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Diversity, social inequality and changes in urban space of Nur-Sultan/Astana

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Issues of social inequalities and uneven spatial distribution of social groups in urban landscape are likely to exist in any society. The unequal distribution of social groups in the urban area is conditioned by the social constraints and individuals` opportunities. In this matter, growth of income inequalities, as well as diverse housing supply and demand lead to the emergence and coexistence of differentiated residential landscapes. This paper presents the case of Nur-Sultan – the capital of Kazakhstan experiencing definite changes both in its urban life and its physical space. The evolution of a provincial city becoming the capital and its floating population with diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds has had its impact on the urban social structure and the space organization of the city. The increasing number of urban dwellers, the emergence of new social groups in urban structure, variety of spheres of interests, requirements and possibilities of diverse social groups of the population have led to the change of the urban space and revision of urban planning approaches.

As a city Nur-Sultan has passed through significant socio – political transformations. The first stage is the reclamation period of the virgin and fallow lands in soviet Kazakhstan, when the city became Tselinograd. In the 1990s until 1997 it was a provincial city (*oblastnoi center*), renamed as Akmola. The next transformation coincides with the period when the city was declared capital of Kazakhstan and received the name of Astana. Today the city is renamed as Nur-Sultan in honor of the first President of Kazakhstan. So, the changes in the city`s names have been accompanied not only by the transformation of the its functions but also by the modifications occurring in its physical space organization.

Before becoming the capital of the country, the spatial inequalities corresponded to the following pattern: the center of the city was the place of affluent households and the spatial poverty was concentrated in the urban periphery as it had been in X most soviet cities. Often, a city center was the concentration of convenient housing stock and had an important residential function. On the other hand, the periphery of a city might lack amenities, such as running water and other kinds of urban infrastructure which could be considered as less advanced and desirable [15].

It is known that during the soviet period cities were constructed and functioned on the base of planned ideological policies. Most of them obeyed the principles of leveling and “eradication” of social fragmentation in the system of urban spatial organization. In this context, discourse of social differentiation in the urban space was considered as a historical phenomenon and natural consequence of labor division. A soviet city was supposed to be relatively equal in terms of residence whereas socio-economic differentiation was hidden behind the walls of homogeneous apartment blocks.

Market relations have their influence on the development of urban space through restructuring the residential fund of the city, which is also influenced both by the role of the state and economic mechanisms. The emergence of new residential fund in urban space organization has gradually changed the socio-spatial organization of Nur-Sultan transforming its vector of development from the soviet scheme to the capitalist one. The spatial inequalities unique to Nur-Sultan is defined through the opposition of “Old city” and “New city”. Locally known “*Staryi gorod*” (*Old city*), which is situated in the right bank of the Ishim river and “*Novyi gorod*” (*New city*), that had been built in the left bank.



Nur-Sultan city: <https://www.inform.kz/ru/v-astaneq3084396>

Nowadays, new urban edges became as popular and desirable as city center. The emergence of new differential housing fund, the coexistence of old and new city parts leads to the visible social contrast of physical urban landscape.

Today, in addition to old parameters of socio-spatial inequalities, new socio-spatial forms have emerged. The space organization forms, typical to a soviet city is considered as the old

type of spatial inequalities. Those forms common to capitalist cities are new types of spatial disparities. The previous “center – periphery” model of spatial differentiation, typical of a soviet city, cannot be completely applied to the urban landscape of Nur-Sultan.

The principal causes of the unequal allocation of urban zones in Nur-Sultan are diverse: specifics to general plan, role of the city authorities, changes in the status of city, development of market relations, financial position and the social status of people, the residing period of the migrating population, features of demolition of shabby housing fund, absence of population’s requirements’ monitoring.

According to some scholars and urbanists, in the development of urban spatial organizations it is important to put emphasis on the general plan of the city [14]. What are the features of Nur-Sultan’s urban planning? How does it relate with needs and requirements of the nowadays city? The planning system, in many Soviet cities, has remained similar to its previous form throughout the years. In the case of the Kazakhstani capital, it is crucial to note the features of urban planning, during the Soviet period, in comparison to present time. There are considerable ruptures that has appeared between the current problems faced by the cities and the application of the planning systems. Instead of reaching a sustainable development, planning has been more used as means of socio - spatial exception and inequalities. This is still dominating the old style of planning “top - down” approach, including regulation and the control of land use.

What system of planning should be applied in the current Kazakh capital? The given question remains open and undoubtedly requires investigations by urban planners, as well as architects and scientists. In that case, it is important to notice that within more than ten years the strategic document concerning the capital has been reconsidered by urban authorities. It is obviously difficult to name the reasons why systems of urban planning were inefficient in some cities. The planning system in many cities of the world has been inherited from the previous colonial ruling or has been roughly adapted, from another context, to those cities, ignoring specificities of certain localities. Quite often the systems of planning and its approaches remain without changes over many years, even if there have been tremendous contextual modifications since the conception time of those plans. The majority of planning ideas originated from the Global North but have been considered and applied universally, even actually met the requirements of advanced capitalism and western liberalism.

“Theorizing the City”

The essential contribution to the studying of spatial inequality has been brought by representatives of the Chicago school whose studies are based on the hypothesis that social relations are materialized in the city-space. There is the well-known theory of Burgess about “concentric zones” or Park’s “human ecology” which interprets the internal mechanisms of urban life. [9]. Their investigation is based on the residential position of urban inhabitants and includes empirical data; this is the main distinguishing point of the Chicago school in comparison to the classics. Over the last decades, mainly due to the works of A. Lefebvre [8], M. Castells [4] and D. Harvey [7], the neo-Marxist political economic explanation of city structure

has been the mainstream approach in explaining spatial segregation and changes in the urban environment. As the base for their analysis, the authors consider economic and political factors, which influence urban space and emphasize how urban social space experiences definite shifts in entering a new period.

While exploring the forms of spatial inequalities my research questions have been probed in the following way. I have examined how the residential place of individuals becomes the product of social inequalities in urban space. My research refers to Lefebvre`s space production theory, namely here is outlined the third type of space in his work, which is *representational spaces* or *lived spaces* [8]. Representational spaces present certain images, patterns, symbols, meanings, myths and legends. This research emphasizes that the new center of the city, located in so-called “New City”, could not only be sum up by the spatial concentration of affluent households but encompassed also a power expression. This urban space acts as an instrument of change in the creation process of a new Kazakh society through material landscape and the city physical space. In this sense, architecture is considered as an ideology of development not only among the city but also through the whole country, where the state “inscribes” new national history of Kazakh society. To tackle this topic on a more physical level, it can be stated that the belonging to this urban part is considered as a form of domination in the urban social structure.

Another idea developed in that paper is related to the emerging “islands” of wealth, the so called “prestigious addresses” in an urban residential landscape, this notion being elaborated by French scholars Pinçon M. and Pinçon-Charlot M [11]. According to their concept, housing address is used as an indicator of one`s social status. According to Rex and Moore, the distribution of prestigious housing or “prestige addresses” is based on individuals` life chances, which is defined by their income level and their stability. As noted by van Kempen (1994), other factors besides income and skills affect individuals` “life chances”, such as household structure, race, gender and age [13]. However, changes in a household`s income are not always followed by changes in the housing market position. Attachment to one`s housing and living environment, household`s composition and size, cultural background, educational level, skills and lifestyle play an important role in decisions concerning potential moving to another housing.

A qualitative methodology of exploring the city

The urban space is considered: by architectural studies that have investigated the urban landscape and physical characteristics of urban environments, as well as by sociological studies which have described the numbers and kinds of people using the space. In addition, there are ethnographic studies, using deep description and interpretation.

This paper is focusing on the sociological research based on inductive strategy. I have used visual observation and focus group interviews in order to explore the urban landscape of Nur-Sultan. I have been concerned by the way social inequalities are reflected in the urban physical space of Nur-Sultan. Before making decision about research methodology, I have reviewed how urban space organization is studied and presented in both sociology and urban

studies, and how is it interpreted from different approaches and perspectives [3]. In other words, the research purpose requires the combination of different methods: from one side the experiences of the natural urban environment, from another side it is key to understand the urban citizen's perception. Therefore, the combination of methods and techniques for data collection has been aimed at achieving the research goal and solving theoretical and methodological tasks of the research. As empirical basis of the research, besides the own sociological materials, I have used statistical data, media and Internet resources¹.

While holding visual observation I have relied on the methodology of the “flaneur”; behavior proposed by Walter Benjamin [16]. Flanner (flaneur) – a wanderer, an observer. The concept comes from the work of Charles Baudelaire, who designated this term as a new type of metropolitan man, “before whose eyes unfolds a gallery of life in the city”. Benjamin defines the flaneur as an observer of urban forms. The study of urban space performed by Benjamin's flaneur focuses on the social dimension of urban life, where the city is depicted as a labyrinth or a multi-layered social universe. Thus, flaneuring, which at first glance seems aimlessly wobbling around the city, is not only a certain mode of sight but also a characteristic of movement in the city, routes, places from which the researcher “repels” in the analysis of urban space.

The second part of the research is formed by data obtained using the focus groups. The main goal of this method is to analyze the people's perception in everyday life about urban space. As it is known, the “new city” has appeared quite rapidly, in a short time, without the natural growth of the population and historical development. Consequently, the city has become a “product” and a strong decision of the authorities. In the context of the research, it is important to identify “where the people in the city are”. Focus group interviews has been aimed at understanding the people's perception, and how can they influence the urban environment.

It should be noted that the sociological data obtained during the qualitative research are not representative and do not claim to be valid. The task is to show and understand what we call “old” and “new” for the Kazakhstani capital – new spaces, new forms of inequality, the people's perception of the urban space, the expression of the social structure in the physical urban space. I have tried to examine the research case of the whole city, focusing on its smaller parts such as urban areas, housing type, facades and addresses. Thus, this research hopes to become yet another “voice” in local urban discussions.

The forms of social inequality in urban space of Nur-Sultan

The emergence of “prestigious address” in urban space

What are the collected data saying about the features and the expression of the social inequality in urban physical space? In order to understand how certain groups perceive the whole city and its parts, the questions have been mainly initiated towards the housing stock in Nur-Sultan. As a type of property, housing is a commodity that includes specific characteristics

¹ Sociological data is based on my fieldwork from 2007 to 2012yy.

(including quality, location and price). Thus, the city housing fund has served as a physical expression of social space. In addition, when analyzing socio-spatial inequalities in the modern capital, along with the type and quality of housing, the indicators such as the infrastructure of the district, (namely social and cultural places), different urban services and facilities, aesthetics of natural and architectural landscapes should be taken in consideration

Today`s forms of spatial inequalities are expressed by emerging new progressing areas and individual housing both in an inner city and on its edges. During the focus group discussions, informants have often mentioned the prestige of the new city in the Left bank, which is mostly occupied by more successful social groups among the urban structure.

What it is meant by ‘prestigious’ according to the informants? *What is prestige for them? What is not?* It is not sufficient to consider only the given definitions of “*prestige*” and “*prestigious*”, based on life conditions characteristics. For the research purpose, it has been necessary to explore how people identify prestigious from their own positions. In accordance to the data collected, it can be stated that informants mentioned mainly the following prestige indicators: *cost of the house, the safety of the district, ecological area and the level of supplied service*. For example, according to the opinion of some informants the following definition of “*prestigious*” can be elaborated: “...*Prestigious is very expensive housing with its own yard, car parking, instead of usual parking in yard, place or corner for rest like a penthouse, good security service. In addition, it could be my own land even not so large. From other side, prestigious is qualitative water, soil, air (ecological area), not a marshy, pure, protected courtyard...*”

So, it can be acknowledged that, if for some, *prestigious* means residing in the city center, for others, this denomination is linked with new urban edges’ lifestyle. The diversity of understanding of this term among people, demonstrates again changes in the estimation and treatment of private housing. If in soviet city the private housing was foremost associated with small and uncomfortable places in the periphery, today it refers to villas in the new suburbs. Analysis of inhabitants` prestige perception gives precious information on the criteria that can be used in order to evaluate Nur-Sultan urban space. The sociological definition of prestige includes indicators of status characteristics. Thus, prestige testifies of the relative rank in status hierarchy and is connected with an estimation of social tendencies expressing values, ideals, preferences of social subjects. The prestige in modern conditions corresponds to symbolic system of characterizing level and life quality.

What is the importance of applying the concept of “prestigious address” in the case of the Kazakh capital? Analysis of both conducted visual observation and focus groups demonstrates that the distribution of prosperous population occurs through their allocation in new areas and urban edges. In this respect, the collected data demonstrates that one of the progressive zones in urban area emerged in the new center of the city. Its domination is manifested by its housing fund and could be defined as elite and business class housing. Secondly, it is also noticeable that housing have specific denomination such as “*Milanskii kvartal*”, “*Expo Boulevard*”, “*Francuzki kvartal*”, and not only a simple street name like “*Abaya Street*”. Here address is considered as social product of urban social differentiation and conditions of social production of

dominant social groups. Special names of the housing fund serve as spatial projection of social groups' arrangement in urban area. This demonstrates how prestigious addresses could testify of the housing's status.

The coexistence of new suburbs and old periphery in Nur-Sultan

The other patterns of spatial inequalities in Nur-Sultan urban space are demonstrated through the emergence of elite housing fund: construction of single or two-storey private real estates in private land plots. The ratio between villa (cottage) and multi-storey construction has been changing in favor of the first. As my own observation shows, today new private housing fund is arranged around successful areas of Nur-Sultan. They are built in new areas of the inner city in the "Right Bank" and in the edges of the "Left Bank". Such urban parts are composed essentially by private or individual housing type (*chastnoe i individual'noe jil'e*). They are new micro districts in inner city –*Ak-bulak, Karaotkel*; new parts on the left bank of Ishim river which are closer to urban edge: *Family village, BI village, Vela village*. Nowadays, the visual data collected in these urban areas of the city display new housing fund type of 2-3 storey cottages as well as the advent of numerous villas.



New suburbs in Nur-Sultan: <https://weproject.media/articles/detail/bi-village-family-village-i-poselok-telman-astanchane-kotorie-vibrali-zhizn-vdali-ot-tsentra/>

The emergence of areas in new suburbs shows the gradual exit of the city center as an emblem of a prestigious way of life. While exploring the city center "exit", we can point out that in the case of Nur-Sultan concepts on suburbanization process in capitalist cities have been reviewed. According to these concepts, suburbs are defined not only as a residential fund but are also the expression of socio - cultural preferences [5]. Suburbs and suburbanization process

has been analyzed in the context of city changes. The forms and structure of modern suburbs has been studied as the result of the emergence of new social groups and the development of modern technologies there. It is mentioned that suburbs are concentration of households with low income, educational level and professional status, usually these are unmarried, childless families, where the young couple/men arrived to city for earnings or in search of new possibilities [1]. In contrast, other concepts argue that the social structure of suburbs is homogenous and mostly populated by middle class [6].

What is the character of city center “exit” in the case of Kazakh capital? Who occupy these new areas? Data received during the focus groups show that the housing fund of a given area is defined as prestigious and characteristic of the elite when the following conditions are reunited: highly comfortable, large-sized living space, modern communications and accompanying infrastructure. These elite individual housing funds are characterized by those main features: they are far from work places and entertaining establishments, they are often railed in by fence and equipped by security systems, such as camera, door phone and e-lock; these are newer and modern areas; they are designed to be more convenient for car, than for the pedestrian and mass forms of transportations; they are built in order to fit one family rather than large-family houses. Consequently, in those neighborhoods we observe a lower density of population in comparison to other section of Nur-Sultan. Besides, it can be witnessed that in those areas the population is generally considered as being socio-economically more homogeneous, than in other part of the city.



Old periphery in Nur-Sultan

Definitely, one can't argue about the existence of only modern and new suburbs, indeed old and unprosperous part of the city remained in this periphery. Today these peripheral neighborhoods are still visible in areas located behind the railway, and old industrial micro-

districts. Those are private residential funds dominated by shabby, uncomfortable housing and almost without any kind of infrastructure. In this case, we can argue about the coexistence of diverse residential suburbs with different quality and type of housing, where the luxurious ones are in the new part of the city whereas the previous regressive zones are now located in old part of the capital. Such different social groups “operate” within different segments of the housing market based on their needs and opportunities. As a result, we experience segmentation of the urban landscape – concentration areas of the affluent and poor population in the city.

The city center(s) of Nur-Sultan

The expression of residential diversity in Soviet cities was living in the historical center, due to its high prestige, and the good quality of its infrastructures or houses. Despite the attempts of the Soviet authorities to destroy and level social differences and contradictions between the bourgeois center and the poor working periphery, the Soviet elite preferred to live in the city center, and the urban periphery remained socially and spatially homogeneous. *What is the “center” in today's city and where is it?*

The data analysis demonstrates that the informant’s answers are highly correlated with their *place of residence and period of residence* in the city. Native people and those, who live in the city more than ten years, define the “city center” as being located in the center of old part of the city. Those who arrived later in the city identifies the area of the Baiterek memorial complex, as being the city center. Data analysis for the question, “How would you explain to the tourist/foreigner/nonresident, where is the city center?” make obvious the dominance of a “new center” around the “Baiterek” monument on Nurzhol Boulevard. It represents certain symbolic value acquired by the definite conditions such as the importance of the place and the cost of the housing determining its status in urban space. This space is also the expression of political and economic ascendancy through the administrative and official building in this area. In this respect, residentially belonging to testifies of a certain symbolic dominance in urban structure. Here I refer to the Bourdieu’s theory of social and physical space, showing how the value of the city social space is reflected in its physical space [2].



Nurzhol Boulevard, left bank: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%BC%D0%82>

The data analysis demonstrates that despite the emergence new center and fashionable urban edges the “*Staryi center*” (Old Centre) still keeps its status as an advanced area in urban space. There is the housing fund in “Samal” micro-district and in part of Respublika street. This urban part is the center of the old city and today known as “Old Centre” or Centre of the “Right Bank”. A housing fund here is one of the first housings constructed at the forming and moving into Nur-Sultan. The main residents of this urban part are high and middle level governmental workers.

Most often, according to data analysis the city center is identified with the concentration of urban life and socializing spaces. The main characteristic of the city center is the presence of services for urban population: entertainment, malls and shops, ability to provide communication and mass events. If, in the former city the prestige of the “city center” was obvious in relation to the “poor” periphery, today the diversification of urban space and the emergence of new types of spaces erode the concept of “center”, which even leads to a decrease of its role. If the only “center” in the Soviet city was associated with large-scale architecture, wide streets or avenues, with its borders being determined by the concentration of administrative buildings (the so-called historical core of the city), today we are witnessing the emergence of new “urban centers” [9].

Here scholars highlight the need for movements to “create/make the city”, namely, necessity to use the means of transport to connect different points of the city, taking into account the distance between the city poles making it impossible to walk (given the impact of difficult geographical and climatic conditions) [12].

“This implies the principle of polycentric city, which is confirmed by the fact that new areas are not built from the old historical center of the former city, but from different peripheries, such as the area of the new mosque, the area of the Nazarbayev University and huge exhibition space for Astana- Expo - 2017 and so on.

The absence of a single proven centre towards which the transport networks would converge is therefore compensated by a multiplicity of centres distant from each other and which can only be linked by the “random” movement of inhabitants” – says author [12].

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Bank of Ishim River: <https://yandex.ru/collections/card/59b6d02facbcf600c4f35c69/>

Considering the socially contrasted character of urban space in Nur-Sultan, within the frame of the socio-spatial approach developed by Henri Lefebvre’s urban theory, one should put

emphasis on the dialectical relation between social structure and space environment, in terms of the urban space organization of the current capital [8]. His major contribution as the sociological thought in relation to social space, where the central idea is that the form are embodying social activity and material culture of a society, considered in spatial forms. Lefebvre's concept of "production" explains that people make (create) spaces where they live. Thus, the space becomes the project created on the basis of interests of classes and other competing forces such as institutions, systems. He argues that land uses and its advanced capitalist relations to production, which he calls "real estate", constitute means of acquiring wealth. Hence different social groups "operate" in different segments of housing market on the basis of one's own preferences and possibilities. Here the willing and preferences of the urban inhabitants produces micro level variations which are based on their economic situation in society.

It is known that Nur-Sultan constitutes high construction and investment attraction among the business community. Here construction has been becoming mass process since it has been chosen as the capital. The dynamics analysis of investments into Nur-Sultan's building sphere over the last years allow us to raise conclusion about the development of investment activity in the capital. For example, in 2002-2008 20-40% of investments in construction work went on building of projects that were further intended to be for sale and tenancy. The considerable share of investments in construction work has been spent also on administrative building. The investment into housing construction have increased from 13 901 million Tenge to 127 525, 9 million Tenge or multiplied by 9,2 times, in term of nominal expression for this period of time².

Why is it important to focus on the investors` roles in the formation of urban space? Theoretically, investors have potential to shape urban space and urban social structure. Residential real estate developers have considerable scope to influence urban social structure. Because housing is a multi-attribute commodity, developers can create a wide diversity of 'products' to meet a broad range of potential (socially fragmented) residential market segments. To create a product for a particular sub-market a residential developer chooses the location of development and supplies the land. The locational choice is crucial as it determines the set of externalities that will affect the residential product. Thus, the role of investor-builder here could be explained by the decision they make regarding the residential market, the finance, planning, risk, or possibilities and that they intentionally aim their construction at certain segments of market or groups which act more or less attractive.

Conclusion

The analysis of visual observations demonstrates the emergence of "prestigious addresses" urban space in the Kazakh capital. Belonging to this "prestigious addresses" shows a symbolic dominance in the social structure of the urban population. In other words, the special names of housing funds are a spatial projection of the resettlement of social groups in the urban landscape. The address of living become a created product that hold the symbolism of dominance in the urban space.

²Official website of Statistics Committee. Available at: <https://economy.gov.kz/en/kategorii/komitet-po-statistike>

The obtained empirical data show the symbolic superiority of the “new” center in the capital – around the “Baiterek” monument on the Nurzhol Boulevard. This urban space has become the “tool” of social and political changes. Here the architecture represents the progress, where the state “writes” new national history of independent country.

The emergence and development of new suburbs in Astana is not only a form of expansion of the urban territory, but also leads to a change in the socio-spatial organization or socio-cultural landscape of the city. The value of villas and cottages is determined by the role they play in the lives of their owners. The emergence of new suburbs in the capital and the exit of the “center” alike Euro-American country houses, which potentially led to the growth of other forms of consumption, representing a prestigious lifestyle. This form of housing is a form of the so-called “demonstrative consumption”, the place of residence serving as a mean of maintaining social status.

The extrapolation of the model “center-periphery” has its limitations in the urban space analysis of the current Nur-Sultan, since the emergence of new housing segment – cottages and villas in new suburban areas. Therefore, it might be appropriate to create a new category for the Kazakh urban sociology as “center – periphery – suburbs”, which is likely to be more suitable to the changing urban space.

While summarizing this paper on forms of spatial inequalities in urban residential landscape, I am arguing that with extension of the geographical borders of Nur-Sultan and growth of its population the main features of urban space's social inequalities is appearing not only in opposition to its center and periphery, but also by opposition of a “new city” to the “old” one. The other feature of socio-spatial inequalities is the emergence of individual housing fund in new suburban areas, which is evidently concentration of privileges social groups. Today residential landscape in Nur-Sultan consists of relatively low-standard apartments located near the city center and its periphery, also highly valued and usually high-quality apartment both in old and new center of the city, highly valued detached housing areas. Thus, new elite housing fund and old ones coexist in current city, leading to urban socio-spatial inequalities and different consuming of the space by diverse social groups, where residential and spatial inequalities have been conditioned by social inequalities within the population. This increases the territorial differentiation of the housing supply, in terms of its availability and affordability.

Here it is important to highlight that urban landscape is shaped not only by architectural constructions, but also people simultaneously build these spatial borders – physical and social markers. Since the choice of the residence always is real for one social groups of the population and nominal for others, it can be argued that social groups are considered as being influential on the space production along with existing urban planning system and other social process. Because the main part of Nur-Sultan population is formed by the migrated people or so-called floating population, they come from different regions of the country with diverse education level, social status and financial position. Although this floating population consists of people with diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds, their primary goals were the same: to seek jobs, higher wages and better life proposed in this new capital. Some of these people were able to make money and use the potential of the urban market, others were able to accumulate amount of wealth, but

majority of comers have nothing but their labor to sell. In this way, formation of urban social structure is connected with its floating population. It is considered that housing opportunities are linked more closely to one's socio-economic position and will be reflected in the social segmentation on the housing market.

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