

ASTANA: A New Post-Soviet Text

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Abstract

The paper examines one of the key innovative projects of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet nation building. As a case in point, the transfer and construction of new capital Astana by Nazarbayev regime will be taken into consideration. In this context, the establishment of national identity via urban environment is particularly essential and is best exemplified by the discussion of Astana's semiotic analysis. The urban environment of Astana should be understood not as a manifestation of modern architecture but as a unique text created by signs and symbolic meanings in an attempt to furnish Kazakhstan's nation building processes. The article attempts to draw parallels between models of urban social utopia and of the Kazakhstan's visionary future. The establishment of Astana is more than a mere modern architectural designing: at the same time it involves both elements of required legitimization, counter colonial/hegemonic struggle, demographic policy, and of civic and ethnic nation building ideologies.

Keyword: Astana, post-Soviet innovation, nation building, identity, signs, semiotics, social utopia

Introduction

The establishment of independence in former Soviet space brought multidimensional transformations in the spheres of culture, politics, social affairs etc. Similar to some countries in Kazakhstan the post-Soviet transformations have been accompanied by thoughtful innovative national building projects. The nation building process in Kazakhstan differs from other post-Soviet states because of its multiethnic and multi-religious society. The President of newly established state, Nursultan Nazarbayev, made striking effort to create new *civilizational text* for Kazakh nation. It is known that Nazarbayev was also a Soviet politician, who after independence became the leader of Kazakh nation. Although his political inspirations have been shaped by Soviet ideologies, he stands out as a unique leader between democracy and authoritarianism whose leadership became innovative in various spheres of Kazakhstan. He also conducted large scale of systemic reforms in the spheres of public administration, economy, politics, legislative, ethnic management etc. Resource based economic growth became crucial for Kazakh society to overcome the traditional and to establish modern tendencies for further development. Indeed, among those one should emphasize the innovative trends in the processes of national identity awakening.

The urbanization of Kazakhstan was comprehended as an inseparable part of nation building. While the creation of individuals through environment was a Soviet methodology, it is applied also by post-Soviet regimes. The environment determines certain values and consciousness: there is a need to change the environment in order to shape out new individuals with new self-consciousness. Though, in this case, the innovative mission of Nazarbayev's leadership became the fact that the regime decided to create new sense of national identity not by transforming the architectural environment of capital, but by transferring the actual capital and building new capital with new ideological content. The 1990s was considered as a first stage of the creation of nation state: a trend has risen to *erase* the Soviet traces by renaming the squares, streets, buildings etc. The processes of re-meaning took place through the embodiment of the symbols of national-historical events, predecessors, heroes and of course political leaders. The paper tries to explain one of the vivid examples of Kazakhstan's modernization: the relocation and construction of capital Astana. As for Roland Barthes in order to decipher the content of a city it is necessary "*to be at the same time semiologist (specialist in signs), geographer, historian, planner, architect and probably psychoanalyst*".¹

¹Barthes, Roland (1997). *Semiology and the Urban*, In Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, p. 159.

So, this article is represented itself as an articulation of thoughts of history, political science and culture aiming at to conceptualize the symbolic meaning of Astana through semiotic analyses. The functions of architectural buildings haven't been restricted only by the services they provide: the buildings of Astana are represented themselves as spaces of nonverbal communication among its citizens. Appropriately, Umberto Eco goes on to say that *architecture* being a system of signs and codes is considered as a kind of *communication* with denotative and connotative possibilities.²In this context I will illuminate the symbolic connotations of some architectural buildings and monuments of capital Astana in an attempt to explain the role of symbolism in functioning the prearranged ideologies of ruling regime.

Indeed there are a number of different methods of deciphering the ideological content of a city. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to mention that the explanation of Astana's architectural buildings is carried out throughout what Merleau-Ponty calls observation from *bird's-eye-view*³. However, the better understanding of ideologies of capital Astana we can be achieved by using the code-languages such as visual, iconic, symbolic codes etc. Additionally, one of the fathers of semiotic theory Charles Peirce distinguish three types of signs; index, icon, symbol for deciphering and investigating certain texts⁴. The investigation of signs of Kazakh nomadic traditions and modernity incorporated into the context of Astana will provide quite logical understanding of both Kazakhstan's ethnic and civic nation building processes and of state's deep commitments to further development. Therefore, as Buchli mentioned Astana tends to be "the face (*litso*) of the country as well as its visiting card (*visitka*) to the outside world".⁵

Challenges to Urbanization

Capital Astana was situated in the northern part of Kazakhstan, within Akmola Province. Since the Russian Tsarist rule the province of Akmola had been subjected to settlements of ethnic Russians. Due to Russian expansionist policies ethnic Slavs has become majority in the industrial northern parts of Kazakhstan. Indeed, these policies caused various transformations in urban spaces. Urban spaces with the accompanying social and cultural relations cannot be separated from the context of politics of a certain historical period. In the case of Astana the politics of Russian rule, both Tsarist and Soviet, have great influence on city's content. Particularly, the Russian demographic policy broke not only the demographic balance of the province in favor of Russians but also it altered the entire content of city. Akomlinsk, the central trading town of Akmola province, was founded in 1832. Ethnic Russian being majority in the province required special set of relations in accordance with their needs.

The establishment of Russian institutions and construction of military garrisons caused mass migration of Russian. These actions can be measured among key reasons for the change of master plan of Astana (1857). Definitely, the changes had been accompanied with the construction of various administrative, educational, cultural, religious (*St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral*) and public buildings in the midst of elements of Russian architecture and of course, naming streets after Russian heroes, cultural figures, politicians etc. Thus, the province of Akmolinsk with its urban environment and societal relations became serious zone of strong influence for Russian ideologies. In 1960 Akmolinsk was renamed into the Tselinograd and remained until 1992. From 1992 to 1998 the city was named Akmola and since 1998 it is known as Astana.⁶The influence of Russian rule was so powerful that the demography of Astana did not record significant change even after independence. During 1990s Russians continued to constitute majority (46.3 %) in the province of Akmola, while Kazakhs formed only 21.7 % of province.⁷ As a result Nazarbayev's decision to transfer capital from Almaty to Astana was strategic in altering ethnic geography.

²Umberto Eco (1979), *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, p. 85.

³See, Ian Buchanan, Michel de Certeau: Cultural Theorist, SAGE, 2000, p. 111.

⁴Charles S. Peirce, (2012), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, Charles S. Peirce (Ed.) Courier Dover Publications, pp.101-104.

⁵ Victor Buchli (2007), *Astana: Materiality And The City* in Catharine Alexander, Victor Buchli, Caroline Humphrey (Eds.) *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia*, Taylor & Francis Group, p. 49

⁶ S. Dzunisov, B. Dosmagambetov (2011). Op. cit., p. 36-47.

⁷Mikhail Alexandrov (1999), *Uneasy Alliance: Relations Between Russia and Kazakhstan in the Post-Soviet Era, 1992-1997*, Greenwood Publishing Group, p. 111.

A. Sarsembayev describes this politics of Nazarbayev regime as a step towards the prevention of any possible secession to Russia of the northern provinces of Kazakhstan⁸. According to the data of the department of the statistics of Astana, from the beginning of 2012 Russians constituted 17.4 per cent (128, 928) of the city population⁹.

The constructed capital caused new problems in terms of settlement of titular ethnic population. To solve this problem Nazarbayev's regime made a decision to organize migration of ethnic Kazakhs from rural areas to new capital Astana and other urban areas. This policy attempts to restore and reinforce national consciousness of Kazakh people, because the urban population achieved "a highly valued sense of belonging and identity" from urban environments, "whereas rural space was a source of inferior identity"¹⁰. Nevertheless, the urban space with its features created a set of relationships for the emergence of national identity among citizenry. Indeed, Kazakhstan's government could not guarantee the creation of new urban population by encouraging the emigration of 'illiterate' peasants from villages to Astana. The urban population cannot be created demographically in a short period of time, because it should go through the key cultural disciplines like music, literature, painting, film, theater and education. The construction of Astana produced gap between the city and countryside. Theoretically the gap was described by the cultural differences of the city and the countryside: culture of the city is open, modern and secular but the culture of countryside is closed, religious and traditional¹¹.

According to above-mentioned text, by creation of new urban areas, the government of Kazakhstan aims to trigger migration of thousands of Kazakh peasants to cities in order to improve the condition of ethnic Kazakh urban population. As a matter of fact, this experience is very crucial to examine not only the transformation of post-Soviet Kazakhstan's economic institutions and infrastructure but also Kazakh identity. The urban migration caused new rules for division of labor¹². Kazakhs historically were focused on agrarian works. The rural environment provided continuity of Kazakhs cultural traditions and ethnic identity. N. Melvin distinguishes two types of ethnic tension between urban and rural Kazakhs: Kazakhs living in urban areas assimilated to Russians and have ethnic identity and national language crisis, while Kazakhs living in rural areas maintained their identity, language and traditions.¹³ The rural-urban dichotomy became quite essential source of identical *distinctions*. To explain this negative phenomenon of blaming one another it is enough to understand the discourse on *mankurtism*. The phrase firstly used by Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov in his novel 'The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years' to denote the ignorance of one's history, linguistic and cultural identity.¹⁴ *Mankurtism* is widely used by Kazakh nationalist to refer Russian-speaking Kazakhs, who lose their linguistic and cultural identity.

On the other hand, under the light of the post colonial idea the negative notion of *mankurtism* once can be transformed into a positive source of national identity formation. If an ethnic Kazakh wants to be 'pure' Kazakh, he or she should overcome the negativity of *mankurtism* through learning Kazakh language and return to national traditions and ethnicity. For this aim, the government of Kazakhstan pays special attention to the improvement of the publicity of Kazakh language in capital Astana. As for cultural critic Walter Benjamin the city is itself a container of shock experiences.¹⁵ In the case of Astana the existing burden of native language and discourse of *mankurtism* are excellent examples of shock experiment for ethnic Kazakhs.

⁸ Azamat Sarsembayev, Imagined communities: Kazakh nationalism and Kazakification in the 1990s, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1999, p. 335.

⁹ Kerimkhanovoi, G. (pod. red), *Demograficheskie godniki goroda Astani*

⁹ *Demographic Yearbook of Astana*, Astana: Department of statistics of the city of Astana, 2012, str. 30.

¹⁰ Joel S. Migdal (2004) *Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004, p. 208.

¹¹ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, (London: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), p. 72.

¹² Saulesh Yessenova (2005) "Routes and Roots" of Kazakh Identity: Urban Migration in Post socialist Kazakhstan". *Russian Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2005.

¹³ Neil J. Melvin, "Russia and the Ethno-Politics of Kazakhstan", *The World Today*, Vol. 49, No. 11, 1993, p. 209.

¹⁴ Chingiz Aitmatov 1988, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, Indiana University Press.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin (1997) On Some Motifs In Baudelaire in In Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 1997. pp. 28-30.

However, as Benjamin argues the aesthetic system of a city takes the role of protector of damaged humanity.¹⁶ Consequently, the aesthetics of Astana has a trend to be transformed into the source of atonement of the sins of history. Thus, the project of Astana, led by processes of modernization, is supposed to unify the tradition and the modern by reducing the gap between the city and countryside. The alliance between urban and rural population is strategically crucial in establishing political stability and gathering society around the vision of single Kazakh language and collective identity in Kazakhstan's multiethnic society. As well as Samuel Huntington argues even under the condition of rural influence on urban societies its politics have become urban¹⁷.

Astana: The soul of the Kazakh future

After gaining independence former Soviet societies have been subjected to numerous societal transformations in an attempt to become *post-Soviet*. One of the important if not the most important precondition in becoming post-Soviet was the creation of new national identities and consciousness. In the case of Kazakhstan the construction of new capital is among various significant identical long-term national programs. Nazarbayev's regime set up a set of nation building policies for the formation of a pan-Kazakh identity. The urbanization as an important component of Kazakhs' nation building policies became a unique driving force in establishing national identity. Accordingly President Nazarbayev in his autobiography states the replacement of capital played a pivotal role in the emergence of state ideology and the concepts of patriotism and statehood¹⁸. The strategy of influencing people's consciousness by the urban environment is a highly efficient method. The signal coming from external environment triggers individuals to establish a new set of relationships in society. Urban environment being as a space of cultural production/reproduction have great impact on people's subconscious and conscious actions. Indeed, the main concern of post-Soviet transition was the establishment of new paradigms of identical relationships. Taking all of these into consideration, the government of Kazakhstan initiated the transfer and construction of a new state capital aiming at to formulate new urban space with new national and civic artifacts, monuments, streets and 'new' urban population.

It can be stressed that Nazarbayev's new capital is an area of disciplinary production that established a set of ideological actions upon the identities and actions of others. To some extent it is similar to a system of control, when governments construct various modern buildings (administrative, educational, entertainment etc.) with the elements of national, ethno and even rural architecture to provide public services and emotional satisfaction to citizens' ethno-political aspirations. Of course, urban space involves various challenges to the government like urban revolts, uprisings and even revolution. Consequently, in order to secure peaceful control into every possible mobilization it is necessary to involve not only state's institutions like police but also to employ urban environment for influencing citizens' consciousness. The essential point of this statement is that ruling regime tends to adapt citizens' daily activity in accordance with state's owned ethnic and domestic policies. As for Halbwachs, "When a group is integrated into part of the space, it transforms that space in its own image, but at the same time it bends and adapts to the material things that resist it"¹⁹.

In the case of Kazakhstan, the architectural space of capital Astana is a mix of modern, civic, ancestral and ethnic artifacts. The distinctiveness of semiotic theories enable city to become readable one and as Victor Hugo mentioned, in his "Notre-Dame de Paris" city is a writing²⁰ which is *read and spoken* by its citizens through signs embodied in the content of a certain city. Metaphorically speaking, a city being the space of Wittgensteinian "language games"²¹, functions as a place of exclusion and integration. In this realm symbolism of Astana works in favor of integration in terms of both ethnic and civic nation building policies of independent Kazakhstan. So, we can argue that to some extent the urban environment of Astana provides some degree of symbolic satisfaction among citizens and legitimacy for government's owned policies. It is also important to mention that the ideological environment will give birth to new societal disciplinary relationships.

¹⁶ See, Anca M. Pusca (2010) Eds. Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Change, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 182-183.

¹⁷ Samuel Huntington, (Op. cit, 2006), p. 74

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 318.

¹⁹ Halbwachs, M. (1950). *La mémoire collective*. Presses Universitaires de France, Albin Michel, Trans, (1997), *The collective memory*, New York: Harper Colophon, p. 186.

²⁰ See, Victor Hugo (2008), *This Will That* in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Isabel F. Hapgood (trans.), Mobile Reference.

²¹ Joachim Schulte (1992), *Wittgenstein: An Introduction*, Sunny Press, p. 97.

Under the light of Foucauldian philosophy such kind of policies “makes” individuals or citizens by regulating their behaviors.²²The aesthetics of urban design is considered as an important driving force for the mechanism of behavior regulation. The urban environment implies unique process of *aestheticization*, which provides an opportunity to deliver the ideas, which shapes the same aesthetics.

Astana is represented itself as a model of a modern post-Soviet ‘text’, which cannot be read without the context of Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet nation building. The importance of capital’s transfer lays in the fact that there is no need to de/re-construct the existing *meta-narratives* of urban environment. The capital Astana is similar to an original *canvas* painted by the masters of state. While, former capital, Almaty was a Soviet city in its content and it would be quite incomprehensible to construct national identity upon the Soviet base/layers of that city. The context of a city in general and the Soviet cultural heritage in particular has unique influence on the people’s sub-consciousness. The problem, which is critical in many post-Soviet cities, was the difficulty of elimination of *Soviet concepts* from Almaty’s architectural, cultural, and socio-political textuality. Thus a requisition has risen to move capital city for the sake of creation national identity in contrast to people’s *homo sovieticus* identities. The textuality of Astana will give Kazakhs a chance to live out of *imagination* of communists, in other words to overcome the risk of *self-colonization*.

One should state that a city is an environment of social utopia. To some extent the elements of utopia is typical to any architecture, because the man-made world constantly is modeled in accordance with peoples’ imagination. Y. Lotman thinking about *textuality* of cities argues that architecture is connected with both utopia and history. “*The deconstruction of an old context is as equally essential component as a creation of new text for utopia. The departure from the context is also accounted: the architectural text should be imagined as a ‘Marsian’ non-existent fragment. The complete disruption of the past outlines the orientation of the future, and from this point the permanent orientation towards the technological opportunities of the era emerges*”.²³The construction of Astana along with national identity, language and self-consciousness are among priorities of Kazakhstan’s visionary future. We want to emphasize here the ‘*emancipation*’ role of Astana in terms of overcoming the colonial legacy of Kazakhstan. During the mass migration and settlements organized by Imperial and Soviet Russia the ethnic Kazakh became minority (Especially in the northern parts of Kazakhstan) in their homeland.

The *minoritization* of Kazakh national society by Russians and other ethnic groups caused quite negative transformation or disruption in the narrative of national imagined communities. Thus, in Andersonian sense, the new capital Astana seems to be transformed into the space of *imagined communities*²⁴ aiming at creating ethnic Kazakh nation. The relocation of capital from Almaty to Astana was on the way to design a ‘*utopian*’ social environment for the development of national consciousness. Certainly, the semiotic system of Astana is kind of ‘*mobile utopia*’ based on three pillars: past, present and future. In addition to this idea Lotman goes on to say that “*semiotic systems are in a state of constant flux*” which should be seen as a law of existence of a certain *semiosphere*.²⁵ The ideological landscapes of the city support the development of ethnic Kazakh identity by referring to the past archetypes. As for example one should look into the national, historical content of architectural design of Astana. In particular, the monuments dedicated to the poet Abai Kunanbaev and to the khans Kerey and Zhanibek are supposed to be the articulation of national narrative.

The urban artifacts of newly established capital functioned as an empowering force of establishing collective identity and fostering the collective memoirs among the citizens of Astana. Prominent Italian architect and theorist Aldo Rossi by conceptualizing the relationships between urban artifacts and landscapes develops the idea of city’s history in clarifying that “*The city is the locus of the collective memory*”.²⁶

²² Foucault, M. (1984). *The Foucault reader*, Rabinow, P. (Eds.), New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 187-188.

²³ Лотман, Ю.М. Семиосфера, Санкт-Петербург Искусство – СПб, p. 680.

Lotman, U.M. *Semiosphera, Sankt-Peterburg, Iskusstvo, p. 680.*

http://yanko.lib.ru/books/cultur/lotman_semiosphera.htm#_Toc17488781 (accessed: 10 October 2013)

²⁴ Benedict Anderson (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, p. 6.

²⁵ Лотман, Ю.М. Семиосфера, Санкт-Петербург, Искусство – СПб, p. 276.

Lotman, U.M. *Semiosphera, Sankt-Peterburg, Iskusstvo, p. 276.*

²⁶ Aldo Rossi, (1982). *The Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi, Peter Eisenman (Eds.), MIT Press, p. 130.

The practice of collective imagination is quite essential in establishing bridges for people to put them together and reinforce their common sense of identity and ethnic solidarity. Above all, these processes are important for multi-ethnic Kazakhstan's nation-building processes. In fact, for the legitimization of adopted principles of ethnic policies of Kazakhstani government (to make Kazakhs first among equals) a necessity has risen to set up certain conditions for the reinterpretation of history and the invention of necessary historical traditions and national myths. The latter is typical to the urban space of Astana, which was a national project aimed at combining the national traditions and myths with the progressive tendencies. This is of course provides sources of justification for Nazarbayev's charismatic leadership.

Baiterek Tower

One of the main symbolic buildings without which the semiotics of Astana cannot be read is Baiterek Tower located in the center of Astana. It is a modernistic illustration of ancient tree of life, the Baiterek, on which magical bird Samuruk laid its egg²⁷. The innovative architectural mission of Astana was comprehended as return to national archetypes. The symbol of tower sets up relations between the past and the prospect of Kazakhstan. The mythical egg of Samruk as a symbol of rebirth indicates the future direction of Kazakhstan. Inside the ball (egg) of the Baiterek you can find the golden imprint of President Nazarbayev's hand. Under the light of Peirce's philosophy of semiotics the imprint of Nazarbayev's hand is represented as a kind of *index*: *Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object*".²⁸When one places his or her hand in imprint, the national flag appears and anthem begins to play. Peirce goes on to say that "*an index is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand. . .*"²⁹The imprint of Nazarbayev's hand or *index* provides an opportunity for the Kazakhs to be in association with the state symbols and the charisma of President. Thus, mythical archetype was also used by Nazarbayev' regime as tool to achieve the legitimacy of its charismatic leadership in the eyes of Kazakh society through the use of signs.

Khan Shatyr

The monumental building of Khan Shatyr (entertainment center) designed by British architect Norman Foster³⁰, is a representation of the invented symbol of Kazakh's nomadic tradition into the architectural environment of Astana. The building's purpose is not restricted to its retail function, but it also provides ideological space for *imagining* their communities in the Andersonian sense. The design of the entertainment center is similar to the Kazakhs' traditional yurt, which underlines the role of ethnicity in nation building of Kazakhstan. Thus, the building with the shape of a traditional yurt awakens national memory of the Kazakh population; older concepts of community are represented in a contemporary structure. Metaphorically speaking the monumental structure of Khan Shatyr is a stationary model of the traditionally mobile Kazakh yurt, which attempts to underline the strong notion of attachment of ethnic Kazakhs to their historical homeland. However, Khan Shatyr is not the only building that resembles Kazakh traditional yurt. The architectural structure of the President's Museum of Kazakhstan is like a traditional yurt with a mosque-like cupola, in which the *artefacts of national archetypes* such as various types of yurts, clothing, and warrior's gold costume etc. So, the symbolic power of the building feeds Kazakhstan's nation building processes by producing a sense of dominance among ethnic Kazakhs in a multiethnic society.

²⁷ The tower represents Kazakhs' national myth of Samuruk; every year the symbol of freedom and happiness the sacred bird Samruk, lays golden egg, which symbolizes the sun, in the Baiterek's crown and when the Samruk flies away the sun is eaten by a snake, but Samruk returns a year later and lays another egg. Thus, the monument is seen as a symbol of eternity, the endless of cycle of life and death, light and darkness, good and evil. The Kazakh national myth is a symbol of perfection and balance between the construction and deconstruction reflecting "*the ideals of regenerated Kazakhstan aspiring to live in peace and harmony*". See NorsultanNazarbayev, Op. cit, p. 314.

²⁸ Charles S. Peirce, (2012). *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, Charles S. Peirce (Ed.) Courier Dover Publications, p. 102

²⁹ Ibid, p.107

³⁰ Foster + Partners, Projects/Khan Shatyr Entertainment Centre Astana, Kazakhstan 2006-2010,

³⁰ Available at: <http://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/khan-shatyr-entertainment-centre/>

Palace of Peace and Concord

Another representational building of Astana is the Palace of Peace and Concord, in which the Opera theatre, University of Civilizations and Museum of Culture are located. The building is itself the symbol of civic values. This architectural masterpiece is created and designed again by British architect Norman Foster in 2006. The Palace of Peace and Concord has become a symbol of religious dialogue and harmony. In 2006, the Congress of leaders of international and traditional religions was held in the Palace of Peace and Concord³¹. President Nazarbayev goes on to say that the Pyramid of Peace expresses the spirit of Kazakhstan, in which bearers of various cultures and nationalities coexist in harmony and accord³².

According to Plato's concept, the geometrical structure of pyramid (Pythagorean conception) as a symbol of proportional equality characterizes the *harmonic unity of unequals*³³. The apex of the pyramid is designed with yellow and blue stained glasses, resembling the colors of the Kazakhs flag. The Kazakhstan is represented itself as guarantor of inter-societal harmony and peace. Thus, the concept of '*Kazaks first among equals*' is reflected in the architectural design of Palace of Peace and Harmony. It is supposed to be a sign of civilizational homeostasis aimed at the providing the equilibrium between its inner and outer components.

The content of capital Astana tells us about another important innovative phenomenon existing in Kazakh Muslim society. There is a concrete official assessment to avoid *religious fundamentalism*. Contrasting to numerous other Muslim countries the capital of Kazakhstan is space free from Islamic religious ideologies. It is arguable to mention that you can't meet a number of mosques in the streets of Astana. Instead, the Palace of Peace and Concord as a symbol of multi-ethnicity and multi-religiosity standing in the eastern side of the Ishim River was perceived by the president as meeting place for the world religious leaders to encourage tolerance, security and stability.³⁴

Al Akorda

The model of Astana seems to be the matrix of societal (ethnic) regulations. The architectural design of capital is represented to be as a social ideal for Nazarbayev regime. The presidential palace Al Akorda being an approximate reproduction of Washington's White House represents the charismatic leadership of Nazarbayev.³⁵ It is located in between the symbol of multiculturalism, (pyramid) and symbols of ethnic belonging (Baiterek and Khan Shatyr) aiming at to symbolize Nazarbayev policies of harmonious coexistence of 130 nationalities. The sequence of above-mentioned architectural buildings constitutes two parallel semiotic texts. In this sense, the flat relief of the city is itself in a *state of equilibrium*. However the dominance of national architectural buildings shatters the equilibrium of the city, which is embodied in the architectural and ideological structure of Palace of Peace and Concord. These semiotic texts are in *state of mobility*. And mainly the semiotic code of that mobility is made between the two most important archetypes (yurt and symbol of sacred bird) of national identity situated in opposite poles of the city. In addition, it is important to comprehend that actually the movement of semiotics is more cyclical than opposite. Indeed this can be conceptualized as return to national archetypes. This fact once again comes to approve the argument that Astana's construction is not only the manifestation of post-Soviet innovation but also an inseparable part of Kazakhstan's nation building.

Kazakh Eli

As a matter of fact the semiotics of a city can't be considered as complex and meaningful without examination of city's historical and monumental buildings. For this purpose, the ideological content of Kazakh Eli monument, situated in the beginning of Astana, will be taken into consideration.

³¹Norsultan Nazarbaev, (Op. cit, 2008), p. 315.

³²Ibid., p. 315.

³³Dominic J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic political philosophy in late antiquity*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), p. 103.

³⁴Edward Wainwright (2012), *Fostering Relations in Kazakhstan* in Adam Sharr ed. *Reading Architecture And Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces And Documents*, Routledge, p. 48.

³⁵Jonathan Aitken (2009), *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan: From Communism to Capitalism*, Continuum, p. 222.

The national and inter-ethnic symbols reflected in the design of architectural and sculptural monument of “Kazakh Eli” symbolizes the independence of Kazakhstan and its commitment to the further development³⁶. The national ornaments and architectural design are attributive components of textual content of the Kazakh Eli monumental complex. The tower, which is a representation of development, has a symbol of Kazakh national myth the sacred bird Samruk on its apex. According to the monument’s textuality the imaginative development of the Kazakhstani state is comprehended as an idea of continuity of generations and development of the Kazakh nation. The monument is based on four bronze bas-reliefs situated in arched doorways of pedestal. The western bas-relief is carving of the first president Nazarbayev and people. The engraving of president behind whom people of different nationalities are arranged, tries to personify the Kazakh nation. The high bronze statue of Nazarbayev in the niche of the Kazakh Eli³⁷ tends to highlight the role of Nazarbayev’s leadership in nation building processes. The second or southern bas-relief represents bravery and heroism as symbols and values of security of statehood and nation. Another base-relief situated in the northern side of pedestal concerns the creativity of Kazakh nation by referring the epochal stages of development and prosperity of the people since the days of the nomadic lifestyle to space flights. Eventually, the final carving symbolizes the future of Kazakh nation, the cornerstone of which is the phenomenon of family and younger generation. Thus, the urban landscape of Astana is a result of reaffirmation of past by means of desired visions of the future Kazakhstan³⁸.

Conclusion

Thus, from the abovementioned text we can conclude that the architectural design of capital Astana became a unique place of national identity, in which the Kazakhs can be engaged in a self-identification process. Additionally, through the urban environment the Kazakh nation is stamped in time and space by referring the past, incarnating the present and looking towards visionary future. The reading of the semiotics of Astana provides quite creative approaches to interpret not only the everyday life of city but also social, cultural and demographic policies of ruling regime. Thus, national, traditional, civic and of course common ethnic mythical elements of Astana’s urban environment provide opportunities for the citizens of Kazakhstan to establish *imagined communities*. Eventually, the establishment of Astana with its’ accompanying social relations as an innovative civilizational form will allow Kazakhstan to be in relations with the outside World. Astana is also considered as a paradigm for understanding the Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet innovative policies.

³⁶S. Dzunisov, B. Dosmagambetov, *T14 Astananin bas jopari. 10 jil*, (Master Plan of Astana, 10th anniversary), (Astana: Delovoi Mir Astana, 2011), bet. 188.

³⁶Астана: Деловой Мир Астана, бет. 188.

³⁷Alex Ulko, Architecture as a mirror of the age. Part III: pasts condensed, present constructed, *neweurasia.net*, 2013, Available at: <http://www.neweurasia.net/cross-regional-and-blogsphere/architecture-as-a-mirror-of-the-age-part-iii-pasts-condensed-presents-constructed/>, [accessed: 10 October 2013].

³⁸Natalie Koch, “The monumental and the miniature: imagining ‘modernity’ in Astana”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 11, No. 8, 2010, p. 777.