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Reconstructing Ukraine: Empowering Communities

Comment by Ievgeniia Gubkina, Ukrainian architect, architectural and urban historian after 3 years of war

The opening conference of Mantovarchitettura 2025 will have a meeting-comparison between two emblematic figures of the relationship among architecture and conflict. Representatives of different cultures, generations and sensibilities, ***Ievgeniia Gubkina*** *and* ***Daniel Libeskind*** *have experienced war and the impacts of geopolitical clashes at different times and eras. Making them necessary and topical materials in their architectural vision. Gubkina, from Kharkiv (in eastern Ukraine, capital of Sloboda Ukraine, the second city in the country with about one and a half million of inhabitants), is currently experiencing the war after the Russian invasion of 2022. We met her with some reflections on the topic.*

War is the most global issue

Ukrainian situation is painful and very dramatic. Observing it allows us to keep local issues (connected to the quality of architecture and the needs of the populations) linked to elements that are absolutely global and involve all the societies in the world. Wars are not just local problems (not the problems of only the countries in war), but the most global ones. What could

be a more global problem than war? Accordingly, the responses we can develop in Ukraine can be a possible solution for other countries.

Destruction and community

After the Second World War bombardments (for instance in cities like Rotterdam or Warsaw) there were a lot of demolitions. Post-war reconstructions have entered history books, they were implemented by famous modernist architects, but they were carried out conventionally from the top-down. Then, in the middle of the 20th century, nobody asked people what they wanted, what kind of requests they had, what kind of different needs they had.

And I'm really scared that Ukraine would repeat the same approach. But people and citizens of the different cities, so traumatized by war, should play the main role in reconstruction of Ukrainian cities. We all went through decades of different participatory projects and in our universities we all taught our students about the need for participation, but at the same time I'm not sure that we have the real tools on how to realize participation, especially in the backdrop of war, destruction, catastrophe and traumatization of society.

At the same time, we already can observe different kinds of potential mistakes when participatory approach is neglected. For example, in Kharkiv, where I'm from, Norman Foster oversees the rebuilding process, with some international organizations, such as UN-Habitat. Their approach is concerning.

I think it's a question of ethics: what about people? How would we really give them the power to make decisions on architecture? At the beginning of the 21st century, we need to change the approach we had in other wars, and it must pass through involving the local communities.

Architectural culture

In the first phase of the invasion, International architectural community was shocked by everything that was going on. There was a sense of great demand for reflection and potential for reaching a new level in the discussion about war and destruction. Maybe the last time there was such a comparable reaction was the Yugoslavian war. For instance, Lebbeus Woods, in his text War and Architecture, reflected on possible ways to overcome the consequences of war with the help of architecture. It's an occasion to develop our global intellectual collective thought as architectural intellectuals. At the beginning of the war in Ukraine, I expected no less intellectual results.

One of the main potential topics to be developed is trauma. I think that in future we need some discussions on trauma and how to heal through architecture. This discussion can help us also visualize possible ways of reconstruction sensitive to the traumatic experiences of people and cities.
It's not just a question of how many new homes to design and to build, as the international institutions, international organizations and fundraisers seem to say. Let's say, 100.000 people lost their homes and we need to reconstruct them. But in doing this, we must not forget about the traumatic experiences people went through. This experience is not something that we should feel ashamed of, hide or neglect. On the contrary, we have to see and respect it. Survivors can teach us how to imagine new shapes and forms.

Do we need aesthetic?
The design process needs to be democratized. People who survived the war don't care so much about the aesthetical shape and form, about styles, about materials, about *"devil is in details"* and so on. It's an aesthetical utopia.
They're much more interested in the functional and utilitarian aspect of architecture. It's a political question to give people the power to decide something about their own homes.

Heritage
Contrary to the opinion that during war, heritage is not of primary importance, heritage is the core of our discussion. In Ukraine, it's even more urgent than reconstruction because our heritage is under threat and can be destroyed any moment.
Heritage is part of the collective memory and culture. Heritage destruction is part of a genocide. And we urgently need to preserve it.

Memories
There are short and long memories. When you look at things closely you have a very short distance, and close reading gives you a lot of emotional intellectual material. Because you see everything and you feel everything. And there is still blood. I remember that during the first phase of the invasion, I couldn't calmly investigate or think about events. And you can't see the whole picture. You are just in the middle of events, you don't know what will happen the next day.

The architectural profession has found itself in a kind of trap. Architects work with the future, designing tomorrow. Architectural historians work exclusively with the past. The architectural profession, therefore, has no means of responding to reality, to today. So we need to develop some tools on how to react to reality right now. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in a deep crisis of the architectural profession.

And the Ukrainian architects?

They're in the middle of a catastrophe. The traumatic experiences can break you, emotionally, economically and even politically.

I'm from an architectural family, a lot of my friends are architects and I am an architect myself. Definitely, Ukrainian architects see the situation much better than anyone from the outside. They have all the potential, education and professionalism for reflection and design ideas. But it is obvious that the war situation does not encourage intellectual reflection, forcing architects to fight for survival, maintain their businesses, and look for contracts. Therefore, it is very important to involve Ukrainian architects in decision-making and reconstruction processes, giving them more opportunities. Nothing about us without us.

READ THE ARTICLE IN ITALIAN

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Ievgeniia Gubkina

Ievgeniia Gubkina, di nazionalità ucraina, è architetta, storica dell'architettura e dell'urbanistica. Il suo lavoro si concentra principalmente sull'architettura e sull'urbanistica del XX secolo in Ucraina, con un approccio multidisciplinare agli studi sul patrimonio culturale.

[IT] È co-fondatrice dell'Urban Forms Center, un'importante organizzazione non governativa ucraina impegnata nello studio e nella conservazione del patrimonio architettonico e culturale. È autrice dei libri *Slavutych: Architectural Guide* (2015) e *Soviet Modernism. Brutalism. Post-Modernism. Buildings and Structures in Ukraine 1955–1991* (2019).

Nel 2020-2021 ha curato l'*Enciclopedia dell'Architettura Ucraina*, un progetto multimediale online che si occupa di architettura, storia, critica, cinema e arti visive.

A seguito dell'invasione su vasta scala dell'Ucraina nel 2022, è stata costretta ad abbandonare la sua città natale, Kharkiv. Dal 2023 insegna storia e teoria dell'architettura alla Bartlett School of Architecture dell'UCL.
Nel 2023, DOM Publishers ha pubblicato il suo ultimo libro: *Essere un architetto ucraino durante la guerra*.

[EN]
Ievgeniia Gubkina is a Ukrainian architect, architectural and urban historian.
Her work focuses mainly on architecture and urban planning of the 20th century in Ukraine, with a multidisciplinary approach to heritage studies.
She is a co-founder of *Urban Forms Center*, a leading Ukrainian non-governmental organisation that works in the study and preservation of architectural and cultural heritage.
She's the author of the books *Slavutych: Architectural Guide* (2015) and *Soviet Modernism. Brutalism. Post-Modernism. Buildings and Structures in Ukraine 1955–1991* (2019).
In 2020–2021 she curated the *Encyclopedia of Ukrainian Architecture*, an online multimedia project that worked with architecture, history, criticism, cinema and visual arts.
As a result of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, she was forced to leave her hometown Kharkiv. Since 2023, she has been teaching history and theory of architecture at the Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL.
In 2023, DOM Publishers released her latest book: *Being a Ukrainian Architect During Wartime*.