Historical Lessons from Post-war Experiences in Dialogue with the Future of Ukrainian Cities

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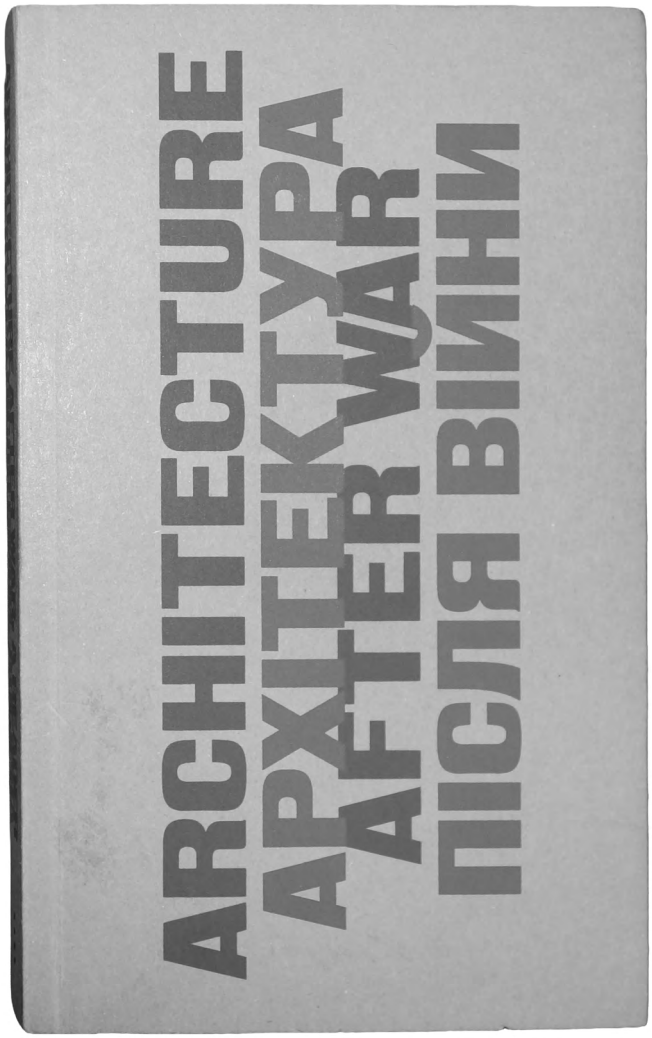

In a world where Russian missile strikes continue to destroy Ukrainian civil infrastructure, leaving millions killed or displaced, where Israel's genocidal action accompanied by urbicidal destruction is devastating Gaza, and numerous other conflicts are affecting people's everyday life, thinking about anything "after war" is a difficult discipline. All ongoing wars and conflicts require action now. However, for Bohdan Kryzhanovsky, a Ukrainian architect, scholar, and editor of the book *Architecture After War: A Reader*, the question of the future and visions of architecture after war is just as crucial and important as current humanitarian, political, and military activities. In his words, "It brings a humanistic focus to the conversation and shapes the future of both political and architectural thinking" (p. 12).

Strolling through the streets of Lviv in summer 2025, I found my attention caught by several exhibition panels placed on the fence of the Vasyl Stefanyk library.[1] One image shows a complex of modernist residential buildings destroyed after a Russian missile strike on the area close to the historic centre of Lviv. It was originally built in 1930 for Lviv Polytechnic University according to a design by architect Mihal Ryba, and nowadays it is part of the local architectural heritage.[2] The photo of damaged buildings taken after the attack was accompanied by its current state, showing how local authorities immediately began with emergency work and the buildings' reconstruction. Similar juxtapositions presented other examples from Irpin, Kharkiv, or Kyiv. In addition to the call for an immediate response, they also showed design proposals for possible future renovations, such as the House of Culture in Irpin, where part of the historic building from the 1950s survived Russian shelling and occupation, and is planned to be enclosed by a new glass structure.[3] However, the public exhibition was not only about the Ukrainian war experience. Pictures of bombed and rebuilt Warsaw, Berlin, Tokyo, and Rotterdam were displayed as the historical predecessors of destroyed Ukrainian cities. A parallel reading of these stories of resilience and restoration creates a source of inspiring ideas that could be turned into current and future practices. The reviewed book *Architecture After War: A Reader* adopts a similar approach. Published in both English and Ukrainian, it covers a range of historical and geographical contexts from the perspective of architects, architectural historians, experts in the field of heritage and conservation, urban studies, and urban planning.

Overall, 10 short essays, including the editor's introduction, presents various historical cases, examining the process of reconstruction and rebuilding the physical environment (housing stocks, industrial facilities, hospitals, schools, etc.) of war-damaged cities around the world, which could serve as partial inspiration for current still in war Ukraine. Focussing mainly on the post-war period of the 20th century, after the end of WWII, they present the ideas behind the new urban plans, as well as visions that capture a new social reality, values and aspirations of societies dealing with the consequences of war. What are the historical lessons from post-war reconstruction? Can Ukraine adopt certain strategies from the past? Are there common factors that can help navigate the restoration process as an environmentally conscious and socially minded response to war damage?

All contributions emphasise the need to act and prepare now, even though the end of the war is still far away. Patrick Zamarian's essay, "Architectural Education in Times of Turmoil, The United Kingdom in the Second World War", describes the war period in Britain as an accelerator of "fundamental changes in the nature and content of architectural education" (p. 30). Moving from traditional aesthetic-based Beaux-art patterns to more collaborative cross-disciplinary practice, the education system produced engaged professionals, who were then prepared for the huge public building programme of the welfare state. In "Visions of Reconstruction", John Pendlebury uses examples from plans for Exeter and Warsaw to show how urban planners' designs, fuelled by political decisions of local authorities, combined the modernist idea of creating a new, better city, and a historicist approach to preserving the cultural identity of urban structure. Similarly, using Britain and Poland as a reference point, Peter Larkham sketches universal stages of the post-catastrophe reconstruction plan considering different temporalities of each stage. Some of these can be implemented relatively quickly, while others, such as new legislation and approaches to land control and property ownership, require long-term planning.

In Germany, rubble from the wartime ruins became an alternative source of building material, as Lynnette Widder shows, while the legacy of building stock from the 1960s and 1970s, which was based on strategies of prefabrication and standardisation of building components, is acknowledged by Silke Langenberg in "Learning from the Twentieth Century" as an effective planning principle to solve housing problems and quickly fulfil needs after war. These strategies are presented as inspiring for Ukraine to meet the demand for a large quantity of affordable housing in a short period of time.

Beyond the European perspective, Andrea Urushima points out how experiences with reconstruction after natural disasters (earthquakes) and planned wartime destruction have contributed to the resilience of Japanese cities, highlighting the importance of planning policies related to the redistribution of urban and rural land, property rights, and housing support.

Shortly after the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the mayor of Kharkiv and Norman Foster agreed to develop a new urban plan for the city. The participation of starchitects, global corporations such as Foster and Partners, and foreign governments, which have their own agendas and interests in the rebuilding process, presents potential challenges for Ukraine. Some local critics, such as architect and educator Oleg Drozdov, have labelled this involvement as "intellectual colonisation".

Drozdov also poses a critical question: "Who – and why – should be involved in the discussion in the process of reconstruction?"[4] Part of the answer is offered by Wendy Pullan in her essay "The Disingenuous 'Clean Slate': Key Concerns for Reconstructing Ukraine". Focussing on "post-conflict" period, when the worst violence of war might be over but physical and psychological division persist, particularly in regions with mixed populations like Donbas, Donetsk, Luhansk, she cautions that the desire to start from zero and initiate a new master plan or residential megaprojects for the benefits of certain political, ethnic or economic groups is a dangerous strategy. Fragmented communities cannot agree on the reconstruction of common public spaces, as can be seen in long-term divided cities, such as Nicosia or Jerusalem. Adopting the "clean state" approach may deepen political and ethnic differences. Therefore, the foundation of renewal should be established through open mixed neighbourhoods, flexible and inclusive public spaces, which would increase chances for visibility and mutual exchange with participation of different communities in a process of rebuilding the local populations' specifics.

Unlike other contributions that approach the topic from a more academic-historical perspective, the text by the duo MVRDV, Jan Knikker and Fokke Moerel, pursues a different aim. In short, "A Journey from Rotterdam: Towards a Forward-Looking Reconstruction" can be described as a combination of a catalogue of MVRDV's architectural achievements in Rotterdam and vague techno-optimist ideas about future redesign of Ukrainian cities. Far from fully considering local contexts, even though they claim to do so, suggestions like exchanging the square-metre areas of destroyed apartments in Mariupol for tokens clouded in some unspecified web app infrastructure or the idea of rebuilding socialist housing blocks to mirror the residential areas of Washington DC or London, seem cringingly out of touch with Ukrainian reality, to say the least. Such visions are well suited to prominent financial or political circles, for which a new Ukraine after the war means, above all, a space for business activities with market deregulation and a weakened public sector. As a critical response to the elite global summits devoted to top-down Ukraine recovery, an interdisciplinary and horizontally organised initiative around a *Reconstruction* project offers new re-imagining and understanding of this issue. It follows a radical or "rooted approach",[5] the goal of which is to reconstruct sovereign Ukraine. Free from both, occupation and economic exploitation.

Overall, the lack of an insider's view significantly impoverishes the book. There is no contribution that showcases the unique experiences of, for example, the post-war reconstruction of Soviet Ukraine after the Second World War, which could provide readers with a historical reference point for comparison. Of course, expertise from abroad is undoubtedly beneficial; it can bring global context to the current debate and offer pragmatic universalistic solutions, yet the local citizens and scholars have histories, needs, and wishes that must be considered in the first place.

The war is not over. There are people who would prefer new windows and roofs on their damaged homes now over a discussion about the new design for the House of Culture at some indeterminate point in the future.[6] However, as Gruia Bădescu recalls, it is important to have this conversation for "keeping people engaged in thinking of future horizons" (pp. 146–147) while dealing with the emotional trauma of loss. Reconstruction involves more than just restoring the physical structures of urban areas; it is also a social process that must incorporate a strategy for the reintegration of displaced individuals into their homes. Citing examples from Sarajevo or Beirut, Badescu emphasises the importance of preserving "the social landscape of the city" (p. 148). Socially minded reconstruction, as such, must include professionals in urban planning together with social researchers and anthropologists, as well as the diverse array of people who once lived and want to live in these places again.

The range of themes is wide; however, there are some lines missing that would be worth paying more attention to. For example, a question of research into the built environment during wartime under unstable conditions, since understanding the structure of the city is crucial for any future rebuilding plan. Further, the relationship with the architectural heritage of the Soviet past,[7] the issue of collective memory and the understanding of cultural heritage from the perspectives of different social groups,[8] the building of war memorials or decentralised reconstruction efforts of grassroot movements and citizen's activities[9] could be more emphasised.

Although presented as a "handbook of ideas for architects and planners and a pragmatic guide for shaping the future of Ukrainian cities", readers should not anticipate "copy-paste" solutions distilled from the past. As the title suggests, "*A Reader*", represents a genre of short essays that limits in-depth analysis in favour of accessibility to a wider public. Nevertheless, this thematically diverse collection of perspectives can contribute to broader academic discussions as well. In response to Russian aggression, the international research community has placed a greater emphasis on promoting and expanding knowledge of Ukraine's architectural history. For example, the Berlin-based publisher DOM has expanded its popular architectural guide series by giving space to Ukrainian researchers. The newly initiated *Histories of Ukrainian Architecture* edition covers architectural heritage of Kyiv, Kharkiv or Slavutych[10] as well as critical reflections of Ukrainian cities' transformation and future development.[11] Like *Architecture After War*, all of these publishing activities contribute to cultural exchange, move Ukraine from a peripheral to a more central position of scholarly interest, and open up the field for possible international collaboration.

The book's key message is its advocacy for an interdisciplinary, holistic approach to architecture in the context

of reconstruction of cities and societies affected by natural disasters or wars. This approach requires not only the cooperation of architects, planners, economists, and politicians, but also the broader involvement of knowledgeable experts and stakeholders. Whether historians, anthropologists, sociologists, or skilled workers and citizens with various socio-cultural backgrounds, they all must be part of current discussions and future processes. Some of these roles are explored more extensively in the essays, while others are touched upon less, yet the collection serves as a comprehensible source and a good starting point for further imagining Ukraine's post-war future for those both within and outside the field of architecture and urban planning.

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1 The street exhibition *Phoenix Cities. Reconstruction after the war destruction* was presented in 2024 on the second anniversary of the full-scale Russian invasion by the War Museum and the Polish Institute in Kyiv. The exhibition then moved from Kyiv to other locations across the country.

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5 This approach attempts to "develop ideas and strategies towards a politics, economics, and ethics of reconstruction rooted in the deep fabric of Ukraine's society, heritage, and environment." ANOSOVA, Daša, Michał MURAWSKI and Dan Jonas ROCHE. 2025. Editorial. *e-flux Architecture*, (9), pp. 1–4 [online]. Available at: https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/reconstruction/556962/editorial (Accessed: 19 September 2025).

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11 HOFER, Andreas, HUJVAN, Anastasia and CHERKES, Bohdan. 2025. *City in Transition: Urban Dialogues on the Future of Lviv.* Berlin: DOM; TREFFERS, Fulco et al. 2024. *A Vision for Mariupol: The Easternmost Gateway of Europe.* Berlin: DOM.