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Whose master plan? Kisho Kurokawa and ‘capital planning’ in post-Soviet Astana, 1995–2000

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ABSTRACT

Astana, Kazakhstan’s new capital city, was established in 1998 and became the only seat of government to be relocated within the former Soviet Union. In 1998, the government of Kazakhstan held an open international competition for a new master plan of Astana, for which 27 projects from 14 countries were received. This article focuses on the activities of the Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, who, despite having been awarded third place by the competition’s jury, was nevertheless declared its winner. I propose to re-examine the circumstances behind the choice of Kurokawa’s proposal (not to mention its financing by the Japan International Cooperation Agency) that eventually led to its implementation as the Master Plan for the new capital of Kazakhstan. A close look at this process will shed light on the way Astana has been perceived and planned since 1998 and also reveal the ways in which planning strategies and (international) politics influenced and co-constructed one another in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

KEYWORDS

Astana; master plan;
international competition;
Kisho Kurokawa

Introduction

In 1998, the government of Kazakhstan held an international competition for the master plan of its new capital city, Astana, which had been officially relocated from Almaty earlier that year. The event became a turning point in the planning history of Kazakhstan’s capital cities, where such competitions had never been organized before. As an act of postcolonial rebranding it aspired to demonstrate that Kazakhstan was ready to implement the newest and most original planning proposals and that the era of Soviet planning (in which the best projects had seen the light of day thanks a handful of bureaus in Moscow or Leningrad) was a thing of the past. The competition was also intended to indicate that the government aspired to transform Astana into a contemporary metropolis, one which would be attractive to tourists and investors.

By organizing an open call for urban design projects, Kazakhstan followed a path that had already been set by other countries. Competitions geared towards choosing the master plans for capital cities were not uncommon in the twentieth century, especially in postcolonial states. However, due to new planning approaches (which favoured urban projects on a smaller scale) as well as increased public scepticism towards large-scale planning projects, far fewer competitions were being organized by the 1990s.¹ In some cases, competitions simply weren’t held: state or municipal authorities had, for a variety of reasons, preferred to make decisions behind closed doors regarding the individuals or agencies they deemed most suited to implement a given project.² Despite these options, the Kazakh

government opted to host an open call for projects to select a master plan for Astana. As various archival sources suggest, however, the outcome of the competition was to a large extent due to a political blueprint rather than a rigorous selection process grounded in strictly professional criteria. This article seeks to reveal the specific rationale and motivations of those who participated in and organized the 1998 competition for Astana's Master Plan, and also addresses the question of why the competition had been held at all. A close look at these events will allow one not only to shed light on the way Kazakhstan's capital city had been planned since 1998 but also to explore the way in which planning strategies and (international) politics influenced and co-constructed one another in order to transform the way Kazakhstan would be perceived at home and abroad after 1998.³

Up until now, research on Astana has focused mainly on the symbolic significance of Kurokawa's work for Kazakhstan⁴ while the history about how precisely his project came into being has been insufficiently explored. Nor has the Astana case been considered in the context of how plans for other capital cities have been chosen. Furthermore, the specific literature on master plans for capital cities have focused chiefly on their content – commenting on how the plans were implemented after they were formally accepted, and analysing the intellectual genealogies, innovations, and the symbolic and material features of the plans.⁵ Vis-à-vis this approach, a historiography addressing the socio- and geopolitical aspects surrounding the organization and decision-making regarding master plans' adoption is unassuming and lacks case-studies. This can be explained, in part, by the fact that, seen from the perspective of the competitions' outcome, a nitty-gritty history of a given plan's background may appear to be of relatively minor interest. However, once such a history is used to investigate the political dimension behind the decisions that were made, then one is equipped to expose the ways in which planning and politics are interconnected and interdependent. By investigating how recent master plans for capital cities have been selected, one is also helped to grasp how complex the decision-making process had been and to see how all such processes involved actors and agencies that extended beyond urban and even national borders. More specifically: ever since the master plan for Canberra had been drawn up – the first comprehensive plan of its kind for a newly established capital city in the twentieth century – two main issues have consistently accompanied all state-run competitions and decisions with respect to choosing a 'new' capital city's master plan.

Essentially, the first issue involves the matter of *who* should design *and* evaluate the proposed plans – should they be foreign or local planners, and, if a mix of both, then in what proportion? As Sonne suggests, the fact that the Australians organized and judged the international competition for Canberra's master plan *themselves* hints at a crystallization of national self-consciousness in that country – despite the fact that most participants had been foreigners, and that the competition had been won by an American couple.⁶ As Ian Morley notes, the new urban plan for Manila, conceived by Daniel Burnham, was the product of a shift in colonial power from Spain to the US, it was still meant to embody the 'progressive' and 'national' values which US governors attempted to create in the Philippines, an occupied territory from which they planned to retreat in the future.⁷ In Brazil, on the other hand, only local architects had been called in to participate in the 1957 competition for Brasília, which would be judged by both local and foreign architects.⁸ Brazil itself had a number of urban planning and design professionals it could rely on to collect proposals, and thus the organizers did not need to hold an international competition – and quite the contrary was the case, given Le Corbusier's attempts to insinuate himself into the competition. Be that as it may, the international jury provided professional legitimation for the competition's results outside of Brazil, and it was also useful for promotional and branding purposes.⁹

The second question concerns the funding necessary for the master plan's subsequent implementation. To what extent were planners guided by their own ideas and values when they proposed their development strategies and solutions? To what extent did they quadruple or compromise their intentions with patrons, jury members, or third parties (such as international funding agencies or third countries) in order to maximize their chances? In the case of Islamabad, for instance, its eventual planner, Konstantinos Doxiadis, had not even been shortlisted by the Ministry of Construction officials. In the end, however, the fact that he was not an American (and therefore could not be labelled an 'imperialist') and that he had connections that could provide funding from the Ford Foundation to develop Islamabad's master plan ultimately allowed him to get the appointment.¹⁰ In the case of Skopje, another well-known planning contest in the 1960s, three factors were involved. These were, as Lozanovska has summarized:

the effectiveness of Yugoslav foreign policy and its non-aligned government under the charismatic leader, Jozep Bros Tito; a world keen to contribute to the reconstruction of Skopje as an optimistic symbol; and the UN seeing an opportunity to manifest a leading role in the co-operation of international humanitarian aid.¹¹

Astana resembled the two above-mentioned cases given the way its 'capital planning' had been entangled with professional considerations and a nation-building agenda, and it too had been influenced by both foreign and domestic policies. The main difference lay in the fashion in which Kazakhstan's government, headed by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, used the format of an international competition. On one level, the whole event was an apery: despite the jury's proceedings, the winning project would still be chosen by the President. On another level, as this article will suggest, the key component in the entire competition was not the project itself, but the very figure of Kisho Kurokawa, whose stand-in for sexy Asian modernity – one that differed from the 'western' version – would be used by Kazakhstan's government in its efforts to rebrand Astana, now conceived as a metonymy for the nascent identity of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Unlike Brasilia, Canberra, or Islamabad which were capitals of relatively known countries, Kazakhstan in 1998 was one of fifteen emerging republics that longed for symbolic visibility and recognition inasmuch as it needed foreign investment to remake its economy. In the post-Cold War world, Kazakhstan neither found it appropriate to rely on support from its former metropolis, nor – as a part (by default) of the former Eastern Block – was it necessarily attractive to Western architects and professionals, many of whom still perceived Kazakhstan through the prism of its symbolic geography within the context of the Cold War. The 'choice' to cooperate with Kisho Kurokawa from Japan thus became Kazakhstan's 'third way,' to differentiate itself from the above-mentioned postcolonial countries as well as other post-Soviet republics (these republics had chosen to rely on domestic planners and thus avoid radical ruptures with the way their Soviet urban heritage was treated).

After providing background information on Astana's planning prior to the competition, this article will re-examine the circumstances which surrounded the selection of Kurokawa's proposal and which eventually led to the implementation of his master plan. This article will also dwell on the architect's political connections to explain how they influenced his professional success. The final part will touch upon the role that Kazakhstan's planning professionals played in the competition and the further execution of Kurokawa's proposal. This text is based on my fieldwork research in Kazakhstan in 2015 and 2016 where I conducted archival research at the National Archives of Kazakhstan (NAK) and at the City Archive of Astana (CAA). Oral interviews that I conducted with three key planners who had been involved in the 1998 Competition and planning decisions for Astana have also been used.

The 1962, 1987, and 1996 Master Plans

The Master Plan that is often attributed to Kurokawa had not been the first blueprint for Astana's urban development. Astana was founded in the 1830s as a fortress and continued to grow slowly until the late 1930s. Since the late 1930s, railway expansion and the wartime evacuation of heavy industries provoked its rapid industrial and demographic growth. In the 1950s Astana (then Akmolinsk) became the administrative centre of the Virgin Lands Campaign, initiated by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and this led to even further development. In the late-1950s, the city consisted of two more or less discernible 'industrial' and 'residential' zones, divided by a railway. In 1957, the Kazakh government approved of the first comprehensive Plan for the city which outlined how the transport system would be organized, urban districts delineated, and its urban expansion chartered until the year 1975.¹² This strategy, however, was soon replaced by a new one which had been elaborated by a team of metropolitan planners and promoted by Khrushchev, who then sought to use Astana (renamed as Tselinograd in 1962) as a showcase for the success of the Virgin Lands Campaign. The '1962' Plan sought to consolidate the functional zoning of the city and suggested a 'systematic and proportional' approach to the development of its 'industrial, residential, and suburban areas.'¹³ According to that plan, Astana should have grown southwards without spanning the Yessil (Ishim) river which was to remain its southern frontier. In 1987, Kazakhstan's planning agency Kazgiprograd revised the '1962' Plan and left it without major changes. By that time the riverside territories had evolved into areas where individuals built up small-scale summer houses (*dača*) (Figure 1).¹⁴

In 1994, Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, proposed to relocate the capital city from Almaty to Astana. The ambition was bold, but the new capital was drastically unprepared for the change. Before relocating the offices and civil servants it was necessary to establish a blueprint that would have guided the development of the city according to its changed status. Hence, in 1995, the government launched a competition for a new master plan of Astana, for which only local architects had been invited to participate.¹⁵ 'Ak-Orda,' a leading architectural firm from the then-capital city, Almaty, won that competition and was appointed to elaborate the plan in 1996. According to the authors, the main problem facing Astana as a capital city was its unfavourable ecological and climatic conditions: the city suffered from floods, strong winds and snowfalls in autumn and winter, and intense aridity in summer. Although the authors did not explicitly criticize the very choice of Astana as the new seat of government, they recommended that the fragile environmental situation in the new capital city be taken seriously.¹⁶ The 1996 plan went much further than its Soviet counterparts in proposals concerning the empowerment of the planning authorities. In particular, it suggested that control over the land in both the city and the metropolitan area be transferred to a 'Planning Commission.' The authors of the Plan had insisted that the 'Commission should be beyond the reach of government bureaucracy.'¹⁷

Yet, whatever issues seemed important to the planners, for the government the key issue was the new urban territories which Astana needed to develop in order to accommodate the state organs and civil servants. The Plan prescribed the expansion towards the directions in which Astana had grown since the 1950s: north-west, west, and north-east.¹⁸ Accordingly, the city centre would have remained within the 'old' Soviet boundaries: between the railway lines and the river. The southern direction was considered the worst area of expansion:

The development of the left bank [of the Yessil River] is associated with a significant deterioration in conditions in engineering and construction. Not only it is a lowland area, but the conditions on the

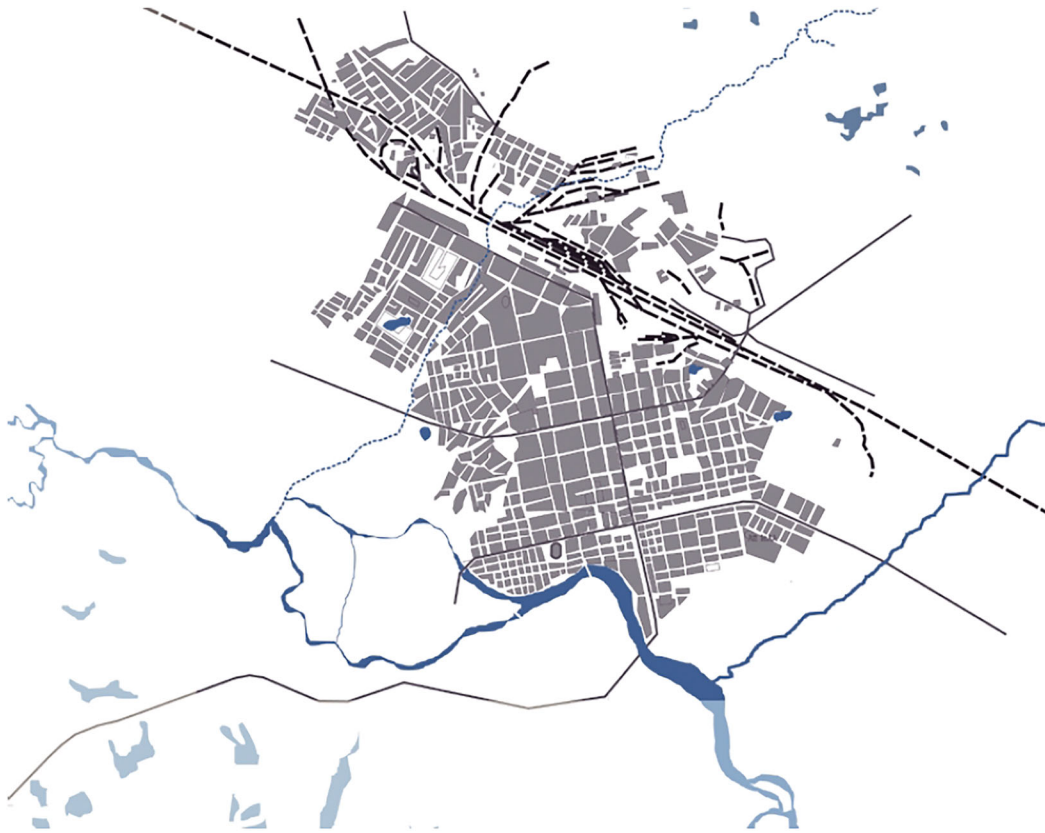


Figure 1. Astana in 1957. One can see that the city is located at the right (northern) bank of the river while the left (southern) bank is empty. Source: NAK, F. 90, The JICA study on the mater plan for the development of the city of Astana, Main Report, Chapter 3, June 2001, p. 3.

left bank are worsened by floods. The full-scale construction on the left bank would unbalance the structure of the city.¹⁹

The plan proposed to situate a limited number of ceremonial and official buildings on the left bank, such as a presidential palace along with memorial and diplomatic city complexes; it also intended to limit daily traffic on its territory. However, this strategy clearly contradicted the government's idea to extensively use the empty territories to the south of the river in order to install the city centre and to build the 'capitol.' A 'from scratch' construction on the left bank would presumably cheapen the costs and open up new representational possibilities.²⁰ This contradiction eventually led to the rejection of the plan that had been elaborated by 'Ak-Orda' and made the government launch another competition which would be open to foreign participants and for which Kisho Kurokawa would win the first prize.

Yet, between the master plan, elaborated by the Kazakh planners, and the new one, which stemmed from the international competition, another plan existed.²¹ The existence of this 'intermediate' plan, realized by the Saudi Bin Laden Group (SBLG), is rarely mentioned in the official documents or by public actors. The president of Kazakhstan described the change in the planning strategy in the following way:

We clearly needed a new, original and best-practice plan for the development of Astana. As soon as possible ... Alas, haste has played a cruel joke on us. In November 1995, we launched a competition for the elaboration of the blueprint of the new master plan. All the participants had a month to submit their projects. On the unlucky day of 13 December 1995 the jury gathered to deliberate on 17 projects. None of them met the competition requirements and none proposed what *needed* to be realized (italics added, N.S.). Given the circumstances and because a more competent methodological approach was required, we decided to organize an open international competition for the best conceptual design of the master plan.²²

What was *needed* was a blueprint for a *civitas solis*, where no artefacts from previous regimes would distract from the vision of the modern future which Nazarbayev aspired to build in Astana. Local planners were slow to grasp this, unlike foreign companies. The president's narrative forgot to mention the fact that by the time the international competition was launched, the SBLG had already been working on a different master plan. According to the explanatory note from Astanagenplan (the municipal planning agency responsible for the development and modifications in Astana's master plan), the work the Group was expected to do was somehow based on the 1995 plan, elaborated by the 'Ak-Orda' firm (and previously rejected by Kazakh government).²³ Moreover, this 'joint' plan was later approved by a governmental decree in February 2000 – at the stage when Kurokawa's proposal was already being elaborated. This raises a question: why did the government of Kazakhstan need an international competition if a foreign company had already been working on the master plan?²⁴

The most probable reason is that cooperation between the Group and Kazakhstan's authorities had been unsuccessful. In fact, the agreement between the parties not only stipulated the creation of a new master plan but also obliged the SBLG to build up the empty lots on the left bank where the new city centre would be located (to later sell them as offices and elite housing units). The Plan was supposed to be a 'gift' from the Group to Kazakhstan and at the same time an opportunity to build up the left bank – a compensation for the elaboration of the master plan, and a profitable business transaction for both parties.²⁵ However, despite the existing agreement, the Group delayed construction due to financial problems.²⁶ As a result, the authorities decided to break the territory

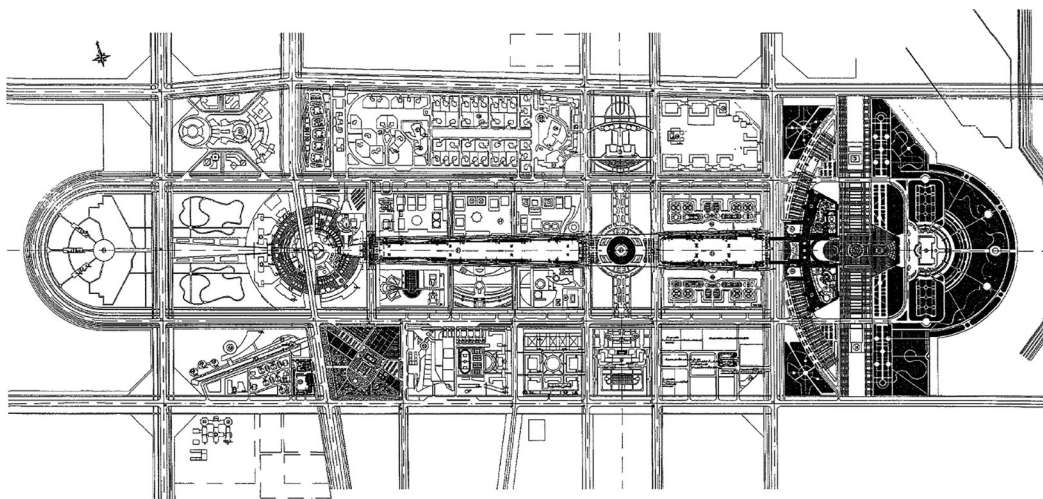


Figure 2. The Urban design model development study in Astana City (a plan of pedestrian deck). Source: JICA and Astanagenplan.

into smaller sections and sell them to other developers. Disagreeing with this decision, the SBLG filed a lawsuit against Astana: the municipal court ruled to expropriate the lots from the company. Later, the Supreme Court upheld the judgement (Figure 2).²⁷

Yet, what remains of the 'vanished' SBLG plan and its unsuccessful cooperation with Kazakhstan is the Monumental Axis on the left bank of Yessil, on which Astana's key landmarks are now situated and which defines the its image. Curiously, the current Master Plan, attributed to Kurokawa and his office, is nowadays chiefly associated with the Axis, conceived by different planners. Despite posterior misattributions this research suggests that the authorship of the Axis should be attributed to the SBLG planners, who based their proposal on the 1995 Master Plan which had been rejected by Kazakh government.²⁸

The 1998 competition

In March 1998 the government of Kazakhstan announced an international competition for 'the draft of the master plan for development in the new city centre of Astana.'²⁹ A governmental commission, headed by the then-mayor of Astana, Adilbek Džaksybekov, appointed the competition's Secretariat (which included professional architects and government officials) whose duty was to define and promote information about the rules and requirements, provide information to all interested parties, and, at the end, organize the work of the jury that would culminate in the selection of three best projects.³⁰ According to the rules, all participants had to submit 8–12 sketches, printed on cardboard tablets, each measuring one metre by one metre and accompanied by a text of 10 pages maximum. All the files had to be marked with a six-number code while the country and the postal address of each participant had to be sent in a sealed envelope. Only licensed architects and those who were active in the previous five years were allowed to participate. The rules obliged participants to use 'electronic means of design' when submitting their projects. Each registered participant received a copy of the existing layout of the city with a marked territory for which a conceptual design was required. After deliberation, the jury had to establish three winners who would receive \$50,000, \$30,000 and \$20,000 respectively. The rules did not guarantee that the winner's project would necessarily be implemented. However, they clearly stated that the winning project could be used for planning in Astana at a later date.³¹

The Secretariat established very brief deadlines for the submission of the projects. All participants had to register before May 8, 1998 and send the materials by 20 August 1998, a little more than three months after the competition was launched. The selection process was organized in a sophisticated way. First, an Expert Committee, appointed by the Secretariat, had to recommend a limited number of projects to be considered by the jury. Then the jury had to choose the three best projects. After this, the President would decide on the final distribution of the three prizes.³²

The jury, chosen by the Secretariat, included seven members from Kazakhstan and three foreigners: Evgeniy Rozanov from Russia, Behruz Çinici from Turkey, and Nels Hall from the US. In comparison with recent capital city design competitions (in particular Brasília in 1957 and Skopje in 1965), the Astana jury did not include a single internationally acclaimed architect. This can be explained partly by the fact that the Secretariat did not possess the financial clout to invite a few well-known figures, but neither had it access to them. Another hypothesis, which I will expand upon later, is that the role of the jury consisted less in selecting the best projects than in helping to legitimize the choice that would be made by the President.

Despite a brief deadline, the call for proposals attracted a number of participants: from its inception, 41 firms from 20 countries had registered for participation. However, by the final deadline the

jury would only recognize 27 projects as conforming to the competition rules. These 27 projects were eventually exposed publicly and made part of the official booklet which was dedicated to the competition. Kazakhstan was represented by nine entries, including one from 'Ak-Orda,' a firm which had already prepared a Master Plan in 1995. Participants from the former Soviet Union included teams from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and sent nine proposals in total. Italian planning firms sent two proposals. Bureaus from Japan, Australia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Poland prepared one proposal each. However, not all entries were of equal quality, and not all the companies had the required planning experience. Kazakhstan's foreign missions participated actively in the distribution of the information about the competition.³³ The description of the requirements was quite vague: the rules requested that participants elaborate a 'plan for the development of the new city centre' but the Secretariat did not provide any data pertaining to the project costs, or site-specific issues, such as transportation and ecology. Despite the lack of information about the site, only a few participants seem to have actually visited Astana. The archival documents only mentioned three planners who sought the Secretariat's assistance in organizing a trip to Astana. (Kisho Kurokawa, who eventually won the competition, did not find time to visit the city before the jury's deliberations.)

The jury reconvened in Astana on 22–24 September 1998. According to the proceedings, it first eliminated seven projects which did not respect the presentation requirements. It then excluded projects which proposed both an intensive re-design of the existing city (a measure considered too costly and therefore inappropriate) and a complete demolition of the city centre.³⁴ Incidentally, the jury gave priority to projects which proposed to develop the city toward the south and south-east – a preference that had not been mentioned in the competition rules³⁵ – and completely rejected those projects which suggested that the city be developed in northern, eastern, or western directions.

After the final deliberation, on 24 September 1998 the 11 jury members proceeded to the selection of the three best projects. The vote was open, however, all projects were discussed without the authors' names being announced; each project was identified via a six-digit number.³⁶ At the final vote, the proposals from the 'Ak-Orda' firm and the Urban Planning Institute of the Russian Academy of Architecture received 11 votes each, i.e. the maximum number of votes from each jury member. Kisho Kurokawa's project received eight votes.³⁷ However, president Nazarbayev, who had to decide on the final attribution of prizes, awarded the first prize to Kurokawa. Second and third prizes went to the 'Ak-Orda' firm and the Russian project, respectively.

The essential concepts of Kurokawa's proposal, stemming as they did from the architectural works he had elaborated in the 1960s, were those of 'symbiosis' and 'metabolism.' In Kurokawa's writings, 'metabolism' combined ideas about architectural structures and those of organic biological growth. An illustration of metabolism in architecture was the Nakagin tower, designed by Kurokawa and erected in Tokyo in the early 1970s. On the basis of the vertical rod-like skeleton of the building were situated removable cells, which had to be replaced, with the passing of time, with new and more technologically advanced ones. In his proposal for Astana, Kurokawa sought to apply a similar approach to urban design. The master plan had to be reviewed and improved every five years, according to the necessities of the growing city. The notion of 'symbiosis' referred to a harmonious co-existence of 'new and old cities' as well as 'nature and urbanism'³⁸ – Astana would develop according to a linear zoning system, thus relieving the future city from 'the limit of structural growth.'³⁹ Kurokawa pointed out that his Plan for Astana would be 'a counter-proposal for a commonly-practiced concentric city' and would comprise a framework of main arteries and components, along with a soft core composed of buildings, which were to be constantly updated.⁴⁰

The new capital should be capable of adjusting to the [city's] future development to maintain balance and order. [...] The zones may comprise green buffer zones (as [would be] necessary to protect the capital against sand storms); existing industries and advanced hi-tech industries; green zones (for environmental protection); existing urban areas; residential zones; a new city centre zone and an eco-park zone.⁴¹

Kurokawa's team conceived a blueprint of a city of constant renewal where the civil servants and citizens would in theory coexist harmoniously in an eco-friendly landscape. In practice, however, the idea of constant transformation and adjustment fit badly with the idea of a stable, monumental core, which is intrinsic to capital cities. It is unclear from the 1998 proposal as to what precisely the 'capital' element was in Kurokawa's solution with respect to the monumental features of Astana as a seat of government. The sketch for Astana's city centre which he submitted for the 1998 competition has never been realized and had nothing to do at a later date with his own Master Plan for Astana.⁴²

As for the architecture of Kazakhstan's capital, Kurokawa proposed that it would be guided by a style called 'abstract symbolism.' The method of abstract symbolism consisted in using simple geometric shapes which would presumably reflect 'traditional cultural aspects of Kazakhstan.'⁴³ For instance:

A triangle as seen in [the] decoration of nomad people, a cone as seen in nomad hats or trees, a circle or a semi-circle which is the shape of the moon and [which] symbolizes the universe are the examples of such geometric features. By applying [such] abstract symbolism, the capital that reflects the tradition and culture shall breed the affection of the nation and construct a landscape [appropriate to] an international city.⁴⁴

However, not only were the Kazakhstani people by 1998 no longer nomads, but also abstract, geometric shapes, such as the triangle, cone, oval, and crescent were widely used in art, architecture, and ornaments of many peoples and cultures, and were by no means specific symbols unique to Kazakhstan. Furthermore, according to the legislation which existed in 1998 and is still in force, the master plan could not, in principle, define or influence the architectural design of the buildings.⁴⁵ Despite these shortcomings which made the implementation of the plan problematic from the very beginning, President Nazarbayev conveyed the first prize to Kurokawa and his associates. What was his reason for privileging the project which did not gain unanimous support from the jury to the detriment of the two other projects which did? This question will be addressed in the next section.

'A pitched battle for beauty'⁴⁶

Kisho Kurokawa began his career in the late 1950s and was one of the founders of the Metabolist Movement. The author of several iconic projects in Japan, by the end of the twentieth century he had become one of the most renowned Japanese architects. During his life he also developed important political connections: since 1997 Kurokawa had been a member of the influential non-party group Nippon Kaigi, which included politicians, businessmen, and public figures. The objective of the group was to promote a certain vision of Japanese nationalism in the country and of Japan's soft power abroad. Designing outside Japan added value to Kurokawa's architectural projects: aside from strengthening his reputation, it also promoted Japan's values and visibility. Some of Kurokawa's works, such as the Japanese-German Centre of Berlin or the Chinese-Japanese Youth Centre in Beijing, were landmarks of the Japanese presence in the countries where they were built. Others, such as the annex to the New Wing of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, were financed by a Japanese company, which suggested that Kurokawa had served as the project's architect.⁴⁷ Although Kurokawa undoubtedly was a gifted professional with a merited reputation, my research suggests

that it was his political connections that played a decisive role in his winning the 1998 competition in Astana. As we have seen, Kurokawa's design received fewer votes from the professional jury than the two other projects. However, for some reason, Kazakhstan's President awarded the first prize to Kurokawa and his team, whose project was later financed, coincidentally, by the Japanese government. I suggest that the following arguments may explain these occurrences.

Firstly, it should be explained that two agencies acted on behalf of the Japanese government in support of Kurokawa's proposal in Kazakhstan: the Japanese Development Institute (JDI) and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The former was a private firm which provided consulting services to the latter, the JICA being a governmental agency in charge of Japanese development aid to third countries. Although formally unrelated to each other, the JDI helped to find prospective projects and write Japan's guidelines for environmental considerations on aid projects, funded by the JICA. In the case of Astana, during the competition stage, it was the JDI's members who were in contact with Kazakhstan's officials. After the competition, however, employees who worked on the master plan were from the JICA, in collaboration with or under the supervision of Kurokawa's office.⁴⁸

Secondly, Kurokawa was in contact with the JDI *before* the competition, and not after winning it. In fact, prior to September 1998, when the results were announced, the Managing Director of Kurokawa's firm, Hank Cheriex, visited Astana. Initially, this visit had not been planned because on 26 June 1998, he had written to the Secretariat:

We have no opportunity this month or the next to pay a visit to Astana City to investigate the existing situation. Therefore, we kindly request that you provide us with photographs of the present environment in Astana City, i.e. the major city vistas and, if possible, an aerial view from which we can develop a three-dimensional image of Astana City.⁴⁹

However, for some reason, their intention changed a week later. On 2 July 1998, the JDI's representative Tomomichi Kageyama wrote to the Secretariat:

Having met with Kurokawa, they are now considering sending an architect to Astana City to learn about Astana and to obtain any useful information, including the opportunity for collaborative work with local architects. Are you able to issue an invitation letter to obtain a visa for him? He is considering visiting Kazakhstan *with us* [emphasis added] at the end of next week, on 10 July, for a period of one or two weeks. His name is Hank Cheriex.⁵⁰

From this letter one can see that the initiative to visit Astana did not come from Kurokawa's office (which was initially not planning to send anyone) but from the JDI; and that Kurokawa would only send an architect from his office and not come in person. Finally, Cheriex did visit Astana: he was accompanied by the Executive Managing Director of Kurokawa's firm, Tadao Shibata, and Shoichi Kobayashi, an economist and planner, who was at that time chairman of the JDI.⁵¹ Moreover, the archival correspondence between the Kazakh government and the JDI reveals that Kobayashi, who previously served as Deputy Project Manager for the Baghdad Master Plan Study, already possessed a long-term entry visa for Kazakhstan.⁵² Another testimonial is even more eloquent. On 20 September four days before the jury's final vote and after having paid a short visit to Astana, Kurokawa wrote to Bair Dosmagambetov, who was the head of the competition Secretariat:

I am sincerely glad that I was able to meet with His Excellency the President of Kazakhstan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Mayor of Astana, and also with You and other leading architects of Kazakhstan. I am happy that despite a short stay in Astana – of only 2 days – I was able to convey to President Nazarbayev a personal message from the Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi and to announce that the Japanese Government is genuinely interested in the planning of the new capital of Kazakhstan, and is genuinely

interested in developing more contacts between the two countries in a wide range of areas including economy and culture.⁵³

Furthermore, Kurokawa had advocated for why his project was the best of the lot and asked Dosmagambetov to convey his argument to president Nazarbayev. Although in this letter Kurokawa did not clearly state that the Japanese government *would* finance the elaboration of the master plan, the fact that he evoked Prime Minister Obuchi's personal message said a great deal. More evidence of the fact that Kurokawa's visit was backed by Japanese officials was that the ambassador of Japan who then resided in Almaty joined him in Astana during his visit.⁵⁴ Serik Rustambekov, a member of Kazakhstan's planning team who won second place at the 1998 competition, recalled that:

Kurokawa did not come with empty hands. He brought an offer from the Japanese Prime Minister, in which the Japanese side expressed its readiness to provide a grant for the design of the master plan. The grant was ready to be provided by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA).⁵⁵

Finally, two years later, in a letter sent to the president of Kazakhstan, Kurokawa himself wrote:

Dear Mr. President, two years ago I *promised* [emphasis added] two things to your Excellency. The first was to elaborate a master plan for Astana, financed through a grant from the Japanese Government. The second was to create a feasibility study on water supply and sewerage in the city of Astana. I am proud to confirm that both projects have been completed successfully and in a very short period of time. These tasks could not have been completed without the support from Your Excellency, and also from Prime Minister Tokayev.⁵⁶

It should be mentioned parenthetically, that the 'feasibility study on water supply' that Kurokawa mentioned was not a random statement. In fact, the two projects were negotiated and financed as a package: the difference was that the technical and financial assistance of \$161 million for the water project was provided to Kazakhstan in the form of a 30-year loan at 2.2 percent per annum while the Master Plan had been 'granted to Kazakhstan free of charge.'⁵⁷

A promotional article from the JICA's journal represents Kurokawa's participation in the competition as if he won it unexpectedly and as a result of an even-handed and intense struggle:

To design the new capital, an international competition was organized in which 50 architects took part [...]. Asia was represented by only one architect, Kisho Kurokawa, who previously worked on various projects in Russia and Europe. However, the competition's favourites were companies from Germany, Russia, and the United States. The preparation period was very limited, only four months. Despite all this, Mr. Kurokawa decided to participate as he realized that it was his only chance to design a state capital. Contrary to expectations, Mr. Kurokawa's project passed the first and second stages of the competition. During the final stage, he managed to present his project to President Nazarbayev. Mr. Kurokawa learned about his victory in Japan, by phone.⁵⁸

Although the competition for Astana was indeed a unique opportunity for Kurokawa to 'design a state capital,' the article exaggerates his achievement by saying that he competed with '50 architects.' The above-quoted passage also demonstrates that the JICA was not unaffected by the Cold War's geopolitical mapping: despite many teams from Central Asia, Kurokawa was for them the 'only' Asian competitor. As for the funding, it states that it had been the government in Kazakhstan that had sought Japanese help to prepare the Master Plan (while not surprisingly no mention of Kurokawa's pre-contract 'diplomacy' had been made).

Such evidence enables one to establish two things. Firstly, Japan was contemplating financing the elaboration of the Astana master plan not *after* knowing that a Japanese architect has won the

competition but *before* it. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain why the JDI chairman would go to Astana before the announcement of the competition results. Secondly, according to Kurokawa's own words, a promise had been made to the president of Kazakhstan concerning the elaboration of the master plan *and its financing*. It may thus be argued that Kurokawa, who might have learnt about the competition through professional or political circles, could have mobilized his connections and participated in the competition for the elaboration of the Master Plan which his office would later realize through his country's funding. In fact, this was a win-win strategy. Japan paid its own experts to work on the Master Plan and financed it in a package with the water project's loan, which had to be paid back. Kazakhstan obtained a water modernization project on reasonable terms and a formally 'gratis' master plan from a world-renowned architect. Kurokawa got the opportunity to 'design a state capital' – an achievement that would put him on a par with a few of the greatest architects of the twentieth century, such as Le Corbusier, Doxiadis, and his teacher Kenzo Tange. But this also reveals that the 1998 competition was a mere sinecure: it served to *legitimize* the choice of Kurokawa, but did not actually *choose* him from among his peers. The 'pitched battle for beauty' turned out to be a well-directed performance.

Nonetheless, it would be simplistic to reduce the rationale behind Nazarbayev's decision to merely financial considerations. Of all the participants in the competition, Kurokawa was the only figure of an international calibre. Despite the JICA journal's eulogy, the German and American companies which had participated in the 1998 Competition were not well-known bureaus with international reputations, but unpretentious medium-sized firms. As for Russian and Kazakh companies, whatever the quality of their projects was, they hardly stood a chance to win as their approaches were deemed to be outdated, a priori, by the Kazakh government. In going beyond the jury's decision and insisting on a Japanese architect, President Nazarbayev wanted to raise awareness of Astana in the world and improve its branding through Kurokawa's name. It should not be forgotten that in the 1990s, Kazakhstan was a poor post-Soviet country, not particularly attractive to investors and tourists. The relocation of the capital city was conceived as a project which would dissociate Kazakhstan from its past and re-invent the entire country's image. Inviting an architect with an international reputation fit into that strategy *par excellence* and the fact that Kurokawa was Japanese provided Kazakhstan with an additional advantage. Just as Doxiadis once represented a strategic advantage for Pakistan because he was simultaneously a Western architect with access to the Ford Foundation, and a *non-American*, Kurokawa was the perfect choice for Kazakhstan because he was neither Russian or post-Soviet (as the adoption of such a figure would signify a symbolic return to the past) nor a 'Westerner' (who, in the public opinion's view, would not necessarily easily grasp the specifics of local conditions). Picking Kurokawa provided a third option which evoked the 'Asianness' of Kazakhstan while also drawing on the public's positive association of Japan's high-tech and cultured civilization.

The curious case of Amanžol Čikanayev

As Kazakhstan's interest in Kurokawa cannot be reduced to financial considerations, the 1998 Competition cannot be reduced to the adoption of his proposal. There were local actors who either moved across borders and served as advisors and cultural mediators for other participants of the 1998 Competition, or worked on the propagation and reception of what had been imported from abroad during the Competition. I will further evoke one such case which I consider to be particularly useful to demonstrate how Kazakhstan's planners adapted both professionally and ethically to a situation

wherein their previous achievements and practices had started to be seen as obsolete (due to political transformations).

Unlike many professionals who had moved to Astana after 1998, Amanžol Čikanayev had been a local resident since the mid-1960s.⁵⁹ Between 2003 and 2012 he worked for the Astana City planning authorities such as Astanagenplan and the Planning Committee for the Astana City Hall.⁶⁰ In 1995, when the very first competition for the Master Plan was launched at a national level, Čikanayev submitted his project which was eventually rejected. During the public presentation which followed the award ceremony, he voiced criticisms regarding the fact that the winning project did not fit the climatic and landscape conditions of Astana which he presumably knew best.⁶¹ In 1998, Čikanayev attacked the rules of the International Competition which, according to him, privileged foreign architects and discriminated against local ones. As a part of the initiative group, he drafted a letter, signed by three-dozen Kazakh architects and planners who protested against the launch.⁶² An excerpt from that letter states:

There are a few artificial limitations that will prevent many experienced professionals from Kazakhstan and the CIS to participate in this competition. Firstly, the electronic means of design required to be used by all participants only capture the design process and for that reason doesn't express the quality of the project's conceptual design.⁶³ Secondly, given the unemployment in Kazakhstan over the last five years, limiting the period of professional experience to the last five years mean eliminating all projects from Kazakhstan itself (...).⁶⁴

Among other things, the letter suggested that a new jury be established, that the rights and the role of the winner in the future planning of Astana be defined, and that the rules be made to correspond to 'international norms,' without specifying what would constitute the latter. Despite these claims and the fact that the letter was signed by more than thirty well-known professionals, including professors of architecture and urban planning, none of the suggestions were adopted; although planners from Kazakhstan were eventually allowed to participate. In a chapter dedicated to the master plan of Astana, Alima Bissenova mentioned that 'Kazakh architects were encouraged to participate in the 1998 competition.'⁶⁵ My reconstruction, based on the archival material, clearly demonstrates that Kazakh architects were not encouraged to participate. Moreover, they had to put pressure on the government in order to be formally included in the competition. On 20 August 1998, during a meeting, the Governmental commission for the international competition ruled that

Considering the fact that many experienced architects from Kazakhstan and the CIS countries were deprived of the possibility of participating in the planning projects in recent years, and given the fact that the possession of a government license for urban planning certifies the necessary experience, we consider it possible for these architects *to be allowed* to take part in the competition [italics added].⁶⁶

Čikanayev, apparently, decided not to deepen the confrontation with the authorities but to collaborate with them. In March 1998, he was hired as a consultant to work for the Secretariat.⁶⁷ His contribution, however, was not limited to that work exclusively. In the archival records one discovers that Čikanayev had been hired as a consultant by an Italian company, Alpina S.p.A., which had also submitted a project to the competition.⁶⁸ Such a dual role raises questions regarding Čikanayev's personal and professional ethics. However, considerations of professional integrity apparently did not bother him:

I said to my boss that I needed to go away for three weeks, and went to Milan. For two and a half weeks we have been working on a draft of the master plan for Astana. I advised them: 'Here it should be like this, here you have flooded territories, here the groundwater is close, and here you should situate the city centre.' Marconi's [head of Alpina S.p.A.] office had a crowd of young computer geeks, and for me it was

the first time that I had seen a computer. Thanks to them, we did the project quickly, although it had seemed to me that drawing a master plan of a city for two weeks would be impossible: in the past we used to do it all with a line and a divider.⁶⁹

Later Ćikanayev asked to withdraw his name from the authorship of the project, which had been submitted by his office.⁷⁰ In spite of this precaution, in the registration form, sent to the Secretariat by Alpina S.p.A. on May 8, 1998, his name is clearly indicated as a member of the planning team.⁷¹

However, the second attempt to participate in the planning for Astana did not succeed either: the first three prizes were attributed to other teams. But Ćikanayev did not give up. After the adoption of Kurokawa's plan, he commented widely on Kurokawa's work and represented himself as his supporter and collaborator. In the texts he wrote and interviews he gave (including the one to myself), he constantly claimed that he met Kurokawa in person and discussed with him the planning for Astana, and would even critique the Japanese architect's approaches to planning and recommend solutions to him that would be more suitable within the local context.⁷² Although much of what he wrote and said contains inconsistencies and is not entirely objective in its descriptions of their author's contribution, Ćikanayev certainly played a role in the reception and interpretation of Kurokawa's planning ideas in Kazakhstan. Overall, his activities may help to elucidate how a local actor, who was not a decision-maker, was able to construct some cultural capital on the basis of Kurokawa's brand and his participation in the 1998 Competition.

Conclusion

The master plan for Astana is still associated with Kurokawa although the changes introduced to that plan between 2005 and 2015 left very few of his ideas untouched.⁷³ Kurokawa's main contribution to the plan, the idea of metabolism, is barely mentioned in the newer versions of the master plan, as elaborated by Astanagenplan (Figure 3).

There is little evidence that Kurokawa himself worked on the master plan. He never came to Astana before the competition and it was the obligation to *organize* his victory which made him pay a short two-day visit to Astana in September 1998. He came to the city later but his teams' planning strategy and predictions regarding the future growth of the city were all but clairvoyant. In 2002, the master plan predicted that the city would have 490,000 inhabitants by 2010 and 800,000 by 2030. Astana has one million inhabitants today. The existing street network cannot cope with the increased traffic flow; engineering and communication networks are not designed for a load of new residential complexes. As a result, many people spend 2–3 h a day in traffic jams. In summer, when it rains, floods regularly occur in the new city centre on the left bank. Paradoxically, many causes that were previously listed as factors in favour of relocating the capital city to Astana, such as congestion, bad air, and an excessive number of people, in only ten years have become the everyday reality of the new capital. These are not only planning issues, of course; any master plan is but a guide, after all. However, these shortcomings do raise questions about Kurokawa's work as a leader of a planning team.

That being said, Kurokawa still played an important part in the elaboration of Astana. His reputation and charisma, the investment he brought into the country for which 'the plan didn't cost a penny'⁷⁴ helped Astana – if not to become a city of the future, then at least, to dissociate itself from its grey Soviet past. Yet, it should not be forgotten that many other actors – overshadowed by Kurokawa – were involved in the elaboration of 'his' master plan – architects from his own office; specialists from the JICA and the JDI; Kazakhstan's planners, diplomats, and the staff of

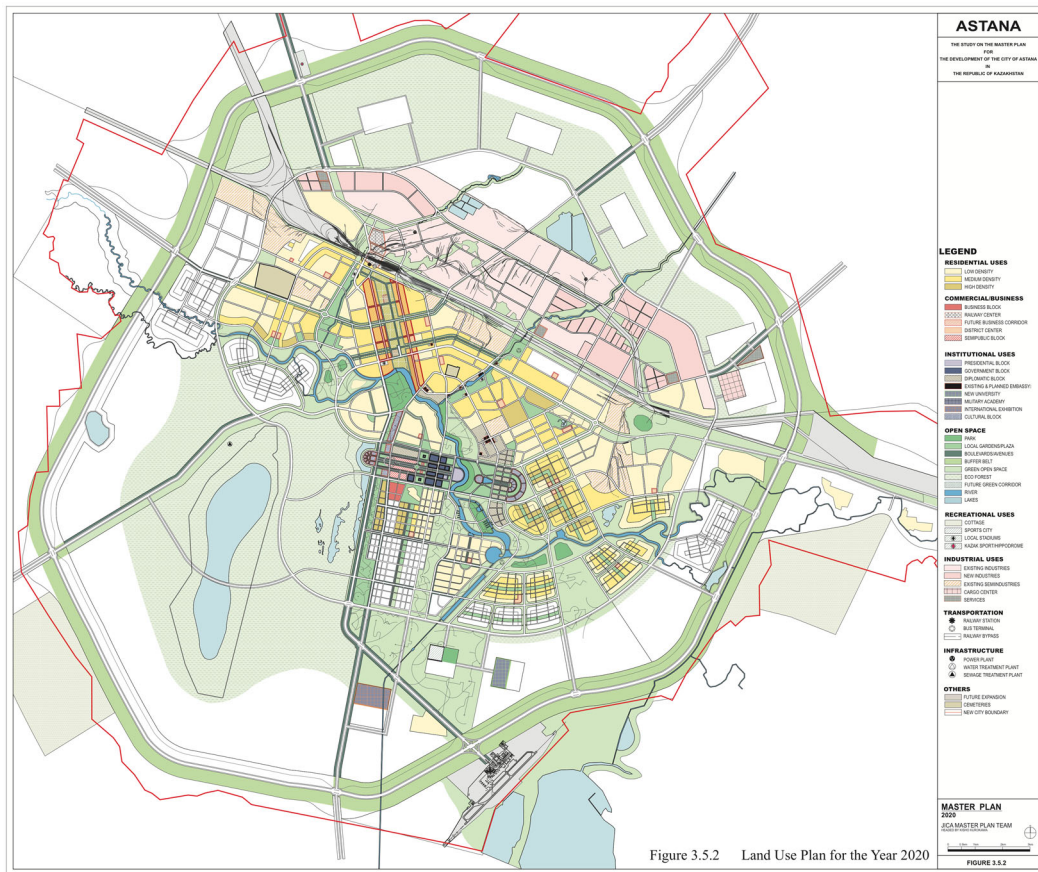


Figure 3. Kisho Kurokawa and Associates, land use plan for the year 2020, JICA master plan team, 2001.

the Secretariat; actors like Ćikanayev who created their own cultural capital on the basis of Kurokawa's brand; and Astanagenplan's professionals who had been trying to adapt Kurokawa's vision to the realities of the city (and at one point ceased to do so). All of them were part of the intense co-construction of a plan whose elaboration went far beyond the frontiers of a singular city and country. Indeed, Astana has become a unique and very thrilling example of the production of identity via urban design in the entire post-Soviet space since late 1990s.

Notes

1. Beaugregard, "More than a master plan," 62.
2. See Daechsel, *Islamabad and the Politics of International Development in Pakistan*, 148–92; Library and Archives Canada, *The Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King*; Fowler, *The Myth on the Abuja Master Plan*, 16. For an example of a regional capital see Perrera, *Chandigarh: India's Modernist Experiment*, 226–30.
3. See Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 153.
4. See, for example, Koch, "The 'heart' of Eurasia?"; Schatz, "What Capital Cities Say about State and Nation Building"; Fauve, "Bienvenue à Astana"; Bissenova, "The Master plan of Astana."
5. See especially Almandoz, *Planning Latin America's Capital Cities*; Gordon, *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities*; and Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*.

6. Sonne, *Representing the State*, 149–52. For the details on the participants and projects of the 1912 Canberra Competition see Reps, *Canberra 1912*.
7. Morley, “The First Pilipino City Beautiful Plans,” 433–34.
8. Tavares, *Projetos Para Brasília 1927–1957*.
9. Nogueira et al., *Brasília: A Capital in the Hinterland in Gordon*, 166. Xavier, *Brasília: antologia crítica*, 27–32, 46–77, 82–93.
10. Daeschel, *Islamabad*, 158–80.
11. Lozanovska, “The Intriguing and Forgotten International Exchanges,” 438.
12. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, File 1, 94–5.
13. Rozhin, “Konkurs na proektirovanie zhilogo rayona,” 1–2.
14. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, File 1, 96–8.
15. Nazarbayev, *V serdce Evrazii*, 2010, 200.
16. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, File 1, 17–30.
17. *Ibid*, 131–2.
18. *Ibid*, 141–2.
19. *Ibid*, 141.
20. Nazarbayev, *Kazahstanskiy put*, 340. See also CAA, F. 424, Vol. 1, File 21, 24–31.
21. Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Decree from July 29, 1998. CAA, F. 424, Vol. 1, File 21, 35–6.
22. Nazarbayev, *V serdce Evrazii*, 239–40.
23. Kussainova, *On the Master Plan of Astana*, 1.
24. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, Work plan, Addendum 20, 7.
25. Kussainova, 1.
26. Bair Dosmagabetov, interview. Farid Galimov, interview. See also Tumakova, “Arhitektura absurda.”
27. Ruling of the Supreme Court, 23.12.2004.
28. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, Draft Plan, Addendum 20, 7.
29. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, File 74, 1.
30. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 4, 3–6.
31. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 7, 7.
32. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 2, 22–23.
33. See NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, Files 10–13.
34. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 3, 3–7.
35. *Ibid*.
36. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, File 14, 9–18.
37. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 3, 7–9.
38. NAK, F. 90, The JICA Study on the Master Plan, Main Report, Chapter 3, June 2001, 19.
39. *Ibid*, 14.
40. *Ibid*.
41. *Ibid*, 16.
42. NAK, F. 90, Vol. 1, File 14, 10.
43. Japan International Cooperation Agency/Capital Development Corporation City of Astana, *The Study on the Master Plan for the Development of the City of Astana in the Republic of Kazakhstan*, p. 17.
44. *Ibid*.
45. Government of Kazakhstan, Decree *On the Master Plan of Astana*.
46. ‘A pitched battle for beauty’ is the title of a chapter dedicated to the 1998 international competition from president Nazarbayev’s book about Astana, *V serdce Evrazii*.
47. Riding, *Arts abroad*.
48. Beaudry-Somcynsky, *Japan’s System of Official Development Assistance*, 109.
49. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 13, 28.
50. *Ibid*., 54.
51. *Ibid*., 52, Kageyama to the Secretariat.
52. *Ibid*., 52.
53. *Ibid*., 212–13.
54. *Ibid*., 102, Shibata to the Secretariat.
55. Vihodčenko, *Rekonstruktsiya naberezhnoy*.

56. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 13.
57. Explanatory note to the draft law of the Republic of Kazakhstan from October 23, 2003 n. 20/7243.
58. JICA's World, September 2001, No.36.
59. Vihodčenko, *Generalnoe sraženie za prekrasnoe*.
60. Official biographical account at the site of the Seifullin Agro-Technical University.
61. Vihodčenko, *Generalnoe sraženie za prekrasnoe*.
62. CAA, F. 424, Vol. 1, File 3, 39–42.
63. F. 51, Vol. 1, File 12, 76.
64. CAA, F. 424, Vol. 1, File 3, 40.
65. See Bissenova, “The Master Plan of Astana,” 129.
66. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 2, Minutes of the meeting (August 20, 1998), 14.
67. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 5, 2 and 11.
68. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 11, 52–99.
69. Vihodčenko, *Generalnoe sraženie za prekrasnoe*.
70. Ibid.
71. NAK, F. 51, Vol. 1, File 11, 53.
72. See for ex. Čikanayev, *Arhitekturnaia simfoniia velikoi stepi*.
73. Government of Kazakhstan, Decree n.73 from January 28, 2009.
74. Author, *Interview with A. Čikanayev*, Astana, September 23, 2015.

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