

## Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship FINAL REPORT

Larissa Babij, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2005-2006

How else to begin this essay than with a tremendous “Thank You!” to the Hays family for providing the opportunity to travel and pursue an independent project, and to the selection committee of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship for granting this opportunity to me. I send this report from Kyiv, where I am currently studying and continuing my explorations into Ukrainian culture and space. Over the past year, I have learned a lot about Ukraine, varying international attitudes toward architecture and city planning, and, of course, about myself. I have selected close to 100 photographs (of over 6000 frames shot last year) that show the many faces of Kyiv through architectural details, photos of buildings, and scenes of people using spaces in both conventional and creative ways.

I came to Kyiv with the intention of documenting the positive (presently existing) architectural construction to replace some of the bitter images of loss that are so common in the Ukrainian Diaspora, and hoping to glimpse the ephemeral spirit of a developing “Ukrainian” style of architecture. But I found the city in its awkward adolescent stage. Architecturally, Kyiv in 2005-2006 can only be described as eclectic and unresolved.

My fellowship year could be divided roughly into a number of stages. Taking Titus Hewryk’s *The Lost Architecture of Kiev* as a guide to invisible landmarks on still visible sites, I started getting acquainted with the city. I found the 30 sites described in his book on a map, walked to them, photographed them, and made a catalogue of basic facts, my observations, and documentary photos. Some were major tourist attractions, like St. Michael’s Monastery of the Golden Domes. Other sites were further from the center and harder to identify.

Of the 27 sites I visited, five have been completely rebuilt, four are still partially standing, one is in ruins, traces of seven of the original buildings remain amidst

contemporary construction, and ten have completely disappeared. As for the latter ten, I suspect few citizens know the history of those places. Although buildings are often marked with plaques commemorating famous citizens who once lived there, these destroyed monuments are gone, and it is impossible to gauge today exactly where they once stood. Some demolished churches are marked by small wooden crosses, like grave markers, leaving a hint for the curious without disturbing the daily progress of city-dwellers. In a few cases, nearby structures have replaced the function of the original buildings, as in the case of demolished churches whose congregations now gather in adjacent former bell towers.

After a few months trekking the streets and internalizing the city, I realized that the present state of the sites investigated by Hewryk did not provide a representative cross-section of Kyiv's current architectural developments. Of the new buildings on sites of demolished historic monuments, some restorations are the work of independent Ukraine, but none reflect the post-Soviet commercial building boom. The skyline is littered with cranes. New construction is everywhere: large, glitzy shopping centers, fancy apartment buildings, clusters of office towers.

New Kyiv architecture is flashy, with many ornaments, colors, and curlicues, boldly displaying the ostentatious wealth of the city's upper crust. To foreign eyes the new designs are tasteless kitsch, and many Ukrainian architects agree. These projects are lucrative, expensive, reflective of the untrained taste of the nouveau riche who are eager to flaunt their extraordinary wealth and the refusal of their architects to take responsibility for the fact that these buildings will stand in the city for the next half-century or longer.

Walking the streets of Kyiv, exploring a new neighborhood, I would sometimes feel I had entered a completely different world or get a sharp impression of a place I've been. Perhaps this is a common syndrome of the traveler, subconsciously sated with so many impressions of all the lands he or she has been to that a random association will bring an image floating to the surface to cover the present view with an obscuring

blanket. Or perhaps this is unique to Kyiv's erratic pool of architectural influences and haphazard planning trends.

Constantly photographing, I was drawn to scenes of contrast and conflict where elegant old churches or theaters rub up against Soviet-era housing blocks, their poor materials crumbling far sooner than those of their hundreds-year-old neighbors; shiny phallus-towers dominating neighborhoods of 4-5 story turn-of-the-century townhouses; pristine green parks shadowed by massive apartment complexes. I kept searching for images that could convey the sense of hopeful chaos, intentional indecision, history, future, regional differences — an endless number of layers all converging on one moment. I wanted to capture something of the energy of a country that is trying to discover and cultivate its own identity out of a long history of occupations and upheavals and rich cultural heritage.

As daylight grew scarce and the air too chilly for leisurely meandering, and as I became more comfortable with my ability to communicate, I began contacting local architects and scholars to ask what they saw in their city. It was difficult to get people to talk about contemporary architecture, and when they did their responses were pessimistic and disappointing. Land should not have been privatized and sold to businesses unsystematically after independence; everyone referred to the need for a city plan of Kyiv and the very obvious lack of one. Amidst the temptations of Wild West capitalism, privatization was so lucrative that no one wanted to set any limits. Clients, whose taste is very showy, drive design. The architect dare not argue, for his livelihood depends on the project. So Kyiv architecture leaves much to be desired. Yet my interview subjects seldom talked of possibility, of solutions, of potential change — perhaps they feel helpless.

In November, I attended an “international forum” on architecture and was shocked by an atmosphere that I could only describe as self-congratulatory old boys' club. Although the featured guests were from countries like Italy and Brazil, they were not internationally renowned architects, but rather friends of the organizers. There was

no moderated discussion on a central topic, merely disconnected individual presentations articulated in Russian without English (or Ukrainian) translation. Despite the disappointment of my expectations, I did appreciate the effort. So I interviewed the organizer and sent an article to the *Ukrainian Weekly* in New Jersey to report the event.

I regularly observed the weekly meetings of the Kyiv Board of Architecture and City Planning to review proposals for new projects. Unfamiliar aesthetics, very technical graphic presentations, and Russian-language discussions left me barely understanding the projects for decorative office towers or rigidly symmetrical residential complexes. Questions centered on practical planning issues like parking and square meters of living space, though a few lively debates ensued over issues of preserving historic monuments or green zones.

Some proposals seemed aesthetically ludicrous, but when members and friends of the Board got up to present, the work passed with nary a criticism. Only a small, tight circle of architects, who are well connected to the bureaucracy that oversees construction, takes charge of major projects. Ukraine's architecture reflects the corrupt and disorganized systems through which projects are approved and built.

Over the year, I traveled to a number of Ukrainian cities – including Lviv, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odessa – which allowed me to better understand the landscape and character of Kyiv as seen through local eyes. Returning from each different city, I would see Kyiv in a slightly different light. I began to understand it as the Ukrainian capital, a center for wish fulfillment that draws young people from all over the country, rather than a small city that seems so sleepy after New York.

Kyiv is truly the meeting point between Eastern and Western Ukraine, with their respective tendencies regarding the use of Russian or Ukrainian language, political leanings, and city planning. Architecturally, many Eastern cities are newer (20th century), with Soviet-planned, wide, tree-lined boulevards and grand plazas. They

are industrial and thus, dirtier but wealthier. Western cities ooze history, and old Austro-Hungarian influence is visible in their narrow cobble-stoned streets and baroque facades.

I spent the winter in the city architectural library, reading more about Ukrainian architectural history, such as the stylistic movement called Ukrainian modern that developed in the late 19th century and lasted until the 1930s. This aesthetic of organic forms and emphasis on decoration resembles the Viennese Secession or Art Nouveau. Today, buildings of this style are considered very attractive and are being diligently restored. Even new constructions mimic decorative elements of the hundred-year-old style. Ironically, when the ornamented edifices first appeared during Kyiv's early-20th-century economic boom, they were considered bourgeois and vulgar.

To share some of this knowledge with visitors to Kyiv, I wrote an article about Jaroslaviv Val, a street with an ancient history, for the *Kyiv Post*, a local English-language newspaper. Tracing the original 11th-century city fortifications, the street now boasts newly restored masterpieces in the style of Ukrainian modern. I was aided in my research by Arkadi Tretiakov, a knowledgeable amateur local architectural historian who is compiling detailed histories of the buildings on various central streets for walking tours. As a native of Kyiv, he also provided firsthand accounts of how the face of the city has changed over the past 50 years.

I wanted to see what more residents thought of Kyiv. Through a written survey, I asked architects, residents, and students which building they liked best in Kyiv and which building built after 1991 they liked best. While I found the results of the survey inconclusive, I did learn a lot about Ukrainian culture from this exercise. There was a general wariness to answer questions that are not pragmatic. Many non-architects did not believe that a layperson could or should pay attention to the surrounding built environment, that it could affect their well-being and aesthetic

values. Some people even bluntly scolded me for daring to ask such “stupid questions.”

I had originally planned to casually question visitors to the sites of “lost architecture,” but my accent and the fact that I spoke Ukrainian rather than Russian set me instantly apart from the native Kyivans, and created barriers to winning the trust of complete strangers. Ukrainians tend to be wary of revealing personal opinions to strangers. I even sensed resistance from close friends to thinking about something like citywide architecture, which they believe is not directly related to their daily lives.

Fighting some of the negative impressions I got about Kyiv’s architectural future and Kyivans’ attitudes toward their built environment, I turned to the fantastical world of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* and read articles by anthropologists Diana Blank and Tanya Richardson about sense of place in other Ukrainian cities. I felt like I had to look at Kyiv through a slightly distorted lens – as a dream-reality – both because this is a city to which people from all over Ukraine flock to fulfill their dreams, and because with Kyiv’s architectural attitude of anything goes, people with economic means are literally building their fantasies, and we have to live amid them.

I began collecting my observations into a series of essays organized around themes that had caught my attention: profit/corruption, landscape, cars as status symbols, housing in its public/private dimensions, the interior/exterior qualities of courtyards and balconies, systems of navigation that rely more on asking people for directions than reading signs. I have discussed the possibility of publishing a summary of my observations in the Kyiv-based architecture journal *A+C* with editor Boris Erofaloff.

However, in my proposed book, these writings will feature secondarily, as pithy word-pictures interspersed between the 50-80 photos that I have selected to illustrate the architectural face of Kyiv in 2005-2006. I hope to convey a sense of place (people inhabiting architecture) to readers. Kyiv through my transplanted eyes is a place of transition, moving waves of influence –aesthetic, financial, social, linguistic,

that is still in the process of forming its identity. I have discussed my ideas with a couple of local designers and am still seeking a publisher.

First I will show my work as a photo exhibition here in Ukraine. In Kyiv, I will present 40 photographs with accompanying text blocks in the gallery outside the library of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, with plans for it to travel to the city architecture library as well. Simultaneously, I will display my photos in an art café in Dnipropetrovsk. Both exhibitions are scheduled to open in late October. I also hope to show my photos in New York at the Ukrainian Museum or at Columbia University.

Not ready to leave Ukraine after merely a year, I enrolled in a Master's Program in Cultural Studies at the National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy," so that I could further develop my linguistic and cultural skills in Ukrainian and Russian. I have contributed freelance articles to the *Kyiv Post* and hope to send a few architecture-related pieces back to New York for *Log* and *Architectural Record*. I hope to continue working as a liaison between my American contacts in the architectural sphere and Ukrainian Diaspora community and my new Ukrainian colleagues.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have made contact with many architectural scholars and activists with whom I hope to continue working. This year, Titus Hewryk, the author of *The Lost Architecture of Kiev*, received a Fulbright grant to conduct research in Kyiv. The community working to raise standards in Ukraine's architectural profession keeps growing, and I hope my exhibited and published work will help encourage growing interest in this Eastern European nation.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work independently, develop my own interests and talents, and intimately get to know the space and the people of Ukraine. I have learned to read the present architecture of Kyiv through deeper knowledge of its historical development and of the Ukrainian culture which influences the attitudes of its inhabitants. I hope the discussions that I've had and the photos I show, which

reflect my unique outsider's point of view, may prompt others to look a little more closely at their surroundings and think more deeply about the potential repercussions of what they build.