

Nick Hannes

# NEW CAPITAL

Lannoo

# KAZAKHSTAN

# ASTANA



**Start of construction: Russian military outpost since 1824**

**Inauguration date: 10 June 1998**

**Initiated by: President Nursultan Nazarbayev**

**Master plan by: Kisho Kurokawa**

**Urban agglomeration population in 2023: 1.3 million**

**Surface area: 800 km<sup>2</sup>**

**Former capital: Almaty**

The coronavirus is on its way out. The world is reopening cautiously. I am the only guest at the Sky Luxe Hotel in the Kazakh capital, Astana. The light in the lobby is dimmed; the tables in the restaurant are not laid. I hear no slamming doors in the corridor, just the monotonous hum of the minibar. I have breakfast in the room as I zap through the TV lineup, seven stations in languages I do not speak. A portly man in shorts and a vest knocks on the door. He says he is an osteopath and points to a well-worn massage table in the dark corridor.

The hotel is located on Nurzhol Boulevard, a three-kilometre-long promenade connecting the Ak Orda Presidential Palace with the marquee-shaped Khan Shatyr shopping and entertainment complex, designed by Norman Foster. The pedestrian zone between the two landmarks is a monumental showcase of architectural extravaganza, founded on prestige and nationalist symbolism. The eye-catcher is Bayterek, an iconic observation tower in the shape of a tree of life carrying a golden egg, within it the gilded handprint of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev. Visitors queue up there in droves to press their palms against the presidential hand while making a wish and taking a selfie.

Astana's urban planning metamorphosis is inextricably linked to the figure of Nazarbayev, who lets himself be called *Elbasy*, 'Leader of the Nation'. For 30 years, he has kept a tight hold on the reins of power. In 1997, he decided to move the capital from mountainous Almaty to Aqmola, 1,000 kilometres to the north. The steppe city was to become the spearhead of post-Soviet nation-building thanks to oil and gas revenues. A new city rose on the southern bank of the Ishim River according to the master plan by Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa. Renamed Astana, in no time at all Aqmola emerged as a global city of more than 1 million inhabitants.

It is not by accident that the inauguration of the new capital coin-

cided with the presidential anniversary. Nazarbayev's portrait can be found on numerous monuments, often in the company of historical Kazakh heroes or *batyrs*. Nazarbayev has his own museum, and the airport and university also bear his name. But the ultimate honour came after his resignation in March 2019. From then on, the capital would be called Nur-Sultan, 'Sultan of Light'. The majority of residents I speak to, however, stubbornly continue to call their city Astana.

The name change proved short-lived. In January 2022, street protests against high petrol prices got out of control. The protesters' anger was aimed at the power of the Nazarbayev clan. In clashes with law enforcement, 230 people lost their lives. To calm things down, in September 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev decided to revert to the name Astana.

Astana is a playground for architects and property developers, inevitably reminiscent of Dubai. Luxurious residential compounds are being built on the outskirts, protected by barriers and security posts. Shopping centres such as Mega Silk Way and Asia Park make small shops obsolete. Near the airport, Central Asia's largest mosque, with space for 18,000 worshippers, is nearing completion. The height record is held by Abu Dhabi Plaza, a 320-metre skyscraper paid for with oil money from the Emirates.

Fortunately, the city also boasts a number of sprawling parks and squares where the Kazakh national character is more in the forefront with street musicians, fairground stalls and ice cream carts. A drunkard is sleeping off his drunken stupor in a public garden.

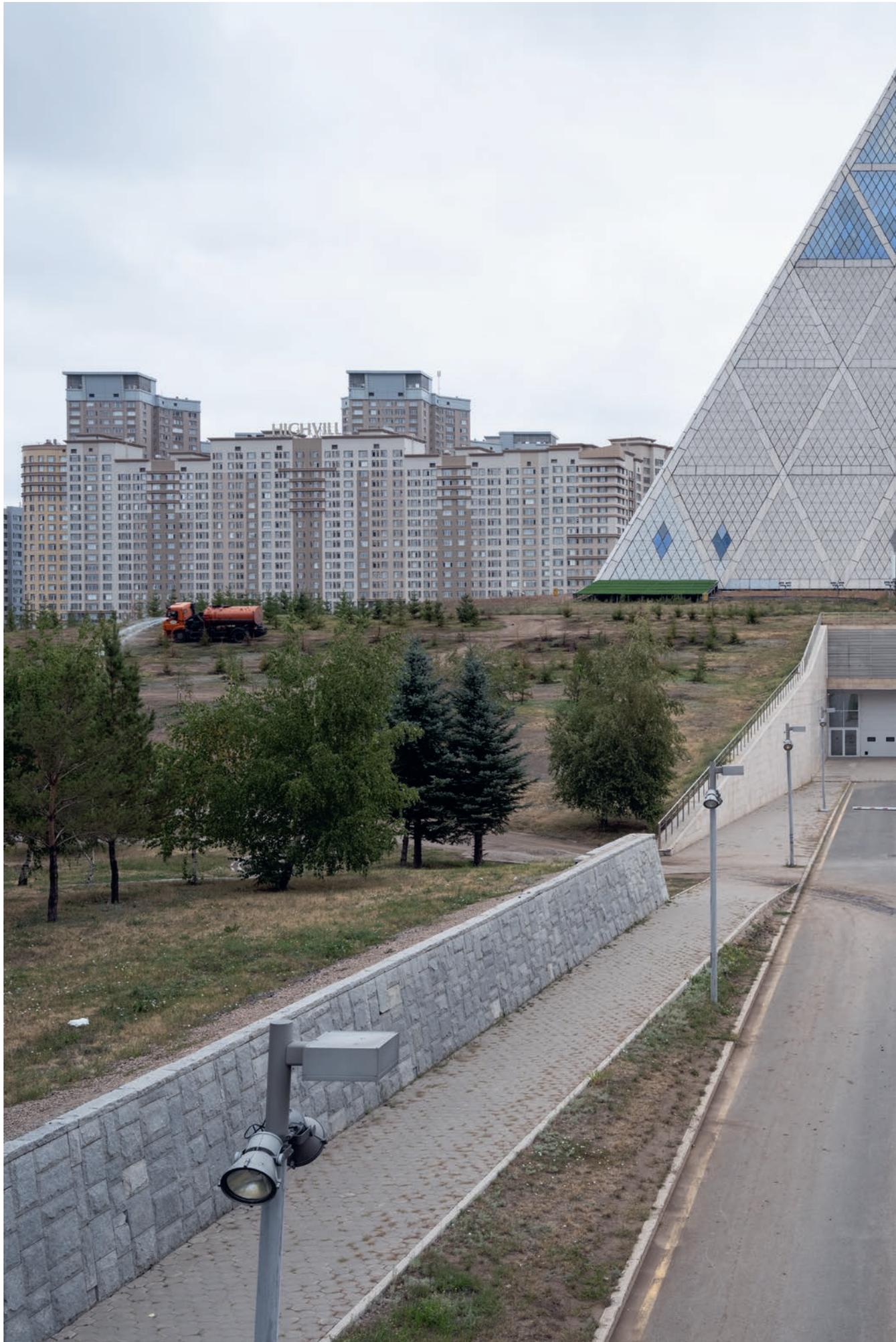
In the endless steppe, city planners saw no reason to sparingly deal with open spaces. With its wide boulevards and extensive parking options, Astana was designed with the car in mind. A significant part of the fleet consists of Yandex taxis — the local Uber — which take on the role of public transport, leading to frantically tooting queues during rush hour.

Construction of an ambitious above-ground metro line began in 2011. However, this light rail transit (LRT) was never completed, because investor China Development Bank froze its credits due to financial mismanagement. Today, a string of 555 concrete support pillars meanders through the city. 'Our monument to corruption,' one passerby lets slip.

Corruption and nepotism are not unheard of in the former Soviet Union. It took very little effort to find a nightclub open as usual despite the strict Covid measures. No entry passes here, or face masks. A live band fills up the dance floor. 'Those with connections here can always find a loophole to get around the rules,' a lady confides in me.

Near the brand-new Nurly Zhol train station, hidden behind billboards for prestigious new construction projects, lie dilapidated residential areas from the days when Astana was still called Aqmola. The vibe is that of a sleepy Soviet village, with dusty streets, vegetable gardens, washing lines and barking dogs on chains. Shame and mistrust prevail. 'Nothing to see here,' a man gestures. 'Go photograph Bayterek!' Many houses have been abandoned or have already been torn down. At a public pump, the last residents come to fill up with drinking water. Where two worlds collide.

August 2021



The Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, designed by Norman Foster.





Astana Botanical Garden.





Sky Beach Club,  
an indoor lagoon in  
Khan Shatyr shopping  
and entertainment complex.





Northern Lights and Emerald Towers skyscrapers on Nurzhol Boulevard.





Independence Square  
and Hazrat Sultan Mosque.











Bayterek Tower.



