

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE IN DOHA AND ASTANA

BY KRISTIN EGGELING

Across centuries and geographies, political elites have used the construction of capital cities as a central tool of governance. Through iconic buildings, historical sights, and architectural experiments, those in power have used the design of their capitals to form national identities, and showcase global prestige. But while traditional capitals were built around honoring history, the archetypal capital city of the 21st century also hints at political ambitions and dreams for the future.

Since the start of this century, the capitals of various Arabian Gulf and Central Asian countries have experienced a construction boom. Both regions are home to young, non-democratic states rich in natural resources. For these states, sovereignty has been more the result of a retreating empire than self-determined nationalist struggles.

“BUILDING UP THE CAPITAL CITY BECAME AN IMPORTANT TOOL TO CONSTRUCT NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOLIDIFY INDEPENDENT STATEHOOD”

In this context, building up the capital city has become an important tool for local elites to construct national identity and solidify independent statehood. This mixture of rentierism and authoritarianism has favored fast and spectacular urban development, which is further driven by an urge for recognition as a viable member of the international community.

In two regional states, Qatar and Kazakhstan, urban development and state building have followed similar trajectories. Their respective capital cities, Doha and Astana, are prime examples of development visions that have literally been built into urban centers. In both cities, official narratives have described urban construction projects in ways that demonstrate the connection between the environment being created and the process of state building. In both cases, these narratives have revolved around globalist, developmental tropes that highlight each city's role in the state's growth, and depict the regime as best positioned to realize a prosperous future for the country.

“DOHA AND ASTANA ARE PRIME EXAMPLES OF DEVELOPMENT VISIONS THAT HAVE LITERALLY BEEN BUILT INTO URBAN CENTERS”

Doha: “A world-class hub”

Until well into the 20th century, Doha was nothing more than an underdeveloped village. Today, the city is filled with skyscrapers and iconic landmarks.

Doha’s urban development began after Qatar’s independence in 1973, fueled by revenues from oil and gas. The first major project undertaken by Qatar’s emir, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani, was to transform the city’s natural bay into a perfect crescent shape to beautify Doha’s central waterfront area.

It was followed by the construction of an elaborate promenade, called ‘Al Corniche,’ after its counterpart in Monaco. The project provided the Khalifa government with a highly visible opportunity to transform the city and instill a sense of pride among its people.

[According to anthropologist Sharon Nagy](#), local lore has it that Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi was driven along the Doha Corniche during an official state-visit to Qatar, and decided that his capital needed a waterfront just as impressive. The story is a source of local pride, since UAE cities, especially Dubai and Abu Dhabi, are generally considered to be more aesthetically modern and sophisticated than Doha.

“UNTIL WELL INTO THE 20TH CENTURY, DOHA WAS NOTHING MORE THAN AN UNDERDEVELOPED VILLAGE – TODAY, THE CITY IS FILLED WITH SKYSCRAPERS AND ICONIC LANDMARKS.”

While the Corniche may have sparked Doha’s development, today, it is hard to tease out the most important project, since the city is constantly under construction. Nevertheless, Doha’s waterfront area is still a central arena for urban development, stretching from the newly opened Hamad International Airport in the south to Lusail City, a major construction project on the northern tip of Doha. Star-architect I.M. Pei’s internationally acclaimed Museum of Islamic Art, and the Sheraton Hotel, which was Doha’s first landmark built in the 1970s, are in this part of the city.

There are also two other outstanding projects currently under construction near the water: the New National Museum of Qatar, and the redevelopment of Doha’s traditional downtown area, called Msheireb. Upon completion, the New National Museum will be one of the first buildings visitors will see when driving into the city. With its interlocking glass and concrete panels, it [has been described](#) as a unique construction that cements Doha’s emerging identity as the region’s cultural capital.

For its part, the Msheireb development [has been characterized as fusing ‘tradition’ with ‘modernity’](#). Building on traditional local practices of lighting, cooling, and irrigation, it has been portrayed as a unique, downtown regeneration project that creates a way of life rooted in Qatari culture, while influenced by Western modernity.

A second site of concentrated urban development can be found away from the shoreline in the northeast of the city. Called Education City, this 3500-acre, self-enclosed, campus-like development, houses local branches of eight world-class universities, including Georgetown and Northwestern University. [According to the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development](#), Education City reflects “Doha’s emerging knowledge-based urbanism.” Among the most prominent buildings in Education City are the Qatar National Library, designed by the world-renowned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, and the recently opened Qatar Faculty for Islamic Studies, which [was shortlisted for the prestigious World Building of the Year award in 2015](#).

As diverse as the city’s urban development projects are, their importance for the country’s leaders lies in their symbolic value as investments in Qatar’s future. The Qatar National Vision, published in 2008 under the patronage of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani and his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, [outlines a comprehensive plan](#) to transform Qatar into “an advanced country by 2030.”

Under this plan, Qatar aims to achieve sustainable development



Doha

Credit: author

in its economic, social, human, and environmental spheres, by that year. Underlying this vision is the transformation of Qatar’s economy from a hydrocarbon to a knowledge-based one. To achieve this, the document envisions Doha becoming a globally recognized hub for sports, culture, and education, a place where East meets West, and modernity is enriched by tradition.

**“THE
DULLEST
PLACE ON
EARTH”**

While only time will tell whether Doha can realize this vision, the city’s global image is arguably moving in the right direction. In 2000, the popular Lonely Planet travel book called Doha “the dullest place on earth.” In 2016, [the same series described Doha](#) as “a great city in the making” that “is on its way of realizing the grand vision of its founding fathers.”

Astana: “Another wonder of the world”

Like Doha, Astana, is new to urban development. The city is younger than its Qatari counterpart, and its fast-moving development an even more recent phenomenon. While it is not located on the sea, Astana’s landscape is also shaped by the flow of water. The river Ishim runs through the city, splitting it into left and right banks. Over the last years, the left bank has become synonymous with Astana’s urban development, as most of the city’s spectacular construction projects are concentrated here.

**“ASTANA IS YOUNGER
THAN DOHA AND ITS
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EVEN MORE RECENT
PHENOMENON”**

Throughout its history, Kazakhstan has had many capital cities. Astana (meaning ‘capital city’, and previously called Tselinograd and Akmola) became the country’s capital on December 10, 1997. Before this, Almaty, which is still Kazakhstan’s largest metropolis, served as the seat of government. Shortly after independence, in 1994, the Kazakh government decided to move the capital from Almaty, purportedly because of its limited space for [social and economic development](#), geographic proximity to China, and penchant for earthquakes.

To justify Astana’s selection, Kazakhstan’s political elite argued that its location was more economically advantageous, and that it [served as a natural bridge between Europe and Asia](#). But, examining the country’s post-independence landscape suggests the decision was also motivated by political factors.

For one thing, Astana represents a symbolic break with the state’s more recent Soviet past, when Almaty was the capital. Additionally, the decision to move the capital provided President Nursultan Nazarbayev with an opportunity to [limit the influence of old elites in and around Almaty](#).

**“FOR ONE THING, ASTANA REPRESENTS A SYMBOLIC BREAK WITH
THE STATE’S MORE RECENT SOVIET PAST”**



Astana

Credit: [Alex J. Butler](#)

Moving the capital helped shape Kazakhstan's global image as a modern and progressive state. [Reflecting on the decision in 2012](#), Nazarbayev described Astana as an important site for showcasing the country to the world, and claimed that, without it, Kazakhstan would not have been awarded the presidency of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010, or the right to host the 2017 EXPO; the EXPO is part of the World Fair system, but smaller and more specialized than its World Fair counterparts.

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Moving the capital northward reflected concerns with domestic stability, and served the government's interest in reinterpreting Kazakhstan's history along ethnic Kazakh lines. Fearing potential secessionist moves from the north's predominantly Russian-speaking ethnic Slavic population, the government encouraged thousands of ethnic Kazakhs to move to the new capital. This migration eased ethnic imbalances in the north, and provided the government with the opportunity to promote Kazakhstan as an ethnically diverse and peaceful country.

Astana's Development

Against this backdrop, the Kazakh government has made every effort to turn Astana into an economic, cultural, and educational hub. Promising an influx of international investment and visitors, Nazarbayev's government [has promoted the city's future potential](#) to develop a sense of both domestic and global pride in Kazakhstan.

In more practical terms, Astana's evolution has been in line with Kazakhstan's official development strategies, namely the 'Kazakhstan 2030' strategy, published in 1997, and its updated version 'Kazakhstan 2050,' published in 2012.

The 1997 strategy [envisioned Kazakhstan's](#) transformation into a secure, socially mobile, and economically strong country by 2030. The 2050 strategy further expands these ambitions, [with the eventual goal](#) of entering the 'top 30 club of most developed states in the world' by that year.

“ASTANA’S EVOLUTION HAS BEEN IN LINE WITH KAZAKHSTAN’S OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES”

As one step toward achieving this countrywide transformation, Nazarbayev's government [has held a number of national and international architectural competitions](#) to ensure the new capital adequately represents the new state.

In 1998, Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa's concept of “symbiotic architecture,” which envisioned a sustainable city with urbanized structures that existed in harmony with the natural environment, [was chosen as the first master plan for Astana](#). But, while Kurokawa's plan was a very elaborate general strategy for urban development, its details for the city's actual architectural appearance were less clear. As a result, from the beginning, there was [a conflict between Kurokawa's plan and the development ambitions of local planners and outside investors](#). In 2005, the government largely abandoned Kurokawa's plan, saying the architect did not anticipate the city's fast development.

But, this bump in the road has not prevented the government from realizing its modern development vision through a number of grand construction projects. These include the Baitarek tower, a tall, 97 meter (318 feet) high, white building that was built in 1997 to mark [the capital's transfer that year](#). It is thought to represent the

“THE TOWER EMBODIES THE STATE, WITH ITS ‘HISTORICAL ROOTS, STRONG SUPPORT, AND A TENDENCY TO FUTURE PROSPERITY’ ”

tree of life, which carries the egg of the sacred bird, Samruk. According to Kazakh folklore, Samruk laid an egg in the crown of the tree every spring, symbolizing the sun, fertility, and new beginnings. [Reinterpreting the story in the context of the 2050 strategy](#), the tower embodies the state, with its “historical roots, strong support, and a tendency to future prosperity.”

Beyond Baitarek, there are two other buildings that carry comparable symbolic weight: the Palace of Peace and Accord, and the Khan Shatyr.

The Palace, locally referred to as “the pyramid,” was designed by British star-architect,

Norman Foster, and houses religious and cultural meeting places. [Explaining its design](#), Nazarbayev stressed that the “four sides of our Palace are oriented to the four sides of the world”, and represent Kazakhstan’s embrace of “all people of all nations and practicing different religions.”

Differing slightly from the Palace, the Khan Shatyr is a translucent, tent-like construction also designed by Foster and meant to represent a traditional Kazakh yurt. [Marketed as a “lifestyle center”](#), the Khan provides family entertainment, retail space, and a beach club with white sand flown in from the Maldives. The peculiarity of these two landmarks points to the fact that Kazakhstan lacks a strong urban and architectural heritage; and that, in its place, imaginative means have been used in an attempt to express a uniquely Kazakh urban style.

Doha and Astana

Examining the narratives that surround urban development in Doha and Astana, one is struck by their similarities. Leaders in both places have depicted their cities as emerging metropolises, places that both unify citizens and express identities. Doha has been marketed as a “world-class hub,” while Astana [is presented as “another world wonder.”](#) These narratives provide some insight into what these cities truly are: political statements serving political interests. While they are impressive, their landmarks and glorious waterfronts are fully intended to convey a message to the world.

“LEADERS IN BOTH PLACES HAVE DEPICTED THEIR CITIES AS EMERGING METROPOLISES, PLACES THAT BOTH UNIFY CITIZENS AND EXPRESS IDENTITIES”

In Qatar and Kazakhstan, and in the Gulf and Central Asia more broadly, urban development serves the state building visions of ruling regimes. While these cities are marketed as “visionary,” we must not forget whose vision they represent. Although the desert and the steppe may forever seem vast and empty, Doha and Astana serve as reminders of their leaders’ ambitions and political power.

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