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Experiencing liminality: housing, renting and informal tenants in Astana

Kishimjan Osmonova

Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article is intended to contribute broadly to research in post-socialist urban studies. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with ‘newcomers’ to the capital, Astana, from different parts of Kazakhstan, I examine the renting practices of newcomers. I analyse the experiences of newcomers in their new urban milieu of Astana, and try to answer the question of what it means to live in the city for various groups of individuals on a daily basis. I examine the Soviet and post-Soviet housing and the continuities of the Soviet legacy when it comes to the institution of propiska (city registration). I show that living in shared flats is a coping strategy to deal with expensive rents and meant to be a transitory step towards homeownership. For this reason many accept high rents and crowded housing as ‘normal’. Furthermore, I argue that informal renting practices are acceptable mostly for young and single people, who are free to experiment with city life, and are on their way to establishing careers and personal lives. However, elderly newcomers and young families with children who do not wish to live in shared flats, but have to rent, feel ‘homeless’ and trapped in ‘liminal housing’. For them, renting is undesirable, and they feel a sense of incarceration if they fail to secure housing.

KEYWORDS

Astana; housing; renting; newcomers; propiska; liminality

Renting in shared flats and informal tenants in Astana

To understand housing and accommodation issues for many ‘newcomers’ (priezzhie) in Astana, one has to live like one of them – that is, in shared flats with multiple sub-tenants. Here I give some examples and a general characterization of life in this temporary housing. Upon my arrival to Astana in 2010, I found accommodation in a shared flat through newspaper advertisements. Newspapers offered quite a variety of accommodation opportunities, ranging from the most expensive, newly built elite apartments in the Left Bank to shared rooms in the old town in old Soviet krushchevka flats. After making several phone calls, I arranged to see one flat that same day, and agreed to move in on the following day. This is the most usual and fastest way to find affordable accommodations. My new shared flat was a new one-bedroom apartment in an almost-finished brick housing compound in the old town, which is considered the centre of town. Many of these new housing compounds have a triangular form. In the case of my
compound (Figure 1) the left wing was still incomplete, and it remained ‘frozen’ during my stay, like many other housing projects that had run into trouble during the financial crisis. My flat was on the top (11th) floor, and there was no functioning elevator. My flat-mates and I had to manage the stairs every day, because up to the time of my departure, three months later, the elevator was still not functioning. This was my entry point into the intimate lives of my respondents, who during my fieldwork shared many stories of their arrival and lives in Astana.

Our flat was a fairly spacious one-bedroom apartment, with a big kitchen and a balcony. My flat-mate Dilnaz, 27 years old, worked as a chief of staff at the local criminal court. She was also the main tenant. I would share my room with her. Two other sub-tenants slept in the other room, which was actually the living room, with a large sofa bed in one corner. But soon an additional person moved in. Alima, our new flat-mate, slept on an air mattress in the other corner of the living room. During the day, everyone was allowed to use the couch in the living room, and when everyone was at home in the evening we would gather in this room to watch TV. This was a communal mode of living, where everything was shared. There was no private space, except the space that was allocated for sleeping. In total, it was five women sharing a one-bedroom flat, each paying about 14,000 Kazakh tenge (about US$ 100) monthly (later two more people joined us). To rent a one-room old khrushchevka flat cost at least US$ 250 at that time, equal to a typical salary for teachers in Astana. There are no statistics available on the percentage of the population that rents or shares flats in this manner, since most people are not registered officially (through propiska, or city registration) and thus are not included in the official statistics. Nevertheless, 70–80% of the people I interviewed (60 in total) were renting, usually with several other

![Figure 1](image.jpg)

**Figure 1.** A newly built housing compound from brick where my flat-mates and I lived in Astana (photo by author, 2010).
people in shared flats. Many of them also stated that although they paid higher rents, their present housing situation in Astana was worse than it had been in their home towns or villages. Despite the vast, empty, and seemingly uninhabited urban space, especially in the Left Bank, the renters enjoyed very little actual living space in Astana. The whole economy of rented flats operates outside the control and regulation of the state, leaving regulation to market forces. Neither landlords nor tenants are protected, since most of the time they do not have written agreements, which leaves a lot of room for all kinds of ad hoc and informal negotiations in the rental market.

The above-described temporary and transient renting practice is common not only among the very poor, marginalized, or ethnically diverse newcomers, but also among those with stable salaries working for the public sector. For example, Dilnaz, the main tenant, worked for the court, and enjoyed a favourable salary, paying only 20% of her salary for rent. Meanwhile, other renters paid 60–70% of their income for the rent in our shared flat. Those employed in the private service sector usually had unstable and temporary jobs. All of the tenants were in their twenties, had some higher education, and had come to Astana in search of career prospects. Other sub-tenants in our shared flat included two female medical students, who studied together and were friends. One of them was a Russian from northern Kazakhstan, while the other had an Uzbek and Kazakh ethnic background and came from the south of the country. These girls were taking their final exams and moved out right after exams, just a few weeks after I had moved in. They returned to their home towns during the summer holiday. Dilnaz immediately sought replacements and took in three more sub-tenants. The two young women were in their mid-twenties and worked in the administration of a local university in Astana. However, they too left, after staying for only about a month, opting to spend their holiday in their home region and avoid paying any rent during their absence.

Dilnaz’s choice of sub-tenants was quick, and seemed to be based on the principle of ‘first come, first served’. She relied on her judgment about who would fit in, and in cases of conflict she would just ask them to leave. During the more than three months that I stayed in this flat, her sub-tenants included a Kyrgyz (myself), a Russian, a Tatar, and three Kazakhs: from Taraz (to the south), Karaganda (north) and Aktau (west). It was an ethnically and socially mixed group. In this way, the next three months proved to be very hectic and exhausting, as new flat-mates were moving in while old ones were moving out; complete strangers joined us and shared our lives, sometimes for a month or even less.

The findings of this research are based on participant observation and in-depth interviews collected in Astana during four months in 2009 and three months in 2010. The methodology is based on the methods of qualitative research, which include ethnographic descriptions that produce detailed accounts of respondents’ experiences and personal stories. The data collected are not meant to be a representative sample of Astana’s population. I interviewed 27 males and 33 females. Most of the respondents (43 out of 60) came from smaller towns and from the vicinity of Astana. The majority of them were ethnic Kazakhs; only 13 were ethnic Russians. Half were rather young people, 20 to 35 years old. Ten of the respondents were pre-capital native residents, who had inhabited the old Tselinograd before it became the capital, Astana. My six flat-mates were young single women, mostly in their mid-twenties, who had moved to Astana in recent years. One of them, Dilnaz, was a local. Through participant observation I got an insight into
the everyday lives of my flat-mates and their mode of living in shared flats. My six flat-mates were typical ‘newcomers’ who did not own housing and could not afford the high rents of single apartments in Astana. Here, thousands of newcomers solved their housing problem by renting shared flats. Most renters in Astana cannot imagine renting for the rest of their lives, because the rents swallow a large part of their salaries, sometimes up to 80%.

It is important to mention that most internal migrants in Kazakhstan perceive themselves not as migrants but as priezzhie (‘newcomers’ in Russian). When my respondents said that every second person in Astana is a priezzhiy they meant mostly Kazakhstanis who came to Astana from different parts of Kazakhstan. They are all citizens of Kazakhstan, as opposed to migranty (a Russified label for labour migrants from other Central Asian countries, such as Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan). Thus, because Kazakhstani newcomers in Astana almost never refer to themselves as migranty, I will use the terms ‘newcomers’ and priezzhie instead of ‘migrants’.

In analysing the housing situation and renters in Astana I apply the concept of liminality, similarly to the way Bjorn Thomassen has applied it in his recent book Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between (2014) regarding contemporary times under the influence of consumerist and globalized culture. He asks how we can employ this concept to understand the social, cultural and political processes in modernity. Since the postmodern turn in the 1980s, liminality has come to be seen in an especially positive light, where freedom and innovation are welcomed, while sacred norms are mocked and authority questioned (1). ‘At its broadest, liminality refers to any “betwixt and between” situation or object, any in-between place or moment, a state of suspense, a moment of freedom between two structured world-views or institutional arrangements’ (7). Here Thomassen goes beyond the narrow definition of the term, which means a middle stage during a concrete rite of passage. Seen in this light, renting is an appropriate temporary solution during a transition, which in the long term is undesirable. I show that mobile tenants who are rather young find themselves in a transitional stage of ‘neither here nor there’ (Turner 1967, 96–97). This transformation becomes all too apparent when the elderly and young families with children have to rent. It is not a viable solution for them; for the younger generation who are single renting is seen as acceptable, but for the elderly it is a sign of failure.

**Soviet and post-Soviet housing**

A shortage of adequate housing in major cities, especially in the capitals, was all too familiar in Soviet times, and thus does not surprise many Kazakhstanis at present. Soviet cities, despite being considered the ‘cradle of civilization’, had a problem of chronic housing shortages (Alexander, Buchli, and Humphrey 2007). In Central Asia one important reason for this was the inflow of immigrants, especially from the European parts of the Soviet Union, during times of rapid industrialization (Alexander, Buchli, and Humphrey 2007). Soviet housing was seen as a public service, and the state was supposed to provide housing to all of its citizens, but in reality the housing shortage was manipulated and was used as ‘punishment, incentive and reward’ (Attwood 2010, 5). Due to higher wages and better services and goods, cities were more attractive than villages. However, access to the big cities was mostly restricted, through the institution of propiska.
The children of the privileged could secure jobs in the cities or the capital city through bribery, while the children of the poor would be sent to remote areas, at least for a few years (Rigi 2003, 38). In cities and towns one had to wait years to be entitled to receive an apartment, which usually was allocated through the workplace or the local municipality (Attwood 2010).

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the post-1991 privatization, most flats were privatized by their long-term tenants, for little money, based on their propiska. Discussing the role of propiska, Hatcher and Thieme (2015, 11) argue that during the early privatization period propiska holders became entitled to ownership rights, which made propiska an important instrument in the transition towards capitalist logic. The major change since independence is that Kazakhstan’s housing policy changed from state-driven to market-driven, to encourage homeownership through market economy mechanisms, such as attracting foreign investments and development of banks and financial institutions (Rolnik 2011). Western governments and international organizations also played a role, by encouraging the growth of private ownership in the developing world globally (Hatcher 2015). However, this shows an inherent negative bias towards forms of renting as an alternative to homeownership, which is promoted by many governments as a way to foster individual autonomy and responsibility (UN-Habitat 2003; Gilbert 2008). Renting is thus seen as undesirable and negative, in comparison to homeownership. In this light, the Kazakh government has also ignored the rental market, as mentioned earlier, leaving regulation to the private sector.

In the background of Astana’s spectacular architecture, homeownership is part of the ‘Astana dream’ lifestyle. The practical realities, however, significantly diverge from this dream, as homeownership is the single most desired commodity, as well as the hardest one to attain. As Bissenova (2012, 121) has showed, purchasing or upgrading one’s housing has become the number-one priority for the aspiring middle class in Astana: ‘New apartment buildings become part of the image and picture of a “beautiful life” and a “must have”’. Many newcomers to Astana, impressed by the construction boom and the building of residential housing, hope to obtain new apartments. Nevertheless, the real prospects of buying an apartment in a newly built housing compound prove to be unrealistic for many.

At their inception, the grand monumental construction projects of Astana left the residential housing sector neglected, which resulted in a shortage of adequate housing for many newcomers (Köppen 2013, 14). Astana’s newest part of town, the Left Bank (Figure 2), mostly became a sanctuary for the affluent upper classes and government employees. The latter were fortunate enough to get subsidized flats through a government housing programme. In Kazakhstan, selected categories of civil servants are eligible for state housing. The state housing programme (gosudarstvennaia zhilishnaia programma), similar to the socialist type of redistribution, allows government workers (gosslujashije) and public-sector employees (budjetniki) access to low-interest mortgages to buy subsidized housing for US$ 350 per square metre (Bissenova 2012, 147). This is far below the market value, enabling even low-ranking government workers to apply for the programme. Many bureaucrats have indeed received subsidized housing. However, public officials and civil servants are not the low-income or socially vulnerable group in urgent need of housing. In this regard, the United Nations Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing in Kazakhstan correctly notes that the country’s
current Housing Relations Act supports this already advantaged group, giving civil servants the same rights to subsidized housing as disadvantaged groups such as the disabled (Rolnik 2011). Indeed, between 2005 and 2007 more than 35,000 priority citizens (e.g. civil servants) gained access to housing, in comparison to only 10,000 persons from socially protected groups such as low-income families (Rolnik 2011).

Other individuals who are not eligible for state housing have to rely on mortgages from banks. *Ipoteka* is short for the Russian term *ipotech’noe kreditovanie*, meaning a home loan or credit, which became very popular starting in early 2000 and reached its peak in the pre-crisis financial years of 2006–2008. The Kazakh state encouraged national banks to promote the local credit market, which led to a situation where obtaining a bank loan was easier than getting a passport (Yessenova 2010, 20–21). Consequently, the desire for homeownership, as well as easily available home loans, led to the inflation of housing prices and to a housing bubble. Many entrepreneurs wished to capitalize on the subsequent construction boom, which also led to speculative housing. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, many suffered because they could not pay their mortgages; those who were included in the government bailout praised President Nazarbayev, who took care of their bad investments. The state had to get involved to solve the credit crisis, as the scene of unfinished construction could undermine Kazakhstan’s promise of modernization, which Astana was supposed to epitomize (Bissenova 2012, 146). Although the homeowners are not the very rich of Kazakhstan, many are members of the aspiring middle class, who back the state in its modernization quest. Bissenova rightly argues that the rising propertied middle class in Kazakhstan supports the status quo because they feel protected by the regime. In this way the state supports those who are already affluent, while the poor (e.g. renters) receive no help with their housing situation.

*Figure 2.* Elite housing condominiums built mainly for government employees in the Left Bank of Astana (photo by author, 2010).
Renting, gaining independence and self-reliance

Aside from the emergent new group of distinctive upper-middle-class homeowners, another group, the renters, constitutes the vast majority of newcomers in Astana who struggle with housing. The stories of renters in Astana are not included in the public discourse, and therefore remain marginalized. Here I argue that, despite complaining about the lack of affordable housing and high rents, renters reproduce the discourse of home-ownership attached to the modernization discourse of Astana. Moreover, renters feel powerless to change anything and push even harder to buy their homes even though they feel excluded from the state provision of modern housing. They wait many years, renting in the hope that they too can buy an apartment in Astana some day. Indeed, some of my respondents worked at two or three jobs, hoping to save up to buy their own apartment.

This is how Alima, my flat-mate, described her initial housing experience in Astana:

Shocking! Nightmare!! [laughs] It was a three-room flat, and each room was rented out. In one room there were three people living, in the second one four, and the third I was renting with another girl. So all in all it was nine people sharing an old three-room *khrushchevka* flat. It was on the fifth floor. The kitchen was so small, I felt like I was living in a dormitory. Of course, I was shocked! Well, I stayed three months there — the owner decided to kick us all out and rent to families rather than to singles. We were all singles. Then I had only one day to find myself a new place. … So I found a place in a two-room flat, I was sharing a room with three other girls and the owner of the flat lived with his family in the other room. I lived there for two years. And now when I think about it after these years, the four of us could have just rented a one-room flat on our own. It seems so terrible now when I think about how we lived then.

Since she did not know the city well enough back then, Alima took the first flat that was available upon her arrival. In this way she changed flats and flat-mates many times in Astana. Finding suitable flat-mates, as well as a reliable landlord, was not at all easy. Despite this experience, Alima justified this mode of living for newcomers:

Yes, you have to rent here, but I don’t think it is a big minus. I had no other choice. It is just part of living in Astana, because it is the capital and therefore acceptable until you have your housing. So I find it acceptable.

Such communal living is widespread and is largely accepted in Astana as a legitimate way to cope with the expensive housing in the capital. Many renters accept high rental prices as ‘normal’ despite the fact that they continue to struggle to make ends meet. The majority of them are single people like Alima or married couples in their twenties and thirties. The couples opt to rent a room for themselves in a shared flat. Initially, after her arrival in 2008 Alima worked for two years in the flourishing banking sector. This was her dream job. She was already considering getting a loan and buying an apartment, but then she was laid off during the financial crisis. When I met Alima, she did not see herself as exactly living the ‘Astana lifestyle’. Her salary was barely enough to cover her rent; she could not afford to go shopping in the new shopping malls, or go out to socialize in bars and cafes. She felt disconnected from the ‘Astana dream’, but nonetheless she was proud to have moved to the new capital.

Many renters agreed that in their hometowns or villages such living conditions would be unacceptable. This attitude of tolerating the unacceptable can be linked with the
condition of liminality. In the transitional phase there is a temporary suspension of social norms and rules (Turner 1967; Thomassen 2014). Since Alima also believes that eventually she can achieve the ‘Astana dream’, which includes homeownership, she is ready to wait and cope with temporary difficulties. In the meantime, the utopia of Astana is effective in the present and serves to justify the negative aspects such as the high rents and lack of well-paid jobs as ‘normal’. Here the crowded conditions become readily accepted and even justified in Astana’s liminal urban space.

It is true that similar shared flats existed during Soviet times. The communal apartment (kommunalka) was a particular type of Soviet housing, where several unrelated families were put together in one apartment (appropriated by the state from the rich aristocratic owners), with shared kitchens, bathrooms and hallways (Gerasimova 2002, 207). This policy was called ‘compression’ (uplotnenie) (Attwood 2010). However, the nature of such communal apartments was forced, and it was families (up to 20 of them) who lived in private rooms in such big communal apartments for decades, under the system where private property was abolished (Gerasimova 2002, 212–215). The communal apartments functioned like a ‘social institution with its rules, arrangements and hierarchical system of power’, where the state ‘intruded into the domestic life of citizens’ through rules and mutual control (212). It was a kind of community, but one where there was no choice but to tolerate other tenants and social life was represented by a ‘constant battle for privacy’ (Attwood 2010). The crucial difference is that now the citizens can enjoy their privacy without the watchful eyes of the state in their privately owned apartments. As I experienced in shared flats in Astana, there is also a complete lack of privacy, since private rooms and sometimes even beds are shared by unrelated persons. Still, it is a voluntary arrangement.

As can be seen, there is a hierarchy of renting options, ranging from the elite flats in the Left Bank, as the most prestigious, to the least desired and respected old khrushchevka flats, vremiankas, and old dormitories. The flats have an advantage in amenities such as hot water, gas and heating, while the vremianka represents a ‘village’ mode of life, with outdoor toilets. Khrushchevka flats (Figure 3) are five-storey apartment blocks constructed under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev in his campaign to provide inexpensive mass housing, starting in the 1950s, with standardized designs, usually having small bathrooms and kitchens. From the early 1960s these types of housing blocks represented the modernization of the urban landscape (Crowley and Reid 2002, 14). The vremianka (Figure 4) is a substandard private dwelling that people have built with poor-quality construction materials such as mud bricks. This is the cheapest renting option, and poorer priezzhie such as manual workers in the construction sector live in vremiankas, without basic amenities. Subsistence farming in urban garden plots is usually situated next to such vremiankas. There is a stigma of poverty associated with these dwellings, and thus in Astana it is illegal to keep livestock in these city-centre properties (Alexander, Buchli, and Humphrey 2007). There are also informal settlements, ignored by officials and mostly located on the edges of Astana, with similar housing of mud brick. One of the goals of the city municipality is to get rid of these types of private dwellings, which are the antithesis of what constitutes modern and world standards. In fact, the city administration has put a two-metre-high wall along the streets in front of such dwellings located in the centre. These walls are covered in pictures depicting future construction projects to replace the old vremiankas.
Figure 3. Khrushchevka type flats in the ‘old town’ of Astana built during Khrushchev’s mass housing campaign (photo by author, 2009).

Figure 4. A vremianka dwelling offering rooms for rent. Poorer newcomers usually stayed in them (photo by author, 2009).
In the beginning, newcomers prefer to share flats with friends and relatives, but later they usually become confident enough to move out and live with strangers. Collective renting allows newcomers to integrate quickly into the city, since many find themselves in a similar situation. New friendships can allow the formation of important social networks, which can be used to gain employment. In this regard, my flat-mates sought help from new friends rather than from their relatives in Astana. Some did not even inform relatives of their arrival. As one woman from a nearby village said, ‘We haven’t told relatives that we are here; first we need to stand on our own feet, and then we’ll tell them. But nobody has even bothered to ask.’ On several occasions Dilnaz helped me renew my migration card in Astana, and her work contacts were very helpful. Likewise, she helped other flat-mates get a propiska. These were often short-term, small favours for fees, without the need of reciprocity or future commitment. Astana has such a mixture of newcomers that new friendship and alliances form as quickly as they dissolve again. This instability of social relations was not seen as negative as such, but was attributed to Astana’s flow and urban dynamics. Although socializing among tenants took place, it was rather superficial and temporary. Still, friendships were made, and mutual support often developed. My flat-mates borrowed money from each other when needed. Sometimes they went to socialize together in cafes or bars.

Like Alima, Raima, a young Kazakh woman in her twenties, was trying hard to find a way to establish her life anew in Astana. She managed to find a job there with a stable salary despite numerous unsuccessful efforts and initial hardships. She lived together with five others in a shared three-room khrushchevka in the old part of town. Although she could not afford better housing, her salary was enough to cover her basic living expenses. She could afford to go out with friends to bars and restaurants from time to time. Crucially, Raima appreciated her freedom to date and socialize with no control or pressure from her parents. For instance, her boyfriend was a Russian man in his late thirties who was a divorcé with two children, and likewise was a newcomer in Astana. She had also experienced personal growth and valued her experience. She came from the northern part of Kazakhstan, and spoke only Russian, but in Astana her best friend was from Chimkent, in southern Kazakhstan. Reflecting on her life in Astana, Raima said:

Here in Astana you are on your own. I have such a feeling sometimes that no one cares about you or what you do, really. You come here and you must organize your life, and no one will hinder you, nor will anyone help you.

Not anticipating the hardships upon her arrival to their full extent, she learned to solve her problems alone. She said that one needs to adapt new circumstances. Raima recalled that she had wanted to try something new and test her skills three years before when she had arrived in Astana. Her goals were radically different back then, but Raima claimed that she still achieved what she had now by relying on herself. She concluded:

Salaries are higher here of course. And I think in Astana I was able for the first time in my life to fully be independent and take care of myself. And in addition to that, I could help out my parents money-wise like many others do here. So it really was independence from parents.

It was a valuable experience about independence. Clearly, Raima’s early expectations were not fully realized, but she claimed that her ‘initial hopes and dreams were replaced
by new ones’. Likewise, Alima was not ready to give up her aspirations easily, as she concluded about moving to Astana:

I do not regret it at all. On the contrary, I made a good decision and feel very proud. Before, if someone told me that I would move away from my parents, and start over again in a new city, renting a shared flat with total strangers, I would never believe it! My friends also thought that it was wishful thinking.

Thus, shared flats were cheaper and also offered freedom and independence to many in Astana. Moreover, there was a temporary community feeling with other tenants who found themselves in a similar situation. As Alima stated, sharing was tolerated, and if there was a conflict with other tenants she could change flats any time. In this process, those like Alima learned to be flexible and integrate discrepancies as ‘normal’, which characterizes the liminal experiences of newcomers.

In this sense, in the end, despite complaining about the unaffordable housing, many renters reproduce the homeownership discourse. Saule, a single mother in her late thirties, wished that not only state employees were eligible for state housing but at the same time did not expect any assistance or support from the state:

I never heard of any help with rental housing from the state, to be honest. I did not hear, I do not rely on the state. I am on my own, I am telling you I never depend on anyone, I only count on my efforts. For example, I am not going to blame the government or someone else, because everything depends on a person.…. But I am telling you, if something does not work, I blame myself. I look for reasons and mistakes that I did, that’s why I think it all depends on you.…. Yes, housing is expensive everywhere. But there are people who earn enough and buy houses. So we can do it too, I suppose. We can!…. My salary is enough for me. If people spent their money wisely they would have enough. People manage to live for 30,000 tenge, and even for 15,000 tenge [US$ 100].…. I think I will manage, in five years, maybe, to get a flat, hopefully.

She guesses it will be five years before she achieves the dream of owning a house. Her suggestion that people should spend money wisely means that one needs to save up and be ready to sacrifice personal material comfort, as she does at the moment, living in crowded flats sharing a rented room with four people. Saule could afford better housing conditions but she chose not to and was saving money. Furthermore, powered with self-reliance, she was thinking she wanted to find a second job when I met her at a job fair in Astana. With the second job she could afford to take out a home loan and bring her son from the village, where her mother was taking care of him. Convinced that possibilities to earn more money exist in Astana, she told her story of how three years before she had left her job as a village teacher and worked her way up from a cleaning lady to an engineer in Astana. She mentioned that her relatives helped her find a job, but without her hard work it would not have been possible. She had practically no free time. In this context, those who complained about high rents or other difficulties did not find a great deal of empathy, and simply were seen as unfit to adapt and cope.

This attitude of self-reliance becomes apparent in the over-identification of many newcomers with the Astana discourse of modernization while trying to realize their goals and ambitions. Astana’s discourse of the ‘city of the future’ supports a neoliberal subjectivity where one can succeed primarily based on individual risk taking and self-reliance, as seen in Saule’s example. Bissenova (2012, 118) also notes that:
Much as in the United States, Kazakhstan has acquired a neo-liberal social vision and a set of personal dream worlds (not unlike ‘the American Dream’) that, together, have been a culprit in, and have significantly contributed to, the creation of the housing bubble and the ensuing meltdown.

In this connection, the image of Astana produced and circulated by the media (hyper-real Astana) denies the actual material conditions and diversity (Laszczkowski 2011, 85). Therefore, when encountering a discrepancy between the hyper-real Astana and the lived reality as seen in renting conditions, many newcomers are disenchanted. But as Laszczkowski (2012) also argues, in the end these critical views do not transcend the modernization project of the state. For instance, the renting situation only increases the desire for ownership of spacious new apartments.

**Landlords and propiska**

In Kazakhstan one is legally allowed to sublet his or her apartment as a private landlord, and the revenue is taxed at 10% as additional earnings. However, if the revenue exceeds a certain amount, or if additional persons are hired on a permanent basis, the landlords must legally register themselves as private entrepreneurs, and pay 2–3% of the profit gained by tenancy agreements (E.gov 2015). The final option is to register as a legal entity or corporation and pay a 20% revenue tax. Landlords who fail to declare revenues and pay taxes are subject to administrative punishments such as fines. Since regulation and enforcement are weak, most rental housing remains in the shadows, and there are no accurate data on the extent of the rental market. This situation creates a highly profitable, unregulated market, as in many post-Soviet countries, where the legislation and regulation of rental housing are slow and weak and only starting to develop. Therefore, the private rental sector largely remains informal and undocumented because of ease of tax evasion and lack of hard rent controls (Dübel, Brzeski, and Hamilton 2006). As in mature Western market economies, the demand for private rentals is especially high for the young and mobile. Higher incomes have driven up rents in the attractive cities such as capitals and major post-socialist cities. Rental supply in these countries is usually much smaller than in Western economies, but rental housing is growing (Dübel, Brzeski, and Hamilton 2006). In Kazakhstan, too, the rental market is mostly in the hands of private homeowners.

In the cases of shared flats, tenants usually do not have written tenancy agreements, and all matters are settled by informal negotiations and agreements. Dilnaz, my flatmate, who was the main tenant, had no written contract with the owner of the apartment. The landlord trusted Dilnaz, and their relations were based on verbal agreement only. The same was true for the relationship between Dilnaz and us, her sub-tenants. We never actually met our landlord. Dilnaz herself was a local, but she did not wish to live with her mother and chose to rent instead. She was a native of Tselinograd, a so-called mestnyi (local). This status gave her a number of advantages over newcomers, such as having a real local registration (propiska), and with that she gained the local landlord’s trust more easily. At the beginning of each month Dilnaz collected money from us and paid the rent. Dilnaz exercised almost unlimited authority in our flat, as she could ask any of us to leave the flat at any time. Such arrangements are very risky for tenants as well as landlords, since neither have legal protection of rights or obligations. Landlords are not protected with the stability and security of rental payments. The payments may be
delayed, or damage could be done to the property; no deposits are paid as security measures. On the other hand, tenants do not always get high-quality housing for the high rents they pay, and they can be asked to leave suddenly, without prior notice. Landlords do not always undertake maintenance repairs and do not promise stability of prices or duration of the renting period. My flat-mates complained about previous landlords who had cheated them by taking payment of rent in advance, then renting the promised apartments to other tenants. Meanwhile, the government has started to pay more attention to the rental sector to better protect landlords as well as tenants. At present, evictions take place based on court rules, and the process lasts up to three months, during which the tenant stays in the flat without paying rent (Vermenichev 2014). These conflicts between tenants and landlords happen quite often.

Propiska, an administrative system of registration, was introduced in 1932 in the Soviet Union to control internal migration, which permitted a holder of a propiska to work in a given town and reside at the specific address (Hatcher and Thieme 2015). It was part of the internal passport system, which also guaranteed that the citizen had rights and benefits (Hatcher and Thieme 2015). Every person was registered at a particular address, and in accordance with registered residency he or she had access to employment, primary and secondary education, health care and other social benefits. Several reasons seem to lie behind the logic of propiska. It was to keep rural dwellers ‘tied’ to the land and keep them from moving to cities – and it was a repression instrument to keep unwanted individuals under control and away from the cities (Morton 1980). Only later was propiska directly linked with payment of social benefits and access to health care.

With time, in the light of differences between urban spaces and the countryside in terms of living conditions, the city propiska became a privilege and hard to attain, and depended on getting a job in the city.

Post-Soviet independent Kazakhstan formally declared the institution of propiska unconstitutional and infringing on citizens’ rights to move and reside freely within the country, and replaced it with mandatory registration of place of residence (registratsiya po mestu prozhivania). Explaining the difference between the Soviet propiska system and the current registration system, the vice-chairman of the Migration Police Department, Sainov, said that the Soviet propiska had an authorizing nature (razreshitelnyi kharakter) while the present registration has a notificatory nature (uvedomitelnyi kharakter) (Akkyly 2012). This measure was meant to change the restrictive nature of propiska to that of a citizen-friendly registration seen primarily as a person’s legal address for contact and planning purposes. Similar changes followed in other former Soviet republics; as Hatcher (2011, 8–9) says, ‘The former propiska system was altered to conform to international best practice (and human rights legislation) on internal freedom of movement.’ Hence, there is a difference between registration systems that are notificatory, in comparison with those that directly restrict internal movement.

Despite the abolishment of the propiska in Kazakhstan as such, the new administrative system of registration is nothing less than an uncanny reinstatement, keeping most of its old functions. Free movement is allowed, but one still has to be registered at a temporary or permanent address. Thus, it is not surprising that most people continue to call it propiska. All my respondents in Astana referred to it as propiska as well. When they move, citizens must unregister from the previous place of residence, and within 10 days register themselves at the new address. The Population Service Centre (Tsentr Obsluzhivania
Naselenia) is the responsible local institution (under the Internal Affairs Agency) where citizens must be registered in a book of registration and renew their registration accordingly. Moreover, the process of registration itself is bureaucratically overburdened. Applicants have to unregister from the previous address and collect the needed papers for the new address. There are up to 10 required documents, including the original documents proving ownership of the property of the applicant or the agreement of tenancy if rented. In addition, the landlord must be present at the registration office with the applicant and provide his or her identity documents (Edilet 2014). Many landlords feel discouraged by such time-consuming procedures and refuse to register their tenants, and also to avoid paying more utility costs and taxes. In Astana the landlords and employers do not offer their tenants or employees any assistance with registration. Based on his research in Kyrgyzstan on propiska Hatcher (2015) argues that landlords avoid the formal tenancy agreements to protect their own property rights by making sure tenants remain invisible. Because of the legacy of propiska, homeowners are afraid that tenants could claim partial ownership of the property in addition to paying taxes. Under Soviet law it was hard to evict tenants who were registered in apartments, so many treated the apartments as theirs (Attwood 2010, 161).

But, crucially, those who lack this formal propiska are cut off from social security and must pay higher prices for social services in the private sector. When they were sick my flat-mates would go to private clinics and pay higher rates than in a state hospital. Recent work on the impact of the registration system on access to basic services concludes that ‘In Kazakhstan’s registration system, there is a direct link between a citizen’s registration status and his or her access to basic public services, to the extent that lack of registration often makes this access impossible’ (Kotova, Ishmukhambetova, and Asanova 2010). Concretely, the report lists barriers in gaining access to ‘free emergency medical service, daycare and secondary education, welfare benefits, eligibility for civil status documents (passports, identification cards, driving licenses, etc.) employment issues, social and political life’. Thus propiska itself becomes a commodity, promising the holder access to jobs, security, medical insurance, and other provisions guaranteed by the state.

Since there are no restrictions on registrations being issued in cities in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the influx of internal migrants in Astana is not restricted or regulated. Almaty is an exception. There, restrictions on registration were introduced in 2010 on the basis of sanitation concerns (Akkyly 2012). Since many were sceptical about the transfer of the capital, officials were worried that the new capital would not appeal to new residents, and hence encouraged people to move to get higher salaries, a promising career in state bureaucracy, and housing subsidies for government and the public sector. This proved to be a successful strategy, and with the construction boom, the new capital attracted not only skilled professionals but also thousands of unskilled workers from all over Kazakhstan and beyond – particularly from the neighbouring Central Asian states. However, most of the priezzhie living in shared rented flats in Astana are not registered. They have to face this problem from the time of their arrival and need to address it throughout their stay, if they have not managed to find a solution for long-term registration. Almost all of my respondents mentioned facing difficulties obtaining a local propiska. As, Nurzhan, one of my respondents, eloquently put it, ‘Without propiska and your own flat you cannot do anything here, these two issues decide everything.’ Newcomers are frustrated when they cannot get a propiska, because without it many face restrictions and difficulties initially finding
employment and getting access to social benefits. Saule, a young woman, explained that at first she could not work because she had no propiska. ‘Nobody [landlords] wants to give you propiska. Last year when I lost my passport I had to buy a propiska for three days for 15,000 tenge (US$ 100) just to apply for a new passport. We bought a propiska from a private person through the newspaper ads.’ In this way most prizzhie find a temporary solution, which is to buy a temporary propiska from a third party when needed.

In connection with fake and real propiska, Reeves, in her research on Central Asian labour migrants in Russia, notes that the trouble begins when migrants buy a presumably real propiska but it turns out to be a fake when checked by the police. It is extremely hard to differentiate between ‘clean’ and ‘fake’ registration when the fake usually looks exactly the same (Reeves 2013). In Astana I did not hear of a similar problem, as the price of a real propiska is much higher than a false one. However, it is possible that some newcomers who are new and have no experience get cheated and buy propiska which turn out to be forged. A false propiska is needed at the beginning to show to potential employers, who cannot judge easily whether it is real. Prices on the open market for propiska depend on authenticity. For 5000 tenge (US$ 33) one can buy a fake propiska. This type of outright fake propiska is a forged one, which does not correspond to any real address or is based on falsified documents. The real propiska is more expensive, as seen in the above example with Saule, who bought a propiska with a valid address for three days for 15,000 tenge (US$ 100). But even with a valid registration there is very little guarantee; for example, a person might be no longer registered at the given address after buying a registration. In Astana one sees numerous ads for propiska; these leaflets sometimes occupy the whole advertisement board at bus stops, promising all sorts of arrangements. Their visual omnipresence is a vital reminder of the demand for propiska on the market.

The authorities are aware of the problem, and efforts to eradicate the illegal propiska market are also under way. In 2007 the Kazakh authorities attempted to simplify the process of registration by broadening the range of options for registration to include additional types of housing such as dormitories, resort housing, hotels, dachas (summer houses), and most significantly a place of employment (Uchet Online Directory 2007). Previously, citizens were to be strictly registered at residential dwellings such as private houses or flats. Moreover, since 2011 those who fail to register within 10 days and live without registration for longer than three months are subject to administrative fines of 10,000 tenge (US$ 66); before three months one gets a warning (Akkyly 2012). In 2010 about 140,000 citizens were fined in Kazakhstan for violating registration rules, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Akkyly 2012). The latest addition to the law on propiska, in effect as of 1 January 2015, stipulates that not only will residents living without registration be fined, but also homeowners who agree to register multiple people at their property (Akkyly 2012). Officials recognize that a large proportion of the internal migrants in big cities do not live where they are registered.

**Elderly and renting: becoming ‘homeless’**

Thomassen (2014, 7) argues that liminality explains nothing in itself; it just happens. What differs is the way individuals react to these experiences. The outcomes are open to multiple directions. As mentioned, there is a risky tendency to romanticize and celebrate liminal experiences in postmodern consumer societies; such interpretations are far
removed from the original meaning of liminality for individuals and society, argues Thomassen (8). Liminality in itself, he argues, is not something to be wished for, as the cases of marginalized renters in Astana seem to confirm. Viewed from this perspective, it is a mistake to romanticize collective renting as a desired end, since newcomers hope to own their own housing and live with their family, enjoying stability, not having to move constantly. Concretely, for renters protracted renting means being stuck in a transitional phase, with no prospect of buying a house and not being able to return to their home towns. In this light, the experiences of migrants and refugees have been identified as liminal where ‘in-between-ness’ is not a liberation but a constraint, because they are in ‘suspension, limbo, transit, non-places, and marginality’ (Andrews and Roberts 2012, 4).

This transitory state becomes apparent when we look at the similar renting experiences for the elderly in Astana, as the following case with Ainagul shows. If renting is tolerable for the younger generation who are unstable in their social status, it becomes a stigma for the elderly newcomers. Ainagul, a woman in her fifties who had come from the small town of Arkalyk to Astana four years earlier with her husband and four grown children, still struggled with paying high rents:

We thought that we would get a flat, propiska, that we will have housing. We have lived here for four years now and still rent a place. We can’t even dare to dream about getting a flat because none of us works for the government or public sector. My children were not able to get higher education. I am already in my pre-retirement age, no chance. … All the flats are expensive. I rent a place here not far from work, I walk to work. … But we are paying a huge amount of money for rent. Too expensive, just too expensive here! Our salary is small. … We came because of the construction. We thought there is work here and there will be housing since they [government] are building houses. But not everyone can afford them. People thought: ‘Wow, construction! And we will also get something’ – young people and young families had high hopes. But it is not easy. Those who had money bought houses, or took flats on ipoteka. … We are now just surviving here, what can you do?! We eat up what we earn and still I cannot afford to eat meat, very rarely that I eat meat. … And my situation now – I have no home, nothing, I am homeless, in short. At the age of 52 I am left without a home.

Her situation was very precarious, as she was often short of money, paying more than 60% of her salary for rent. She belongs to a new, marginalized group who consider themselves ‘homeless’. The move to Astana for this elderly woman was traumatic since she had endured a complicated surgery, during which her husband left her for a much younger woman who had her own flat. The husband could not take all the difficulties with moving in and out of multiple apartments. They had had four children together and had lived together for 35 years. Ainagul was renting a room with other sub-tenants in a shared flat, but despite sharing a common kitchen, toilet and bathroom, they were strangers to each other and had little communication. The other sub-tenants were young families, and they had little in common with Ainagul. This starkly contrasted with the social life of my flat-mates in our shared flat. The relatives of Ainagul’s husband kept in contact with her ex-husband, but they never visited Ainagul. Furthermore, the elderly like Ainagul are unable to invite guests or relatives and feel left out of their extended family support network. Often they cannot invite guests over because there is not enough space to host them, making them feel ashamed of their housing situation. In this light, homeownership becomes the basis of security and social acceptance. As Bissenova (2012, 134) also points out, housing is crucial ‘to maintain one’s identity, privacy, and
social status’ in Kazakhstan. This means that the elderly and middle-aged newcomers who want to start a new life in Astana face prejudice if they fail to obtain housing. In the case of Ainagul, she faced double marginalization: first as a divorced woman and second as a ‘homeless’ person who had to rent. Thus, while the younger generation is embracing the ‘uniqueness’ and freedoms that Astana offers, the older generation feels lost and unable to manage the stress of constantly moving. Against this background, where private property defines whether a person is rich or poor, renting increases not only the feeling of material deprivation but also symbolic status deprivation.

Similar to the elderly, those who move to Astana with families and especially young children cannot accept renting as a long-term solution. And those who want to start a family are likewise constrained by the absence of housing. Some of the single women in their late twenties I met were under pressure to get married and have children, but they complained that in order to give birth they needed an apartment. If the couple secure housing, they can stay in Astana, and if not they have to go back to their home towns or other regions where housing is more affordable. Therefore, renting offers only a temporary solution and is accepted by society as a necessary stage for mostly the young and unmarried while they are studying or early in their careers. No one wishes to stay in ‘transition’ forever, as the ultimate goal is stability and immobility rather being in constant movement. Without proper reintegration, liminality is dangerous since it can lead to feelings of alienation and loss of being at home. As Thomassen (2014, 17) succinctly put it:

> If moving into liminality can best be captured as a loss of home and a ritualized rupture with the world as we know it, any movement out of liminality must somehow relate to a sort of home-coming, a feeling at home in the world and with the world, at the levels of both thought and practice.

**Conclusion: the liminality of renting in Astana**

In Astana newcomers were searching for their share of luck in the new capital of Kazakhstan. For many it was an obvious choice in the light of Kazakhstan’s booming economy and flourishing new capital, which promised a jump into a future full of hope and economic opportunities in the ‘city of the future’. Indeed, the sight of constant construction, glimmering hotels and shopping malls, and the sound of bulldozers and cranes, communicated a message of progress and prosperity. Newcomers made up an army of renters, unstable, vulnerable and dissolving, but also coming together again. Mostly occupying the unstable private and service sectors, their livelihoods were insecure. Many had been living in Astana for several years, but their mode of living made them neither permanent residents nor newcomers. They had no registration, no proper accommodation, and also were constantly searching for better jobs and higher salaries. Refusing to leave when difficulties arose, many remained in the city and tried harder to succeed. The desire to live in the capital and find a well-paid job united them. A few did succeed and were able to realize their goals and ambitions, while many others were struggling to live up to the ‘Astana lifestyle’, as was the case with my flat-mates. Astana still remained an enchanting city, even if their dreams had not been realized so far. They hoped that one day they would manage to buy a flat. In the meantime, they had to cope with renting in shared flats. Certainly, the dream of homeownership and the reality of renting are quite apart from each other, so that no one is pleased to pay high rents for a prolonged period of time.
In this article, I have showed that renting is a highly unstable and transitory (liminal) mode of living, which nonetheless has become accepted as a part of living in the capital and as a part of urban living. The liminal experiences of renters in Astana contain both aspects: the positive qualities such as the freedom to move, gain independence and experiment with new life modes; and the negative side such as instability, uncertainty, ambiguity, being in limbo, and coping with disappointments. The younger generation accepts renting because it is perceived as only a temporary stage until one settles down and can renew one's social networks after gaining more stability. For the time being, renting allows tenants flexible participation in the 'city of the future' since they can leave and come back any time they want. The liminal stage might be quite long for some, and even longer for those with no prospects of getting a house. For my flat-mates this meant that their transition into adulthood and starting a family was postponed. For the elderly, liminal housing has disrupted their entire social status. For them, Astana's urban space is 'foreign', where old social norms and values are becoming less observed. Consequently, housing becomes vital for a person to feel like a worthy member of society. Some can become stuck in a permanent transition, like the divorced Ainagul, with no prospects at all of buying a house. Inability to secure housing becomes a sign of failure and draws social stigma as an unreliable person. Thus, despite the stories of independence and freedom, the dark side of liminality in shared flats becomes prevalent as renters increasingly feel trapped and frustrated.

In many cities in developing countries, a great proportion of the urban population rely on renting as a preferred tenure choice since it allows them to move to cities temporarily in search of work or better prospects; and it is not only low-income groups that benefit from renting (Dübel, Brzeski, and Hamilton 2006). Similarly, newcomers in Astana – especially the young and mobile – who cannot purchase housing depend on the rental market, a fact that allows them to be flexible while pursuing their study or career goals. But Kazakhstan still lacks a comprehensive national housing policy, and relies too much on market institutions such as home loans to encourage homeownership. Moreover, as mentioned, the state housing policy supports the already privileged group of civil servants, putting them on the same level as low-income and vulnerable groups, who are in greater need of adequate housing. Finally, the rental market and tenants are ignored to a large extent by the government, though most of the newcomers in Astana rely on renting to cope with the shortage of affordable housing. Instead of demanding affordable rents with better quality and tenancy agreements, the renters just work harder and hope to purchase housing in the future. The rental market is seen as benefiting private landlords, who are only interested in making a profit, while offering as little protection as possible to tenants. Renters feel powerless to influence or change the rental market. In this article, I have paid attention to both the liberating and the dark sides of the liminal state in the context of housing. The negative side becomes dominant when the dream of obtaining housing becomes even more distant.

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