GENERAL ARTICLES

In the shade of the chinar Dushanbe's affective spatialities

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Abstract: This article evaluates the ongoing reconstruction of Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, from the perspective of the affective registers it has elicited: from the despair of those who fondly remember the city's earlier Soviet facade to those who have benefitted from the expansion of housing stock and green space across the city center. Exploring these positions and the role of statist conceptions of modernity, personal and political memories of space, and the emotions called forth by urban redevelopment, the article elaborates on the place of affect and sentimental politics in the processes of city beautification and development. It argues that the despair experienced by city residents in their protests against redevelopment projects has both enabled and constrained citizens in terms of their participation in Dushanbe's urban development, economic redistribution, and the politics of memory.

Keywords: Class, memory, modernity, resistance, Tajikistan, urban change

Alla Sergeevna, a museum employee in Moscow, is obsessed with collecting musical artifacts for her museum, searching for them across the Soviet Union. She hears about the "White Grand," the piano of the last Emir of Bukhara, which according to legend had been gifted to the Emir by the last Russian Tsar; the Emir had wished to present the piano to his French wife, who was waiting for him in Bukhara. The Bolshevik Revolution disrupted this romantic engagement, and the piano was lost somewhere in the area of Dushanbe, at the time a small village (*kishlok*) in Central Asia. Overcome with the desire to find the piano, Alla Seergeevna embarks on a trip to Dushanbe, which had since become the

capital of Soviet Tajikistan. When she arrives, she discovers a very curious nascent city, which, while containing a modern airport, still lacks public transportation to take visitors to the city center. Alla Sergeevna, unable to compete with savvy and experienced local residents for seats on the makeshift "public" transportation, eventually takes a donkey cart into the city.

The movie *Belyi Roial'* (The White Grand), in which Soviet viewers learned about Alla Sergeevna and her adventures in Dushanbe, was filmed in 1968 by Tajikistan's Tajikfilm studio. It depicted a developing and growing city with open squares and clean boulevards. In this movie, audiences also heard a song dedicated

to the city where the white grand piano was awaiting its eventual discovery. The lyrics of the song “Dushanbe” portrays a city of “bubbling streams and ancient and proud chinars [eastern plane trees],” dipped into a valley encircled by snow-covered mountains and stretching along the Dushanbe River. “Only Dushanbe,” the song continues, “will I keep in my heart forever.”

The city that Alla Sergeevna fell in love with had, however, been built only decades before; even the proud chinars that provided shade were relatively young. Dushanbe had been planned and built by architects from Moscow and St. Petersburg, eager to try their hand at the audacity of city planning as well as, in many cases, to avoid the reach of Stalinist era repressions. Built to reflect the Soviet Union’s cultural hierarchies and expectations of a republican capital, Dushanbe came to be reminiscent of a European city (Kalinovsky 2016, 2018; Kassymbekova 2016). Throughout the Soviet period, the city was largely ethnically non-Tajik, with Russians and Russian-speaking minorities a clear majority of the population. In early 1990, however, the Tajik child Amina arrived in Dushanbe: her father had been appointed to a new position in a republican ministry. A Russian speaker who had attended Russian-language nurseries and schools, Amina was as usual placed in a Russian-language school. Arriving just before the start of Tajik civil war, at a time of turbulent violent outbreaks in the country’s south, Amina was scorned by some of her Russian and Ukrainian classmates as a “stinky refugee” (*voniuchaia bezhenka*). Later, Amina recalled, the majority of these non-Tajik pupils disappeared, their families having left for Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere in the former USSR.

Amina and her family joined and contributed to Dushanbe’s changing demographics—from a Soviet “multicultural” city to a more homogenously “Tajik” one.¹ As a non-Tajik city in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, though, Dushanbe had from the start been a potential site of conflict, as competing groups—Tajik, Russian, Soviet, urban, rural, or otherwise—all claimed the right to the shade of Dushan-

be’s chinars. When more open conflict began in the early 1990s, it was in part over rumors about the distribution of housing and access to urban resources (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013: 180). Even with the departure of Dushanbe’s European population in the 1990s, however, the struggles over the city’s proper demographic and formal shape did not subside. As this article will demonstrate, claims to the city continue to be leveled by different groups of city residents with many using reference to the Soviet past as premise and justification.² Conflict has been particularly aroused with the rapid rebuilding of the city over the past two decades, calling forth many strongly affective claims to its urban space.

This article will evaluate the ongoing reconstruction of Dushanbe from the perspective of the affective registers it has elicited, from the despair of those who fondly remember its earlier Soviet oblique to those who have benefitted from the expansion of housing stock and green space across the city center. By counterposing these positions and exploring the role of statist conceptions of modernity, personal and political memories of space and the emotions called forth by urban redevelopment, the article will elaborate on the place of affect and sentimental politics (Berlant 1999) in the processes of city beautification and development. While the desperation shown by those mourning the old Soviet city of Dushanbe may not have been able to stem the tide of construction, this article shows it was able to produce through its emotional cascade a change in the economic and social order of construction, one that brought together developers and poorer segments of the populace in a relatively fairer, if stringently marketized, redistribution of housing.

Affective and spatial resistance to history

In Dushanbe today, many residents feel that their city is “disappearing,” a word choice of regret that explains the feeling of loss experienced by many Dushanbe residents. Loss, however,

is here a relational feeling; it is not necessarily shared by all. Sharif, a young man who alternates between working in construction in Russia and driving a taxi on the outskirts of Dushanbe, was overwhelmingly happy about the changes in his city. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first residents to culturally adapt to the new Dushanbe have been migrant workers like Sharif, who had grown used to high-rises in Moscow and were finally seeing similar developments at home. Sharif, who worked in multinational construction brigades in Moscow, reported that he now proudly shared pictures of Dushanbe with his colleagues from other countries. Before, he shrugged, “what would I have shown—it was shameful how the city was so unattractive.” Today, he suggested, “we are building Dubai 2”: the beautiful (tall) buildings were something to proudly share.

There has been more to the changes in Dushanbe than just tall buildings. Strolling in Dushanbe’s city center in the spring, a visitor can today see lush gardens blooming with thousands of tulips and roses guarding government buildings. Young trees that were imported from other countries have been planted along roads significantly expanded to make space for increased automobile traffic in the city. Some of the trees quickly take to the soil and show off their fresh light green leaves, while others fail to adapt, prompting some residents to scoff that “I told you they were not proper for our climate,” and the state to quickly remove and supplant them with another type of tree. Many parks have been recently renovated, making space for children to enjoy the city. “Dubai 2” might be a bit of a misnomer, given the lushness of vegetation in Dushanbe’s city center, yet what this name posits is a kind of future or extended present that allows the city to be seen and compared without feeling shame. At the same time, though, Sharif does not know the city center well: when he works in Tajikistan he stays on the outskirts of the city, avoiding the frequent police stops in the center, where he is required to “share” his earnings with the city’s traffic police. On the outskirts, he says, it is calmer, and

one can work without interruption. He rarely sees the signifiers of modernity of which he is so proud.

While many of the new buildings in Dushanbe look like a pastiche—an odd mixture of neoclassicism and glass modernism when it comes to government buildings—or plain and tall apartment buildings, many appreciate both the height of these buildings and their aesthetics. Zarif, a young professional working in an international organization, recently purchased an apartment in one of these new buildings in the heart of the city center, citing the surprisingly bright orange color of its exterior as a cause for joy and one of the reasons for his purchase (Figure 1). From the fourteenth floor he can enjoy the beautiful view of the mountains. The building’s height, as was noted by Sharif, is also important, reinvigorating images of Moscow, Dubai, or South East Asia brought home.

In Tajikistan, the redevelopment of the capital city is also juxtaposed to the country’s chronic reliance on labor migration to Russia. At present, remittances from migrant workers in Russia constitutes approximately 30 percent of Tajikistan’s GDP, and migrant workers’ contribution to the local economy is frequently discussed locally and internationally. In this context, Dushanbe’s beautification becomes a site of assertive politics, where the achievements of urban redevelopment should be attributed, in theory, to the government and the government alone. The appointment of the president’s son, Rustam Emomali, as mayor of the city in 2017 has further anthropomorphized the city’s development in the figure of Emomali as a representative of the ruling elite. On 9 September 2018, Tajikistan’s president, Emomali Rahmon (2018), gave a speech nominally in commemoration of independence, but in fact dedicated to the improved (*obod shudan*), beautiful and modern (*zebovu peshrafta*) Dushanbe: a city, which, according to the speech, had been fully transformed (*ba kulli digargun shuda*). The complete transformation of the city had been directed toward the creation of *obod*, a word that in Tajik captures the conditions of com-

FIGURE 1. Newly completed residential building (photo: Bahovadinova 2018)

fort and cleanness; the sort of order that makes a dwelling not only livable, but also enjoyable. This creation and delivery of *obod* is reminiscent of other recent development projects, such as Bangkok's urban beautification and its local support observed by Michael Herzfeld (2006). Explaining the support of Bangkok's residents for the demolition of old buildings, Herzfeld sees the city's beautification as the architectural equivalent of politeness, in which rapid redevelopment simultaneously marks, but also masks, the structural violence of economic inequality. The lengthy discussion about Dushanbe's development in Rahmon's speech also articulates William Bissel's observation that cities are never accidental: what goes and what stays cannot be separated from questions of power (in Schwenkel 2013: 256). A city (especially a capital city) is meant to elicit feelings of pride and patriotism (Acuto 2010) and, as Mateusz Laszczkowski (2011: 80–85) has discussed in relation to Astana, produce ideological effects and restore a sense of progressive social order.

Unsurprisingly, urban redevelopment has often been discussed within the framework of modernity ("delivered development"). In many academic accounts, large-scale spatial redevelopment and reorganization is analyzed as a process of "catching up." This "feeling of being late," as observed by Li Zhang (2006: 465) in China, posits change as a process of dividing the past from the modern, thus requiring the emergence of ruin and accepting that the "present is a matter of the past" (Laszczkowski 2011: 88). The dialectic of ruination and renewal in the creation of beautiful cities also posits a transformed modus of state-citizen relations, often representing the various effects of neoliberalization (see Bissenova 2014; Goldman 2010; Graan 2013; Peck and Theodore 2015; Schwenkel 2013; Theodore, Peck, and Brenner 2011; Watson 2014). Demolition and the cleaning out of space for new buildings reflects the transformation of state power into a dispersed network of public and private institutions, making accountability for damage and ruination difficult to pursue (Chu

2014). The new spatiality of cities also shapes and transforms social life and spatial arrangements within dispersed crowdedness (Zhang 2006: 461). This is what Michael Herzfeld (2006: 142) has termed “spatial cleansing”: the conceptual and physical clarification of boundaries—not only the removal of the old, but also the belief that the old is not of value and an affront to civilized (modern) life. As Alima Bissenova (2014: 130) has also observed in relation to the construction of Kazakhstan’s new capital, Astana, in the former Soviet Union, city building represents a break with the history and legacy of the USSR. This semiotics of spatiality is both produced and experienced, and built environments embody the emotional attachments and feelings of their producers (Tuan 1977 in Lagopoulos 2009: 171). This, I suggest, creates an affective bond of person and place that can have important productive effects.

By considering the politics, power relations, and emotions associated with city redevelopment, we can approach nationalizing projects as a process of “polite” resistance to the Soviet past. In Tajikistan, the economy and political power are inimically reliant on Russia, making an open discussion about the Soviet heritage impossible. At the same time, however, in the practice of city development/demolition this past is both rejected and actively erased becoming a vital channel for discussions about the historicity of the Soviet past. The process of city redevelopment, moreover, has revealed not only disagreements over urban development’s redistributive economy, but also sharp debate and dispute about the role and nature of the Soviet state and the post-Soviet political order—as well as the emotional bonds between citizens and one or another post/Soviet model of modernity. Among many residents of Dushanbe like Sharif, who is proud of the city’s new buildings, there are others expressing frustration over the loss of history and some of the city’s famous chinars.

In the conflicts that arise over citizens’ claims to cities as a spatial representation of affective bond to society, important questions are raised about the transformation of social life in the

un/building of space: what exactly this transformation constitutes, and how can we address the gaps and mishaps happening on the path of this transformation? In Dushanbe, a court case, coping with change, or citizens’ refusal to speedily evacuate their homes provide valuable lenses to observe the affective despair that arises when an emotional bond to place is destroyed with little opportunity for recompense. While citizens’ economic interests feature prominently in Dushanbe’s city redevelopment (as elsewhere), this article explores the role of affect in articulating and en/acting discontent about the disappearance not only of a city but also of memories of political and social life. The role of despair in explicating citizens’ engagement with city redevelopment opens up new avenues to explore how feelings of loss and desperation produce affective relationships with disappearing buildings and private homes.

The processes of beautification and the building of modern cities requires intrusions into citizens’ intimate lives, as well as their memories of neighborhoods, homes, and buildings. Unsurprisingly, resistance on the part of those losing their homes has been a common attribute of city redevelopment (Herzfeld 2006: 145; Zhang 2006). This study situates resistance in the broader field of concerns activated in the affective registers of citizens in dealing with, explaining, and coping with social and spatial transformations.³ Desperation, the expression of painful feelings, constitutes an integral part of redevelopment; it provides a platform for discourse and action when other means, such as legal or lobbying channels, are ineffective. As Serguei Oushakine (2005: 6) has located despair in the crumbling social fabric of the post-Soviet Russian periphery, for example, he has also noted the accompanying responses of “decisiveness and courage.” It is in this relationship between giving up but also trying to hold on, an ambiguous condition of losing one’s epistemic ground, where emotive responses to the political are articulated and voiced.

In my understanding of affect and the affective dimensions of political life, I am guided by

the works of Lauren Berlant, whose focus on “sentimentality” is pivotal to my understanding of the affective bonds and bindings with the state.⁴ Sentimental politics is the process of using feelings of trauma, social negation, pain, or utopian ideals and dreams in the fields of policy, law, and everyday experiences of events. Berlant (2011) suggests that attachments to the political are situated within an individual’s wider sociality; I would also add spatiality as an equally important dimension. What happens when these attachments are growing thin and the few registers left in the material heritage are being rapidly razed? More importantly, what happens when policy and law become the sources of real or imagined abuses of power, while hopes for their remediation are no longer available (see Berlant 1999: 54)? Paying attention to the role of sentiment and its articulation in writing, conversations, and in court proceedings allows us to see these affective registers and emotive relationships with the city, its ecology, and the compounding and problematic category of home. As Mateusz Laszczkowski and Madeleine Reeves (2017: 4–8) have posited in their volume on affective states, attention to the affective flickers of intensity captures the ways the personal can morph into the political, offering productive ethnographic glimpses into experiences of, and participation in, the political project.

The memory of the political: Soviet modernity and un/building of a modern city

When I met Zeinab over coffee one day, she was very emotional and sad. On the way to meet me, she had seen the demolition of Dushanbe’s central post office. She was agitated, saying, “I feel like they came to my home and turned everything upside down (*perevernuli vse*),” reproachingly shaking her head. Zeinab had very close emotional attachments to the city, especially the city center: she grew up in the center, worked in the center, and socialized in the center. She

was also a young woman with a very good job, who occupied one of the highest-paid positions in the country’s international development sector. Following the understanding of affect as the interplay “of the body with the sensory world it inhabits” (Hirschkind 2006: 82; also Navaro-Yashin 2012), Zeinab’s embodied experiences of the city produced a desire for Dushanbe to remain the same; she hoped for the present not to occur. Her affective attachments were located in the specific buildings, streets, and infrastructure that she experienced daily while walking from her home to her office. When this spatial order started to rapidly change, she was frustrated at *them* coming into her city. This sentiment of anger is quite different from Sharif’s feelings about the transformation of his city, and his feelings of pride cohabitate in Dushanbe with the desperation of those who have experienced the loss of their “home.”

Zeinab is not alone; a number of Dushanbe’s well-known residents have voiced similar sentiments of painful feelings—sometimes more publicly. In June 2016, an article was published in a Dushanbe newspaper entitled “The King’s gift: Maybe it is time to move the capital to Danghara?” pondering if it might be time to move Tajikistan’s capital from Dushanbe to Danghara, a small city in the south of Tajikistan (Aziia-Plius 2016). The proposal was made by the newspaper in response to Saudi Arabia’s promise of funding the building of a large and ambitious parliamentary complex in the heart of Dushanbe. The central location in Dushanbe designated for the complex held residential apartment buildings, the Mayor’s Office, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Iranian Embassy (Figure 2), all of which had been built during the Soviet era.⁵ Dushanbe’s intelligentsia was openly critical of the planned construction: not only would the plan erase the city’s history by demolishing older structures, it was also politically questionable. Taking money from the Saudi government to level the embassy of Iran was seen as illogical. Iran was a long-time partner of the Tajik government, albeit with complicated and unresolved historical disagreements.⁶

FIGURE 2. Former Iranian Embassy (photo: Bahovadinova 2018)

The Saudi proposal had been made amid the demolition of many other buildings in the city center along Rudaki Avenue, a long street traversing the major ministries and universities (see Shermatov 2017). After losing an intense campaign to save the Mayakovskii Theatre building—one of the oldest Soviet buildings in Dushanbe—it seemed that local newspapers and the intelligentsia had lost their temper. Gulruhsor Safieva, a local poet, provided an eloquent rejection of the demolitions:

You can raze historical buildings, but you cannot rewrite history. In millions of years history will be restored. They say that victors write their own history, but I say that history writes itself. . . . As for the [newly built] buildings, I want to say there is nothing eternal in this world. Everything comes and goes. Once I was in Riga, the capital of Latvia, and I was shown the house of an executioner: it had not been razed but was preserved for future

generations. So that people could feel. No matter what our city is—whether it is socialist, communist or Tajik it should be respected. History should be respected, so others will respect you. (Aziia-Plius 2016)

For the residents resisting redevelopment, the value of material Soviet heritage lay in its preservation of memory. The memories of houses, streets, and grand arches, which allowed one to feel the city, were coming from the country's former elites: those who once had a close relationship with the built Soviet modernity and social and political order. Their relationship with the city and desperation over its loss, fascinatingly, seems to invoke the figure of Chingiz Aitmatov's (1988) *mankurt*. A critique of the Soviet modernizing project, Aitmatov's story features a *mankurt*, a slave whose memory is destroyed, leaving him obedient to his captors; in allegorical terms, a person who has lost his true self to the modernizing flattening of the Soviet project. Paradoxically, the intelligentsia's critique of

post-Soviet reconstruction was based on this same nexus of memory and identity: those who destroyed the Soviet material heritage, they suggested, were also losing their sense of self. What was not articulated in this critique, however, was whose memory was to be preserved; instead, the intelligentsia's affective responses to ruination drew upon a broader register about the symbolic value of the buildings.

Those committed to changing the city, however, also use history to support the demolition of Soviet-era buildings. Saidjafar Ismonov, a deputy in the Tajik parliament, has stated that the building of a new parliamentary complex would be “a historic act” (*istoricheskoe deyanie*). With regard to the project of demolition he noted:

None of these buildings represent any historical value. Moreover, this [Rudaki Street] is a central road; it's right across from the National Palace [the president's official residence], and it should correspond to the look of the city. No matter what country you visit, you see that opposite the administrative seat of presidents there are beautiful buildings. This will represent the state, culture, and the nation.

Ismonov also noted that the “Rokhat” teahouse—which was also the target of future demolition—while a famous place for lunch for tourists, residents, and deputies, did not have any value. This was also true for the Mayakovskii Theatre building. “What kind of culture does the teahouse represent? What architecture is there—it is neither European, nor Asian, not Tajik—it is all random (*sluchainaia*)” (Aziia-Plius 2016). Ismonov suggested it would be okay to save the Mayakovskii Theatre, because the original declaration on the formation of the Tajik SSR had been signed there. But, he added, the building was not in compliance with seismic requirements, and if an earthquake happened “Who will be responsible for people's lives?”

The demolition of “random” (read: Soviet) buildings of unclear provenance offers the new state the opportunity to arrange its capital in a more orderly way, providing buildings that are not only more stable and clearly demarcated, but also more closely reflecting proper social arrangements. As Abidin Kusno (in Bissenova 2014: 132) has observed in his urban ethnography, the state creates “spectacles of order” via “exemplary spaces” and “exemplary centers.” Yet it does more than just that. The proximity to the president's National Palace of Dushanbe's apartment buildings and simple citizen residences (Figure 3) has been presented as a political and global aberration. With the president's relocation from his more modest official Soviet residence to the recently built and ostentatious Palace, a new social organization of space was required. In this new order, the Palace would not be accessible to ordinary citizens. The state would divide the Palace and other exemplary buildings from the rest of the city with place fences and green spaces, the same parks and playgrounds that have recently grown abundant in downtown Dushanbe, for example, on the plot of land once housing the Mayakovskii Theatre.

Yet parks and trees also present a contested space of spatial affect, where memories of place and time complete with visions of properly “Tajik” modernity. In Dushanbe, trees are not only a distinct feature of the city: they also complete its symbolic and literal ecosystem. Chinars, or eastern plane trees, planted throughout Dushanbe, provide shade in the summer with their tall stature and exuberant vegetation. Many Soviet-era stories about the city, including the movie *The White Grand*, focus on the city's chinार-lined alleyways. Yet the chinars are not simply a natural backdrop; they too are part of the Soviet past, planted by Soviet authorities to organize the city space. Like their architectural peers, they have not been immune to challenges. For Dushanbe's city administrators, chinars have been a disaster waiting to happen: the tree's long and thick roots extend outwards, not downwards, a trait well adapted to Tajikistan's dry summers and

FIGURE 3. The Palace of the Nations (photo: Bahovadinova 2018)

limited groundwater but a threat to roads, sidewalks, and buildings alike. Their lustrous vegetation also means large heaps of leaves in the fall, requiring increased the workloads of city cleaners, and by extension, the city budget (Abdukakhorov 2017). As a result, in recent years, chinars have begun to disappear from Dushanbe's streets, to be replaced with Belgian chestnuts, conifers, and other "more suitable" trees.

For those with childhood memories of Dushanbe's chinars, this removal is as impactful as any, an emotive strike against experiences and emotions of place and belonging. An older professor of geology with fond memories of Soviet Tajikistan, Holnazar Muhabbatov (2013) has criticized the felling of trees justified by the state on the basis of widening parks and expanding roads for cars. Muhabbatov has cited Islamic law, considering such practices sinful, as well as European and worldwide strictures against the cutting down of trees. Ultimately, Muhabbatov situates the felling of trees within the question of what it means to be a proper city dweller, one

aspect of which, he says, is respect for trees and the need to understand their ecological value. As Muhabbatov suggests, moreover, the debate over the place of chinars in Dushanbe highlights the gap felt by many residents between their experiences of the city and the experiences of those in charge of planning and reconstruction. Safina Azizovna, a woman in her sixties who moved to Dushanbe in the 1990s, clearly expressed the sense that the interests of these two groups have diverged. She was devastated to see her beloved chinar alleyways disappear and having to walk in the city without their shade. "The chinars," she said, "they are right for our climate. They've come and planted fir trees, which provide no shade. But what do they care—they never get out of their cars!" Sweating and breathing heavily in the summer heat, Safina curses the generic "they" for submitting her body to these conditions. In this account, the city administration did not understand the value of chinars, and their relationship with pedestrian city dwellers.

What has linked Dushanbe's chinars, the demolition of many Soviet-era buildings, the changing demographics, and the separation of state buildings from residential complexes in the minds and in the criticism of the city's intelligentsia has been the new contained and exclusionary spatial arrangement for the government in the city. Sites of power, such as the new Parliamentary Complex or the National Palace, were to be geographically distanced from citizens, thus creating a very literal detachment between the ruling elite and the citizens. This proposed arrangement sat uneasily with many Dushanbe residents, who were used to a closer proximity to government buildings. It is this bifurcation between the rulers and ruled—what Gafur Shermatov (2018) has termed “feudal postmodernism” in light of the high fences growing around private homes and the elite's attempt to create “status spaces” (*statusnoe prostranstvo*). Objections to such developments, however, occurred in a context of increased financialization of redevelopment: as Christina Schwenkel (2013, 2015) has noted in her analysis of post-socialist Vietnam, the broader move toward urban reconstruction has been driven by a shift in value from infrastructure to land. This has disincentivized states and urban administrators from listening to those making claims to the symbolic and historic value of buildings. Silenced by both perceived unilateral decision-making and neoliberal economic logic, these intellectuals chose to critique the nature of the state and its relationship with its citizenship. They found a way to express their feelings of loss and despair within the affective bonds of spatiality.

By cherishing the Soviet look of Dushanbe, these activists and supporters of the previous Soviet heritage were at the same time closing their own imagination to what it might mean to be a resident of Dushanbe today. What could memories and experiences of Soviet material heritage bring to people like Sharif? What about the many “rural” residents of Dushanbe who had arrived, bringing their families and *kazans* (traditional cast-iron cooking pots) in search

of work and improved livelihoods? In articulating their resistance within the framework of memory, these intelligentsia foreclosed on any opportunity for a wider and more inclusive challenge to the ongoing demolitions. They did not appeal to or seek alliances with the majority of Dushanbe's residents, many of whom were experiencing completely opposite affective attachments to new, post-Soviet modes of modernity on display.

The wages of despair

For many of those directly affected by demolitions, Soviet history was in fact not the most immediate concern when it came to protecting their homes. Instead, personal family histories and attachment to one's home provided a much stronger basis on which to resent and refuse demolition plans. Adolat Batoeva, a professor at one of Dushanbe's local universities, was one of the first to experience demolition and the challenges of resisting the state. She lived in a private home in a central Dushanbe neighborhood previously populated by the local Jewish community. This is a quiet neighborhood a short walk from the city center, where narrower streets fulfill the function of both roads and sidewalks. When Batoeva's demolition saga began in the early 2000s, this was still an undeveloped neighborhood with many middle-class and poorer families, the former living in brick houses with larger courtyards, and the latter in thin-walled two-story homes built out of thin wooden boards. Today, the neighborhood has undergone its own redevelopment, with smaller homes replaced with grand two- and three-story houses, which now belong to the rich and are often rented at high prices to international organizations. Twenty years ago, however, little attention was paid to this neighborhood.

Thus when Batoeva and a few other families received eviction orders, it was unexpected and sudden. A youth complex, the families were told, was going to be built on the territory where their houses stood. While her neighbors qui-

etly packed their belongings and left, Batoeva refused to leave her home in exchange for an apartment provided to her by the City Administration (Taj. *Khukumat*) on the outskirts of the city. This was in keeping with Batoev's character. As a local professor, Batoeva was well known for her principled nature. When Tajikistan's civil war officially ended in 1997, a large cohort of former combatants were allowed to enter various universities' law departments. When Batoeva was administering an exam, one former combatant entered fully armed, dressed in military fatigues and a Kalashnikov hanging over his shoulder, in an attempt to intimidate the examiners. Looking up at him, Batoeva simply said: "Okay, you are going to leave, disarm, and then reenter the room" to the horror of other professors present. Former combatants were not known as pliable students; Batoeva had a reputation for being even more immovable.

After a few heated discussions with city representatives who had been coming to persuade her to relocate, Batoeva was finally brought to court by the *Khukumat* under the fabricated criminal charge of having assaulted one of these representatives. Batoeva stood in court and defended herself, shocked by the arbitrariness of the situation. The court proceedings, in which she, a very short woman, was charged with assaulting a man who stood two meters tall, embodied the absurdity of the charges (as well as the place of the law in the state's specific modality of control). She had been brought to court for her defiance and principled nature, which until that day served her well, even disarming former combatants. Notwithstanding her impassioned challenge against the fabricated charges, however, Batoeva was ultimately convicted of assaulting the court officer and given a probationary (*uslovnii*) sentence of two years. Her eviction order stood.

Throughout the process, however, Batoeva resisted and challenged the hearing procedures. Fighting for her innocence, she was very well aware of her bleak chances to win. In her desperation, she dared to resist the then almighty mayor, whose close association with the presi-

dent made him immune to the law and societal opinion. Batoeva did not want to leave her home because it was everything to her: it was the memory of her marriage, the first steps of her children, and the place where she had celebrated her professional and personal successes. It was also a place of remembrance for her deceased husband, who, two days before he died, had climbed to the roof to patch a few cracks and cover it with a new layer of paint so that Adolat would not have to deal with these matters for at least a year after his passing. For Batoeva, this house was much more than the simple material heritage of the Soviet state: it was her life and memories. From her perspective, the erasure of this particular building was not a matter of postcolonial critique; it was the destruction of her world.⁷

Batoeva had also refused to leave her home for economic reasons, as the apartment offered to her in exchange for her home was in a newly built building on the outskirts of Dushanbe. When she was forced to move, and after her house was razed, I visited her in her new home, where I found her scared and despairing that matters might never change. Her new apartment seemed shaky and poorly built, and she worried about earthquakes. She was equally scared for her children, as she felt the full force of the mayor's office and its abuse of the law. Most of her friends had also stopped speaking to her. "Everyone has turned away from me, only one friend came to my court hearing," she said, recalling the trauma of past years. Yet even as she despaired about improving her situation, she continued to advocate on her own behalf, appealing to international colleagues and declaiming the injustice of her case. Shortly thereafter, she was provided with a better apartment, also in a new apartment block built on the bank of Dushanbe River, which she liked a bit better. She was still skeptical about the safety of her new home, but the location was better.

Batoeva's affective register of despair in response to her eviction illustrates, on the one hand, the defeat of resistance to Dushanbe's urban redevelopment—yet it also shone pre-

viously unseen light on the *Khukumat's* harsh response to any objection to its plans. In time, this led to changes in the practices of urban development in Dushanbe. A local NGO started to provide pro-bono legal services to residents like Batoeva and was provided with funding by an international organization. Court cases and publicity over these cases, surprisingly, led to a more redistributive form of city redevelopment. Today, residents whose homes are to be demolished receive apartments in buildings built on the same site of their former homes; they also receive monthly rent compensation for the duration of construction. Although Batoeva did not greatly benefit from her case or her desperation, she and others like her made demolition more desirable for many, especially for the poorer residents of Dushanbe.

A new demolition order

Rano was standing in a corner of the room, giving orders to the man in charge of a few workers who were removing absolutely everything from the walls and windows of the apartment. We were standing in the apartment's former living room, with window frames already removed, by a door leading to a small balcony, the walls of which had intricate designs that let in plenty of light. The apartment stretched across the building, letting in the sun in the mornings from the kitchen side, which also held a small balcony, and then later in the day through the living room balcony. Rano, peering out through the window, showed me the thickness of the brick wall—about half a meter deep. The walls looked massive from the inside. There was lots of noise in the apartment; the workers were tearing out the bathroom fixtures. Rano had asked them to take out literally everything.

The apartment had once belonged to a high-ranking Soviet bureaucrat, a Russian woman, who sold it very cheaply to Rano's father. This woman had been fleeing then Tajik civil war in the early 1990s and had asked Rano's father, who also worked for the government, to buy

it from her.⁸ She dreaded the idea that it could be occupied by commanders or fighters if she simply left it behind. Out of friendship, Rano's father had purchased it, complaining about the unnecessary cost. After the war, however, the apartment had benefited their family quite well as both a central home and a source of income when rented to foreign expatriates. Located in a quiet part of the city center, in a three-story white building with intricate decorative details in the Stalinist neoclassical style, the building had been built and designated for Soviet party officials. With high ceilings, spacious rooms, and large hallways, it was a very beautiful apartment. When I asked Rano if she was sad to see the apartment demolished, she shrugged.

In many respects, however, Rano's calm response to the demolition of her family's apartment also rested on the knowledge that at least they would be compensated for the loss. A new government regulation dictated that residents of demolished buildings be offered housing in the new and modern apartment buildings built on the spot, along with monthly compensation for rent in the amount of 400 USD per month for two years while the new building was under construction. These represent fair financial compensations in a country where the average salary is still under 100 USD a month, and they meant that many of Dushanbe's city center residents are notably happier about the prospect of having their homes demolished.

This is especially true among the less privileged segments of society. Apart from homes once occupied by Soviet governing elites and neoclassic apartment buildings, the center of Dushanbe also houses a fair number of "Finnish" houses, two- and three-story buildings built of clay and straw in the 1920s and 1930s as a speedy and cheap—and initially planned as temporary—solution to the endemic Soviet housing shortage. In the area around Mirzo Tursunzade Street, a thoroughfare that parallels Dushanbe's central Rudaki Avenue, two of these "Finnish" houses were demolished in 2019. Their residents, some of whom worked as informal taxi drivers for their wealthier neighbors living in

brick apartment buildings, all very happily collected the documents necessary to legalize the demolition. They would soon be living in a modern multistory apartment complex, together with the residents of apartment buildings where they could have not previously afforded to live. This new more redistributive form of city development had been earned through the emotive despair of people such as Botoeva, who also attributes the broader benefits of redistribution in part to her own ordeal of losing her house and the memories it represented.

By way of conclusion: The hero developers

The sales office had been built into a shed sitting on the edge of a building site partially under construction in the spring of 2019. Behind the office there was a tall, four-meter, green fence that hid the construction site. Two middle-aged women were sitting on chairs and speaking with a younger woman, probably around 25, who sat behind a table covered in sheets of paper and fashion magazines. All three women were speaking in Russian, indicating their social status and “urban” class identity in Dushanbe, a city that has become a dominantly Tajik-speaking environment.

The two older women had come to discuss buying an apartment in the building to be built behind the fence. “I will be able to look out the window and see children playing below,” one of the two commented to the other, “and it won’t be in the street!” She turned to the saleswoman, who had been smiling at them, “But what is your final price?” The saleswoman responded: “Okay, this is the twelfth floor,” and taking out a calculator and punching in some figures, “it will be 600 dollars [per square meter].” The two women objected. “Oh! That’s very expensive. We just came from a nearby new building; there, they offered us 450. Why is yours so expensive? We’re paying upfront; no one pays upfront right now. How about 500? We just like this neighborhood;

the location is good.” Yet the saleswoman was unmoved. “Who is the property developer (*zastroishchik*) there?” She asked, emphasizing that this was really the most important question, “don’t you know who the *zastroishchik* is?”

These negotiations continued for a fierce 40 minutes without clear resolution; the two women ultimately left to shop around at other construction sites’ sales offices, where photos of new buildings were being shared together with floor plans. The offices also represent authority: the legitimacy of the building and its expected quality are embodied not in the state or its regulations, but instead in one person. This is the property developer (*zastroishchik*), whose reputation determines the willingness of many to purchase apartments in a building. Depending on the *zastroishchik*, some buildings are felt to be more reliable and worth living in. When customers shop around and try to get the best possible price for apartments, they are often told that the price was higher because of the *zastroishchik*. If his past buildings have stood the test of time, the implication went, the new ones were to be expected to perform accordingly.

When I asked Rano if her family was okay with the plans for their new building, she quickly said: “Well, we know the *zastroishchik*: he’s an Urgut guy (*urgutskii parnishka*); he builds solidly.” Without mentioning his name, Rano identified the developer as someone reliable, belonging as he did to the Urgut minority group, who are considered more entrepreneurial than the average Tajikistani. But more than an entrepreneur, this developer represented the organization of care for the building’s residents: his company would be responsible for the maintenance of the territory and buildings. In many regards, this form of governing urban space, in which individual builders became the caretakers of city blocks, was replacing the collapsed Soviet practice, when the state had provided for buildings’ maintenance. I remembered this conversation when I left the sales office on the construction site, walking upward on a street that was fully under “redevelopment.” I was puzzled

that the seller never asked what materials the new building uses, never invoked the law or the relevant building codes. Would buyers and sellers not be interested in these matters, given the proclivity of the local topography to quite frequent earthquakes? (Batoeva, for example, had been skeptical and afraid of the apartments provided to her because of their seeming lack of earthquake proofing.) For most buyers, however, the figure of the *zastroishchik* and the personal trust he embodies, allows for sidestepping regulations, and, by extension, the state: the individual developer assumes the role of safeguarding the newer buildings. The new city construction was reifying the emerging post-socialist social and political order; in this process of production, the *zastroishchik* was coming to embody the true hero of Dushanbe's city beautification, bringing to construction sites not only dust and brick and glass, but also the voiced sentimentalities of elites and poor like.

In the capital of Kazakhstan, Nursultan (Astana), Laszczkowski (2011) has considered the ideological affects the new city can offer: those arriving experience and participate in large scale city beautification. These ideological affects, as he vividly illustrates, are not unilaterally shared; they create social division in places like Dushanbe. The process of beautification, the mishaps of court cases, and the refusal of some residents to support local visions of "modernity" allow us to situate these processes in larger questions about what it means to be a city dweller, evaluating both an elite's refusal to accept changes, as well as a more sanguine response on the part of large segments of city residents. In many regards, resistance to Dushanbe's redevelopment has been largely articulated through words or the unwillingness to vacate one's home, a desperate refusal to accommodate the processes of beautification. Interestingly, although individual voices of resistance had little expectation for recompense and reflected an affect of hopelessness, enough outcry and court cases have in the end effected a more redistributive order. While failing to gar-

ner support outside of those sharing their own experiences of the Soviet project, the Soviet-era elite's sentimental politics contributed to an alliance between the poor and the developers: the former have been provided with more equitable access to apartments and the latter to a more amenable populace of residents.

The developer (*zastroishchik*) as hero entrepreneur—one even thanked by Tajikistan's president in his 2018 speech—also opens up a new perspective: looking for the "state" in the context of marketized city transformations and not always finding it in state institutions. On the one hand, the state became tangible and made visible in the articulation of residents' discontent, thus becoming a "dark assemblage" (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017) and the unitary "they" of residents' approbation. Yet the *zastroishchik* points to an overall awareness of the disaggregated nature of the state, with state officials endowed to project a future city over which they have little practical control. In contrast to the "socialist affect" of city building that directly organized and planned cities, boulevards, and chinार-lined alleys and celebrated the workers that built them, the "post-socialist affect" (Schwenkel 2013) is amorphous and can celebrate neither the state nor workers, only entrepreneurs and apartment buyers. Building cities in market environments means their ideological affects are haphazardly produced, and the order of the modern city requires not only the transformation of state power (Chu 2014) but also the slippage in the meaning of modernity and the proper form for a "beautiful" city.

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Notes

1. I keep “Tajik” in quotation marks because this category flattens the ethnic diversity of the country into the national image of a Tajik. See the discussion in Bahovadinova (2016). Demographic changes in Dushanbe predated the civil war, but were exacerbated by it; see Korobkov and Zaionchovskaia (2004) and Kul’chik, Rumiantsev, and Chicherina (1990). For a recent piece on the perspective of “indigenous” Dushanbe dwellers (*korennye zhiteli*, many of whom are not ethnically Tajik, see Shermatov 2020).
2. As it is beyond the scope of this article, I will not directly address conflicts between city residents and new arrivals.
3. Academic works have privileged statist imaginations and aspirations for a better future, as well as ideological promises and crypto-colonialism in explaining the feelings of catching up, speeding up, or being late for modernity. While citizens’ resistance or support features prominently, few works have investigated the ideological and emotional precursors to resistance, such as desperation.
4. In my understanding of the state, I am guided by the anthropological literature: the state as an idea, a unifying principle for a plethora of governing practices and institutions, the state as experienced in everyday life. See Abrams ([1977] 1988); Foucault (1980, 1991); Mitchell (1999); Reeves (2014); Taussig (1992).
5. The Iranian Embassy occupied the former headquarters of the Tajik Republican KGB, a surprisingly green and leafy compound behind the Ministry of Agriculture.
6. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Soviet and subsequently independent Tajikistani governments have been skeptical of the Iranian state’s overtly religious stance on politics. In addition, during the Tajik Civil War (1992–1997), the Iranian government provided support to activists and politicians from the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) that had ultimately lost the war.
7. Tajikistan has a notable history of state-sanctioned forced displacement. For the Soviet period see Ferrando (2011); Kurbanova (1993).
8. See Andrei Volos’s novel *Hurramabad* ([2000] 2017) for a discussion of the desperation felt by Russian residents abandoning their homes during the start of the Tajik Civil War.

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