

Book Review: 'City of the Future': Building Space, Modernity, and Urban Change in Astana by Mateusz Laszczkowski

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Cities are notoriously difficult places for anthropological fieldwork. They may be home to a rich tapestry of cultural groups that offer a range of ethnographic opportunities, but that very richness creates an enormous challenge for researchers attempting to capture the overarching culture of the city. This is why anthropologist Mateusz Laszczkowski's *'City of the Future': Building Space, Modernity, and Urban Change in Astana* is such a fascinating work. Its ostensible focus may rest with Astana, the new capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan, but its implications reach into a variety of urban settings. Rather than play it safe and focus on one or more narrowly-defined groups living in the city or rush headlong into the impossible task of trying to make broad claims about the entire urban community, Laszczkowski takes a more open-ended approach. "The perspectives explored in these chapters," he explains, "are all partial, all more or less loosely connected fragments" (p. 23).

The six chapters in this text take on different aspects of culture in Astana, yet they form a surprisingly coherent whole. What ties them together are a set of research questions centered on particular themes, including the divide between urbanity and rurality, the relations between local natives and the waves of distinct migrants into Astana, and, most importantly, the dynamics between space, place, and social formation. Together, these themes reveal much about how the changes inherent in a city's ongoing pursuit of modernity shape the politics, culture, and social relations of the city's diverse groups of inhabitants.

Astana is an extraordinarily attractive site for exploring these sorts of questions. It began as a tiny 'tsarist outpost' named Akmolinsk, but it quickly achieved cityhood in the 1960s. Since that time, the city has undergone two dramatic transformations. The first witnessed its birth as a Soviet regional industrial center renamed Tselinograd, where a number of major factories aimed to produce an agricultural revolution in this provincial backwater. Then, in the early 2000s, a decade after the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of an independent Kazakhstan, the city became Astana, the so-called city of the future and a shimmering new capital for the young nation. At the time, government leaders envisioned these changes as complete metamorphoses, highlighted by the large factories in the Khrushchev years and the breathtaking development of upscale housing and modernist landmarks in the new Left Bank neighborhood (referring to its place along the Ishim River away from the traditional city center). As Laszczkowski points out, such utopian dreams hinged on the idea of a 'clean slate' that imposed the new atop the old and thereby created distinct ruptures between the city and its surrounding regions, among new and old neighborhoods in the city, and even between new generations astride the divide between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.

Laszczkowski captures these fractures through ethnographic studies using what he calls “three open-ended networks of informants” (p. 24). These include Russian or Russified members of the middle class, immigrants from smaller, less ‘modern’ communities in Kazakhstan, and a group of long-term Tselinograd residents. The range of subjects is impressive, but it is how he studies them that is so interesting. First, Laszczkowski concerns himself less with solemn rituals or singular practices and more with everyday actions. In Chapter 2, for example, he observes “mundane walking by residents simply going to work or school, doing their shopping, visiting their friends and relatives, or strolling just for leisure” (p. 100). In the final chapter, he participates in a popular online game called Encounter, in which contestants scurry around town to complete elaborate and often intentionally absurd challenges devised by gamers online. Each of these moments unveils the crucial role of the materiality of space, and it is these observations of the spatial dynamics of life in Astana that mark an important contribution of the book.

The chapters provide a fascinating range of spaces and places, from large celebrations in the public square in Chapter 4, on to the courtyard of an apartment block in Chapter 5, to an innocuous marketplace in Chapter 6. In these examples, space becomes much more than the locus of an established culture, and much more even than the passive arena in which new cultural constructions emerge. Instead, space in its material form shapes the relationships among groups of residents. As he explains, “The public aesthetics of space have become . . . the pivot of multidimensional processes of social and cultural transformation (p. 154).”

Laszczkowski is clear that the creation of new identities in the crucible of the modern city remains a highly performative act. As he shows in Chapter 1, for instance, being seen as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ is perhaps more about manners of dress, speech patterns, and behavior than it is about geography. However, in Astana it is also very much about the materiality of housing. Where a house is located, the size of the home, what it contains, and where one stands in the queue for new housing, are all key. Speaking about two of his informants, a married couple, Laszczkowski reports that despite the fact that they had lived in the city for many years, “What seriously impeded the couple’s becoming successfully ‘Astanian,’ in their own eyes, was the housing question” (p. 71). In this case, the dream of quality housing reflects the ways in which middle class denizens buy into the official, utopian image of the city, but this is by no means the only vision. Laszczkowski coins a new term, “spatial intimacy,” to refer to an alternative sense of community held by less affluent long-term residents of the old Tselinograd, who have no ambitions of living in the Left Bank, but who feel no less connected to the city. As he explains, “Spatial intimacy refers to embarrassing flaws found in the spatial environment shared by a group of people—for instance, the ‘rural’ outlook of a city. The recognition of those flaws serves to intensify the sense of connection to the place and to each other” (p. 97).

In many ways, Laszczkowski's observations affirm existing work, and indeed his book does a marvelous job engaging some rather complex theories in accessible terms. Yet, his ideas on spatiality are also highly original, and deserve a wide readership. Readers may wish the publisher had permitted a few more photos in the book, since many of the existing images appear too sterile to aid a book about vibrant cultural change. It would have been especially useful to see more images of the Encounter games, where the material dimensions of space come face-to-face with emerging digital conceptions. However, Laszczkowski's prose is vivid enough to paint a picture of a city whose transformations reach far beyond the vista of the shimmering icons of the Left Bank. Coupled with its excellent theoretical framing and wide-ranging fieldwork, *'City of the Future': Building Space, Modernity, and Urban Change in Astana* is set to become a must-read not only for anthropologists, but also for any social scientist or humanities scholar concerned with how the contested notion of modernity can reach into the very pores of the urban metropolis.

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