these buildings nonetheless allow government officials to promote the image of religious tolerance. In smaller towns and cities, however, places of worship have increasing significance in urban life, even if actual respect for religious practice is patchy across the region.

Figure 10-8. Mashkhur Jusup in Pavlodar, completed in 2001 (Source: Natalie Koch, 2011)

Consumer Spaces

In addition to the changing symbolic landscapes since 1991, Central Asia's cities have undergone major transformations as the countries have reconfigured their economies around the principles of capitalism. For many people, one of the most welcomed aspects of this transition was the sudden availability of foreign-made consumer goods. Although the 1990s were marred by severe economic depression, regional markets were slowly liberalized. Ranging from cars to cheap housewares to electronics, imported goods increasingly became affordable for ordinary urban residents. And by the early 2000s "modern" shopping malls began to open in the largest cities—the Dordoi Plaza in Bishkek, for example, and Kazakhstan's Mega malls (figure 10-9). Especially in the more affluent cities, these upscale commercial centers have become quite popular. Featuring extremely clean, modern-looking interiors and strict security patrols, they offer high-end clothing and luxury stores, food courts and more formal restaurants, movie theaters, and other family-oriented entertainment. These pleasures are out of reach for many of the visitors, but it is nonetheless common for people to simply buy a drink and sit socializing with friends in the climate-controlled malls. Doing so in these comfortable mall spaces can be an important way for locals, young people in particular, to position themselves as "modern" urbanites.

From the mall's clean and ultramodern setting, aspiring middle-class visitors often come to look even more disdainfully on the "outmoded" retail centers, such as TsUM (*Tsentral'nyi Universal'nyi Magazin*, the Central Universal Department Store). These Soviet-era complexes populated most cities during the Soviet Union era but have slowly been disappearing across much of Central Asia. Their basic model still prevails in most provincial towns and cities, and in some places like Dushanbe, TsUM remains an urban icon. But for increasingly affluent Central Asians, TsUM-style centers seem like a relic of the past, frequently coded as insufficiently urbane and dominated by rural people with a "village mind-set"

(*sel'skii mentalitet*). Social hierarchies in Central Asia have long operated through this urban/rural divide, but reconfiguring the region's economies around capitalism has also reconfigured the urban spaces where people code and interpret the significance of this divide. As in other capitalist countries around the world, this often works through the subtle but calculated use of shame. Consumer spaces are organized through a dense web of unofficial codes that lend certain places an aura of exclusivity—for example, at restaurants, clubs, cafés, or malls—such that lower-income individuals feel highly uncomfortable and shameful and simply avoid being in such a place. In Central Asia's cities, these codes of personal conduct and the administration of shame have increasingly been rearranged to match the norms of a neoliberal consumerist economy.

Figure 10-9. Mega Mall in Astana (Source: Natalie Koch, 2011)

This social stereotyping comes into clear focus at Nur-Sultan's Khan Shatyr mall, which opened to great fanfare for President Nazarbayev's seventieth birthday in 2010. The government consistently described this four-hundred-million-dollar project as being "for the people." Taking this deceit to heart, many rural tourists can be seen making the pilgrimage to their capital's newest attraction. They do not do much more than walk around and take pictures, as everything in the consumerist paradise is far beyond their means. More troubling, perhaps, than being financially excluded is that, once inside, the village visitors encounter the disdain of Nur-Sultan's established middle- and upper-class urbanite shoppers who see them as out of place. Although rural visitors often seem unaware or simply do not care about the contemptuous stares, the consumer-oriented experience at the Khan Shatyr brings Kazakhstan's new inequalities sharply into focus. But if the villagers experience revulsion at the social inequalities that the Khan Shatyr represents, urbanites reject their outlook as symptomatic of their "village mind-set" and lack of "modernity"—never as an example of their higher morality or egalitarian principles. The visitors are simply expected to adjust their norms to match the country's new political economy. In short, in these new consumerist spaces, rural visitors are often negatively stigmatized as being "backward" or "old-fashioned," rather than as having any legitimate grievance about Kazakhstan's newly capitalist orientations. So deep is

this stigma that it effectively forecloses any discussions about alternate, perhaps more equal, social and spatial practices.

The urban/rural and modern/backward divide is also visible in how people purchase their groceries. The new shopping malls of Central Asia have large international grocery stores, such as the Turkish chains Ramstore (Kazakhstan) and Beta-Stores (Kyrgyzstan). Although originally catering primarily to foreigners and local elite, these stores are increasingly frequented by Central Asia's growing middle class. However, the vast majority of people still do the bulk of their shopping at local markets or bazaars (figure 10-10). In many cities, urban planners have tried to crack down on bazaars by removing them entirely or by imposing impossibly taxing new regulations. Some bazaars, however, are unlikely to be eliminated in the near future as they are true cultural icons, such as the Green Bazaar in Almaty, the Chorsu Bazaar in Tashkent, and the region's largest, Bishkek's Dordoi Bazaar. In addition to these, a range of smaller weekly markets can be found throughout the region's cities, and street vending is common in various urban neighborhoods. But as Central Asia's urban residents become more affluent, they are beginning to shift their shopping habits and thus a significant element of their urban sociality to more regulated, Western-style commercial spaces—in the process, stigmatizing bazaars as a relic of the past or something reserved for poor rural migrants.

Figure 10-10. Bazaar in Kyzylorda (Source: Natalie Koch, 2015)

Urban Housing

Paralleling the shift toward increasing socioeconomic differentiation in Central Asia's consumer spaces, urban housing patterns have also been characterized by growing inequalities in the postcommunist period. Cities have seen an influx of rural migrants since the 1990s because of the economic restructuring in the countryside combined with loosened state residency restrictions. People who had never lived in cities before came to see urban life as the way of the future—or at least as offering a glimmer of hope for a more prosperous future. Often not able to afford housing in the established neighborhoods of their destination cities, rural migrants started to build small makeshift dwellings at the urban periphery. These informal settlements, like those in many other parts of the world, tend to lack access to basic services such as sewers, water, and electricity. In the most extreme cases, these communities are located in areas that pose serious health hazards to the residents, such as the Altyn Kazyk settlement located near a waste dump on the outskirts of Bishkek, which housed close to one thousand rural migrants. Slated for removal in 2009, the

cluster of small clay houses would be covered in a haze from smoldering waste, and some of the homes were even built on top of human graves.

Although not all informal settlements are as tenuous as the Altyn Kazyk case, in their relative poverty and lack of services many are not too different from some of Central Asia's poorest villages. Of course, elites and urban planners have overwhelmingly considered these communities as threatening the image of the city, marring its modern image with pockets of "backward" village life. They have consequently undertaken extensive efforts to demolish informal housing settlements. For example, numerous such communities have been destroyed in and around Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Ashgabat since the mid-2000s. Protests against these actions and insufficient compensation have been widespread, though the nondemocratic nature of urban politics across the region means that planners typically proceed regardless. In the Pervomaisk neighborhood on Ashgabat's outskirts, for instance, dozens of homes were bulldozed in early 2013, after the government gave residents only two weeks' notice to vacate and little or no financial compensation.

In their efforts to eliminate informal housing, state and urban planners have relied heavily on the language of modernity to justify their efforts to "clean up" or "modernize" their cities and housing infrastructures. This attitude has also defined official approaches to more established micro-districts and housing blocks that were characteristic of Soviet planning. This is exemplified in the way that Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev has spoken about the areas of Nur-Sultan that were part of the original Tselinograd settlement, which have slowly but systematically been targeted for removal:

> But on the eve of our move from Almaty, Astana was a typical provincial town. There were a lot of old, decrepit buildings, which were spoiling the look of the new capital. We had to demolish them. . . . They did not match the look of Kazakhstan's new capital at all. As to my views on Soviet architecture, I will say that each epoch leaves its creations. Some of them live forever, others do not pass the test of time [and] quickly become morally outdated and wear out physically.

Nazarbayev's description of Soviet-era homes as "old," "decrepit," and "morally outdated" and his concern that they "spoil the look of the new capital" clearly illustrate how significant urban aesthetics are to state planners. From their vantage point, "outdated" buildings are little more than architectural objects—not places that people live in and love, make their own, and in many cases call home, because they lack any better alternative. Of course, this is not a story that is unique to Central Asia, but the power of a city's master plan and all the other accoutrements of urban planning is their ability to depersonalize these spaces and treat them as problems to be "solved."

Urban planning dictates are not completely arbitrary, however. Wealthier citizens in Central Asia's cities are increasingly demanding modern, high-rise apartment buildings, which are slowly replacing older (and newer) low-rise developments (figure 10-11). This trend is especially strong in the city centers but starts to taper off as one moves outward toward the edges of the city. At the other end of the spectrum from the peripheral shantytowns, upper-class citizens have also appropriated state and private land to build large villa-style homes on city outskirts. In Almaty, for example, I lived with a family in an elite gated community at the city's southern edge, where it starts to climb to the foothills of the Tien Shan Mountains. Residents here enjoy cooler temperatures and dramatically cleaner air than in the city center. In addition to the expense of owning a home in this area, which is off-limits to the vast majority, one must also own a car. There is no bus service. And even then, my hosts explained to me, it had long been necessary to own an SUV with off-road capacity in order to access these homes. For many years, the major access street, Baganashyl (off Al'-Farabi), was not paved. However, this changed when President Nazarbayev started frequenting the tennis courts off Baganashyl, at which point his complaints led to its immediate paving. This small but representative example shows that urban planning and infrastructure priorities in Central Asia are often set by a handful of political elites, working to actualize their desire for modern conveniences and beautiful urban landscapes unblighted by the signs of inequality upon which their own privilege depends.

Figure 10-11. New apartment complex, next to older low-rise housing in Astana (Source: Natalie Koch, 2011)

Seeing Urban Life

In Central Asia's more affluent cities, such as those in Kazakhstan and other countries' capitals, urban life has been increasingly oriented toward consumerism, made possible by the newly capitalist orientations of the states' post-Soviet trajectories. But just because the governments have chosen to liberalize their economies and plan their cities around new market ideals so as to project an image of their countries as "modern" or at least "modernizing," this does not mean that people automatically absorb these values. Among the younger generations and urbanites more generally, we do see an increasing valorization of consumerism and the strengthening of a new moral economy that naturalizes the inequalities brought by Central Asia's transition to market capitalism.

Operating through the language of "modernity," urban planners and residents aspire to domesticate the many pleasures and comforts they associate with urbanism in the world's richest urban centers—with models ranging from more established Western cities to the iconic images of high-rise living and consumerist paradises in contemporary Dubai. As people of the region come to travel more and see the diverse array of urban forms that are open to them, many are seduced by the glimmering images of capitalist urban development. Increasingly marking the older Soviet landscapes as outdated has meant distancing "modern" urban life from that Soviet past and its infrastructures. For any individual, this can take on completely different forms ranging from simply owning a car, on one hand, to shopping in a new Turkish grocery store or supporting the government's decision to remove a Lenin statue.

Not all citizens have been so eager to accept this new moral economy, of course. But more than their rural compatriots, city dwellers have been able to access the benefits of the transition. Although socioeconomic inequalities are part and parcel of any city in the region, the stark contrast between rural and urban life means that, for many, simply living in a city is a marker of status and indeed "modernity." From this perspective, the geography of urban life in Central Asia cannot be understood as the mere product of "top-down" planning from nondemocratic state-based elites. Rather, the built form of the region's cities

and the infinite number of interactions and possibilities they channel involve an oscillation between top-down and bottom-up dynamics, between identity narratives about what is "modern" or "backward," and between political understandings of the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present and future.

In crafting their everyday lives in Central Asia's cities, ordinary citizens are always navigating between their own material desires and the material conditions with which they are working. These desires and conditions are often shaped by elite-dominated processes, like monumental urban planning or the demolition of "outdated" city buildings. But the quotidian practices and desires of ordinary citizens always have the power to overflow elite intentions—potentially laying the ground for more substantial change in how these cities are built and inhabited. Sometimes this may look like street protests against government corruption, other times it may look like the simple desire to keep one's shoes clean and demanding a proper sidewalk to one's home.