

# EXPLORING ASIA:

## ASIAN CITIES — GROWTH AND CHANGE

### EXTREME ARCHITECTURE, PUBLIC SPACE AND WEALTH IN CENTRAL ASIA'S CAPITAL CITIES

By Dr. Nathaniel Trumbull  
Department of Geography, University of Connecticut

*Editor's note: This article is the fifth of five featuring pieces by Dr. Anand Yang, Dr. Anu Taranth, Dr. H. Hazel Hahn and Dr. Kam Wing Chan*

The cityscapes of Central Asia's two wealthiest capital cities are largely unknown in the West. Both Ashgabat and Astana; the capitals of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, respectively; lie far afield from the international tourist circuit. New revenue streams from oil and gas—now exported directly to Western Europe and China—have dramatically transformed Ashgabat and given birth to Astana.

The public spaces of these two cities have become the playgrounds of their leaders. With the assistance of some of the world's star architects, these capitals now arguably contain some of the world's most lurid architecture. Residents and visitors alike can only gaze in amazement.

Ashgabat's new buildings and monuments are testaments to the supreme power of the Turkmen leader Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in 2007. There are many such symbols of power and self-aggrandizing demonstrations of authority. The Turkmenistan Broadcasting Center tower, completed in 2011 for the 20th anniversary of Turkmenistan's independence and visible from everywhere in the capital, has the largest star-shaped architectural feature in the world (verified in the Guinness World Record,) a representation of the Oguz Khan star, the national emblem.

Turkmenistan's current leader, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, has softened some of the

features of the previous leader's personality cult. For instance, he has allowed the opening of public Internet cafes. But Turkmenistan still tops world rankings in human rights violations.

Astana, which rises up from the open steppes that surround it, became the Kazakh capital in 1997, transforming it from a steppe village into a metropolis of nearly a million residents. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's decision to move his country's capital from Almaty, largely for geopolitical reasons, has resulted in a massive influx of peasants to the new city. However, the upstart city of Astana has had trouble attracting cultural activity from the previous capital of Almaty.

Examples of Astana's new architecture, such as the Norman Foster-designed Khan Shatyr shopping mall, project the wealth, power and eclectic taste of Nazarbayev's new Kazakhstan. Foster is also the architect of the city's Palace of Peace and Reconciliation.

Are the public spaces of both Ashgabat and Astana becoming Disneyland versions of Central Asian cities? It is peculiar that both cities' public spaces, even those most expensively designed and constructed, are largely empty during the day and evening. Residents appear to shun visiting some of the most central public spaces. Those Western tourists who have visited these cities remark on how few people frequent the outdoor public spaces. The public spaces are clearly aimed more at glorifying national leadership than creating the "Happiest Place on Earth."

Only during nationally orchestrated public events do crowds gather in these public spaces. Even then, the crowds are reported to consist largely of invited



*The Arch of Neutrality in the city of Ashgabat was a 75-meter rocket-shaped tower topped with a gold statue of Niyazov, which rotated throughout the day so that his face is always basking in the sun. It was demolished in November and December, 2013.*

populations, either those newly arrived from the countryside or those brought in for a day to the city and organized in groups by the town of their origin.

Where are the wealthy urbanites? They leave these outdoor public spaces to residents newly arrived from the countryside and converge instead on the growing number of inside malls. Indeed, consumerism appears to be leaving its mark on the indoor malls of Astana in particular, whose wealthy population has adopted Western tastes.

Personality cults, monuments to legitimize state authority and large-scale public events were all standard features of the Soviet regime. The freshly garish public spaces of Ashgabat and Astana appear to be variations on this theme. At the same time, other new manifestations of urban life, including those of conspicuous consumption in indoor malls, provide a stunning representation of the desires of the individual consumer. Of course, only a privileged few can take full advantage of this form of public space in either of these "showcase" post-Socialist cities.



The Henry M. Jackson  
School of International Studies  
University of Washington



To register for NIE, visit us at [seattletimes.com/nie](http://seattletimes.com/nie)  
or call 206.652.6290.