

Building for the future

The role of British architects in Kazakhstan

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Sir Alan Duncan
KCMG MP

Khan Shatyr

In the mid 19th century, British architect-turned-artist Thomas Atkinson and his wife Lucy made a journey on horseback across the territory of what is now Kazakhstan, becoming the first Europeans to visit some areas and along the way producing a son whom they named Alatau Tamchiboulac. Their travels are commemorated in *South to the Great Steppe: The Travels of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson in Eastern Kazakhstan, 1847-1852* by Nick Fielding, published by FIRST. The intrepid travellers frequently visited yurts, where they were made welcome by the locals, becoming perhaps the first Britons to note this traditional form of architecture which has recently inspired the work of Sir Norman Foster and Asif Khan in Astana.

In 1996, H.E. President Nursultan Nazarbayev chose the small provincial town of Akmola in the north of Kazakhstan to become the new capital, replacing the established capital Almaty in the far south of the country. The town was renamed Astana, literally meaning “the capital” in Kazakh, but a word that according to Jonathan Aitken in his book on Kazakhstan is a subtle one, also “implying the flight of an eagle, or a winged journey into the future”.

Just two years after its inception, Astana was inaugurated as Kazakhstan’s new capital on 10th June 1998. Sometimes described as the “Dubai of the Steppes”, Astana today is an impressive sight. As Sir Alan Duncan MP, British Minister for Europe and the Americas, put it when he visited the city in August 2017:

“As I look around, I am stunned by the sight of a gleaming

new capital city arising from the eternal steppes. Astana is a truly magnificent achievement.”

Duncan made these comments at the Nazarbayev Centre, the archive and library of the President of Kazakhstan. This distinctive bowl-like building, topped by a vast glass oculus, was designed by British architect Sir Norman Foster and his team. This was not Foster’s first work for the President. Senior Partner of Foster+Partners Nigel Dancy recalls:

“In the summer of 2004 we got a phone call from Norman, who was on holiday in Cap Ferrat at the time. He said the President of Kazakhstan wants a pyramid. It has to be finished in 21 months. Let your imagination soar.”

The Palace of Peace and Reconciliation was opened two years later on 1st September 2006, in time to host the triennial Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. The 62m high pyramid is clad in a lattice of stainless steel with an apex of stained glass designed by British artist Brian Clarke and featuring the dove of peace. The Palace houses educational facilities, a national centre for Kazakhstan’s various geographical and ethnic groups, and a 1,500-seat opera house.

Foster+Partners latest work in Astana is Khan Shatyr, literally the “Tent of the Khan”. Clad with ethylene tetrafluoroethylene (ETFE), the giant structure with its quilted fabric roof houses a shopping mall and entertainment centre sheltered in a climatic envelope - a “world within” from the harsh conditions of the steppe. There is even a waterpark and Sky Beach Club.

London based architect Asif Khan also drew on nomadic tradition when he designed the UK Pavilion for Astana EXPO 2017. His tent-like structure, with a visionary 360-degree landscape and a soundscape by Brian Eno, was awarded silver medals for Exhibition Design and Visitor Experience.

One of the panel of judges commented:

“The United Kingdom’s artistic and interactive interpretation of a yurt was beautiful. The environment that element created was unique and powerful. The structure was like a rare and precious element that compels humans to gravitate toward it and interact with it. Touching the spokes was like playing a giant harp that wraps around you and emits light instead of music.”

The UK Pavilion provided an inspirational setting to draw together the many corporate, political, academic and cultural leaders from the UK who visited Astana this summer for the hugely successful EXPO 2017. E

