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From War into the Future: Historical Legacies and Questions for Postwar Reconstruction in Ukraine

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Following the large-scale invasion by Russia, the future of postwar Ukraine is being sketched: in social media and public discussions, by launching reconstruction initiatives, and, most recently, by establishing the National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from the War. These discussions, both in Ukraine and internationally, invite revisiting the histories of previous 'postwars', mostly the recovery and rebuilding efforts after WWI and WWII, but also post-Chornobyl (Chernobyl) and post-Cold War. Contemporary discussions may shed new light on the previous story of postwar recoveries, while recoveries in the past may offer valuable perspectives for ongoing debates, such as those about the entangled relations between political and expert powers; participation and shared authority; the challenge of navigating local and international expert knowledge in rebuilding communities and localities, and the potential of architecture in coping with trauma. Architecture and urban planning have a key role in the process, which can bring change not only to the physical materiality of place, social relations and communities, but also to the ways architecture and planning are imagined and practiced.

Keywords: Ukraine; war; postwar; reconstruction; recovery; historical legacies



Much of European history of the 20th century is described as ‘postwar’: from post-WWI to post-WWII into the post-Cold War. ‘Postwar’ is familiar to many from the title of a major book, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (Judt 2010). Now, in the midst of the recent large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, with all the uncertainty about when it will end, and guessing what names and chronological frames it will acquire in the future, we are already discussing and sketching our newest ‘postwar’: in social media and public discussions, by launching initiatives, and, most recently, by establishing the National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from the War.¹ For me, as a scholar of postwar transformation in cities marked by massive displacement, political regimes and border changes, exploring how societies reassemble and accommodate themselves in new built environments, and also as a Ukrainian citizen, there is an added poignancy to the situation now.

In her essay *Comparative Urbanism*, Jennifer Robinson urged researchers dealing with cities to “‘think with elsewhere” to allow conceptualization from any city and to draw insights from a wide array of contexts while acknowledging the locatedness of all theoretical endeavour’ (2016: 188). Her words resonated with me, as I was working on two cities — Lviv (Lwów) and the Polish Wrocław (Breslau) — located away from the big political centers in the off-mainstream region. I might not have arrived at a new theory, but I have definitely felt encouraged to not feel peripheral in my interests, or, for that matter, in the place where I live and work. More recently, Rosemary Wakeman made an attempt to include towns and smaller cities across different regions not as derivative but as crucial sites of an urbanization story (2020: 7). These are encouraging works, reflecting a shift towards more critical, inclusive and diverse knowledge production and circulation. Yet smaller cities and off-focus regions do tend to fall through the cracks of grand exhibitions and survey textbooks — unless war re-centers the discussion. And this is what we are witnessing: us, here, talking about voices from Ukraine.

My contribution comes from my perspective as both a scholar and a witness, embedded in the contingency of the unfolding war in my home country. I can hardly offer answers in this brief format, but looking back into the past, I will try to reflect on the ways historical legacies can help us pose some questions in thinking about the future ‘postwar’. This may also suggest some tentative avenues for researching and teaching urban history and architecture in and about Ukraine and the region more broadly.

Multiple Postwars

Discussions on the future postwar in Ukraine trigger attempts to revisit the past. While most discussions in Ukraine circle around three *de*’s — de-colonization, de-Russification, and de-Communization — I suggest using the lens of heritage to briefly assess possible avenues of how we can revisit the past while thinking about future reconstruction.

Let us think of the previous postwars as a heritage, not only through tangible buildings — whether modernist or Socialist Realist — but also through sets of intangible ideas and concepts. Contemporary Ukraine possesses multiple legacies that touch several national stories of postwar rebuilding. After WWI, there is the already mentioned Lviv, which as a part of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939) tells a postwar story of postimperial nation-states with large ethnic minorities, as do Uzhhorod (Ungvár), as a part of Czechoslovakia, and Chernivtsi (Cernăuți), as a part of Romania. Kharkiv, the capital of Soviet Ukraine until 1934, tells a different story of a socialist city as a postwar and postimperial experiment. Then there are the massive reconstructions after the devastations of WWII (Figure 1), with communities torn apart by occupation, destroyed in the Holocaust, displaced by changes in borders and remembered by descendants, from Israel to Poland, USA to Brazil.



Figure 1: Postwar reconstruction of Lviv Railway Station, 1947. Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History, Lviv.

Rather than seeing these multiple postwar stories as distant, ‘other’, un-Ukrainian, or even anti-Ukrainian, they can offer a multiplicity, challenging us to theorize from the multiple ‘elsewhere’ to build complex genealogies of knowledge and practice, and maybe come up with new theories in the process. This can help us see various postwar buildings and built environments beyond their form and aesthetics, opening new perspectives into the processes that precede their creation and extend beyond, immersing them in both fixed and changing settings, often settings about power. Exploring such heritages can indeed be helpful as we chart new postwar territories.

Expertise and Power

The end of WWI and the need for radical change marked the growing role of experts who explored new horizons for a better future across different geographies and political ideologies. For example, Martin Kohlrausch, in his excellent study on architects and the power of expertise in East Central Europe, including the Second Polish Republic and the region of Galicia, shows how they imagined the region as one of both backwardness and development opportunities (2019: 36). In her *On Civilization’s Edge*, Kathryn Ciancia explores how political authority and professional expertise overlap in imagining the postwar transformation of towns in Volhyn, then in eastern Poland, a process that involved challenging imperial hierarchies and injustices while perpetuating and creating new ones (2020: 201–202). Volhyn and Galicia, formerly parts of the Habsburg and Romanov Empires, together suffered a lot of damage in WWI and thus are places by which to imagine a new future for the postwar Polish state. After WWII, most of these historical regions became a part of Soviet Ukraine. (More than a thousand kilometers east, as Christina Crawford has recently shown (2022), planners and architects embarked on a huge experiment of creating socialist cities, such as Kharkiv.) Whether in an interwar Polish Republic or Soviet Ukraine, architects were crucial for postwar rebuilding, both physically and politically. They were embedded deep within the international circulation of knowledge and the construction of new states. It was the cooperation between experts and state political power that enabled radical changes, even if coming at the price of moral compromise — or of life. The stories of such entanglement remain visible in the built environment, from Lutsk to Kharkiv, but these can also be seen as sites of problematizing the relations between experts and political powers.

Massive destruction, especially of the physical fabric of cities in WWII, required even more active engagement of experts, especially planners and architects, and a closer interplay with political power. A new deal between state and society had to be translated into built forms. The Soviet project was relaunched domestically and expanded internationally, first in much of Eastern Europe and then far beyond Europe, as shown by Lukasz Stanek

(2020). In Soviet Ukraine, devastated by the war and Nazi Germany occupation, architects and planners worked within, with and under state officials of the Communist party to bring destroyed cities back to life. Or they worked to accommodate the largely surviving built environment of cities in the new regions annexed after the war — in historical Galicia, Bukovina and Zakarpattia (Transcarpathia) — that were transformed from being parts of the Polish, Romanian and Czechoslovakian states into western regions of Soviet Ukraine, as shown by Svitlana Frunchak in her research on Chernivtsi (2010). Architects, planners, party or state officials and managers of state enterprises working on municipal levels formed the most critical power nodes for postwar transformation and recovery.

In the late 1980s, new city of Slavutych was constructed as a home for some residents of the city of Prypiat and personnel for the Chornobyl nuclear power plant (**Figure 2**). This new city both displaced and accommodated the inhabitants around Chornobyl station, and as such contained the consequences of the explosion. This is now another example of a post-catastrophic recovery, one resonating with the ecological dimension of the ongoing war (Gubkina 2016; Plokhy 2018; Brown 2019). The implications of expert knowledge and political power are pushed to the foreground, especially in relation to decision-making processes and responsibility. The post-Chornobyl experience of planning a new city and providing new housing are brought up in the media as one of the previous experiences to refer to in the context of mass displacement caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine (Demianov 2022).

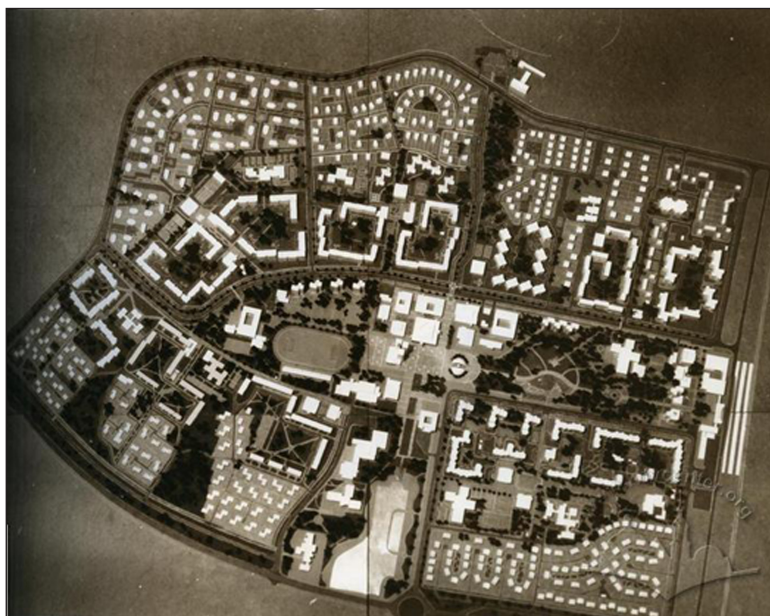


Figure 2: Model of the City of Slavutych. View from above. 1988. Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History, Lviv. Collection of Local History Museum of Slavutych and Chornobyl NPP.

Close cooperation between the state and experts was challenged by the post-Cold War transformation and the unmaking of the Soviet project. This was a period when the role and place of the state in the society underwent radical rethinking and new kinds of economic and political relations were introduced. While this process is rarely thought of in terms of being postwar, as there was no physical destruction, it might be useful to apply such a lens to flesh out ruptures and radical transformation, especially of power relations. Private practices and clients became new avenues through which architects could work. Opening up to international markets and forging relations with new sources of knowledge and power further changed the field.

Yet across all the ruptures, legacies have remained. A number of infrastructures developed during state socialism were reinterpreted and creatively appropriated after the collapse of the Soviet Union in Ukraine. A whole infrastructure of expertise was inherited from the Soviet state and became 'building material' for the independent Ukrainian state: the Union of Architects, state planning and building companies, educational and scientific institutions, not to mention the urban environment, engineering networks as well as everyday practices. Thus, postwars represent stories of experts being able to experiment with the possibility of change, but also, and no less, stories of change, both enabling and endangering power relations that intersect at national, international, regional and municipal levels.

The question that emerges for Ukraine now is how to navigate this complex terrain, full of institutions and milieus with different genealogies of expertise — and different access to political power and capital. Postwar as history, and also as heritage, reveals a field of huge possibilities. We can expect that the postwar we are facing already, either discursively or as the urgent reconstruction of destroyed places, and the postwar we are going to see in the future is a competitive and conflictual arena. What kind of communication or cooperation is possible in situations where it seems impossible and perhaps unnecessary to unify those different actors? Or will we witness a postwar where urban spaces become a playground for different combinations of power relations between political figures, Ukrainian architects, real estate developers, international architectural firms and development agencies, urban movements and activists? In addition, the EU and individual states will likely be offering a patronage for reconstruction as a whole or for specific cities, taking existing tensions and power interplays to a whole new level.

Decentralization and Participation

After both world wars, states — whether new nation-states or new Soviet or socialist states — emerged in Eastern Europe as key players. Yet the sheer scope of tasks that emerged from wartime destruction demanded decentralizing. Despite all the

high-level ideas and ideologies, construction with brick and mortar takes place in specific geographical and practical settings. In a way, locality centers and decenters the processes of large policies of postwar recovery.

It is no surprise that some of the most illuminating research on postwar transformations examine very big questions on a small, local scale — from Magnitogorsk to Nowa Huta, Kharkiv to Baku, Warsaw to Munich, Wrocław to Leipzig, to name just a few areas of study (Kotkin 1997; Lebow 2013; Crawford 2022; Piątek 2020; Sternberg 2022; Thum 2011; Demshuk 2021). Postwar reconstruction in the Soviet case was connected with enhancing the role of city architects. Facing the volume of destruction and the tasks required to overcome it, the Soviet Ukrainian Union of Architects decided to hold some of its annual congresses in different cities — not only in Kyiv, but in Donetsk (then Stalino), Zaporizhzhia, Lviv and other regional centers. This was a new practice that aimed to supervise and consolidate, but also to activate resources and embed ideas locally.

Furthermore, a significant section of postwar housing was built by individual families rather than in a centralized and planned manner, relying on resources at hand, with some or no help from the state. The urgency of housing is a big feature of all postwar conditions, but planning and scale take time, and winter does not wait. In mid-1950s Lviv, the city of my forthcoming book, more than half of all new housing was built by individuals, defying the concepts of collective and planned construction and responding instead to the urgent needs of the everyday. This kind of individual construction was also a site of participation and citizens' creativity, still rarely acknowledged as a part of the architectural history of this era, nor yet as heritage.

In today's Ukraine we see how decentralization matters and how participation has become a currency in public discussion and expectation. The question for the future postwar would be how to communicate and connect various, sometimes very different, ideas and visions of reconstruction conceived across Ukraine on the local scale of a particular town. For example, one of the new political personas of the war and most probably postwar is the town or city mayor. We hear much less from oligarchs, but we see many interviews with mayors from cities and towns, big and small — Dnipro, Chernihiv, Irpin, Kharkiv, Kherson, Pavlograd to name just a few — in the daily news as well as on more professional platforms (Musaeva 2022; Ohorodnyk and Salizhenko 2022; Riasnyi 2022). The presence and, arguably, the power of mayors is growing: they are present in the cities under attack and very probably, depending on their performance, they will be in the position to shape postwar recovery.

Yet local does not necessarily mean participatory. We can already follow the stories of contacts and meetings, possible cooperation and contracts between architectural bureaus and municipalities. Media, social media and the architectural community

have all reacted vigorously to the possible cooperation between star architect Norman Foster and the mayor of Kharkiv (Kozlova 2022a). One example is the cooperation between a Japanese architect working in the Netherlands, Hiroki Matsuura, and the municipality of Irpin, one of the towns destroyed near Kyiv (Kozlova 2022b) (Figure 3). Both examples also entail the question of the architect's previous engagement in Russia.



Figure 3: Hiroki Matsuura meeting with Irpin mayor Oleksandr Markushin. Photograph by Volodymyr Karpluk Office, Investment Council of Irpin, 2022. Published by Українська правда.

An even bigger question is, what is the role of architects, and how can we think of international yet locally embedded cooperation in such cases? There are already several groups and new initiatives, from those emerging from the official, and old, Union of Architects (heir of the Union of Soviet Ukrainian Architects) to new and ambitious groups like Ro3kvit, Re:Ukraine, ReStart Ukraine and New Housing Policy,² all working in close cooperation with architectural offices, uniting architects, urban experts and practitioners. Moreover, there is a growing number of volunteer and bottom-up initiatives.³ While the Union of Architects has a long tradition of proximity to state power with all the accompanying legacies, the latter groups are more connected internationally and act in a more participatory mode. What could the future landscape, shaped by such an array of different actors, look like?

Finally, how can participation be exercised in the context of massive displacement — without speaking of occupation? How can experts share authority and engage

communities when inhabitants are dislocated and distressed? This is something that I encountered when giving a lecture for Kherson University at the end of March 2022, when Kherson was under Russian occupation, about the various postwar histories in the 20th century. In the discussion that followed, the topic of the participation of inhabitants came up, revealing that people wanted to avoid ending up in an environment — especially the built one — decided over their heads. The legacies of power of expertise, of connections with political power and real estate developers, loomed large on the Zoom screen.⁴ So how can we think beyond form and space in an attempt to reassemble war-torn relations in communities where the built environment has been drastically and violently changed by war? How can the experts, especially architects, whether local or international, be not only creators but mediators and assistants on the long path that moves away from the war? How can all of this change the way we think about architecture and the role of the architect?

Loss and Voices

Postwar is always about dealing with the loss of human lives and mourning the dead, with bonds destroyed, bodies and minds tormented by injuries and trauma. The loss of buildings and infrastructure will be addressed by physical rebuilding or building anew. But buildings, like people, have stories, and these stories will change. Their inhabitants will be telling stories while they make new buildings into places of living, eventually and hopefully new homes. Yet they also will probably make sites of memory about lost homes with whatever fragments they have left, physically or just digitally, as images on phones. The work of making these connections, relating to both lost and emerging built environments, will be crucial in reassembling communities, in place or at a distance. We are looking at a long postwar in which we will probably spend the rest of our lives.

How do I, as a scholar of the postwar, cope with my research becoming my life? Looking back, I think about how many individual experiences of previous wars and postwar recoveries were lost, erased, never noted. Many people who went through the extremity and everydayness of war and occupation never had the opportunity to leave testimonies. Looking forward, at my institution, the Center for Urban History in Lviv, we have launched several documentation initiatives, including the gathering of oral testimonies of displaced people and experts working across various spheres. Many other institutions and initiatives have done similar things. Documenting the now defines the future history, memory and heritage of this war.⁵ Therefore, it feels important to create archives that will accommodate diverse, different, marginal and even dissonant experiences. Telling about the war will be a part of recovering, taking many years and many stories.

Notes

- ¹ Government of Ukraine, National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from the War, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/national-council-recovery-ukraine-war>.
- ² Ro3kvit Urban Coalition for Ukraine, <https://www.ro3kvit.com/>; Re:Ukraine Housing, <https://www.balbek.com/reukraine-eng>; ReStart Ukraine, <https://restartukraine.io/>; New Housing Policy <https://newhousingpolicy.com.ua/>.
- ³ Some can be found here, on the website of the symposium 'The Reconstruction of Ukraine: Ruination/Representation/Solidarity': <https://reconstruct.in.ua/support/>.
- ⁴ Kherson was liberated on November 11, 2022.
- ⁵ Center for Urban History, 'Documenting Experiences of War', <https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/academic-en/research/documenting-war-2/>.

Author's Note

This position paper is based on my talk in the plenary roundtable 'Voices from Ukraine: War, Heritage, Reconstruction' during the 7th EAHN conference in Madrid in June 2022.

Competing Interest

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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