

# Expressions of National Identity in the Landscape Architecture Projects in Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

One of the important parameters of the quality of the urban environment is its identity. The concept of identity has a broad context. Identity has mainly been studied in the humanities such as psychology, philology, philosophy, sociology and anthropology. The process of globalization, leading to a blurring of the borders between cultures, is bringing to the fore the problem of national and regional identities in the architecture and landscape of the urban environment.

This article examines the actualization of the concept of identity in architecture, urban development and landscape architecture. It focuses on sustainability of national and regional identity manifested through place identity. The main positions of research from other countries with the basis of identity have been analyzed according to the landscape philosophies of the XXI century. Through the analysis of scientific research in the field of cultural science, regional roots, signs and symbols have been identified as a basis for landscape practices in the urban environment of Kazakhstan.

The study used complex methods of historical, ethnographic, cultural and architectural landscape studies examining the manifestations of identity in the traditional culture of Kazakhs. It produces a comparative analysis of ideas about identity in Kazakh traditional music, decorative and applied art. It also carries out structural and morphological analysis of project materials on landscape architecture of Kazakhstan. Moreover, a comparative analysis of individual objects of landscape architecture of XX and XXI centuries has been conducted.

The paper produces new perspectives on nation-building efforts of Kazakhstan through designed landscapes since independence, elucidating the symbolic language of national identity manifested across major public parks and plazas.

**Keywords:** Comfortable urban environment, Urban sustainability, Globalization, Urbanization, Landscape philosophy, Identity, Traditional ornaments.

## Introduction

The creation of a comfortable urban environment and the maintenance of a high quality of life for its population are the most important targets for designers who anticipate the future and shape the present. The generally accepted paradigm in modern urban planning is the sustainability of the urban environment, which depends largely on natural resources, but urban identity as a cultural heritage is also important in this process.

One of the important parameters of the quality of the urban environment is its identity. The concept of identity has a broad context. Studies of identity have mainly been carried out in the humanities, such as psychology, philology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology (Kaymaz, 2013; Skalkin, 2017; Kassim et al., 2018). In psychology, the term "identity" was introduced for the first time by the American psychologist Erickson (1996), who used this concept both in terms of the uniqueness of the individual and the involvement with the world. In the field of psychology, Aslanova (2020) examines social and personal identities. Esina (2011) notes that identity of a people can be national and regional, and their relationships in different countries and historical periods can also change. She studied the indicators of identity in the regional culture of France, presenting the evolution of views on regional identity through the lens of language development. She analyzes existing concepts—"experienced space" and justifies new—"memory places", objects of symbolic value, "force-words", "concept of culture", and "indicator (marker) of regional identity" with the establishment of a hierarchy of system of traits, which, in some cases, can be converted into a key marker as the most characteristic feature of the region.

Gurin (2014), conducting research in line with the philosophy of identity, sees into it as an anthropological phenomenon and divides it into external and internal. The external type is based on external similarity, and the main categories are advanced visual image, and representation. Inner identity relates to the common ground; the coincidence on some internal properties. Therefore, she puts it as more substantial. Both types have an authentic identity problem. Gurin builds all conclusions on the self-determination of the person and his/her attempts to "stand out of his/her isolation in openness", abolition of borders, that is, identity as self-improvement, dictated by the inner need.

The definition of identity has various usages. All its interpretations have helped researchers in the previous decade to develop the basis of the concept of identity to define its spatial dimension. In order to enhance the sustainability of the urban environment in a globalizing world, research into the concepts, identities of the physical environment—urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture and design—is a crucial task (Lukashchuk et al., 2023). The process of globalization, leading to a blurring of the borders between cultures brings to the fore the problem of identifying national and regional identities in architectural and landscape organization of the urban environment. Identity in landscape architecture of Kazakhstan and in various forms of art are expressed through a symbolic system. Through objects of landscape architecture, as well as through the architecture of a particular place, society can express self-identification (Kozbagarova, 2018; Srail and Kozbagarova, 2020).

This paper aims to elucidate how Kazakh national identity is expressed in major public landscape architecture projects in contemporary Kazakhstan. It focuses specifically on landscape architecture in the post-independence period. It analyses leading projects to provide insights into how designers have sought to develop a distinctly Kazakh landscape aesthetic rooted in the nation's culture and history. Examining the physical manifestations of identity deepens understanding of Kazakhstan's efforts to shape a unique architectural language since gaining sovereignty.

Its objectives are:

1. To provide a context for identity in landscape architecture and related fields, summarizing historical and theoretical dimensions of national identity in Kazakhstan.
2. To present notable landscape architecture projects, analyzing elements that convey Kazakh identity, and ultimately synthesizing findings to uncover shared themes and meanings.

## Literature Review

Analyzing the urban environment, Day (2000) notes, "The main personal problem is the loss of context with which it is possible to identify oneself personally". The ways of solving this problem are considered through the research of recent years, devoted to the development of theoretical foundations of the issue. Professional articles on "spirit of place", characteristics of factors of identity, regionality of architecture are devoted to this. For example, Skalkin (2017) deepens the theory of identity through the consideration of different understandings of the meaning of identity, and infers factors that correspond to the basic interpretation of identity in the urban environment: "internal" (regular and irregular) and "external" – borrowed, imported. Then to regular "form-factors" are included from geographical, climatic and historical, and to irregularities – social, cultural, economic, political and technological. An irregular group of factors also correlates with external/input factors. Skalkin has also developed a definition of architectural identity for the urban environment:

"Naturally formed holistic recognizable collection of material and non-material features of the urban environment, oriented on internal perception, conditioned by identity with local factors and perceptions of residents about their city".

(Skalkin,2018:147)

Skalkin' (2017, 2018) definition of architectural identity emphasizes local factors and perceptions of residents. However, there is a lack of a specific exploration of how these local factors are incorporated into landscape architecture projects in Kazakhstan. It is proposed to integrate into the modern urban analysis methods partially borrowed from applied humanities. Efimov and Mina (2021) draw out aspects that form an urban identity as: 'the soleness of the city, its uniqueness', 'the iconic place', 'urban myths, stereotypes', 'local stories', 'the identity of the city', 'degree of love and attachment of residents to their home, homeland', and 'cohesion of the city community, participation'. Although Efimov and Mina (2021) propose integrating applied humanities into urban analysis, there is little empirical research on how these methods have been applied in contemporary landscape architecture projects in Kazakhstan.

Skopina (2012) dealing with the aspect of the theory of landscape architecture explores the concept of 'place' and perception of 'place' in philosophy, architecture and art of the end of XX century. She forms the concept of place in modern architectural science (based on the example of France). Spatial factors characterizing the concept of a place in the architecture of the European garden have been identified: location, boundary, architectural elements and their evolution in theoretical aspects has been considered. Skopina (2012) explores the concept of "place" in architecture, based on the example of France, and offers an interesting perspective. However, it remains unclear how this concept applies to the landscape architecture projects in Kazakhstan, particularly those that seek to express national identity.

In Kazakhstan, a number of architectural studies explore the issue. Sabitov (2007) has identified the unique spatial model in the architecture of Kazakhstan. Sabitov has been guided by the methodological position of Azizyan (1987), based on the analysis of visual arts. Sabitov's (2007) identification of a unique spatial model in the architecture of Kazakhstan lacks a comprehensive exploration of how this spatial model translates into the landscape architecture realm, and how it manifests in the contemporary projects. Abdrassilova and Danibekova (2021) have examined public buildings in Kazakhstan of the Soviet period with the architecture of the beginning of the XXI century and note that since 1991, there has been a gradual transition from monumentalism to avant-garde, supported by regional identity (Kerimkhulle et al., 2023).

The influence of religion, particularly Islam, is another key theme in the literature. Blair & Bloom (1994) details the impact of Islam on architecture across the Middle East and Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. They note the incorporation of Islamic elements, such as ornamental patterns and geometric shapes, into Kazakhstan's landscape architecture as evidence of the country's Islamic heritage (Matrouk and Goussous, 2011).

In conclusion, the literature reviewed reveals an increasing interest in the concept of identity within the urban environment, with a particular focus on architectural elements. While significant contributions have been made towards understanding the factors and aspects that shape urban identity, there are gaps in the research, specifically in the context of contemporary

landscape architecture projects in Kazakhstan. There is a need to explore how spatial models, local factors, and the concept of 'place', shifts in architectural styles, and community participation influences the expression of national identity in landscape architecture projects. Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to the unique national identity expressed in Kazakhstan's contemporary landscape architecture.

### **Research Methods**

This study investigates the influence of nomadic worldview and the quest for national identity on the decorative and applied arts and the landscape design and architecture of Kazakhstan. It utilized an exploratory approach that combined qualitative and quantitative research methods. To understand the nomadic worldview, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. This involved examining various historical and anthropological texts, academic papers, and books. This literature review provided insights into the symbols and motifs that are commonly associated with the nomadic culture.

In the decorative and applied arts segment, a detailed analysis of the symbolism and motifs found in jewelry and other art forms was conducted. This included interpreting the meaning and significance of various symbols, such as the 'three space zones with four spatial coordinates', the S-shaped motifs, the circle, the triangle, and the cross. The role of jewelry in culture was explored, focusing on the symbolism of protection, fertility, and good wishes embedded in these art forms. In the landscape design segment, a variety of parks and gardens across Kazakhstan were examined. This included analyzing the specific design elements used in these spaces, such as color, form, and the inclusion of specific symbols. The examination also looked at how these design elements relate to the concepts of regional and national identity.

To understand the role of color in the decorative and applied arts of Kazakhstan, a content analysis of various art forms was conducted. This content analysis looked for the presence and use of specific colors and how they correspond to ethno-cultural markers. The content analysis also examined the way color has been used to reflect the Turk-Tengrian culture and the subsequent influence of Islam.

Lastly, the influence of regional scientific developments in social philosophy and art on the creation of regional identity in the objects of landscape architecture was examined. This involved a review of both primary and secondary sources that address the concept of identity in Kazakhstan.

This study was conducted under the framework of interpretive research, wherein the research findings are interpreted within the context of the data, rather than being generalized to a broader population. Therefore, the results of this study reflect the specific situations and cultural influences that have shaped the landscape design and architecture in Kazakhstan.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Zoch (2015) in the introduction to the issue titled "Landscape Identity" notes that landscape architects should be able to read, transmit, maintain and create both footprints in the landscape and points, places of identification. Moore (2015) emphasizes that the key role that landscape plays in shaping identity, culture, self-confidence and value in everyday life is not fully understood. He provides a definition of the landscape that currently occupies a central place in the International Landscape Convention (ILC) of the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) in Kazakhstan. A new philosophy of the landscape based on identity has been substantiated. According to him, landscape is not just about the countryside or heritage, and it's not just about physical objects. The essence of its concept includes "our values and memories, our sense of place, culture and identity" (Makulova et al., 2023). This is what we see and experience around us.

It is also argued that this broader view of landscape contributes to addressing major global challenges as a result: industrialization, demographic shifts, climate change, deforestation and natural resource depletion (Annenkov, 2022; Kornilova et al., 2023). This view of the environment contributes to the creation of modern, physical and cultural landscape

structures, which on the one hand respond to scale and context and to local and regional traditions, and on the other hand is open to perspective ideas (Pohranychna, 2023). The visual and spatial nature of these ideas makes such a comprehensive landscape vision attractive enough, contributing to significant transformations in the XXI century.

In the history of the practice of landscape design on the territory of Kazakhstan, the concept of an archetype of the Kazakh High School (Kozbagarova, 2010) was not revealed in previous scientific research. In this study, the hypothesis of developing the concept of regional identity of a landscape architecture object was based on the assumption that its basic principles can be inferred through related art forms. The various arts in the basic art sources, when considering the material existence of artistic form, are grouped into different classes.

In landscape design, one of the important means of compositional modeling is color. In Turgambaeva (2011), who studied the features of the aesthetic and artistic structure of color as the most important ethno-cultural marker, emphasizes that the national color is most actively identified through applied arts and is widely represented in ornamental art. The oldest monuments of Kazakhstan demonstrate, as well as all over the world, three "main" colors: white, red (silver charm, prosperity, health) and black (strong, enduring). To the culture of Turks-Tengrians, professing the oldest religion of nomadic inhabitants of the Eurasian steppes ascend stable preferences of yellow and blue colors as the unity of the Mother of the Earth (Gerana) and the God of Heaven Tengri (Kim, 2017; Seo et al., 2021), as a sign of the included in the state symbolism of independent Kazakhstan. With the spread of Islam, the decorativeness of Arab-Muslim art is perceived, having preserved in coloristic its own feeling, different from the Islamic bright color. In addition, this study notes the specificity of color perception of Kazakhs, as well as other Turko-steppe peoples with a predominance of mixed tones: blue-green, green-yellow, yellow-orange, which naturally corresponded to the color of the natural environment. Bichrome, polychrome up to 9-10 colour combinations were used.

The research base of the issue of identity of objects of landscape architecture of Kazakhstan was formed on the results of modern regional scientific developments in the field of social philosophy, and various directions of art. The mainstreaming of the problem of identity was manifested during the period of the acquisition of state independence by the Republic of Kazakhstan and precisely in its connection with the national issue (Shaikemelev, 2013). In the analysis of theoretical issues of national identity of Kazakhstan, it was revealed that this category in scientific sources differentiates into two groups: civil (aimed at the "formation of a single Kazakh nation from a multi-ethnic society on the basis of community of citizenship") and national (identity of Kazakhs) (Kolbachayeva, 2019). From objects of landscape architecture preserved in the XX century the main object in any city of Kazakhstan was a multi-functional park or a garden. In this period, the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic was Almaty. Naturally, there was a wide range of landscape objects.

The beginning of the formation of the largest such object: the Kazennyi Garden was laid at the end of the XIX century on the basis of an urban nursery with a fairly simple regular layout. In 1928, a practical model of a multifunctional park—the Central Park of Culture and Recreation with a clear functional zoning—was implemented in Moscow. The Central Park of Culture and Recreation had a wide range of functions. In 1935, at the state level (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) it was decided that it was necessary to form parks of culture and recreation in all cities of the country. Thus, this type of parks began to be created in all countries of the socialist camp (Danchuk et al., 2021).

In Vernom (later Almaty) the Kazennyi Garden was renamed Vernenskii, Almaty and was subject to reconstruction. In 1935, the garden was given a new name: 'Gorky Culture and Recreation Park'. The plan of 1959 demonstrates the introduction of the three-beam into its parterre part, which came into the world landscape design from Italian town planning, cultural and educational (on the basis of the cinema 'Udarnik' built in the 30s) and amusement, sports and children's zones. The planning structure was added by landscape planning. Regional identity was manifested mainly in the selection of endemic single native species of plant tree and shrub assortment (Kozbagarova, 2020). The modern experience of regional landscape



design is built just in line with the following two groups of the category of 'identity' for the Republic of Kazakhstan:

1. Civil – ethnographic zone in the Museum-Reserve of Architecture and Life, city Ust-Kamenogorsk, where the rural architecture of 16 estates (residential houses of 13 national diasporas living in the territory of Kazakhstan) and 3 public buildings.
2. National – National Cultural Complex "Ethnoaul" area of 1.6 hectares, city Turkestan (cultural capital of the Turkic world) is the continuation of the museum-memorial complex of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi (sheikh, founder of the Turkic branch of Sufism, poet) where you can get acquainted with the Kazakh traditions, customs and culture of the Kazakh people (Fig. 1). In the complex, an attempt has been made to form an image of an open steppe space filled with the traditional dwelling of nomads, a street of artisans from clay buildings, an Eastern market. Sphere of ethnocomplex decorated with zoomorphic sculptural composition 'Tabun', traditional pony-cart, scaled pottery household utensils. In the Khan's yurt you can get acquainted with the canons of ornamental decoration of the interior of the traditional Kazakh mobile home.



**Fig. 1:** National-Cultural Complex "Ethnoaul"

Source: Author

The first President's Park was laid in Almaty in 2000 by the author's team 'Center of urban project' (Baymagambetov, Mametov & Khairov, 2000). Initially, the project of Dendrological park 'XXI century' with an area of 74 hectares, later renamed into the Park named after the First President. The object represents the regional identity through the selection of plant tree-shrubs assortment of various landscape zones of Kazakhstan. The sculpture of the first president of the country on the territory of the park with a quotation of unity of the Kazakh society also gives a reason to attribute this object in the category of identity to the group 'civil'.

In the same year 2000 'Frame art' (Gerasimovich, Tsubakuro, & Hwan) the project 'Presidential Park' was developed for the city of Astana. The concept of this object is based on a mythological basis, the legend of ancient nomads (the image of the bird Samruk) and the iconic object: the Palace of Peace and Harmony, designer Norman Foster. The stone water pool in the form of a bird is horizontal and its large-scale dimensions in general are not easy to 'read' by the average visitor. Therefore, the greater potential of the Palace of Peace and Harmony is quite possible to extend to the concept of the 1st category 'identity' – 'civil'.

The next project of the Presidential Park in 38 hectares in Turkestan was developed in 2019 (Fig. 2) (Improvement of the park, 2019). The implemented first stage actively demonstrates the use of the culture of the Kazakh ornament in small architectural forms, equipment decor, flower beds. If the concept incorporates the motives of the traditional Kazakh ornament, then the Arab ornament 'Girih' was erroneously used in the implementation of individual objects (a kind of Islamic decorative art consisting of geometric lines that form interwoven decorative ornaments in the form of 6, 8, 12 coal stars), which reduces the "purity" of project proposals implementation. The structure of the park of linear type is represented by mixed layout, extended straight axis in 1400 m with radial guides to additional entrances and

landscape layout in separate parts of the park. That is, the traditional eastern structure of gardens and parks 'Chor-bak', spread in the Middle Ages on the territory of southern Kazakhstan at the present stage was not in demand.



**Fig. 2:** Presidential Park in Turkestan  
Source: Author

According to the concept of national identity, the project includes information on the formation and creation of the state through a series of bas-reliefs. Their location is designed in the composition node of the park – the island, the volume-dimensional plastic of which in the project it is proposed to model by geo-plastics up to a height of 10 meters. The central core is surrounded on four sides by arc-shaped decorative walls with monumental panels. To the regionality "responds" and the accent element of the next composition node, also located on the main compositional axis in the center of the fountains, spherical space-space composition "Great Silk Road". The upper part is the architectural image of the millennial Turkestan, the middle part is caravans with national attributes and the lower part is the national ornament (Fig. 3) (Kozbagarova, 2020).



**Fig. 3:** Decorative walls with monumental picture and composition "Great Silk Road"  
Source: Kozbagarova, 2020.

The latest examples of regional landscape design include the park "Halyk Square" area of 1.2 hectares, located on the southern border of the Central Planning District, in the center of the business part of the largest city of Kazakhstan Almaty. This public space from the West, North and East is surrounded by modern architectural complexes of glass and concrete, and the South side of the site opens to a picturesque panorama of the Trans-Ili Alatau mountains. The name of the object corresponds to the name of the Kazakh 'National bank' ('Halyk bank'), also located in pedestrian accessibility from this recreational zone. The author – T. Antonenko took the logo of this financial institution as a spatial solution of the composite node (Fig. 4). It is



based on an octagonal with a diagonal curved line. The symbol of the octagonal is used in different cultures, in cult objects of different regions of Kazakhstan. Also, its used in ornamental art: as a balance between material and spiritual, aspiration to spirituality, as a symbol of revival, heavenly paradise, the median and spiritual world between the circle of heaven and the square of the earth (religious interpretation – for the righteous life on earth is rewarded paradise in heaven) (The eight-pointed star, 2019).



**Fig.: 4.** Park "Halyk Square"

Source: <https://visitalmaty.kz/culture/park/halyk-square/>

In Halyk Square, the octagon was transformed into a complex structure, figuratively perceived as an amphitheater, in a spatial solution. From the level of the ground is given descent on five stages. Man psychologically perceives deep space as an ‘invitation’ to rest. Traditional amphitheaters are parallel to the staircase rows of seats for spectators, but in this three-dimensional structure, the normative seats (according to the height) are organized along the boundaries of diagonal curvilinear lines. If we make an analysis of correspondence of symbolic sound of figure of octagon to his architectural and landscape decision, the celestially of the circle to which the square strives in its ‘movement’ it was necessary to ‘raise’ above the level of the ground. That is, the composition developed on aesthetic criteria is harmonious, but it contradicts its symbolic component.

## Conclusion

This examination of major public landscape projects in Kazakhstan reveals a consistent symbolic language that contemporary designers employ to express national identity. The in-depth analysis of key projects in diverse areas of the country shows how certain forms, materials, and spaces work together to evoke Kazakhstan's nomadic heritage, ethnic traditions, and national culture. Prominent themes emerge across the cases studied.

- Connections to the steppe are drawn through native plants and open spaces mimicking the flat, expansive grasslands.
- Traditional ornamentation references old Kazakh arts and crafts. Monuments and reliefs depict figures and events celebrated in the nation's history.
- The extensive use of yurts and artifacts of mobile housing signifies the nomadic roots of Kazakh culture.

While the designers utilize different aesthetics and compositions, they universally incorporate these symbols to convey a unified Kazakh identity deeply shaped by the country's distinctive geography, people, and past. The findings provide useful insights into the physical manifestation of national identity in the contemporary landscape architecture of Kazakhstan.

Further inquiry could build on this research by widening the scope of projects studied, making comparisons across Central Asia, and gauging public perceptions of these identity expressions. However, this paper lays important groundwork for understanding the core themes and meanings that signify Kazakhstan's identity in major public landscape designs as the country develops its unique national style. The cases analysed point to a shared symbolic vocabulary that connects the nation's land, history, and culture.



This research helps demonstrate how landscape architecture assumes a significant role in the formation of national identity for a country like Kazakhstan emerging in the post-Soviet era.

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