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THE IMAGE OF THE GOROD-SAD: SEARCHING FOR HOWARD'S GARDEN CITY IN ALMATY

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Abstract

This paper investigates the evolution of the “garden city” or *gorod-sad*, first developed by Ebenezer Howard and modified by Soviet-era urban planners and policymakers, as it applies to past and present Almaty, Kazakhstan. This analysis provides a more nuanced account of the concept of the *gorod-sad* in early- and mid-Soviet-era praxis. It seeks to understand the dissemination of the *gorod-sad* as a meme, and illuminates underlying assumptions about the relationship between nature and urbanity. As a result of an historical analysis of the *gorod-sad* ideal, this paper finds a need for a more nuanced understanding of that term in relation to Almaty's branding. Sources include archival materials; newspapers, encyclopedias, guidebooks, and other documents from the Soviet era and present; and the author's numerous formal and informal conversations with Almatians and Kazakhstanis about the city in question.

Keywords: Almaty, Alma-Ata, *gorod-sad*, garden city, meme.

Almaty seems to live a double life. The city, Kazakhstan's former capital and its largest population center, sprawls across an area of great natural diversity: to the south, jagged snow-covered mountains bare their teeth, while to the north the land gradually transforms into open steppe. Between these two extremes lies a multi-layered urban space where hectic bazaars and parks bursting with greenery provide

a contrast to the precisely quadrilateral street grid. Alma-Ata, as the Soviet-era capital city was known, was so famed for its abundance of green spaces, parks, and apple orchards that it achieved renown across the former Soviet Union as a *gorod-sad* or “garden city.” Yet for every tourist guidebook or wistful comment that supports this moniker, there is another point of view. Today many Almatians are

quick to reply that their city is in no way a gorod-sad, or if that term can be used, then it applies only to Alma-Ata. Given the precarious state of urban nature in a post-Soviet city still grappling with approaches to financing park maintenance and managing urban growth, such reactions are understandable.

In this situation, it is necessary to investigate the origins of the *gorod-sad* as both urban planning concept and urban brand, tracing its evolution across decades and countries, and examining how the phrase gained new meaning in a local context. Only by doing so is it possible to answer two pressing questions for the city today: what makes or made Almaty a gorod-sad, and does it have any future as such?

Origins: Garden Cities of To-Morrow

In the late 1800s there lived in London a man named Ebenezer Howard. Although his official occupation as a producer of the British Parliament's records seems neither particularly prestigious nor revolutionary, Howard, thanks to his experience observing the reconstruction of Chicago following its Great Fire of 1871 and association with social reform-minded circles, originated one of the most important urban planning concepts of the following century. He described a vision of a marriage of the best aspects of town and country life in his 1898 book *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, revised and reprinted in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*.

Howard's garden cities were towns of fixed size, where a population of 32000 workers would live on an area of 2400 square hectares. Families would live in their own houses with yards. In the center would be a park, easily accessible via

radiating boulevards, and a permanent agricultural belt would surround the residential area. The town would have schools and cultural establishments, but pollution-causing manufacturing plants were to be located elsewhere. Residents would commute from these bedroom suburbs via railway or highway to an industrial zone or larger urban center for their jobs.

The foundation for these communities was in fact revolutionary. Howard, highly critical of the negative effects of industrialization upon the working class and influenced by utopian discourse, envisioned towns governed by workers' cooperatives of all those who held shares of land and built upon land purchased at low cost (due to its extra-urban location). Residents would be able to own their own houses. That said, Howard's garden cities balanced "in a state of tension between individual and social ideals," designed for the capitalist context but drawing upon some communist ideals.

The Howardian garden city attained popularity not only in the United Kingdom and Western Europe, where planned communities such as Letchworth and Welwyn (in the UK) and Hellerau (in Germany) were founded in the early 1900s, but also in the then-Russian Empire. In 1911, Howard's book was published in Russian, and in 1913 the Russian Society of Garden Cities (*Rossiiskoye obshchestvo gorodov-sadov*) was formed. Although economic and political conditions were different—cities were less industrialized, though nonetheless overcrowded and unclean, and the imperial government showed more suspicion towards anything resembling local autonomy—Russian planners implemented characteristics of

the garden city, such as boulevards, green space, the location of industry outside towns, and the notion of population controls. Settlements near Moscow and in Siberia were dubbed “*gorod-sad*,” “*posyolok-sad*,” and “*khutor-sad*,” however, these places differed from Howard’s financial model, as they often bore a closer resemblance to company towns, i.e. mono-industrial communities built by a factory owner who had the economic and societal means to exercise complete control over a town’s design.

From Garden City to Gorod-Sad

In the months following the October Revolution, the Bolshevik government “gladly accepted Howard’s idea,” for what better way was there to provide the proletariat with all the comforts of so-called modern life, albeit in a modified economic format in which the state, not workers, would own the land. The continued popularity of the garden city also reflected the intense debates between urbanist and disurbanist schools of city development of the time (see, for example, Sabsovich’s *sotsgorod* or Miliutin’s linear city). Yet by 1922 Howard’s ideas were criticized as examples of bourgeois individualism, capitalist imperialism, and overly localized and thus anti-Soviet.

Over the ensuing decade, the remnants of the Howardian garden city were replaced by what Meerovich calls the “socialist garden settlement” (*sotsialisticheskii posyolok-sad*). While both renditions were intended to be self-sufficient communities of a fixed size, the latter was built around a “city-forming base,” i.e. a factory. While the Howardian version was to supplement large cities, the socialist version was meant to replace them, transforming a vast territory into

a series of small towns surrounding manufacturing plants, not to mention other differences such as apartments instead of separate homes. Here one would discover not the best elements of city and country, but their blurring-together.

While official histories expunged ties to Ebenezer Howard from the narrative, the term *gorod-sad* remained and gained widespread popularity in the Soviet Union, primarily thanks to Mayakovskii’s 1929 poem, “Khrenov’s Tale of the Kuznetsk Construction Site and the People of Kuznetsk,” about the dramatic rebuilding of a Siberian city now known as Novokuznetsk. In the poem, Mayakovskii describes the future city as a land of factories and coal processing plants pushing back the taiga, but it is not only a mechanized utopia. The poem constantly repeats that “In four years, here will be a garden-city.” The ideal Soviet city, the reader understands, is a place where industry and nature come together.

Thanks to this poem, the phrase “garden city” or “gorod-sad” circulated throughout the Soviet Union, becoming a meme, that is, an idea or concept that spreads amongst humans (best exemplified today by the spread of internet memes), replicating and sometimes mutating in a way reminiscent of genes. Indeed, over the ensuing sixty-odd years, cities ranging from Moscow to Leningrad, Kazan to Omsk, Kiev to Baku, and Ashgabat to Bishkek were proclaimed garden cities in guidebooks, newspaper articles, and other materials; and the term *gorod-sad* remains a popular descriptor for urban space today. Yet what does it mean to be a *gorod-sad*?

Tracking a Meme: Growing the Gorod-Sad

Posing the above question to Russian-speakers (not only in Almaty) garners a host of answers. While some connected to architectural or creative circles speak of urban planning and Howard, many more understand the *gorod-sad* as a place filled with trees, green space, and parks, regardless of its organizational principles or industrial presence. Although green space can be an important component of a city's identity, oversimplifying the understanding of *gorod-sad* to refer only to green space runs the risk of eliminating a multilayered concept that sheds light on historical developments in urban planning, politics, and environmentalism. Additionally, given the diverse array of urban landscapes to which the term has been applied, it is important to examine its meaning in a local context, focusing on one city's experience. In order to illuminate the evolution of the *gorod-sad*, this paper will subsequently examine official visions (as depicted in newspaper articles as well as meeting protocols of government entities) of Alma-Ata as garden city.

In fact, Alma-Ata's image as *gorod-sad* arose before Mayakovskii's poem. The 1927 decision to relocate the then-Kazakh ASSR's capital from Kyzyl-Orda to Alma-Ata ignited one of many waves of construction as the government rushed to create an appropriate capital city. Aside from building projects, these efforts included propagandizing Alma-Ata's pleasant living conditions and unique natural surroundings. An article appearing in a 1928 edition of the Soviet Steppe newspaper related that the city had existed since the twelfth century and that "above all, Alma-Ata is a *gorod-sad*," indicating that the term was in use

before "Khrenov's Tale." Yet the author's particular understanding of the *gorod-sad* highlights the abundance of surrounding orchards, not any organizational principle or feature of the city itself. Since in Russian *sad* can refer to a garden or an orchard, there is a sensation that the author was either playing with words or reinterpreting a phrase they heard but did not fully grasp. At the same time, the author manages to introduce a special local context by linking a worldwide phenomenon to Alma-Ata's apples, apricots, and other fruits.

In the same way that genes can influence multiple phenotypes, references to the *gorod-sad* could manifest differently. A 1931 article, briefly reporting on the local City Council (*Gorsoviet*), stated that "the city's planning will be carried out on the organizational principle of a *gorod-sad*," namely, that industrial zones and residential areas were to be divided into sectors, and the creation of canteens, cultural centers, and other communal establishments should be considered. Here one observes echoes of the Howardian vision, passed down through the Russian and Soviet urban planning profession, calling for conditions that will improve daily life. Moreover, this article appeared at a time when any form of *gorod-sad* supposedly had been excised from Union-level parlance and practice, indicating that even early Soviet-era urban planning may have allowed for more local influence than typically acknowledged.

Although the Howardian principle of separating residential and manufacturing zones was strictly encoded in Alma-Ata's 1936 General Plan, which also included plans for a 140-hectare park zone along the Vesnovka River, the General Plan's draft project and related documents do not

repeat the phrase *gorod-sad*. Instead they focus on what is to become Alma-Ata's defining trait: its profusion and diversity of parks, squares, and tree-lined streets and boulevards, places that "in some way complete [its] character as a 'green city.'" However, today's reader should avoid overidealizing the so-called garden city and consider the degree to which the narrative of the green city was a response to simultaneous industrialization. The greening of urban space was "imbued with ideological and utilitarian intent," a nuance observable in a subsequent 1937 guidebook: "It will be not only a *gorod-sad*, the 'father of apples;' it will be a city of light industry, a resort city, a city of the sun, of health, the fair city of Lenin and Stalin."

Yet even this narrative of the green garden city did not want for debate. While some authors wrote as though not a trace of old Vernyi, the pre-Revolutionary town, remained in the transformed socialist *gorod-sad*, other sources acknowledged that Vernyi too had its green spaces, such as those that became Gorky Park and Panfilov Park. They also referenced the city's graph paper-like layout and climate-driven traits (e.g. locating factories to the north, where pollution would drift away from the city) as related to the "principle of the *gorod-sad*." As in 1928, such phrasing indicates a separation from what one could call the "pure" *gorod-sad*, and yet it demonstrates how memes change over time, not only through mutation but also through the influence of the environment in which they occur.

As Alma-Ata's population continued its dramatic upward trajectory during and following World War II, the specific local image of the garden city became clearly defined, reproduced countless

times in guidebooks and encyclopedias that exhaustively detail the capital's best parks. Yet the need to house an ever-growing population posed a challenge to the lush oasis. The mid-1950s decision to fight urban congestion through microdistricts and satellite cities changed the landscape of Soviet urban planning and the face of Alma-Ata. While certain traits of microdistricts—self-contained communities with more fresh air and access to nature than the urban center, from which residents commuted to work—and satellite cities drew upon Howardian heritage, their development meant that the city encroached more and more upon the surrounding environment. Moreover, the constant expansion westward meant that so-called central parks were no longer central, and residents were left scrambling for places to go for strolls instead of enjoying the microdistricts' courtyards, as official policy would have had it.

With this urban development a conflict became clear, one that had existed in the image of Alma-Ata as *gorod-sad* since the first reports of a utopian city where parks and factories would coexist and continues today. On the one hand, there is an image of the Almatian *gorod-sad* as a natural Garden of Eden, an untouched sacred place thanks to its climate, mountains, and fruit orchards. Yet gardens are not naturally occurring; they are planted, watered, and tended by gardeners—by humans. In this way the city also becomes a man-made Paradise, where "greenness" means that every year the square hectareage of green space increases and tree-planting targets are overfulfilled. As Catherine Alexander puts it, "it is at once Eden and Paradise; it is a pre-Baconian idea of man in nature as opposed to man triumphing over nature through technology [...] Eden, in

other words, was the untempered, natural world; Paradise would be regained first by destroying and then by recreating Eden.”

This duality gives rise to two concepts. First is the understanding of Alma-Ata as a utopia, both in terms of achieving socialism as well as achieving civilization, a place with traditionally beautiful trees and parks instead of the dangerous mountains or the supposedly empty and alien steppe. Simultaneously, due to the tension between Eden and Paradise, a sense of anxiety about the Almatian *gorod-sad* arises. Already in 1946 the local Union of Architects declared that construction must not occur on certain streets, which would cause the city to lose its image as a garden city; in the 1960s, the fear of trees being cut down or dying due to poor irrigation resounded in popular journals—and these fears retain their resonance today. In Facebook groups and personal blogs, residents post photos of damaged trees and condemn the semi-privatization that has altered the landscape of many of Almaty’s park spaces.

The Gorod-Sad Today

Almatians today continue to reproduce the *gorod-sad* meme, as exemplified in a wide array of articles, guidebooks, and personal blogs. Yet nearly always such usage is tinged with nostalgia for a past when life was comfortable and good. Today references to the *gorod-sad* summon feelings of scorn or alarm, as exemplified in a social advertisement by Yekaterina Tulyakova bearing the slogan “Your search ‘Almaty is a gorod-sad’ did not return any results” (“Po zaprosu ‘Almaty—gorod-sad’ nichego ne naideno”), or in oft-heard refrains that “We don’t have anything in particular” when I describe my research on Almaty’s parks. Meanwhile, the city

government no longer appears to favor the old slogan. Instead Almaty is being rebranded as a green city in the sense of sustainability, a developed urban center with public transportation and renewable energy: a new manifestation of utopia hovering between city and countryside.

Many ask whether Almaty can maintain its identity as *gorod-sad*, but such a question bypasses an underlying issue, namely, the lack of a clear definition of what it means to be a garden city. Are Alma-Ata and Almaty linked to the Howardian garden city? Yes, but they belong to a different tradition, one in which the garden city becomes the Soviet *gorod-sad* overflowing with parks and boulevards, a concept that spread meme-like on local and national levels. Although this modified image of the *gorod-sad* are an important aspect of the city’s visual brand (Russian branding may not have been part of the lexicon in the 1930s, but the phenomenon existed nonetheless), branding is not only something that appears on picture postcards. Rather, branding in any era is a reflection of political and social policies that, in the case of Almaty, influenced a certain relationship to nature wherein nature is something to be calculated and harnessed for the sake of the modern human lifestyle.

Almaty can have a future as a *gorod-sad*, but in order for this image to flourish, it is necessary to decide upon a working definition of that term. While Howardian tradition is not as strong, the city has an excellent opportunity to capitalize upon its historical urban green spaces as well as surrounding landscapes and the current attention being given to environmentally-friendly policies. However, in choosing this identity, Almaty’s decision-makers

and public should also countenance the historical baggage of the term, as well as consider the influence of Kazakh and Kazakhstani culture upon it. Only with a

more nuanced understanding of the gorod-sad's genetic code will it be possible to preserve or modify the role of this identity in Almaty's future.

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ОБРАЗ ГОРОДА-САДА: АЛМАТЫ КАК ГОРОД-САД БУДУЩЕГО

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Аннотация

В данной работе рассматривается эволюция города-сада, изначально разработанная Эбенизером Говардом и доработанная градостроителями и политиками советского времени, применительно к городу Алматы прошлого и настоящего времени. Данный анализ приводит более подробное объяснение понятия "город-сад" на практиках начала и середины советского периода. Данная работа дает попытку осмысления популяризации идеи "города-сада" освещает основополагающие положения во взаимодействии природы и городской жизни. В результате исторического анализа образцового города-сада данная работа обнаруживает необходимость в более детальном осмыслении данного термина в отношении брендинга Алматы. Источниками для исследования являются архивные материалы, газеты, энциклопедии, путеводители и другие документы советского периода и настоящего времени, а также многочисленные формальные и неформальные беседы автора с жителями Алматы и Казахстана в целом по теме данного города.

Ключевые слова: Алматы, Алма-Ата, город-сад, популярная идея.

ҚАЛА-БАҚШАНЫҢ ҮЛГІСІ: АЛМАТЫ ҚАЛА-БАҚША БОЛАШАҒЫ РЕТІНДЕ

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Аңдатпа

Беріліп отырған жұмыста қала-бақшаның эволюциясы, Эбензир Говардтың әдепкідегі жобаланған жұмысы мен кеңестік саясаткерлермен қалалық сәулетшілердің жасалынып біткен жұмысы және Алматының өткені мен келешегіне қатысты қарастырылады. Бұл тұжырым кеңестік кезеңнің басы және ортасындағы тәжірибе негізінде қала-бақша түсінігіне неғұрлым егжей-тегжейлі анықтама береді. Беріліп отырған жұмыс қала-бақша идеясының көпшілікке мәнін түсінуге мүмкіндік береді, сонымен қатар қалалық өмірдің, табиғаттың өзара іс-әрекетін, негізгі ережелерін атап көрсетеді. Қала-бақша үлгісінің тарихи талдау нәтижесінде, аталмыш жұмыста Алматы бренді терминіне қатысты неғұрлым егжей-тегжейлі түсіну қажеттілігін анықтайды. Зерттеу жұмысының дерегі ретінде мұрағат материалдары, газеттер, энциклопедиялар, жолкөрсеткіштер және т.б. кеңестік кезеңнің және қазіргі уақыттың құжаттары, сонымен қатар автор Алматы мен жалпы Қазақстан тұрғындарымен ресми және бейресми келіссөздері болып табылады.

Трек сөздер: Алматы, Алма-Ата, қала-бақша, танымал идеялар.