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From a 'Black City' to a Paradisical Garden: Villa Petrolea and the Metamorphoses of the Oil-Fevered Baku

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Abstract

In 1873, an 'accidental discovery' of oil mines at the Absheron Peninsula by Robert Nobel gave a start to the dramatic metamorphose of its natural, economic, and cultural landscapes, inasmuch as it laid the grounds for the industrial transformation of the whole Russian Empire, setting it on an 'oily path' of modernization and preparing for the evolution of a new world order that is still rooted in fossil fuels. This essay traces the history of the transformation of the natural landscapes of Baku initiated by the Nobel brothers and the Branobel corporation to adjust 'the wild' local environment to their 'Westernized' vision of an ideal living through the construction of the Villa Petrolea: 'a little paradise in Baku.' The Nobels' activities and the concept of 'fair capitalism' practiced to the mutual benefit of all stakeholders proved efficient for the construction of their industrial empire that developed within the modernist aesthetics of resistance to and improvement of nature that was seen as the only progressive way to civilize and modernize the barbaric and outdated territories of the Russian Empire. The article reflects on the cultural origins of the traditional European 'desire' to improve the wild nature, which is seen as imperfect and 'naked' and to re-create the lost gardens of Eden, a metaphor for an image of an ideal society that still proves viable in the contemporary politics.

Keywords: Nobels, oil-Industry in Azerbaijan, Villa Petrolea, gardens of Eden, Russian Empire