

Bringing theory into practice: seeking constitutive utopian potential in Astana

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary architectural and urban theorists have called for resurrecting a utopian spirit as a means of imbuing urban design with social imagination, which they argue is currently lacking and badly needed (cf. Harvey 2000, Pinder 2002, Coleman 2005, 2011, 2013, Hatuka and D'Hooghe 2007, Picon 2013). Toward this end, this essay poses the city of Astana, capital of Kazakhstan and host of Expo 2017, as a site to begin examining how utopian analytical frameworks might inform certain readings of the city, which could in turn guide practical design decisions. Western journalists to Kazakhstan's new capital city frequently label it 'utopian', in the popular, disparaging sense. And allusions are often made to capital-relocation and nation-building projects from the modern era, with Astana representing a postmodernist or late capitalist variation on a theme ostensibly bound for social disaster. But if utopianism is deserving of reconsideration, as recent scholarship maintains, so is Astana. Recent academic literature and experiential accounts of Astana's urban growth, when considered alongside contemporary utopian theory, challenge hasty classifications. Indeed, Kurokawa's 'flexible' development plan for Astana initially sought to avoid the totalizing tendency of modernist master plans. Moreover, despite the garish character, as seen through foreign eyes, the genuine hopefulness Astana evokes in its residents should not be cynically disregarded. For designers contributing to the Astana project, utopian praxis means taking seriously the city's 'constitutive' utopian potential and developing designs that aim to foster inchoate opportunities for social development.

KEYWORDS: utopia, Astana, theory, practice

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, Kazakhstan's glitzy new capital city, Astana, seems well-deserving of the popular label 'utopian', directed derogatorily at its placeless, mythical quality. Such characterizations of Astana by Western visitors and critics tend to convey attitudes of contempt and mockery, which speaks as much to the predominantly negative Western/postmodern views toward utopianism as it does to urban realities on the ground. But with utopian theory now enjoying a reawakening in academia, scholars are earnestly considering the potential for utopian thinking to inform urban practices (Coleman 2005, 2011, 2013, Harvey 2000, Hatuka and D'Hooghe 2007, Picon 2013, Pinder 2002). And if the utopian project is deserving of a second glance, so is Astana. There, as architectural representations of the past, present, and future are at once juxtaposed and superimposed, "the city is imagined as a locus of practical solutions that will bring about a viable, morally and materially improved future" (Laszczkowski 2011a, 86).

Recent attempts to salvage and reconstruct the utopian imagination following its postmodern fall from grace include necessary historic revisionism and theoretical (re)interpretation. Much of this work also functions as a critique of contemporary architectural schemes, built or otherwise, which tend to offer purely *spatial* visionary imagery, lacking the utopian criteria of *social* imagination or critiques of present-day conditions (Coleman 2013, Contandriopoulos 2013). Thus, reconsidering utopia offers an opportunity to reform the discipline of architecture, as well, infusing it with a renewed political agency exerted through suggestive and substantive ideas for bettering society. As Coleman (2011) contends: "When allowed to flourish, Utopia can catalyze the radical reinvention of architecture, infusing it with the conviction that society can be improved through reconceptualizations of the world 'as it is' via imaginings of its transformation into something else or other, into an alternative" (184). This paper is an attempt to build on this scholarship by offering an urban project currently underway as a site for theoretical exploration.

With its reputation as an authoritarian ruler's sandbox for global 'starchitect' projects, Astana is certainly not the most logical choice for such an undertaking. On first pass, it would appear, in fact, to meet the criteria of a 'degenerate utopia', like Disneyland, with hegemonic fantasies overwhelming any possibility for critical engagement (Marin 1990 [1972]). Yet, as Pinder (2002) argues, even accurately-applied negative utopian classifications should not preclude more nuanced, hopeful readings:

In some literature, it is as if all alternative readings of these spaces are necessarily written out in advance: that, in the attempt to convey the enclosing and alienating nature of what is being targeted, critics neglect the possibilities for other perspectives and points of struggle. The more compelling the portrait presented of degenerate utopias, the more the critic succeeds in conveying the closing of hopeful horizons, the less other readings seem possible. It should be noted, however, that even in some of the most apparently bleak assessments of spectacular urbanism, there are gaps and opportunities for struggle, and the developments themselves may be read in ways that exploit such gaps as well as uncover the desires that remain embedded within the developments as the basis for oppositional politics (237).

So whereas social criticism and scholarly analysis may reach cynical conclusions, urban designers seeking to genuinely engage with utopian projects are compelled to identify and pursue such 'gaps and opportunities'. Toward this end, Astana is employed as a foil to engage questions regarding utopian theory's role in the design process. If, as Coleman (2011) observes, "the real possibilities of Utopia always require an architectural frame" (2), Astana offers a vivid contemporary milieu for investigating the role of utopian theory to inform urban design.

1.0 ASTANA

On the flat, barren Central Asian steppe a skyline emerges like a mirage, seemingly produced overnight. As one of the most ambitious city-building projects in recent history, the envisioned Astana is being rapidly translated into real space. When Astana was designated the new capital of Kazakhstan in 1997, its development quickly became a significant economic engine of this resource-rich, former Soviet nation, attracting international investors as well as migrants from across the country in search of a better life. Amongst elites and non-elites, Astana embodies the future of the nation of Kazakhstan, as well as the region. At the heart of this promise is Astana's Left Bank, a collection of over-scaled projects mainly by foreign design teams; a veritable dreamscape of iconic architecture commissioned by Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, framed by a colossal glass pyramid and a giant tent-shaped shopping mall, with a tower referencing a local origin myth at its center (Figures 1-4). Each of these structures employ typological and symbolic references that ostensibly project "various codes referring to (official) Kazakh symbols, statues, myths, stories, and history" or more contemporary leitmotifs that underpin the nation-building project, notions of cultural inclusivity, regional leadership, and environmental sustainability (Köppen 2013, 598). As photographs of these spectacular projects made the rounds through Western media outlets, Astana's global brand soon took hold. Western journalists who actually traveled to the Kazakh steppe disseminated predictable narratives of the city, their words infused with eye-rolling, head-shaking, and shoulder-shrugging (cf. Gessen 2011, Green 1998, Moore 2010, Myers 2006). They described Astana as "utopian", in the sense that it seemed more imaginary than real—more like a contrived idea of a city than a place to call home. In its most reductive form, this 'utopian' characterization carries with it a certain level of orientalism, cynicism, and moral superiority (Koch 2012). It may serve as a humbling reminder to recall that we Americans undertook a similarly extravagant, similarly 'utopian' capital-building project not so long ago along the banks of the Potomac River.



Figure 1: Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, designed by Foster + Partners.
Source: Flickr user Ken and Nyetta, 2011



Figure 2: Khan Shatyr Entertainment Center, designed by Foster + Partners.
Source: Flickr user Ken and Nyetta, 2011



Figure 3: Astana's capital mall with Presidential Palace in center.
Source: Flickr user Ken and Nyetta, 2011



Figure 4: Astana's capital mall with Bayterek Tower in center.
Source: Flickr user Ken and Nyetta, 2011

Critical dismantling of such casual 'utopian' characterizations, as well as attempts to elicit Astana's positive utopian potential, begins with resolving several inaccuracies. First, the city is not "no place", as Thomas More's original meaning of "Utopia" suggests, nor was it constructed on a blank slate. In fact, the site has a deep history, much of which remains—albeit not always visible to outsiders or newcomers. While the most recent chapter of Astana's history began in 1997 when it was declared the capital, the present condition is a palimpsest of layered histories of human settlement. In spite of this quality, the trope of 'emptiness' or 'no place' has played a significant role throughout the site's modern history, employed by colonial and native elites as a means to "legitimate the exertion of power to shape political and social life" (Buchli 2007, 48). As the latest historical inflection point, the rebranding of the site as the nation's capital offers the potential of transcending the trope of 'emptiness' in favor of a more nuanced narrative of place. While it is "plausible that Kazakhstan's state planners likely preferred a 'blank slate' for its nation-building project—where the population could be 'shocked' and would lack the 'social resources for resisting and refashioning the transformation planned for it'" (Koch 2010, 772-3, quoting Scott 1998, 256), in selecting an occupied site, those charged with constructing Astana have had to negotiate the realities of it being located 'somewhere': "Efforts to construct governing apparatuses and create popular national identification occurred not on *tabula rasa* but on terrain littered with the partially viable edifices from previous state-building and nation-building experiences" (Schatz 2003, 131-2).

While scholarship has scrutinized government-issued narratives for relocating the capital (cf. Huttenbach 1998, Wolfel 2002, Schatz 2003, Anacker 2004), local, non-elite attitudes receive much less attention. Recent interviews of Astana's inhabitants reveal that the nation-building project of the Kazak state has largely been adopted by the populace, who "enact their own situated visions of modernity" in the context of their rapidly growing capital (Koch 2013, 2). Indeed, Koch (2012) notes that

ordinary Kazakhstanis do not see Astana as a utopian dreamland, and especially not the residents, for whom it has become 'their' city. It is something they have made their own, and many with great pride. For Astana's residents, it is part of their life and their lives are 'real' (9).

Through what Laszczkowski (2011a) refers to as the 'Astana effect', "a restored sense of a cohesive, progress-oriented sociality [is] directed toward a collective future which affects individuals' imaginings of their personal futures" (84). Astana's promise of a radically better future could certainly be interpreted as pure ideology; but the very character of the built environment, however garish to foreigners, is ostensibly a key factor in evoking genuine hope

in the people of Kazakhstan. Moreover, the fact that Astana can be perceived by inhabitants as an ongoing, open-ended project as opposed to a *fait accompli* suggests the potential for a multiplicity of urban interpretations, engagements, and futures—whether conflicting or harmonious.

2.0. EVALUATING ASTANA'S UTOPIAN POTENTIAL

Utopian theory offers conceptual clarity and complexity to a term that is riddled with contradictions and whose meaning shifts depending on cultural and historical circumstances. Several utopian theorists have proposed taxonomies for classifying utopia's positive and negative potentials. Coleman (2005, 24-40, 56-62), for instance, draws upon the work of Mannheim and Ricoeur. In Mannheim's conceptualization, utopia and ideology ostensibly function in a co-leveling process: "utopia could be a corrective for ideology" (Sargent 2010, 123). Thus, insofar as ideology is a conservative force wielded by those in power, utopia is its revolutionary counterforce, "the beliefs of those who [hope] to overturn the system" (*ibid.*, 120). Ricoeur further developed this relationship between ideology and utopia, adding a key layer of complexity:

Contrary to Mannheim, [Ricoeur] set out to construct what he called a single conceptual framework encompassing both, which could link utopia and ideology dialectically...Ricoeur suggested that ideology and utopia each have two traits, 'a positive and a negative side, a constructive and a destructive side, a constitutive and a pathological dimension'. The positive, constructive and constitutive dimension of one can function as a corrective to the negative, destructive and pathological dimension of the other (Coleman 2005, 57).

Convinced that the concept of utopia itself cannot be considered inherently good or bad, Ricoeur sought to distinguish between socially productive or progressive utopias and those that were socially destructive or reactionary. He referred to the 'good' utopias as "constitutive" and the bad utopias as "pathological", each with certain identifiable characteristics. In Ricoeur's taxonomy, pathological utopias are identifiable through their unrealizability, their immediateness, and their matter-of-factness. With the goal of escaping contemporary circumstances and breaking with historical trajectories, past and existing conditions are ignored in a "total disregard for pre-existing and ongoing patterns of life" (*ibid.*, 58). In terms of their architectural manifestation, we can think of pathological utopias as "buildings or large complexes envisioned as requiring total and immediate implementation", thus "deprived of the benefits that partial implementation over time offers" (*ibid.*, 58). Such features are what make pathological utopias inevitable social tragedies when built, as they (deliberately) rupture social life and remain inflexible to any quotidian engagement by their inhabitants. Constitutive utopias, on the other hand, exhibit

a deep understanding that memory, place identification and orientation are valuable qualities inextricably linked to human desire...In contradistinction to the speed with which pathological utopias must be realized, constitutive utopias value the benefits of slow, considered change. Moreover, utopias of this sort begin with compassion for the attachments individuals and groups establish with all aspects of the existing milieu they inhabit...Simply put, constitutive utopias are situated. They emerge out of conviction that reasonable and intentioned progress is good (*ibid.*, 59)...

This suggests a design process that draws upon intimate knowledge of the particularities of places and communities. Yet, in striving for social progress, constitutive utopias cannot merely reflect or reproduce the status quo: whereas pathological utopias disregard existing conditions, constitutive utopias stem from a situated, critical perspective. A further point of distinction involves post-occupied conditions:

Unlike pathological utopias, constitutive utopias can embrace action, practice, obstacles and incompatibility. Furthermore, they exhibit tolerance for conflict between goals, embracing divergences as opportunities...Elasticity opens

projects up to the potential of re-evaluation during processes of implementation that are ideally comprehensive and gradual (*ibid.*, 60).

In sum, whereas pathological utopias are total, immediate, and dislocated from considerations of place, constitutive utopias are situated, progressive, and flexible.

With this theoretical orientation in mind, it is worth examining Astana's development plan, which was premised on the very concept of flexibility. Originally delineated by Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, the plan makes explicit reference to the fatal error of modernist city planning:

The traditional master plans have always given a great importance to the process of finalizing the ideal form. In contrast with the traditional idea of these master plans, [this] proposal...proposes a new system that analyzes and reviews the situation every five years, and modifies the plan in a flexible way (Kurokawa 2002).

Here, Kurokawa is attempting to resolve the flaw of pathological utopias, in which image and reality inevitably dissociate, and alternative visions enacted in everyday life are rejected out of hand. Instead, the Astana master plan purposefully “lacked any concrete details concerning the actual architecture. There were only general guidelines that prioritized freedom and flexibility for local interpretations of urban and architectural quality while counseling against ‘imported’ aesthetics” (Köppen 597). Thus, whereas capital city-building projects like Brasilia were governed by totalizing plans, Astana's master plan calls for a flexible organization open to recurrent revision, with a concept for urban growth that incorporates “the past, the present, and the future; local tradition and global trend—all in relations of creative ‘symbiosis’” (Laszczkowski 2011b, 93). Of course, grounding an urban vision on the notions of flexibility and symbiosis logically turns the plan's execution into an *ad hoc* process, for better or worse:

Just as Kurokawa's plan for Astana has been only partly implemented, not all elements of his philosophy are fully embraced by the local architectural establishment...Rather, his discourse is appropriated, modified, and turned into a new, original, locally meaningful form. In the process, Kurokawa's often aloof language is reduced to speak more directly to local concerns and commonsense (Laszczkowski 2011b, 94).

Kurokawa's plan also foregrounds issues of environmental sustainability, including language based on notions of metabolism and ecological resiliency, as well as organizational systems for waste management and public transportation. And though the actual construction of Astana has certainly not been a model of sustainable development by most measures, potential remains on the horizon: Kurokawa's core ideas have been carried forward as the guiding principles for Expo 2017, the theme of which is “Future Energy”. Again, cynical readings of such efforts would not necessarily be misguided; but for those seeking to contribute to the quality of Astana's built environment, there remains ample possibility for positive utopian inspiration.

Overall, Kurokawa's plan for Astana draws upon many of the qualities of constitutive utopias—it can be interpreted as being situated in place, socially conscious, as well as flexible in its piecemeal rollout. However, it certainly has its shortcomings. Whereas the master plan contains some seeds of constitutive potential, its lack of specificity means that it falls short of certain other benchmarks that comprise a more robust vision of utopian principles, such as what Coleman (2013) proposes:

In my view, a persuasive assertion of utopia in architecture would, at a minimum, depend on the following four elements: social and political content; a significant level of detail in the description (in social terms) of what is proposed; elaboration of a positive transformation of social and political life as key to what is proposed or constructed; and, not least, a substantive—ethical and

aesthetic—critique of the present as the first steps beyond it, informed by a critical-historical perspective (24-5).

Embedded in this conception of architectural utopias are a host of issues demanding deeper elaboration. But at this juncture it should be underscored that the analytical role of utopian theory in architecture is not to determine whether a design is utopian in an absolute sense, since

projects for cities and buildings, even when constructed, are partial, remaining proposals about future occupation and action momentarily realized through the presence of sentient bodies: social life completes building (Coleman 2005, 62).

In this case, then, analyzing Astana's master plan is of limited use from the perspective of a designer seeking to engage in the city's utopian project. In addition to referencing Kurokawa's guiding principles, drawing upon the lived experiences of Astana's residents would signify a logical and prudent resource for maximizing constitutive utopian potential.

3.0 TWO ASTANAS

In part to establish the historical-psychological break deemed necessary for the goals of the capital-building project, the post-1997 development of Astana has been almost exclusively on the previously-unoccupied Left Bank of the Ishim River (see Figures 1-4). There, great effort has been paid to circumscribe a symbolic center for both the city and the nation by framing a monumental mall with various structures that express politically-strategic, representational functions. As Köppen (2013) writes, "the district was intended to display and convey a general sense of Kazakh political and economic power, but also specifically built as a representation of Kazakh cultural dominance within the de facto multi-ethnic state" (600). Despite the district bearing obvious similarities to the layout and proportions of the Washington Mall, amidst such dissimilar historic and cultural contexts, the resemblance is primarily a conceptual one. For instance, the programmatic functions of the framing structures in each city differ greatly, and this, tied with cultural symbols, largely determines local connotations. Moreover, whereas the Washington Mall was conceived as the nucleus of an urban system of grids overlaid with diagonal avenues, Astana's government district establishes no such logic of a layered, total geometry. Following Kurokawa's master plan, the mall does define the cardinal grid of new development to its south, but the city's patchwork configuration to the north is left wholly intact.

With Soviet-era planning principles enduring on the north bank of the Ishim River, the overall result is a veritable collage city comprised of utopian urbanism from two historic and socio-political paradigms. The spatial dichotomy and disjunction experienced between the historic and new portions of the city (those being the communist and capitalist portions) has led to an experience Laszczkowski (2011a) refers to as "the two Astanas", felt most strongly by the city's newest residents:

Those who migrate to the city are often surprised to find out that large parts of it look much different from what they were prepared to see, and deny the name 'Astana' to areas which do not match the picture (85).

Citizens have developed strategies to reconcile or cope with this perceived discrepancy:

If one lives and works in the old, right-bank part of the city, which is by far most often the case, one develops a habit of taking Sunday walks in Nurzhol Boulevard [on the Left Bank] 'to feel that one lives in Astana'...The image is granted more authenticity than the material city; the representation defines what counts as the 'true' material referent of the name 'Astana' (*ibid.*, 86).

However, in terms of land surface, those areas appearing unlike the 'real' Astana still outnumber the 'real'. Even today, village life and informal settlements remain only a stone's throw from the capital mall: "Behind massive metal barricades along the city's broad new avenues, one can find neighborhoods of decrepit shacks just like those found in the country's

provinces" (Koch 2010, 774). In fact, the most recently constructed informal structures are those built to house the many migrants who lack affordable housing in the very city whose skyline they helped erect (Köppen 2013). Other scholars have highlighted this striking, discordant relationship between the image of Astana and its lived reality (Buchli 2007, Danzer 2009). In their attempts to reduce latent discrepancies, elites employ various modes of power (Anacker 2004). This, ironically, can open up sites for struggle over Astana's uncertain future. For instance, the Soviet portion of the city received a facelift as part of the capital relocation project—not to blend in with the Left Bank, necessarily, but to appear less 'Soviet' in foreigners' eyes—consisting mainly of inexpensive undertakings like installing vinyl siding over concrete housing blocks. As Koch (2010) writes, "Many of the colorful new facades are literally just facades: one can walk around to the back of a building and see the old Soviet structure" (774). Shoddy corrugated metal fencing is often erected to conceal and reinforce socioeconomic disparities along edges of greatest variance. Buchli (2007) argues that, not only do such tactics highlight the government's inability to maintain the city's pristine image, they expose limits to hegemonic control; 'public secrets', embedded in the physical imperfections of the built environment,

permit subdued criticism of political life and become the opposition texts literally to be pointed at and read from the crumbling walls with the discussions and rumors they elicit (47).

This potential is echoed by Danzer (2009) who claims that, "although the state can supply identification opportunities, it cannot control whether and how artifacts are appropriated" (1564). Or, in other words, "people always use buildings and cities in ways architects and planners have never anticipated" (Coleman 2011, 6). And herein lies the seeds of utopia residing in everyday life. The multiscale dichotomies embedded in Astana's development patterns can serve another utopian function. As Zygmunt Bauman (1976) argues,

Utopias relativize the present...One cannot be critical about something that is believed to be an absolute. By exposing the partiality of current reality, by scanning the field of the possible in which the real occupies merely a tiny plot, utopias pave the way for a critical attitude and a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man. The presence of a utopia, the ability to think of alternative solutions to the festering problems of the present, may be seen therefore as a necessary condition of historical change (13).

Thus, not only can the elite-constructed image of Astana be read as fallible, its juxtaposition with other Astanas may function to relativize the present in a way that promotes alternative projections. So long as the city can be experienced in this fashion, hope for real social progress will continue to persist in Astana, if only in the utopian potential of its residents' minds.

CONCLUSION

As an object of inquiry, Astana reveals how even an urban setting that at first blush seems totalizing, placeless, and socially reactionary—when considered with a genuinely utopian attitude—contains inchoate seeds of situated and progressive possibilities. While we can assume this applies to every urban setting, in Astana, the processes and juxtapositions are made ever-present in exaggerated form. As a project still very much underway, Astana offers urban designers the chance to participate in shaping its utopian image—by relativizing existing conditions and rejecting attempts to interpret the city as a *fait accompli*. It could be argued, in fact, that participation in the Astana project (or any urban project, for that matter) ethically obliges architects to take seriously the possibility of the city's utopian potential.

Within the burgeoning literature on architecture and utopia, there remains a lack of scholarship written with consideration for practical design decisions, specifically how utopian theory might impact the design process, particularly the constraints and realities of practice, including those related to time, knowledge, information, power relations, and cultural dissonance. This perhaps stems from what Coleman (2005) describes as the paradoxical 'unthinkability' of utopia in architectural practice (254-6). Regardless, if the potential of utopian theory is to transcend its

purely analytical function, the process of design itself requires taking seriously the utopian problematic—engaging with utopia, not merely analyzing its partial forms. This essay is an attempt, albeit modest, to span utopian theory toward the realm of practice. As future-oriented professionals, architects and urban designers must critically (not cynically) contend with existing, constitutive utopian elements in a given context to begin constructing particular visions of urban futures. Engaging utopian theory in a more conscious and reflective manner will, at the very least, help guard against the tendency to produce purely spatial visions. However, the extent to which critical-reflective design processes might inform utopian *and* practical architectural practices demands greater attention.

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