

Introduction

Pathways into the 'City of the Future'

One wintry evening, six friends in their early to mid twenties sat around a small kitchen. Through the narrow window could be seen the courtyard below, wedged between two grey concrete apartment blocks from the mid 1970s. It was January 2009, midway through my fieldwork, and we were in my rented apartment in a Soviet-era neighbourhood in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. While water for tea was coming to the boil, Kirill¹ told a recent joke representing the popular genre of (post) Soviet railway travel *anekdot*:

Some people are travelling by train from Almaty to Moscow. For days, all they can see out of their compartment's window is steppe. Boring: steppe, steppe, steppe ... Suddenly [Kirill, abruptly animated, speaking loudly] they go: 'Look, Astana! Just look at what fantastic buildings they've built! Wow, Astana!' [and just as abruptly – subdued, monotonous] And the steppe again, and steppe, and steppe, and steppe ...

It might be a risky idea to start a book with an anecdote so context-specific that few readers are likely to get it. But Kirill's joke evokes many of the themes of this book. Astana is located in north-central Kazakhstan, amidst vast plains on the outskirts of southern Siberia, swept by powerful winds that encounter little to diminish or redirect them. In summer, endless expanses of tall grasses and wheat wave under immense skies. In winter, the scenery is covered with a thick blanket of snow. The region, in the approximate middle of the Eurasian landmass, has a harsh continental climate with very hot summers and long, dry, frosty winters with temperatures dropping to as low as minus 40°C. The river Ishim, a tributary of the larger Irtysh, which it joins on the Russian side of the border, flows slowly through the land. Astana sits at a point where the river takes a mild north-westerly turn. As travellers approach Astana by car or by train, a sheaf of glass and steel skyscrapers shine from afar amid the flat steppe landscape, flickering like a



Map 0.1 Kazakhstan

mirage. But this is a fairly recent development, connected to a set of complex and ongoing transformations in this city and in Kazakhstan more broadly.

Kazakhstan gained independence with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Astana became the country's capital in December 1997, when the seat of government was relocated here from the much larger Almaty. Almaty, a good thousand kilometres to the south-east (Map 0.1), had been the capital of Kazakhstan throughout the Soviet period – that is, since the 1920s. The new capital, in contrast, used to be a mid-size provincial city, centre of an agricultural region. Originally established as a Russian tsarist outpost named Akmolinsk, from the 1960s the city was known as Tselinograd (Chapter 3), and then, after independence, briefly as Aqmola (1992–1998). Following the capital relocation, it received its present name, Astana – Kazakh for 'capital'.

A government-orchestrated building boom was soon to thoroughly transform the city. Beginning in the early 2000s, an expansive area of grandiose government buildings, shiny office skyscrapers, hotels, massive residential complexes, commercial venues and symbolic monuments was built – generally on previously undeveloped land on the opposite bank of the river from the pre-existent Soviet-era urban core (Figure 0.1). The pace and scope of construction were often astonishing, and the style of this new architecture was literally unseen before in Kazakhstan. The emerging built forms stood in sharp contrast to the Soviet-era box-shaped concrete apartment blocks and shabby semi-rural individual dwellings that make up the bulk of the urban built environment elsewhere in the country, including the old part of the new capital itself, as well as Kazakhstan's numerous remote villages. It was these spectacular new buildings that Kirill's joke referred to. But as the joke suggests – and as this



Figure 0.1 The skyline of Astana (photo: M. Laszczkowski)

book explores – ‘the spectacular’ stands in an ambiguous relationship to the mundane. The new cityscape of Astana was built to impress. Inevitably, however, it evokes questions about the nature of its – often concealed – embeddedness in the surrounding social and material landscapes, on which it depends as much for resources needed to construct and populate the new capital as for the aesthetic and ideological effect.

Paralleling the architectural transformation, Astana also underwent a sweeping demographic change. In little more than a decade after the capital relocation, the population of the city roughly tripled (from around 250,000 in the mid 1990s to between 600,000 and 800,000, according to various estimates, by the late 2000s) as a result of migration from all corners of the country. The presence of this large and heterogeneous group of migrants has engendered complex dynamics in the formation of collective identities and notions of belonging.

The changes of spatial, social and political relations underway in Astana offer a unique opportunity to explore the complexity of connections between space and diverse emerging social actors, structures and representations. The ongoing transformations in the Kazakhstani capital highlight built space as a dynamic field of the political – that is, of the processes whereby social aggregates, patterns of relations, values and horizons of the possible are defined, defied and defended; where experiments in structuring social life can be carried out, fail and be taken up again. In official discourse, Astana was dubbed the ‘city of the future’ (*gorod budushchego*) or ‘city of dream’ (*gorod-mechta*). Its construction was explicitly framed as an assertion of the rise of the new state and its place in the world.

Among Kazakhstani citizens, the developments triggered fascination, hope and enthusiasm, but also disbelief, scepticism and sarcasm. Kirill's joke above expresses that tension between enchantment and doubt. Astana's new built forms became touchstones for conflicting public feelings, imaginings and evaluations of the state, society, modernity and the future. They became foci for questions that citizens asked themselves about the material conditions, forms of social life, politics, personhood and identities that would be desirable, appropriate or even possible (Buchli 2007).

To date, a specifically anthropological, ethnographic study of Astana – one that moves beyond a focus on elite schemes for ruling and transforming space and society – has been pending.² This book ventures to address this lacuna. It is an ethnography of space- and place-making in the city – a study of mutually constitutive relationships between individual and collective subjects and their spatial environment. It explores the many ways in which materiality and imagination intertwined in constructing Astana – both in the literal sense of 'construction' as building and in the more metaphorical sense of 'social construction of reality'. It follows how the city's inhabitants engaged in embodied practices, discourses and the work of imagination to lend specific characteristics to space, to make and maintain places, to become particular kinds of subjects and define their terms of belonging in the social 'worlds' they constructed. And it investigates the imbrications of multiple visions of the past and the future materialized in the built environment.

In the book, I ask, *inter alia*, what social dynamics did the capital relocation and the building boom engender? What futures did it evoke? What possibilities for arranging social relations were opened up, or closed down? What specific qualities were inscribed in built space, and how did their inscription affect other social processes? In particular, in what ways was space constructed as 'urban' or 'rural', 'modern' or in need of 'modernization'? And how did those characteristics of space translate into individual and collective identities among the various groups of residents? I also ask what imaginings of locality and its relationship to the world at large were evoked, enabled or compelled. How were these different imaginaries enacted, affirmed and contested in spatial practices? What might be the effects of everyday engagements with old and new built forms for the formation of sociality, subjecthood, place and politics?

The making of places imbued with particular characteristics is a fundamentally political activity through which local subjects claim agency, identity and power (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Rodman 1992; Ong 2011). This book emphasizes that this is not limited to elite projects – such as the development of Astana orchestrated by the post-Soviet regime in Kazakhstan – but involves the situated, interconnected but uncoordinated agency and aspirations of multiple actors. Hence, I follow the relationships between officially produced ideologies, discourses and images, and the details of everyday life in the quickly

transforming city. This is also a book about the connections between the construction of global imaginaries, the state-inspired production of urban space and local place-making. It inquires after the spatial practices and imaginings through which residents, migrants and planners situate themselves, their collectives, their city (and, implicitly, the country of which it is the capital) in historical and translocal contexts.

The ethnography of the ongoing sociospatial dynamics in Astana emphasizes that place-making, by virtue of the tangled relationships between its participants and the constraints set by the material make-up of places, is a reiterative process and its outcomes are usually provisional and in some measure indeterminate. In particular, various actors' efforts to materialize a vision of distinctly 'urban' social and moral order – undertaken at various times and with different versions of the urban ideal in view – repetitively entail the proliferation of material forms and social practices that undermine that desired order and that are construed as 'rural'. The tension between these mutually opposed yet inextricably linked spatial categories – 'urbanity' and 'rurality' – remains at the heart of the politics of place-making in Astana and the construction of situated identities. As the discussion in this book further reveals, these are simultaneously spatio-temporal categories, for 'urbanity' is construed as tantamount to 'modernity', 'progress' and the future, while 'rurality' is associated with 'backwardness'. Thus, the material and imaginational construction of space entails also the equally political construction of alternative qualities of time.

Focusing on the changing urban landscapes of the Kazakhstani capital, I highlight the importance of built forms – their construction, their tangibility and rigidity, their fragility and need of maintenance, as well as their aesthetic properties – to social continuity and change. Subjectivities, identities and collectives, visions of social worlds and actors' particular emplacements in those worlds, are all made and remade, I argue, through engagements with space and the built environment. As I elaborate later on in this introduction, built space is also the material dimension that gives substance to contested and consequential narratives of pasts and futures. By focusing on Astana, this book highlights the enduring strength of the myths of modernism and modernization as teleological collective utopias (Berman 1988; Benjamin 1999 [1927–1939]; Ferguson 1999; cf. Buck-Morss 2002), while simultaneously making a case for the radical openness of space to plural experimentation with 'alternative social visions and configurations – that is, "worlds"' (Massey 2005; Ong 2011: 12).

Astana, Kazakhstan and the Global Lives of Modernist Urbanism

'Modernism' may be defined as the belief that present and future reality can be shaped rationally, according to plan, by means of the controlled transformation of the material and social environment. The human individual, in this mindset,

becomes simultaneously the subject and object of transformation (Berman 1988). Historically, modernism entailed the emergence of new forms of power aiming to transform and 'improve' society (Foucault 1977, 1991; Mitchell 1988; Scott 1998). The building and rebuilding of cities has consistently been one of the principal ways of exercising this power in diverse parts of the globe. In introducing this book, therefore, it is instructive to place Astana in a transnational historical context of modernist urban planning ideologies, highlighting the features it shares with cities on various continents as well as what is specific to Kazakhstan and its new capital. Such a comparative view helps underscore the relevance of Astana to broader scholarly and political concerns with the burgeoning diversity of contemporary cities, and with the practices through which variously situated subjects claim their place in the world and compete to define global hierarchies of value.

Nineteenth-century European capitals were subject to massive reconstruction orchestrated by governments in the pursuit of nationalizing, modernizing or other transformative agendas (e.g., Agnew 1998 for Rome; Harvey 2003 for Paris). But modern urbanism in the sense of an institutionalized nexus of arrangements for planning and managing the social environment in cities was born, according to Paul Rabinow (1989), out of experiments undertaken by French colonial authorities in Africa and Asia (see also Metcalf 1989; Wright 1991). Soon, the newly invented technologies of urban planning and governance found application in France itself. In the second half of the twentieth century, city-building proved an attractive way for the elites of newly emerging postcolonial nations and states to assert their place on the map and their aspirations to 'modernity'. In particular, constructing new capitals not only carried much symbolic weight but also seemed a forceful practical move on the road of state-building and modernization. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the capitals of at least ten formerly colonized countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America were relocated (Schatz 2004b: 115).³

The most widely known of these relocated capitals is Brasilia, the capital of Brazil built from scratch between 1956 and 1960.⁴ It was also there that the ideals of 'high modernist' socially transformative city planning, as developed by Le Corbusier and the CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) movement (Scott 1998: 103–46; Hall 2002: 219–61), were most fully realized. Architectural and city-planning solutions – such as the elimination of the mixed-use street and its replacement with the motorized highway and immense square, or the settlement of residents into *superquadras* – that is, gigantic apartment blocks – were introduced with the explicit goal of forcing individuals into new forms of consciousness and changing society. President Juscelino Kubitschek and the architects responsible for planning Brasilia envisioned the new capital as an 'exemplary centre' (Holston 1989, drawing on Geertz 1980) that would radiate progress across Brazil and thus help overcome poverty, inequality and technical obsolescence. The experiment, however, remained confined to Brasilia and ended

in failure, from one viewpoint at least, as the forms of social exclusion that had plagued Brazilian cities were reproduced, perhaps even more maliciously, in the new capital (Epstein 1973; Holston 1989; Caldeira and Holston 2005).

From this angle, Astana is not an unprecedented case. There are suggestive parallels in particular between the Kazakhstani capital and Brasilia. Yet it is important to remember that urbanism, like other forms of modernity, does not travel unaffected 'from the West to the rest' (Roy 2011: 309–10). Rather, multiple interconnected yet often incompatible modernities and urbanisms have been produced in different parts of the world and at various historical moments, including a spectrum of 'socialist' and 'post-socialist' conditions worldwide. Astana offers a rare opportunity to study the 'social life' of urban space, first under state socialism and more recently under a regime that fuses strong central government with an embrace of the transnational capitalist market.

Arguably, the Soviet Union was where socially transformative production of urban space was undertaken at the largest scale. Cities were ideologically valued as hotbeds of modernization. The architectural milieu of a socialist city was held to provide the catalyst for producing a socialist society (Crowley and Reid 2002; Alexander and Buchli 2007). City-building (*gradostroitel'stvo*) developed into a unique discourse and institutionalized practice, a form of total social planning (French 1995; Collier 2010: 34). Especially in the 1930s under Stalin, building new cities was understood as tantamount to constructing a new social order, 'building socialism'. Multiple towns and cities were built where none had previously existed. Entire industrial cities built from scratch, such as Magnitogorsk in the Urals (Kotkin 1995) and Karaganda in Kazakhstan (Brown 2001), were expected to produce not only coal or steel but also a new kind of 'collectivist individual' (Kharkhordin 1999) and new social relations. Simultaneously, where the Bolshevik government found the need to 'modernize' particularly acute – as in Central Asia – historic urban centres were reconstructed to turn them into hotbeds of transformed society (Liu 2007 for Osh; Stronski 2010 for Tashkent). The objective, in either case, was to, quite literally, build 'a new economy, society, politics – in short, a new culture' (Kotkin 1995: 34; Hoffmann 2003). In later decades, the urban built environment in the Soviet Union retained its ideological role of social mould (French 1995: 69–95; Buchli 2000: 138–58; Gerchuk 2000). Nikita Khrushchev, who had succeeded the deceased Stalin, urged extensive and swift construction of standardized housing, materializing ideals of residential equity and 'modern living for all'. The scale of the mass housing campaign initiated in 1956 was such that apartment blocks erected under Khrushchev and his successor Brezhnev comprise to this day the bulk of the built environment of many a former Soviet city – including Astana (see Chapter 3).

Following the dissolution of the USSR, each of its former republics and 'satellite' countries followed a different, contingent trajectory of transformation of the political and economic system (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann

2002; Humphrey 2002b; Jones Luong 2004). Although this was allegedly a post-ideological age (Fukuyama 1992), everywhere urban space was restructured to manifest and give momentum to the transformations (Andrusz, Harloe and Szelenyi 1996; Alexander, Buchli and Humphrey 2007; Czepczyński 2008; Darieva, Kaschuba and Krebs 2011). Spatial renewal, especially in capital cities, appealed to leaders of the newly independent states as an attractive way to perform statehood, promote new national identities and induce new political-economic relations. While Kazakhstan was the only post-Soviet state to relocate its capital, all post-Soviet capitals were refurbished (Bell 1999 for Tashkent; Grant 2014 for Baku), and in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan the capital was renamed (from Frunze to Bishkek). Many smaller cities were likewise rebuilt (Ruble 1995 for Yaroslavl, Russia; Trevisani 2014 for Namangan, Uzbekistan). In some places, like in Astana, cityscapes were subject to sweeping transformation. Turkmenistan's Ashgabat made headlines around the world for its extravagant built forms erected to represent in concrete, steel, glass and lots of marble the ideas of the country's idiosyncratic leader, Saparmurat Niyazov, better known as Turkmenbashi (Šír 2008; Denison 2009). Ashgabat is the only regional counterpart to match Astana in terms of the scale of construction (Koch 2015b). An important difference between the two seems to be that while Ashgabat was conspicuously shaped to materialize Turkmenbashi's personality cult (Denison 2009: 1175), Astana's new built environment appears rather to embody ideas of development, 'modernity' and entrepreneurial statehood (Koch 2012a; Bissenova 2014), only implicitly hinting at president Nursultan Nazarbaev's 'personality cult by proxy' (Adams and Rustemova 2009).

Kazakhstan is a presidential republic, and a series of constitutional amendments, referendums and elections, none of which has been recognized by international monitoring bodies as fair, has allowed Nazarbaev (the last Soviet-era leader of Kazakhstan) to occupy the post of president continuously since independence in 1991.⁵ In 2008, the two-chamber parliament was monopolized by the president's party, Nur Otan (Bowyer 2008).⁶ Opposition is weak and fragmented, its leaders (commonly former Nazarbaev cronies fallen out of favour) compromised, exiled or both. Usually, little physical violence is necessary to prevent organized expressions of dissent, although individual opposition politicians or journalists who would not be co-opted (Cummings 2005: 108–16) have been harassed, jailed or killed in circumstances of which little or nothing is publicly known (Schatz 2009: 210). However, in a rare outburst of spectacular violence, on 16 December 2011 the Kazakhstani police cracked down on striking oil workers in the Caspian town of Zhanaozen, leaving at least ten dead (Kislov 2011) and many injured. This dramatic episode provides a chilling reminder of the nature of translocal connections through which Astana is produced, since the development of the capital city depends on the political economy of Kazakhstan's oil, in which towns such as Zhanaozen are crucial sites.

The Kazakhstani regime's strategy of maintaining complacency usually relies on more structural and thus less ostensive forms of violence and on providing relative prosperity to selected constituencies (Koch 2013). Economically, following the acute crisis of the 1990s (see Chapter 1), Kazakhstan is doing relatively well compared to its neighbours in the region. It is a resource-rich country – as some citizens would sometimes boast, 'the entire periodic table of elements' is found in its territory. Major American and European companies have invested in the exploitation of Kazakhstan's oil and gas deposits. Between 2000 and 2007 – which coincides with the crucial first phase of the building boom in Astana – Kazakhstan's economy growth rate, generated primarily by the extractive industries, was an impressive 9 per cent per year (Central Intelligence Agency 2011). While residents in many areas of the countryside and factory towns across Kazakhstan that were ruined economically in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR still find it hard to make ends meet, the fruits of oil-fed prosperity are clearly visible in the largest cities such as Almaty, the Caspian port of Aktau and, first and foremost, Astana. Alongside impressive developments of the built environment and urban infrastructure, residents in those places – at least those who can afford it – enjoy access to cosmopolitan consumer goods (Laszczkowski 2011b).

The cost of building Astana is unknown. By 2007, it was officially estimated at fifteen billion U.S. dollars, while independent scholars believed the actual price tag must have been much higher (Dave 2007: 168). The works are carried out by a range of construction companies, some Kazakhstani, others foreign – primarily Russian and Turkish. Financing comes either from the state – as with government buildings, monuments and housing for public officials and civil servants – or from domestic and international commercial investors. The financial crisis in 2007 drove a number of developers into bankruptcy. As a result, the pace of the works dropped considerably around 2008, with many projects frozen in mid construction. However, state intervention, including bailouts for bankrupt companies and subsidy programmes for would-be homeowners, soon helped overcome the crisis and put the construction back on track (Bissenova 2012: 141–58). At the time of this writing, in 2014–2015, the new part of Astana continues to expand with further residential complexes, commercial venues and public projects such as a new university campus.⁷

Official public discourse in Kazakhstan – consisting mainly of works attributed to Nazarbaev, his speeches and publications by various officials and luminaries (e.g., Dzhakysybekov 2008) – reveals considerable affinities between the construction of Astana and earlier, in particular Soviet, modernist visions of social transformation through city-building. The discourse revives the myth of modernization as linear development and progress (cf. Ferguson 2005). A range of familiar modernist topoi are reiterated. For instance, the topos of the conquering of 'nature' is invoked when it is claimed that the new capital has 'risen' out of the 'bare', 'virgin' steppe. The tropes of 'emptiness', 'bareness' or 'barrenness'

of the land have been persistently invoked in subsequent 'colonizing' narratives in this area since the time of tsarist colonization (Buchli 2007: 47–48) and, as is discussed at several points below, they resurface for various political uses – also contesting official ideology – today (see especially Chapter 3). Another commonplace modernist trope in contemporary official discourse about Astana – speed – is emphasized in numerous assertions that the construction works in the new capital are accomplished at a 'miraculous' or 'record-breaking' pace (e.g., Nazarbaev 2006: 349; cf. Berman 1988: 49–50).

Nazarbaev calls Astana a 'symbol of the rise of the state' (2006: 357); 'of the renewal of Kazakhstan ... of the inextinguishable creative energy of its multi-ethnic [*mnogonatsional'nogo*] nation ... a symbol of the nation's belief ... in the nation's own strength' (Nazarbaev 2005: 17); finally 'a symbol of the liberated nation's hope and assuredness as to its flourishing future and the future of its descendants' (ibid.).⁸ Evaluating the results of building Astana, the president adds in a clear modernist idiom: 'As a systemic mobilizing factor of the rebirth of Kazakhstan, Astana has accomplished her historical mission ... Kazakhstan today is a stable and cohesive state, firmly and irreversibly progressing along the path of socio-economic development and socio-political reconstruction of society' (ibid.: 49). Astana, moreover, is expected to radiate development out across the national territory – an effect Nazarbaev (2005: 58) calls 'resonance development'. Here, the echoes of the utopianism of Brasilia, half a century earlier, are perhaps the most clearly heard (cf. Holston 1989: 14–20).

Nazarbaev (2006: 335) suggests that the origin of the idea of capital relocation can be traced back as early as 1992, just a few months after independence. He claims this was when he first thought of then Aqmola as the future capital and writes:

The time called for great and significant deeds. But are great deeds possible with an old burden of conservative mentality? [A mentality] basically unable to accommodate concepts such as private property, the market, pluralism, the freedom of speech and of the spirit ... Some extraordinary decision was needed to help shake the people and literally 'air' [*provetrit*] their brains. Thus, little by little, I came to the conclusion about the necessity of capital relocation. ... Because a capital, as I had no doubt ... defines the vector of development of the state and allows to structure society in line with global trends. (Nazarbaev 2005: 27–28)

And further:

The capital of a state is not just the brain of the country, but also its central nervous system, defining not only the mentality, but also the norms of behaviour of all strata of the population and even of individual

citizens. The capital is the place where the behavioural structures of the entire society are formed. (Nazarbaev 2005: 28–29)

In these passages, modernist tropes resonate with particular intensity. Nazarbaev positions himself as the quasi-Faustian ‘developer’ who sets out to destroy ‘old mentality’ and ‘air people’s brains’ to create conditions for the construction of the new (cf. Berman 1988: 60–71). He declares that the capital relocation was to change the Kazakhstani society to make it more compatible with ‘global trends’, paving the way for private property, market relations and so forth. Just as in Soviet modernist ideology, the city is expected to serve as the engine of social transformation. Speaking of shaking off ‘the burden of conservative mentality’, the president simultaneously strikes an acutely modernist note, writing that the changes are expected to reach into individual citizens’ consciousness in order to transform their behaviour and thus programme the ‘behavioural structures’ of society at large.

The echoes of Soviet modernism become even more explicit when Nazarbaev spells out the ultimate reason for the construction of Astana as follows:

The country needed a patriotic breakthrough, a feat, akin to that of the Virgin Lands Campaign. Yet this time it was related to new conditions: the strengthening of independence, the building of statehood, the deepening of socio-economic and political transformations. And we were convinced that the transfer of the capital to Aqmola would, in many respects, facilitate the accomplishment of these goals. (Nazarbaev 2006: 350)

Here, the president most openly declares the transformative agenda associated with the construction of Astana. The Soviet past is invoked in an ambiguous claim of simultaneous denial and renewal. Although elsewhere in this discourse ‘Soviet’ is at times synonymous to ‘outdated’ – as in the phrase ‘to turn a Soviet town into a contemporary capital’ (Nazarbaev 2006: 351) – in the passage just quoted Nazarbaev likens the building of Astana to the Virgin Lands Campaign, the Tselina. That had been a massive agricultural development scheme carried out under Khrushchev in the 1950s and 1960s to transform the steppes of north-central Kazakhstan into an enormous grain-producing region for the USSR (M. Pohl 1999). As I describe at more length in Chapter 3, the campaign had also boosted the growth of Tselinograd – a crucial stage in the history of today’s Astana.

Yet, I argue, it would be a mistake to write off the Kazakhstani government’s Astana project and attendant ideological discourse as mere reinvention of Soviet ideology. Without necessarily believing in President Nazarbaev’s commitment to the values of ‘pluralism’ and ‘the freedom of speech and of the spirit’, it is

worthwhile situating Astana in a broader, transcontinental pattern. Over the recent decades, governments variously allied with particular class constituencies and corporate interests have continued to restructure cities in China (Zhang 2006; Bellér-Hann 2014), South and South East Asia (Askew 2002; Herzfeld 2006; Roy and Ong 2011; Schwenkel 2013), the Middle East (Koch 2014), Africa (Mbembe 2004; cf. Simone 2001), the Americas (Cooper 1999; Rutheiser 1999; Low 2000) and in Europe (McDonogh 1999; Herzfeld 2009; Weszkalnys 2010). Of course, these different cases cannot be reduced to instantiations of a single politico-economic or cultural logic. While ideals, benchmarks and models travel across cities on different continents, each local case of urban transformation is a 'particular engagement with the global' (Ong 2011: 2). In late-socialist Kunming, for instance, the goal has been to 'speed up' growth and 'catch up' with other, more developed areas (Zhang 2006); in Manila, the objective of restructuring the downtown is to nurture a class of residents fit to form the managerial corpus for a desired knowledge economy (Shatkin 2011); and in Berlin, it is to regain 'European' identity, supposedly lost during the decades of socialist rule over one half of the city (Weszkalnys 2010: 49–61). However, this worldwide perspective suggests that the modernist 'will to improve' (Li 2005) by means of spatial transformation (usually for the benefit of some groups and to the detriment of others) endures in this supposedly postmodern, non-ideological world.⁹

In her introduction to a recent collection of studies of contemporary Asian cities, Aihwa Ong (2011) identifies two master prisms through which urban life in what until recently used to be called the Third World has usually been studied. What she calls the 'political economy approach' subordinates the plurality of urban experience on several continents to generally a single factor: the global spread of the forces of (originally 'Western') capitalism. In turn, the 'postcolonial' approach applies the similarly singular logic of the struggle of the 'subaltern' against colonial domination. But, Ong contends, none of these approaches does justice to the plurality of creative experiments with urban forms, through which subjects across Asian cities seek not only autonomously to assert their own identities, but also to lay claim to define what counts as 'modern' and re-establish the distribution of 'centres' and 'peripheries' in the geography of the global production of 'modernity'.

Kazakhstan belongs to a part of Asia that lies beyond the scope of Ong's argument. The urban experience in this part of the continent has been interpreted by scholars through another master trope, one that links it to specific other world regions: 'the post-socialist city' (Andrusz, Harloe and Szelenyi 1996; Alexander, Buchli and Humphrey 2007; Czepczyński 2008; Darieva, Kaschuba and Krebs 2011). While the category 'post-socialist' clearly has much merit in emphasizing common characteristics that link places in, say, East Germany, Kazakhstan and Vietnam and make them different from other areas that might be located much nearer but have not had that kind of historical experience with 'socialism'

(Humphrey 2002a; cf. Kandiyoti 2002; West and Raman 2009), I suggest that the post-socialist trope can be as limiting as the reductive effects of the tropes of ‘capitalist globalization’ and ‘the postcolonial condition’ identified by Ong.

Instead of reducing the multiplicity and diversity of cities to one or another of a handful of master narratives, what is needed is ethnographic attention to what Ong calls ‘worlding practices’ – ‘constitutive, spatializing, and signifying gestures that variously conjure up worlds beyond current conditions of urban living. They articulate disparate elements from near and far, and symbolically re-situate the city in the world’ (Ong 2011: 13). As the chapters in this book make clear, these situated practices include the agency of leaders and planners as well as so-called ‘ordinary citizens’. The relevance of the Astana experience to our understanding of the diversity of hybrid urbanisms proliferating in the world today stems from the polyvalent mixing of such signifying practices: some akin to those in operation elsewhere, some drawing on the specific legacies of Soviet urbanism, and some context-specific instances of local innovation.

While the bulk of this book explores this heterogeneity of place-making practices in Astana through foci on a range of everyday experiences by residents, hybrid approaches are notable also in the work of local political and professional city-planning elites. Despite the pronouncements of the government discourse as cited above, members of the architectural establishment in Astana whom I interviewed for this research rejected the idea that the massive state-orchestrated construction campaign in Kazakhstan’s new capital served goals of social transformation. They shunned Soviet modernist ideology in favour of a liberal approach, postulating permissive ‘user-friendly’ planning (Chikanaev 2008; cf. Rutheiser 1999: 327). In 2001, a General Plan for the city was commissioned from the Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, merging references to the ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘nature’, ‘tradition’, abstract geometric symbolism and hi-tech futurism (Chikanaev 2008: 85–89; Bissenova 2012: 34–67). The late Japanese master explicitly set his ideals in opposition to those of Le Corbusier’s modernism, which had guided the design of Brasilia and influenced Soviet urbanism (Kurokawa 1997). As time went by, Kurokawa’s plan was repeatedly corrected by AstanaGenPlan, a planning institute established to supervise its implementation and adjustments, until no more than basic general ideas were preserved from the original vision. Anthropologist Alima Bissenova (2014), who has followed the work of AstanaGenPlan, argues that the Kazakhstani authorities’ goal in hiring Kurokawa – next to securing the considerable sums from the Japanese international cooperation funds that came with his plan – was to buy ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) associated with his expertise and thus help position Kazakhstan in a global ‘economy of appearances’.

I suggest that the paradoxes of simultaneous break and continuity between Soviet-era and present-day production of space in Astana are themselves socially and politically productive. They enable a range of creative constructions of the

past and the future by the ruling and city-planning elites as well as by individual citizens. Contradictions such as reiterating key tropes of Soviet modernist city-planning ideology and rejecting it, or hiring the Japanese star architect and subsequently thoroughly changing his master plan, highlight the complexity of 'worlding' in a place like Astana. Creative reworking of Soviet ideological and institutional legacies and re-appropriating heterogeneous neoteric ideas and flows of symbolic as well as financial capital are but some of the ideological and politico-economic practices involved in the ongoing emergence of Kazakhstan's capital.

By having Astana built, the Kazakhstani government put forth a particular vision of the national future within a global context. This does not imply that the vision was completely explicit or coherent, let alone hegemonic. But, as the chapters below explore, various actors' imaginings of self, place, time, sociality and politics were articulated in relation to that vision and its material realization in built forms. Buildings gave 'modernity' a specific look and texture. Individual residents of Astana variously, performatively and creatively engaged with those material forms to claim a place for themselves in the local social environment as well as in an imagined world at large. Exploring these engagements ethnographically entails revisiting anthropological perspectives on place and space, the local and the global, from a novel angle afforded by the particularities of Astana's past and ongoing development.

Anthropology's Space

During the 1990s and 2000s, a 'spatial turn' occurred in anthropology. While space had always formed a part of the background against which anthropologists crafted their accounts of social organization, in this more recent period space began to be increasingly brought to the foreground as a constitutive dimension of social life (Lawrence and Low 1990; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Anthropologists have come to appreciate how place and space are constitutive of social relations, personhood and subjectivity, as well as various forms of social organization and political processes – in short, of culture. Scholars in the discipline recognized that, as geographer Doreen Massey put it, 'it is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too' (1984: 6). Anthropology's spatial turn drew on earlier developments in geography (e.g., Massey and Allen 1984; Agnew and Duncan 1989) and on a range of philosophical theories spanning from a focus on the human body and the sensory perception of space (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1962; Casey 1996) to neo-Marxist analyses of the political economy of space production (Harvey 1973; Lefebvre 1991 [1974]).¹⁰ While the turn has been immensely productive, anthropology also inherited from these various intellectual currents a number of binary distinctions and habits of thought that, I would argue, may impede the understanding of the

social dimensions of space (or the spatial dimensions of the social). It is some of these dualisms that I aim to reconsider.

One fundamental distinction is that between ‘space’ and ‘place’. Much ink has been spilled by theorists trying to define these two categories and their mutual relationship. Broadly, scholars agree with the common-sense view that space is general while place is particular; that places are where objects and events are distributed across space. However, phenomenologist Edward Casey (1996) argues, for instance, that while it is conventionally assumed that places are secondary subjective constructs carved out from objective space, the actual experience is the opposite: the abstract and general concept of space is an elaboration of the direct perception of particular, concrete places by the human individual (see also Tuan 1977). In contrast, Michel De Certeau (1984) reverts the terms. ‘Space is a practiced place’, he writes (1984: 117), by which he means that places are abstract geometrical positions enlivened and thus transformed into spaces by being used: ‘the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers’ (ibid.).

In general, as geographer John Agnew (2005) notes, ‘space’ lends itself to objectivist interpretations, while ‘place’ to subjectivist ones. That is to say, the analyses of ‘space’ tend to focus on political economy and planning, while those of ‘place’ highlight subjective ‘meaning’, personal experience and intimate communities. Connected to this is a political dualism. Space is often conceptualized as the domain of planning, control and uniformity, while place tends to be seen as the locus of particularity, difference, spontaneity and, more or less implicitly, resistance.¹¹

This dualism is reflected, *inter alia*, in Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work on the social production of space (1991). Lefebvre’s fundamental thesis – on which numerous other authors have drawn and on which I also build in this book – is that space is produced by social actors, purposefully and within the structures of political economy. Simultaneously, space is what enables and conditions social relations. It sets constraints and opens up possibilities for action. In other words, space ‘is at once result and cause, product and producer; it is also a stake, the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies, and hence also the object of wagers on the future’ (Lefebvre 1991: 142–43). It follows that a transformation of space is a necessary condition of social change. This is clearly relevant to Astana, where the development of built space was linked to a reconstruction of state order following the demise of the Soviet Union and Kazakhstan’s independence, and to a transformation of the economy (Laszczkowski 2014). According to Lefebvre, each new politico-economic formation (mode of production) requires qualitatively new spatial relations. For instance, capitalist space is ‘homogenous’ and ‘fractured’ – that is, divisible into formally equivalent abstract units that can be subject to trade. Also ‘the state’, as a condition of its own emergence and operation, establishes a particular kind of space appropriate

for its objectives: a space that is bounded by borders, hierarchically organized into centres and peripheries, and hardwired with infrastructural networks that support the maintenance of control and production (Lefebvre 2003a).¹² Lefebvre sought the bases of resistance against the imposition of abstract state-capitalist space in the memories, representations and practices rooted in an older kind of space that the state and capital colonize: the supposedly more authentic, concrete and lived 'space of places', so to speak (Agnew 2005: 90).

Anthropology, at least since the 1960s, has been distinguished by a sensibility to practise, to the particular, the irregular and the 'bottom-up', to the indeterminacy of social action and the partiality of its outcomes (Ortner 1984; Moore 1987). The anthropology of place and space has been informed, alongside Lefebvre, also by phenomenology (Richardson 1982; Ingold 1995; Feld and Basso 1996; Richardson 2008), semiotics (Fernandez 2003 [1984]) and various theories of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; De Certeau 1984). By the turn of the century, the prevailing anthropological view seemed to be of places as shifting, provisional constructs of a plurality of situated agencies (e.g., Raffles 1999). While taking into account the structuring impacts of 'the state' and other 'large-scale' forces, anthropologists tend to emphasize how places are continuously constituted as meaningful realities through everyday practices, repeated bodily movement, language, narratives and symbolization. Places, in the anthropological perspective, are 'multivocal' – constructed by a multiplicity of actors who claim 'voice' in shaping particular locales and defining the relations between them (Rodman 1992).

These various inspirations are brought together, for instance, in the way Setha Low expands on Lefebvre's work by introducing the concept of the 'social construction of space' as a counterpart to 'social production':

The *social production of space* includes all those factors – social, economic, ideological, and technological – that result, or seek to result, in the physical creation of the material setting. The materialist emphasis of the term *social production* is useful in defining the historical emergence and political/economic formation of urban space. The term *social construction* may then be conveniently reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control. Thus, *the social construction of space* is the actual transformation of space – through people's social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting – into scenes and actions that convey meaning. (Low 2000: 127–28, italics original; see also Low 1999b)

I argue that the distinction between 'production' and 'construction' – despite its analytic usefulness, best proven in Low's own work – reiterates the

same kind of dualism expressed in the place-space dichotomy. 'Production' is about political economy and the agency of structural forces such as the state and capital; 'construction' is about the everyday, personal attachment, community and, implicitly, resistance.

Taking the perspective on places and spaces as complex, multivocal and dynamic for my starting point, I want to question that resilient dualism and shake up the relative ease with which the complexity of the mutually constitutive relationships between social forms and space is analytically divided into material 'production' and phenomenological, linguistic or symbolic 'construction', and space itself is split into seemingly separate planes of matter and 'meaning'. In making this critical move, it is helpful to draw on the work of geographers and anthropologists who scrutinize the dichotomies of place and space, the local and the global (Tsing 2000; Massey 2002, 2005; Agnew 2005; Cresswell 2011). This is not to say there is no difference in meaning between these terms, but to emphasize how place and space are intricately related. The distinction between place and space, as much as that between the local and the global, is not a qualitative difference, but rather an oscillation between figure and ground (Strathern 2002), a matter of perspective. Attempts at stopping this oscillation and fixing boundaries between these spatial categories are themselves profoundly political acts on which projects of domination (for example, state control over a designated 'territory' and all the places that it encompasses) are founded (Mitchell 1990, 1991). This is why it is important to keep those categories in motion.

In Massey's formulation, for instance, places remain particular, yet each is constituted as a node of translocal, space-spanning relationships. Places are 'constructed on a far larger scale than we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent' (Massey 1994: 154). They are open and unbounded, integrating 'in a positive way the global and the local' (1994: 155; see also Tsing 2000). Space, on the other hand, remains, in a sense, general, but it is 'concrete and embedded too. It is no more than the sum of our relations and connections ... and, like place, it too is continually being made' (Massey 2002: 25).

Issues of scale and politics are connected to this. I argue that a sharp analytic separation between 'the state' and other 'large-scale actors' producing space 'from above' and, on the other hand, individuals or 'local communities' constructing place (or, 'constructing space' in Low's sense) on the intimate scale of the everyday is untenable.¹³ In the chapters that follow, my ethnographic focus shifts back and forth between panoramic vistas of the design of Astana and close-ups of the details of everyday practice and the capillaries of the built environment. This does not so much mean moving across scales, as following how scalar imaginations – perceptions of the 'large' and the 'small'; the 'global' and the 'local'; the 'general', the 'collective', the 'particular' and the 'individual'; the 'total' and 'the partial' – are themselves produced in a plurality of situated practices (Marston

2000; Latour 2005: 184–85). For instance, in Chapter 1 I explore the tensions between individual migrants' personal experience of living in Astana and more totalizing visions of the city and its place in the world, in which they have affectively and materially invested; Chapter 4 studies how contests over the qualities of the city played out within the more restricted boundaries of central squares; and in Chapter 5 I look at how cross-currents of broad-ranging flows of people, ideas and materials were provisionally stabilized to make up the local milieu of a neighbourhood. Astana, I argue, is continually constructed by planners on their drawing boards and by excavators and cranes raising new buildings and monuments, as much as by residents engaged in quotidian conversations, encounters in the street and maintenance jobs inside back alleys and courtyards. Simultaneously with this ongoing construction of the city, in all those situations other scales are being produced and contested: from face-to-face relationships within apartment blocks and neighbourhoods, to national identities (Chapters 2 and 3), to electronically connected transnational networks (Chapter 6) and global cartographies of value (Chapters 1).¹⁴

Politically, these processes are hardly reducible to the bipolar dynamics of domination and resistance. Sometimes, the residents' place-making and world-making practices are aimed to resist or contest schemes imposed by government officials (Chapters 3 and 5); more often they are not (e.g., Chapter 6). Rather, what goes on is a complex interplay of heterogeneous agencies whose objectives may or may not overlap and that contingently collide or collude, opportunistically drawing on one another. It is through such translocal relationships that place and space, from the intimacies of the 'local' to the immensity of the 'global', are constituted in a proliferation of diversely situated performances and encounters.

Following Massey (2005), I emphasize the radical openness of space to heterogeneity, change, improvisation and possibility, and its simultaneous material concreteness. Space, I argue, is inherently hybrid: far from the fantasies of Cartesian 'realism' and, at the other extreme, a post-structuralist obsession with free-floating signifiers, space is an ever-morphing assemblage of material and imaginal elements (see also Cresswell 2011). It is generated through the multiplicity of situated practices, which it enables, evokes and endures. In Astana, various images and imaginations of the city and the world, in the future and in the past – produced as much by professional 'imagineers' (Rutheiser 1999: 322) as by 'ordinary' residents – are particularly significant in motivating social action (see especially Chapter 1 below). Simultaneously, these images become concrete, are reaffirmed or compromised by the particular material qualities of the surfaces of buildings, streets and squares, and specific building materials. In Astana, glass and steel, for instance, epitomize 'modernity' and 'urbanity' while mud-brick is the stuff of 'rurality', obsolescence and 'underdevelopment' (Chapters 1–3). As brought to the fore most clearly in Chapter 5, material elements of the built

environment not only induce specific interpretations of social life, but can actually modify human agency and partake in the constitution of places, persons and collectives (see, e.g., Buchli 2000; Latour 2005; Thrift 2008).

The challenge for contemporary social theory is to productively bridge ‘social-constructionism’ – the emphasis, that is, on the imaginative and discursive aspects of social formation – and the recognition of the social efficacy of non-human material actants, as found in a range of novel theories that have been termed ‘the new materialisms’ (Coole and Frost 2010; cf. Navaro-Yashin 2012). This challenge becomes especially clear in researching space- and place-making, that field of mutually constitutive relationships between human individuals, groups and their material spatial environments. The task is to recognize the significance of objective spatial relations and the agency of material elements, and at the same time capture the difference made by the specifically human work of imagination, representation and narrativization.

The complexity of space and its openness to coexisting plurality of actual and virtual alternatives – what, following Victor Turner (1988), can be called *subjunctivity* – requires a theoretical approach equally prepared to simultaneously embrace disjunct perspectives, operate across (seemingly) incompatible planes and speak a plurality of languages – a kind of theoretical and methodological surrealism that has always been the lifeblood of ethnography (Clifford 1988). The chapters below are an attempt to perform such ethnographically informed hybrid theorizing, bringing together materialist, social-constructivist, semiotic, human-centred and thing-centred perspectives. The arguments of this book are simultaneously powered by attention to everyday practices, the phenomenology of spatial experience, materiality and by a loosely post-structuralist (but also Benjaminian) emphasis on imagination, discourse and representation (e.g., Baudrillard 1983; Foucault 1986; Zukin 1992; Soja 1996; cf. Benjamin 1999 [1927–1939], 2002 [1936]) – for these are all consequential dimensions in the making of place, space and selves.

Space and Time

One of the key themes addressed in this book concerns the entanglements of space and time in the built forms and social dynamics in Astana. Constructing pasts and futures in the material form of the built environment is a crucial element in the politics of space and place. It is a classic *topos* in anthropological theory that time – like space – is a social construct, imbued by human groups with various qualities (Hubert 1999 [1905]; James and Mills 2005; cf. Gell 1992). Particular qualities of time are materialized in the landscape and the built environment (Ingold 1993; Bender 2006). The meanings of various periods and of time’s flow itself change along with the material condition and social uses of places and buildings, while within the material structures of the built environment national

and personal temporalities clash (e.g., Herzfeld 1991; Edensor 2005; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Schwenkel 2013). Post-socialist cities subject to reconstruction – the selective erasure of architectural and monumental legacies of the past, their replacement with new *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1996) to establish new versions of history (Wanner 1998; Forest and Johnson 2002) and the simultaneous construction of new cityscapes expected to embody desired futures (Pelkmans 2003; Alexander and Buchli 2007; Czepczyński 2008; Weszkalnys 2010; Grant 2014) – are among those places where the politics of spatio-temporal entanglement are especially clearly foregrounded.

In Astana as elsewhere, new visions of the state and social order are articulated in relation to the past and past versions of futurity that remain materially present in the architectural tissue of the city (cf. Street 2012; Stoler 2013). This book explores how the co-presence of old and new elements in the built environment enables constructing the city as multiple overlapping and frequently incompatible time-spaces, or 'chronotopes' (Bakhtin 1981). The city's Soviet-era incarnation, Tselinograd, is kept alive in multiple ways (Chapters 3 and 4). Different futures and pasts not only take shape through architectural design and officially produced images of the cityscape (see Chapter 1), but crucially their specific meanings emerge from everyday embodied practices by situated actors. The new parts of Astana are explicitly constructed to materialize a particular vision of the future, yet their construction depends – conceptually as well as materially – on the very conditions of the present that it denies. As I point out in Chapter 1, for the individual actors involved, this creates a paradoxical situation of a temporal limbo where the future seems almost at hand yet perpetually suspended in (literally) mid construction.

At the same time, as the Chapters 3 to 6 highlight in various ways, the enduring presence of Soviet-era spatial forms and imaginations, and their ongoing transformation through residents' practices, enable alternative constructions of the past and the future. This sometimes implies critique of dominant city-planning and state-building discourses and of the political economy of the post-Soviet state. In old-time neighbourhoods, where most lifelong residents as well as recent migrants live (Chapter 2), change occurs every day, from one mundane instance to the next (Chapter 5), and the watersheds of official history are blurred by the continuity of dwelling (Chapter 3). Industrial ruins unexpectedly become the venues of creative performances by young people that spawn astonishing collages of materialized spatial and temporal imaginings (Chapter 6). But of course all of those places are also enmeshed in and affected by the material and ideological dynamics of the 'building of the future'.

Theorizing the City Anthropologically

By declaring my work an ethnography, I express a methodological choice – the choice of a style of research and writing that aims to speak to broad theoretical

questions through an evocative and relatively detailed description of forms of everyday social interaction in a particular place at a particular time. But writing an ethnography of a city – especially a city being actively and thoroughly transformed, like Astana – singularly reveals the challenges and contradictions inherent in this methodology. As discussed above, places are rarely, if ever, bounded or stable (Raffles 1999), and neither does the turbulent flow of time lend itself to slicing into handy snapshots (Sanjek 1991) – rather, it carries with it uprooted fragments of former configurations and bits of knowledge, creating often unexpected juxtapositions and new forms always-already in motion.¹⁵

Like any large city, Astana is dizzyingly dynamic and complex – by which I mean a condition where ‘phenomena share a space but cannot be mapped in terms of a single set of three-dimensional coordinates’ (Mol and Law 2002: 1). Geographers Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift describe the city (any city) as ‘a complex imbroglio of actors with different goals, methods, and ways of practice’ (2002: 92). Cities, according to them, ‘are truly multiple. They exceed, always exceed’ (ibid.: 30). Or, as one character in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* perceptively notes, ‘the modern city ... is the locus classicus of incompatible realities’ (2006 [1988]: 314). For these reasons, cities are – and, since the inception of modern social science, have always been – both exceptionally compelling sites for inquiring into the maelstrom condition of ‘modernity’ (Berman 1988), and extremely challenging settings for social research (Sennett 1969).¹⁶

The formidable difficulty in researching cities is ‘to see the totality as well as the parts’ (Harvey 2003: 18). For anthropologists, this took the form of the dilemma over whether their goal was an ‘anthropology of the city, or only in the city’ (Hannerz 1980: 248; cf. Fox 1972, 1977; Jackson 1985; Gulick 1989; Low 1999a). Most of the time, anthropologists have preferred to study variously defined enclaves within cities – ethnic ghettos, occupational groups, religious communities, particular spatially delimited districts or kinds of place (e.g., Hannerz 1969; Burdick 1993; Bourgois 1995; Caldeira 1996; Baumann 1996; Bestor 1999; Low 2000; Herzfeld 2009).¹⁷ More ‘panoramic’ anthropological studies of cities have tended to focus on political economy and planning (e.g., Epstein 1973; Holston 1989; Rabinow 1989).

Recent theory in social science, rather than being overwhelmed by the immense complexity of the phenomena it seeks to study, embraces the dynamism and incoherence or ‘messiness’ of social life (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Mol and Law 2002; Law 2004; Latour 2005; Massey 2005). In this context, the unique heuristic potential of anthropology’s beacon method – ethnography – comes to the foreground in new ways. The challenge of urban ethnography has long been the incompatibility of the traditional requirement of a spatially bounded ‘field’ as a necessary condition of the ethnographic enterprise (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; cf. Candea 2007) with the empirical unboundedness and turbulent nature of city life. But, as mentioned above, ethnography also means

a commitment to an epistemology that values partial truths and ever shifting perspectives and recognizes its object of study – ‘culture’ or ‘social life’ – as an always-already changing configuration of partially connected fragments (Clifford 1986; Strathern 1995, 2004). What anthropologists do is inquire as to how those bits and pieces come to be arranged and rearranged; how the connections among them are provisionally stabilized and unmade.

Thus, despite the challenges, I would argue that anthropology may be particularly well equipped to explore and theorize cities as heterogeneous and constantly morphing sites of abundant, open-ended action. Low (1999a: 2) postulates that ‘the city’ in anthropological writing should not be a ‘reification’, but a focus of study, a heuristic frame for research. The methodological objective, then, is to observe performances and processes that occur within and constitute the city treated as a necessarily ‘unstable and shifting frame of reference’ (Latour 2005: 24). In certain ways, such an approach resembles the manner in which city dwellers experience their cities: from the innumerable particular interactions with space, built forms and other human actors arises a shifting, indeterminate sense of the city as a whole.

As AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) ethnographically shows with several African examples, the city is usually a perpetual ‘work in progress’, contingently assembled by residents and other actors who creatively, and with a lot of effort, draw on local and translocal resources to patch up the social and material fabric of place. Similarly, the recent ethnography of Berlin’s central square, Alexanderplatz, by Gisa Weszkalnys (2010) conveys the notion of the city as an ongoing becoming, composed of spatial and temporal elements and perspectives that ‘relate but don’t add up’ (Mol and Law 2002: 1). Weszkalnys speaks of Alexanderplatz as ‘multiple’ (drawing on Mol 2002) – that is, an object distributed across time and space; a place simultaneously constituted by events of diverse kinds, occurring within its shifting confines as well as far away: planning symposia in the town hall, political rallies, artistic happenings, informal get-togethers, hanging out.

Such an understanding of cities is congruent with the approach to place and space as continually crafted through a plurality of disparate, connected but not necessarily compatible, diversely situated practices. It also jibes well with the discussion of scale earlier in this introduction. For the perennial anthropological difficulty in studying cities was essentially a matter of scale. The city was just too big for the ethnographer to get a grip on, while on the other hand studies conducted inside neighbourhoods or with particular resident groups seemed inadequate as bases of inferences regarding the totality of city life. Yet the approach to cities as ‘multiple’ offers a way not so much out of this conundrum as to thrive on it. It consists in seeing all scales, both infra-urban and supra-urban – say, from a relationship between flatmates to a transcontinental network of migration or exchange – as mutually reflected in one another, sort of fractal-like (cf. Gleick 1988; Strathern 2004), and continually reproduced in interactions occurring in

far-flung locations. ‘The city’ is then one of those scales, ever provisionally stabilized, and embedded in the ongoing productivity of places and spaces. Studying it ethnographically entails exploring the very multiplicity and heterogeneity of the situations in which it is being constructed, and of the locales where that occurs.

Rather than focusing on any one site, my book expands outward from a range of different locations within the built texture of Astana, such as the kitchen described in the opening vignette – or a courtyard, a street, a square, a ruined factory – and from the quotidian practices that they enable, such as joke-telling, socializing, walking or participating in spectacles. This plurality of viewpoints helps grasp the complexity of the city as it is lived and imagined – the variety of ways in which heterogeneous performances and processes specifically interweave in forming these diverse sites (Askew 2002). Moreover, this choice of a kind of ‘multi-sitedness’ (Marcus 1995) within one city – ‘one’ and simultaneously ‘multiple’ – highlights that each particular perspective, every individual location within Astana acquires its specific meanings through relations to other sites; each moment – actual or virtual – acquires its qualities by being imbricated with plural pasts and futures co-present in the built environment. Together, these sites and moments – each of which is itself multiple, a criss-crossing – give rise to ‘Astana’ as the ever-shifting, incoherent and open-ended ‘whole’, not a system but rather an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) that becomes the focus of political and personal projects, the reference frame for imagining selves and worlds, and for wagers on the future.

Fieldwork in the ‘City of the Future’

This book draws on thirteen months of continuous ethnographic fieldwork in Astana between June 2008 and July 2009, supplemented by several short visits later on. An approach to city life that deliberately adopts a plurality of foci, as outlined above, creates specific challenges when translated into a fieldwork methodology. The perspectives explored in the chapters below are all partial, all more or less loosely connected fragments. This has been a conscious choice that I, as researcher, made. In part, however, this multiplicity of partly disjointed viewpoints was imposed upon me by the conditions of urban fieldwork. Living on my own in a rented apartment (in a Soviet-era neighbourhood), I was often alone and with not much in particular to do – paradoxically, perhaps, given the maelstrom of activity that defines the urban. I was concerned about the lack of that round-the-clock intimacy with informants that forms a part of the romantic image of ethnographic fieldwork. When all my local friends and acquaintances were busy at work or university (where I could rarely follow) and I was not having an appointment with a city planner or a neighbour for a more or less informal ‘interview’, I often kept myself busy walking the city street by street.

Partly, it was these walks that made me realize the importance of space and its complexity – from the newest monumental plazas to the dusty semi-rural back alleys – for the dynamics of social formation underway in Astana. (Initially, I had thought this would be a book about time, and more narrowly focused on the most recent buildings as futuristic fantasies. Only gradually did I realize that time itself was ‘messy’ – that is to say, that the ‘future’ was plural and could not be easily separated from multiple ‘pasts’ and ‘presents’ – and inextricably entangled with material space.)

Basically, I built three open-ended networks of informants. One, which began with Mira, the daughter of my first host-family during a pre-fieldwork trip, consisted of young people, roughly between eighteen and thirty years of age: ethnic Russians, other Slavs and Russophone Kazakhs, with broadly ‘middle-class’ backgrounds (through, economically, there was a world of difference between, say, Sputnik – the son of a high-ranking government official, and Kirill – the son of a working-class family, who had not finished higher education, worked as a salesman, moonlighted as a taxi driver and lived with his wife and child in a dorm provided through his wife’s work; see Chapter 2). The parents of some of these young people became important informants too, such as Sasha and Olga in Chapter 1. My second network included Kazakh migrants from small towns and villages scattered across Kazakhstan. What brought them together was that they were all low-ranking employees of a biotechnological research institute (mostly, lab hands or administrative clerks rather than scientists) where my other early host, Bakytgul’ – a female migrant from the east Kazakhstani countryside (see Chapters 1 and 2) – worked. They earned little by local standards (say, the equivalent of one hundred and fifty Euros a month), and most of them occupied rented rooms in the old part of the city. The third network consisted of the residents of the apartment block where I lived. I characterize this group at some length in Chapter 5 – basically, they were Russians or other Slavs, between their forties and seventies, and most of them had lived for most or all of their lives in Tselinograd/Astana. Finally, there were also people I met casually beyond these networks and then followed (for instance, Sultan in Chapter 1); local university contacts; and experts such as city planners and architects. Other than my own observation and the analysis of public discourses (media content, officials’ speeches and the like), the bulk of my knowledge of Astana derives from ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998) with members of these different groups, sharing with them the experience of various places across the city, and from hours upon hours of conversations in which they generously shared with me their reflections about living in Astana.

Initially, I worried about the compartmentalization of my informant networks. However, I gradually came to accept that this reflected the fact that most urbanites, as James Ferguson notes, know one another in a specific way: ‘some quite well, some only in passing, others in special-purpose relationships that [can

give a researcher] detailed knowledge of some areas of their lives and almost none of others' (1999: 21). Had I decided to access other groups (for instance, non-Russian-speaking poor Kazakh rural migrants; or members of the professional elites) this would have become a very different book. But such relativity of perspectives is, as noted, a feature of both city life and the ethnographic enterprise.

* * *

It remains briefly to outline the chapters that follow. Chapter 1 begins by exploring how Astana is constructed – both materially and imaginatively – as a utopian place; a social environment designed to transcend the constraining conditions of the past and the present and to materialize a desired future. The outline of the official ideology accompanying the city's development since the capital relocation, begun in this introduction, is complemented in Chapter 1. I reconstruct a historical narrative common among post-Soviet urban residents that depicts the period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a time of breaking social ties, disrupting material connections and the almost literal decomposition of 'modernity'. Against that background, I follow individual actors in Astana pursuing their own projects of 'modernity' and 'modern' personhood in relation to images and expectations of 'the city of the future' and amidst heterogeneous material landscapes. This casts in sharp relief some of the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the emergence of the new capital.

In Chapter 2, the ethnographic focus remains attuned to the personal experience of migrants engaging with the material and social environment to perform their desired styles of personhood. Drawing on five personal accounts that cover a range of different experiences of gradually settling in the city, I highlight the relationship between contemporary expectations of 'modernity' and 'urbanity' and Soviet-era ideals of 'modern' urban 'culture'. I follow how individuals' efforts to perform particular models of personhood were reciprocally related to constructing Astana as a place imbued with specific, though variously defined, characteristics: 'modernity', 'worldliness', or 'rurality' and 'backwardness'; and how constructing 'urbanity' entailed also the inscription of the 'rural' into the urban social and material landscape. Moreover, this is linked to dynamics of collective identification, as individuals' efforts to become 'modern urbanites' involved drawing distinctions between groups. While scholarly discussions of collective identity in post-Soviet Central Asia have usually emphasized such ascriptive categories as ethnicity and nationality, my analysis highlights a notion of identities as embodied, performed and intrinsically linked to the qualities of place.

Chapter 3 shifts from the narratives of recent migrants to long-standing, Soviet-era residents. The analysis reaches back in history to reconstruct the reiterative efforts, over decades, to create urban 'modernity' in Tselinograd – underscoring the ambiguous relationships between contemporary and Soviet-era

visions of modernity. The chapter examines how long-standing residents, confronted with spatial and social transformations in the wake of independence and the capital relocation, draw on narratives of Soviet-era modernization to assert their belonging in the city and, I argue, in 'modernity'. Nostalgic discourses emphasizing the residents' intimate connectedness to place and quotidian spatial practices such as walking help reconstruct Tselinograd in the present as an alternative chronotope of collective belonging. Moreover, the chapter highlights the ambiguities inherent in the category of 'rurality': on the one hand, in a sequence of different colonizing narratives over decades (or indeed centuries), rurality is recurrently construed as the bothersome condition that requires a modernizing intervention to overcome it; yet simultaneously, in the present-day nostalgic reconstructions of Tselinograd by its former residents, rurality is emphasized to enhance the sense of intimate local 'community'.

Chapter 4 further elaborates on the relations between long-standing urban residents and more recent migrants, and how those relations connect to the material and imaginal constructions of city space in the past and the present. Concentrating on public holiday celebrations in the central squares of Tselinograd and Astana, a more specific spatial focus is adopted in this chapter. Accordingly, the chapter compares Soviet-era and present-day meanings and uses of 'public space' in the city, exploring a novel angle from which to consider ongoing scholarly debates on this topic. I argue that official holiday celebrations in central squares serve to communicate to audiences of primarily rural migrants an image of Astana as the 'city of the future' and a collective identity of 'Astanians' (*astanchane*). Yet the absenteeism of long-standing urbanites and certain other groups of migrants implies a challenge to official meanings of who can claim being 'modern' and 'urban' subjects. Thus, public holidays, although ostensibly monopolized by official discourse, become an arena in which contests over collective identities, belonging, the qualities of place and the shape of the future are played out.

In Chapter 5, the focus then shifts away from 'public' space and into the nooks and crannies of a Soviet-era residential neighbourhood. The chapter illustrates how place, local actors and the specific temporal rhythms of place-making emerge out of a plurality of contingently interweaving translocal agencies, alongside, apart from, despite and sometimes against official city planning. This analysis underscores the unruliness and instability of place and emphasizes the roles of heterogeneous material items in enabling and constraining human performance in place-making. I ethnographically follow a group of long-standing residents engaged in patching up the infrastructure of their apartment block and the adjacent courtyard out of available scraps, at a time when the attention of city-planning authorities was concentrated on producing the new urban landscape elsewhere in the city. Through the residents' improvised creative labour, place was constructed at once materially and as imbued with memories and

meanings. However, a conjunction of factors – including shifting legal and economic conditions, migration, changes within the city administration, personal relationships among neighbours and the recalcitrance of material elements of the infrastructure – eventually led to the residents’ losing what little control they had over their block. To the committed residents, that meant an unravelling of locality.

Finally, Chapter 6 follows the players of ‘Encounter’, a game that consists in exploring industrial ruins, incomplete buildings and other dark ‘capillaries’ of the city, and staging outlandish, surrealistic scenes in public space. Playing Encounter was a particularly engaging research method that gave me a visceral, sensorial kind of knowledge *of* (rather than *about*) Astana’s material space – a knowledge that it has been a challenge to translate into text. If I have ever ‘gone native’ (Kuhn 1970, cited in Tresch 2001: 313) for brief moments, it was surely during these games. Although played by only a couple hundred (mostly young and relatively affluent) people, I argue that the game offers an especially revealing perspective on the themes of this book. The bulk of the book examines various actors’ attempts to stabilize visions of place, time and social order through engagements with the built environment. The Encounter game and its players, in contrast, inject the surreal and the subjunctive into the ‘archi-texture’ of the city (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]: 118). Exploding the cultural codes of built space into a flurry of ephemeral hybrid configurations, the game brings a radically open horizon of possibility to the fore. Moreover, by enlivening industrial ruins and other parts of the city more usually deemed obsolescent or abandoned, and by enacting fantasies drawn from Soviet historical themes, Encounter animates Tselinograd not just as a nostalgic retrospection but rather a living material-and-imagined time-space. Thus, Chapter 6 emphasizes the radical openness of urban space to the heterogeneity of creative social performances. This is followed by a brief conclusion in which I chart some of the broader implications of the case of Astana for the study of urban transformation and power.

Notes

1. The names and nicknames of all informants appearing in this book are pseudonyms, unless otherwise specified. Most informants are referred to with their (fictionalized) first names only, yet – following the custom in the Russian language – those informants who were considerably older than me and with whom I maintained more formal relations are called with their first names and patronymics (e.g., in Chapter 3, Maria Pavlovna, or in Chapter 5, Mikhail Petrovich).
2. A forthcoming book by anthropologist Alima Bissenova (n.d.) based on her doctoral dissertation (2012) studies the liaison between the aspirations of an emerging urban middle class in Kazakhstan’s largest cities, including Astana, and the ‘state’ that caters to those constituencies by developing ‘modern’ urban environments. Other than Bissenova’s work, an early exploratory article by Victor Buchli (2007), and my own work (Laszczkowski

2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2015, 2016, forthcoming), the scholarly attention that Astana has attracted so far comes primarily from political science and geography. This work has tended to focus on elite discourses and strategies of state-building and government (Schatz 2004b; Koch 2012a; Fauve 2015). Scholars have also inquired about the official and unofficial motives that led President Nazarbaev and his allies among the ruling elite to relocate the capital. Official explanations centre on geopolitics (the old capital Almaty's dangerous proximity to China), logistics (Astana's geometrically more 'central' location, the argument goes, being more suitable for creating a transportation and communication hub) and even seismology (Almaty lies in an earthquake-prone zone at the foot of the Tian Shan). Unofficially, commentators have spoken about reshuffling power-elites (Schatz 2000a, 2000b; Cummings 2005) and about plans to diminish Russian domination in Kazakhstan's north – the legacy of Soviet-era resettlements – and pre-empt the threat of separatism (Kaiser and Chinn 1995; Kolstø 1998; Wolfel 2002; Anacker 2004). Astana has, moreover, been interpreted as an attempt to legitimate the regime through an ostentatious display of wealth (Matveeva 2009: 1105) and as a central element in Kazakhstan's 'branding' as a successful, progress-oriented 'Eurasian' nation-state (Marat 2010). In general, the project has been seen as an attempt to rally the citizenry around a 'national idea' and thus tackle the 'identity dilemma' with which, according to many scholars, the old-new elite was confronted (Akiner 1995; Svanberg 1996; Holm-Hansen 1999; Kolstø 1999; Malkova, Kolstø and Melberg 1999; Odgaard and Simonsen 1999; Olcott 2002; Dave 2007).

3. Additionally, in 1999, the capital of Malaysia was relocated from Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya; in 2005 the capital of Myanmar (Burma) was transferred from Yangon to Naypyidaw; and in 2006 the Pacific island republic of Palau changed its capital from Koror to Ngerulmud. In turn, looking back in history, Turkey's Ankara (1923) (Çinar 2007; Batuman 2009) and Australia's Canberra (1927) (Beer 2008) can be considered antecedents of that trend. Strictly speaking, Turkey had of course never been colonized. However, Ankara was built to assert the change from the Ottoman imperial regime, nineteenth-century Europe's (in)famous 'sick man', to the youthful, progress-oriented Republic. The nationalistic rhetoric of the republican government prefigured the post-colonial nation-building ideologies of the latter half of the twentieth century (Bozdoğan 2001).
4. It should be noted that Brazil had since 1822 been an independent state, and so its capital relocation did not occur in an immediately postcolonial context as was the case elsewhere (Schatz 2004b: 115).
5. For a general overview of the Kazakhstani political system, see Cummings (2005); Olcott (2002); Schatz (2004a).
6. The marginal presence of two other parties was restored in the 2012 elections, which nonetheless returned an 80 per cent vote for Nur Otan and were characterized by international observers as 'orchestrated' (Radio Free Europe 2012).
7. On the latter project, Nazarbaev University, see Koch (2015a).
8. Calling Kazakhstan's population 'multi-ethnic' refers to the fact that, as a legacy of its complicated history (especially during the Soviet period), the country is inhabited by over a hundred officially recognized 'nationalities and ethnic groups'. The Kazakhs numbered 53 per cent in 1999, and 63 per cent ten years later; the second largest group are Russians, with 30 and later 24 per cent (Agentstvo 1999: 11, 2011a: 20; see Chapter 2).
9. It is worth noting that in the late twentieth century large architectural projects were sometimes undertaken not to reinforce domination, but to represent and help empower

- previously disenfranchised peoples such as the Kanak of New Caledonia, the Australian Aborigines, the Black natives of South Africa or the Blacks of the U.S. South (Findley 2005).
10. See also, with regard specifically to urban space and built forms: Castells (1977, 1978, 1983); Harvey (1985a, 1985b, 1989); Hillier and Hanson (1984); King (1980); Lefebvre (2003b [1970]).
 11. The political implications of the place-space binary are ambivalent. As Agnew also remarks (2005: 83), 'place' is often assumed to be the locus of nostalgia and conservatism, while 'space' represents the transcending of the past and is seen as open to progress.
 12. Although in the Soviet Union and other officially socialist countries built space was explicitly produced with the goal of constructing an altered future society (Kotkin 1995; Crowley and Reid 2002; Humphrey 2005), Lefebvre pondered whether 'state socialism' had managed to produce its proper, qualitatively specific space. 'The question is not unimportant', he argued, for 'a revolution that does not produce a new space, has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses' (1991: 54). Yet, Lefebvre found himself constrained to leave the question unanswered (*ibid.*). Similarly, as I have outlined above, it is ambivalent to what extent the developments in Astana break with Soviet patterns in space production. However, as explored in the chapters that follow, the government-orchestrated production of space significantly creates conditions for multiple, multifaceted and indeterminate dynamics of social change.
 13. On the problems entailed by the concept of community, see, e.g., Creed (2006).
 14. In this sense, place-making practices are worlding practices, in Ong's (2011) sense cited above.
 15. One practical challenge during writing has been the quickly changing material landscape of Astana. New buildings and vast neighbourhoods have continued to grow, while old squares have been refurbished, monuments removed and replaced, and so forth. The forms of social action enabled by those various sites have been shifting as well. The past tense used generally in the bulk of this book refers to the main period of fieldwork from 2008–2009. Occasionally in the text, however, I have decided to highlight this continuously morphing character of the site and subject matter of this research.
 16. Early classics of urban sociology sought to construct rational coherent models of the city (Simmel 1969 [1903]; Spengler 1969 [1922]; Weber 1978 [1905]; also Redfield 1969 [1947]; Redfield and Singer 1969 [1954]). However, both Georg Simmel (1969 [1903]) and Max Weber (1978 [1905]) identified heterogeneity, diversity and excess as defining features of urban living. Sociologists of the Chicago School later attempted to sort out and map that diversity and dynamism, depicting zones of different qualities and the flows and relations between them, similar to ecological models or meteorological charts (Park 1968 [1925]; Wirth 1969 [1938]; see also Hannerz 1980: 19–58). Yet, in 1970, Henri Lefebvre, seeking to define 'the urban problematic', again emphasized movement, contradiction, the proliferation of difference and the impossibility of closure (2003b: 171–78).
 17. Recently, this approach has developed to produce studies of transnational, deterritorialized, mobile or 'floating' groups within and between cities (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Ong 1999; Zhang 2001).