Kyiv, Ukraine - Revised Edition

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The Missing Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv

2.1 Life in Limbo

We begin with a tangled story about a wonderful museum that had the misfortune of becoming homeless. It is the Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv. I began to learn its story soon after I arrived in Kyiv for this project and ventured on a first outing. I had been there years earlier during a short visit to the city with my late father, and now I wanted to study the museum in detail as I began to immerse myself in any- and everything that I could learn about Kyiv. A handsome English-language guidebook that sells well in the city had reminded me where to go: 8 Orlyka Street in what was described as the “aristocratic Lypki” district, in a beautiful two-story baroque building from 1753-1755 that was once called the Klovscki Palace, a residence for VIP guests to Pecherska Lavra, the Monastery of the Caves, the ancient golden-domed Orthodox religious complex that is Kyiv's leading visitor attraction. For a time later, the building housed the first Kyiv Gymnasium (a school) and then the Women's Theological Seminary. It became the city's official history museum in 1981. The guidebook promised that the museum’s “carefully assembled collection gives a detailed picture of the past and the present of the Ukrainian capital” and that “the museum has been recognized as a center of knowledge about Kiev.” I did not doubt these claims, but I remembered the museum as somewhat of a clutter of thousands of old objects in glass cases. As it turned out, I was going to learn a lot more about the present from the museum than about the past.

There was no museum at 8 Orlyka; the guidebook was outdated. Instead, I was confronted with the new location of the Supreme Court of Ukraine, a guarded gate, and a security guard who told me that the museum had moved, but that he did not know where. I found out the next day that Kyiv's history was even closer to home, at 2 Khreshchatyk, in “Ukrainian House,” a newer, Soviet-style building on a low hill overlooking European Square. The building had been Kyiv's Lenin Museum for the several years between its construction in 1982 and the fall of Lenin's statue. Lenin, I already knew had never been to Kyiv, and the Lenin Museum, I learned later, never became

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3 Quotations from Malikenaite, ed. (2002), p. 76. The text of the guidebook refers to “Kiev,” but itself has “Kyiv” on the cover page. So it goes with this city.
A local favorite. According to a current Ukrainian guidebook, the museum amounted to nothing more than a “communistic agitation-propaganda center” (Kurus et al., eds., 2010, p. 171). And so once again, still new to the city, I set out for a day of learning at the Museum of the History of City of Kyiv, and once again the lesson would be about the city today more than about history. I climbed the broad stone stairs from European Square and entered through the one door among several that was marked open. A guard asked me what I wanted. There was an empty rotunda before me, a nice stylized map of Ukraine above that decorated the empty space, and dead stillness except for the guard whom I seem to have disturbed. I asked him about the museum of Kyiv’s history. “It’s on the fourth floor,” he told me, and pointed the roundabout way around the rotunda to my choice of stairs or elevator. I asked if I could shoot a photo of the rotunda and the map but he said no. I was puzzled but took him at his word, and went upstairs. From the fourth floor balcony, I looked down at where I had just been and photographed the same guard with his head down on his desk.

A sign on a partly opened door said in Ukrainian “Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv.” I peered in and a startled woman at a mostly bare desk inside welcomed me in. I asked for the museum and she said that this was it. The only exhibit was in the next room, she said. There was a nominal cost, and I was welcome to see it. The room, it turned out, was about the size of my bedroom and the exhibit was made of about 20 or so watercolors and oil paintings of Kyiv scenes from various times during the Soviet years. I enjoyed the show, although it was hard to linger for longer than about ten minutes, and I signed the register as the first visitor of the day. Before I left, I explained that I was hoping to see more, and that I had come from the United States to learn about Kyiv. The woman at the desk explained that for the time being there is no more, although exhibits in the adjoining room will rotate and I was welcome to come back. I said that I had been to 8 Orlyka Street in the past, and had been anxious to see the exhibits again. As I asked what was going on and told her something about my professional credentials and a plan to write about Kyiv, she said that perhaps I should meet the head of the museum, and that he would explain it all to me.

And so it is that after a few minutes I was taken to another room and entered the office of Vitaliy Vasylovych Kovalinskiy, aged 70, famous Kyiv historian, prolific author of Kyiv history, editor of the journal Kupola (Dome, as in Kyiv’s iconic church domes), and head of the barely visible Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv. The room was the size of my modest office at the university, but there were many, many more books piled everywhere, posters, Kyiv maps, and mementoes on the walls, a desk with higher piles
of paper than on my messy desk, and a desktop computer that was not exactly yesterday’s but more from the day before yesterday. He welcomed me warmly, heard me out about my interests, and then did indeed explain it all as promised. He said a lot more, too, as we met quite a few more times, often because I had a list of questions from reading homework that he “assigned” me. As soon as I raised my first questions about history, he turned me to selections from his nine volumes of Kyivski miniatury (Kyiv Thumbnails), fun essays about all sorts of Kyiv topics that he had published between 2002 and 2011. I began to buy the books as soon as I left the first meeting in the old Soviet-style bookstore on the other side of European Square, and forevermore thereafter walked Kyiv’s streets with insights from what I had read. In this way, Vitaliy Vasylovych became for me an early and key informant. In subsequent meetings, he railed against ill-conceived proposals to erect super skyscrapers in historic districts and about the neglect of aging infrastructure and historic monuments. Once, he walked me to the landmark statue of Prince Volodymyr the Great, the 988 baptizer of the Kyivan population, to show me its wear and to discuss efforts to arrest corrosion. On another occasion, we went through his computer files

Figure 2.1  Exhibits from the Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv being packed up for moving to limbo (Courtesy of V. Kovalynskyi)
and slid electronic copies of documents, photographs, news clippings, and other information about the now-invisible museum from his hard drive to my jump drive (Figure 2.1).

Our conversations started as soon as we exchanged business cards at the start of the first meeting. I noted that his vyzivivka (business card) had only phone numbers and an email address as contact information, and no street address for the museum that he directed. His response to my question opened the door to learning how land use politics works in Ukraine and proved invaluable. As he explained the situation, he spoke in the deliberate and professional tone of a senior and respected museum head. Yet, I could also see that Vitaliy Vasylovych was angry. The museum had been kicked out of its quarters on April 24, 2003 (the date of the official notice), simply because the Supreme Court liked the building and had more pull. Now, more than eight years later, a skeleton staff was trying to keep busy in a far corner of the former Lenin Museum, while the museum’s 40,000 exhibits were locked away in crates in the building’s bowels. Promises swirled about a new location, first this one and then another one, and then another one still, but none had come to fruition despite Vitaliy Vasylovych’s best lobbying efforts, despite considerable support for the museum’s cause from Kyiv’s cultural community, and even despite a strong letter of support from the head of Ukraine’s parliament. The Supreme Court is fully entrenched in Klovskyi Palace, and one after another plans for replacement quarters fall through. And so, Kovalinskiy and the other employees found themselves to be exiled for an indeterminate term to a Ukrainian limbo, a silent place called Ukrainian House that used to be a museum about Lenin.

2.2 An Imperium of Raiders

The fate of the Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv is the result of what Ukrainians call reyderstvo (raiding; the same word appears in Russian). I later learned about dozens of other examples where people or institutions with superior connections to power were able to displace those without, and I saw that this was a fundamental element of the way that Kyiv works today. Cultural institutions such as museums, art galleries, libraries, and bookstores were disproportionate victims, but raiders also took places of business, residential buildings, schools, at least one medical clinic, and many, many plots of ground that had served neighborhoods as public squares, children’s playgrounds, or green spaces that Soviet city planners had once carefully allocated. If someone wanted your site or even
the business that you had worked hard to grow, they simply pulled strings to have you investigated for tax fraud, building code violations, unpaid customs levies, or any of a number of other trumped up charges, and you were gone. The courts would rarely help, because there, too, raiders bought influence. And if need be, thugs would be hired to hasten your departure. In the new Kyiv, instead of the wisdom of planning professionals, the voices of citizens, and even the laws of the state, the only forces that mattered in what land was used for by whom were connections to power. In many cases, those connections were rooted in family ties, as a father might be a member of parliament and a son or son-in-law might be a developer-entrepreneur, but more often it was money that did the singing. I witnessed dozens of protests about the situation at City Hall and other venues, read honest reporting by journalists, saw citizens’ petitions for redress, and even attended some hearings in court, but almost always the result was the same – money sings loudest and opens doors to power and property.

Sadly, Ukraine has become an imperium of raiders. Even during communist times, there were elites and politically connected thugs who lived above the law and profited from the wealth of the others and the nation as a whole, but now since the blunt force of capitalism has been unleashed the actions of raiders run central. As expressed by Kyiv architectural historian Mykhailo Kalnytskyi, “[in the past] the Bolsheviks destroyed many things for the communist belief, and today people will destroy anything for money” (Kozmina, 2000). In addition to the countless cases of heartache, misery, and injustice that are brought on, the net result is (1) an enormous concentration of wealth into relatively few hands; (2) more concentration of more wealth into fewer hands as the most adept raiders raid raider-competitors; (3) enormous gaps in incomes and levels of living between the most adept raider class and the rest of Ukraine; and (4) the general impoverishment of the country as a whole. What is more, the very realistic threat that raiders will take over any successful business has hampered foreign investment into Ukraine and chased away potential investors. Furthermore, even humanitarian aid for the poor or victims of a disaster such as a flood, be that aid from within Ukraine or a form of foreign aid, is subject to hijack, as raiders have routinely helped themselves to shipments of food, medical supplies, and other necessities which they then put on the market for their own profit.

That is only half the story. Although we will never be able to quantify it, the other half is that a very large share of the profits from raiding leaves the country. Some raiders are Russians and work as if there were no boundaries between the two countries, so the money goes to Moscow and other cities to
the north, but most are citizens of Ukraine who invest, spend, and squirrel away what they have taken in other countries. There are Swiss banks and banks in Cyprus among other places where transparency is hampered, yachts in the Mediterranean, and villas in the south of France, in Spain, and elsewhere. There are ski chalets in Switzerland, expensive apartments in London or in the United States, beachfront property in Thailand, and second homes in Israel. The money goes also for shopping sprees in Paris and London, and for expensive private schools and universities in the United Kingdom, the United States, Switzerland, and other countries for the children of the rich. Details come from anecdotal evidence, investigative reporting, and “outing” by political opponents, but proof is scarce and a total picture, including knowing the total monetary amount that has gone offshore, is not possible.

2.3 Theater at Teatralna

Having said all this about reyderstvo, there is more to add about the saga of the Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv. Fast-forward two years and Kovalinskiy is now retired, his staff has dispersed, and there is no longer a trace of the museum in Ukrainian House. Lenin’s place is now a venue for rotating displays for things to buy from abroad: high-end automobiles, wedding dresses, Japanese electronics, and popular fashions in clothing and accessories. From time to time, the airy rotunda where the revolution’s leader had once stood provides a floodlit runway for leggy models. The museum, meanwhile, was reorganized (more than once) under new leadership, was renamed the Museum of the City of Kyiv, and was assigned a new location. It was opened to the public near the end of 2013. I know the new building well, and I have visited the museum. The staff was extremely courteous and I felt very welcome. I was even able to get in at the discounted rate for senior citizens of 15 hryvnia as opposed to the normal price of 30 hryvnia (US$2 as opposed to US$4 in round numbers), even though I offered to pay full fare as I am not a Ukrainian citizen. The nice woman at the ticket desk insisted that as long as I am a senior citizen and speak Ukrainian, I should get in as a Ukrainian. The rest of the story about the new museum continues with tales about demons. This part of the story can be called “Theater at Teatralna.”

Teatralna is the name of a busy Metro station in the center of Kyiv that is near various popular theaters, including the Theater of Russian Drama at the very intersection where the Metro exits and Kyiv’s beautiful Opera
Theater just up the street. On weekend evenings there is also an interesting “theater” played out below ground near the entry to the subway system – a dance party for pensioners to live accordion music. The oldsters dance with one another as couples, as well as in groups stepping together around a perimeter, and there are always plenty of onlookers clapping in time to the music. But the “Theater at Teatralna” that I describe here is neither one of the theater buildings nor the oldsters’ dance party beneath the street intersection, but the singular “theater” that has accompanied the illegal construction of a multilevel commercial building on the site of a small public square at the Teatralna Street intersection. This construction project was frequently and vociferously protested by “Save Kyiv” activists. I went to these protests regularly, developed good sources about the situation, and saw it as an excellent case study of Kyiv’s mess in microcosm. You can think ahead about how this new building figures into the story of the museum.

The address is 7 Vulytsya Bohdana Khmelnytskoho (Bohdan Khmelnytskyi Street). Perhaps because it is a central street-corner location that is much desired, the site has changed often in character. In the mid-19th century, it was the residence of an educator named Klymovych. It was then sold in 1871 to the noted Ukrainian political figure Hryhoriy Halahan who made Number 7 his own residence and turned Numbers 9-11 next door, a total of five buildings, into a private educational institution named for his father Pavlo Halahan. In 1919, after the Revolution, Number 7 became a medical clinic, then for a short while a theatrical school, and then from 1928 it was an institute for writers. The much-used building was finally taken down in 1981 when the subway was put through and Teatralna Station constructed. From that time until 2003, the site was a “square” – a small, green open space where passersby and local residents alike could take a break in a busy city center. The space must have been much beloved because when it was taken away in 2003 for development, all hell broke loose. The conflicts have not stopped since.

What happened is this. In November 2003, the Kyiv City Council announced that it had entered into negotiations with a company called Alliance-Center, Ltd., a construction and development company owned by two companies registered in Kyiv that wanted to build a multilevel commercial complex on the site. Neighbors began to protest that the city was taking away their square, and then after initially signing off on the proposal, the Kyiv Metropolitan System (the subway company) voiced objections, too, saying that the construction would imperil the rotunda above the entrance to Teatralna Station directly below. Even more, concerns were voiced that a collapse could occur just where people passed through turnstiles into
and out of the station and lined up to purchase tokens and passes. Other complaints came later with the start of construction from neighbors who complained about noise. The Theater of Russian Drama across the street protested that noise and vibrations were interfering with performances and rehearsals. Critics also argued that a new commercial center was not needed, because there were already too many shopping areas in the center of Kyiv that lacked customers and a surfeit of empty office space. As a result, in July 2006 the city withdrew its authorization to continue construction, attaching the site to a “zone of protection” around local theaters, but about 18 months later, after who knows what transpired, the land was sold by the Kyiv government to Alliance-Center, Ltd., with the understanding that construction would continue.

Protests stepped up. At the end of 2009, opponents of the project had gathered more than 3,000 signatures of citizens against the project. There were frequent gatherings across the street from the construction site, speakers, placards, and clever programming by protest organizers. One event involved a theater-like performance by costumed characters who passed bribes from builders to city officials, who in turn produced documents that the builders need to start construction. The press was always present, as protest leaders made sure to inform journalists in advance about their activities. Police were always there, too. On February 2, 2011, the Cabinet of Ministers of the government of Ukraine proclaimed that the construction needed to stop, but it did not. On February 2 of that year, the head of Kyiv city administration Oleksandr Popov ordered that construction had to be halted by February 9, but it continued. On February 10, the chief architect of the City of Kyiv, Serhiy Tselovalnyk, said that the crane that supported construction would be taken down on February 17, but it was not taken down. On March 28, 2011, an appellate court upheld an earlier court decision that the construction was illegal, but construction continued. On April 7 it was announced in the press that demolition of the building was started, but on April 8 it was reported in the same sources that construction was continuing. In May 2011, the Kyiv City Council declared that such construction could not be permitted, because 7 Vulytsya Bohdana Khmelnytskoho fell within the historic preservation zone centered on the St. Sophia Cathedral complex, but construction continued.

Informants explained that builders were able to continue building despite orders to cease because they faced no risk. If they ever actually had to stop and were ordered to dismantle what they had erected, they would be paid for their trouble, i.e., for the cost of construction and the cost of demolition and clean-up. Apparently, such is the close relationship
in Kyiv between well-placed builders and their sponsors in key positions of government. As a result, one of the protest leaders, Natalia Moussienko, a neighbor of the project, proposed tongue-in-cheek that if the building were allowed to stand, it should be not a commercial center but Kyiv’s Museum of Corruption.

2.4 A Dubious Home

Natalia was close, but not quite accurate. As hinted above, this building, now completed, is the new Museum of the City of Kyiv. This is because of a “Solomonic” compromise that the well-meaning Oleksandr Popov announced with great satisfaction on August 26, 2011: the public would get back space that it had lost to the developers, and the museum would at long last get its new home. When the museum’s directors protested that the site was way too small for the 40,000 exhibits that they had boxed into crates, and that they did not want to be in an illegal building, and that they did not want to fall through the subway station’s rotunda onto the Metro tracks below, they were replaced. The government of Kyiv and the government of Ukraine had had enough of the bickering and here was the solution, no matter what. Besides, Euro 2012, a major football tournament that Ukraine and Poland were cohosting, was fast approaching and was going to occupy everyone’s attention, so this matter had to be put to rest. Plus, it would look good to have a museum for visitors to see. There was not enough time, of course, to actually open the museum in time for summer 2012 visitors, but signs were put up high and low that this was the Museum of the History of Kyiv, along with a brass plaque that is so shiny that it can function as a mirror. It reads that this building is a “gift to the people of Kyiv” from Alliance-Center, Ltd. There was a “grand opening” of the museum on May 26, 2012 (just before the start of the football tournament), complete with blue and yellow balloons (the colors of Ukraine’s flag). It was scheduled for 3:00 p.m., but just in case there were protestors who intended to disrupt the event, it was held earlier, as the Soviets would have done, at 1:00 p.m.

No one really believes that Alliance-Center, Ltd., actually gave its building away. Conventional wisdom is that in these kinds of “scandalous” situations (from the word skandalnyi/skandalna that is applied often to construction by raiders), the taxpayers keep paying, in this case for a building that they did not want on a piece of land that was illegally taken from them. And what a structure they got! Not only is the building said to be unsafe with respect to the Metro below, the architects gave it an eleventh hour “museum look”
by sticking six cheap-looking statues of medieval knights and Cossacks in
a row on the roof line (they have hooks on the back for hoisting), and above
the doors are female caryatids with their backs against the building. They
look silly as could be holding up nothing more than thin pieces of clear
Plexiglas that provide a sliver of shelter from rain. Other than the nice staff,
what is inside is goofy, too. There are two floors of displays in cases from a
catalogue. While it is refreshing to not have the usual clutter of thousands
of objects, the displays as a whole are very thin and represent only a tiny
fraction of the old museum’s wealth. Also, the exhibits are not especially
well chosen and not always well explained, although most key times in
the city’s history from when Kyiv was the glorious capital of an impressive
princely state called Rus to independence in 1991 are touched on at least a
little. However, some display cases are curiously empty. While the first floor
has a wonderful model of ancient Kyiv as a centerpiece that I remembered
seeing a long time ago when I visited 8 Orlyka years ago with my late father,
the second floor centers on something entirely unexpected – a beautiful
silk Japanese kimono accented with gold thread. The sign says that it was a
gift from the city of Kyoto. In fact, we might close this discussion by saying
that everything about the museum, from the creepy statues with hooks
on their backs on the roof to the inexpensive display cases with hastily
assembled displays inside, says that Kyiv’s history resides in this building
only temporarily. The museum, we conclude, is still in limbo, its collections,
if they have not been raided, are still in crates, and the man who (among
others) lovingly cared for them, Vitaliy Vasylovych Kovalinskiy, is out of
the picture.

Alexander Motyl, a specialist on Ukrainian politics and Professor of
Political Science at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ, minced no words in
a Kyiv Post article entitled “Misrepresenting History at the Kyiv Museum”
(2013). He begins with the question “Does Kyiv have a history” and concludes
that based on the weak exhibits, visitors to the museum would answer the
question with a resounding “No.” “The bottom line,” Motyl writes, “is that
this is unlike any exhibit of history I’ve ever seen. There are no narratives,
no stories, no highlights, no themes – just a bunch of almost randomly
collected stuff. Stuff, needless to say, may make for a great flea market, but
it does not amount to a museum exhibit.” I agree. I agree also with Motyl’s
assessment of why such a poor museum exists:

4 The article is also available on Motyl’s blog in the online journal World Affairs: http://www.
worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/alexander-j-motyl/misrepresenting-history-kyiv-museum.
So who is to blame for this disaster? ... The Yanukovych regime. The ministries of culture and education are run by Regionnaires [members of the Party of Regions] committed to emptying Ukrainian history, culture, and language of all content and reducing them to footnotes of some grand Soviet/Russian narrative. The last thing the Regionnaires want is a capital city with a genuine history: that might suggest that Ukraine has a history and that – heaven forbid – Ukrainians have an identity.

I am glad that Motyl wrote what he did because it both opens the door and offers independent support for arguments that emerge in the pages ahead – that Yanukovych and his fellow Regionnaires are to be counted as central demons in Kyiv’s present traumas.