Kyiv, Ukraine - Revised Edition
Adrian Cybriwsky, Roman

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12 Reflections

12.1 A Souvenir and a Song

We begin with an inexpensive but telling souvenir that I once brought home from Kyiv. It is a work of junk art which may be legally exported from Ukraine (as it says explicitly, tongue-in-cheek on the back), and is printed on a small block of “ecologically clean wood” (as it also says on the back). The front is an image of Ukrainian faces in shades of white and grey drawn against a gloomy black background. In the center is a familiar portrait of a young Taras Shevchenko, the beloved “bard of Ukraine,” representing the heart and soul of the nation. There are also some church domes, such as those in the title of this book, and a small rendition of the heroic statue of Batkivshchyna Maty (Mother of the Fatherland), the enormous Soviet-built World War II monument. However, most of the images and all of the larger ones other than Shevchenko suggest the “demons” side of the book’s title. There are big-breasted beauties sipping cocktails (one has vampire teeth); a creepy-looking gangster with a shaved head and a cigarette in his mouth; someone dancing with the face of death; and a mix of symbols of consumer society (the front of a BMW automobile and an advertisement for Coca-Cola reflected on the sunglasses of still another shady character). I could not resist buying this “art” because as soon as I saw it I envisioned this paragraph. Instead of calling on comrades to join the famers’ collective or win the war effort, as the heroines of Soviet society had done so famously, the caption to this image says (in English): “Welcome to Ukraine: Not Smiling Country!”

Yet, a popular song that is heard often in the city, “Kyeve miy” (“My Kyiv”), carries a refrain with the rhetorical question: Yak tebe ne lyubyty, Kyeve miy? (How can one not love you, my dear Kyiv?). The melody is catchy. The 11 notes for the 11 syllables of the refrain play on Independence Square in the center of the city as a clock tower chimes the hours. The song is also heard, with or without lyrics, over the speaker systems in subway concourses and platforms during the morning rush, and want to or not, it is easy to wind up carrying the tune around all day afterwards. I at least, if not others, sometimes smile with appreciation for the city when I hear it.

Indeed, Kyiv is easy to love, truly so. I say this because we have read about one thing after another in this book that is wrong in the city – inexcusably wrong – so a declaration of love and an explanation for why one loves the city

74 Music by I. Shamo and lyrics by D. Lutsenko.
is necessary. We focus on the problems because we care and because we want solutions. We love Kyiv for many reasons. The city reflects in its landscape more than a millennium of rich history and architectural landmarks even though that history was itself marked by enormous tragedy and the worst urban destruction, and is still beautiful despite imposition of Soviet same-ness to its vast housing estates and, as we have seen, shameless disorderly urban development after independence. Despite appearing to be dour at first impression – something that is said to be an outcome of living within the rigors of Soviet society – the people of Kyiv are genuinely warm and friendly and the city is welcoming. Cultural opportunities are everywhere, and life in Kyiv can mean having to choose between too many concerts, too many theatrical or ballet performances, too many art gallery shows, and too many good speakers at university campuses and learned societies at once. Despite poor city planning, much of what is new in the city is good, too: improved housing choices for those who have found a foot in the economy; better shops and a full choice of goods; economic links and opportunities to the global world; good restaurants and a bustling nightlife; and new freedoms to travel and to pray. There is also increased use of the Ukrainian language in Kyiv and patriotism to Ukraine, both of which the Soviets had suppressed as they had suppressed travel and prayer. There are other pluses, too.

To my mind, the single most spectacular feature of Kyiv is the city center, where the mighty Dnipro River cuts through the middle of Kyiv and divides it between the historic Right Bank and the much more recently developed Left Bank. It is an enormous green zone with parks, forests, meadows, wetlands, and countless sandy beaches (Kyiv Urban Design Studio, 2006). Some of the beaches are big and public and others cozy and secluded. In a section of this vast zone that is called Hidropark, the area near the Metro stop has countless food, ice cream, and beer kiosks, restaurants and nightclubs, an amusements and rides section for children, and designated places for an enormous variety of sports: volleyball, tennis, ping pong, weightlifting, gymnastics, basketball, and others. All of this is left over from the Soviet Union. There is also bungee jumping, a zone on sandy dunes for dirt bikes, and jetboat rentals, among newer diversions. Other cities have great beachfronts or enormous parks, too, but no other city anywhere has such an enormous and diverse green center to which citizens converge from all directions during their free time. Indeed, in other cities people scatter in all directions when they have days off. But uniquely, in Kyiv, when the seasons allow, they come together in the city’s heart (Figure 12.1). There, they enjoy themselves in each other’s company. From here especially, one can sense great potential everywhere for Kyiv, if only the demons that now trouble the city could be brought under control.
12.2 A Messy Period

We had come to Kyiv during what a friend has called (in English) a “messy period” in its history – that period of time between the end of one system of social order and replacement by a new order that works. I have used terms such as “difficult transition” and the “Wild West” in text to describe the situation, and highlighted it early in the book with discussion of a graffito on an escalator in Kyiv’s subway system that proclaimed that “Ukraine Is Far from Heaven.” It has been more than 20 years since Ukraine became unexpectedly independent and Kyiv became the national capital for the first time in a very long time; now it is clear that 20 years is not enough time to replace mess with success. Few countries in history have been fortunate enough to be born without trauma, and many have taken much longer than just one generation to forge the kinds of societal agreements that work for the country. Ukraine will be a mess for a while longer, and Kyiv will continue to be picked apart by the greedy and self-interested. Lamentably, recognition of Kyivans’ rights to their city and the institution of effective protections for them by rule of law within their city are still some way down the road. Also sadly, much of the social security that socialism had provided...
such as steady work for all, decent shelter, and at least a modicum of social equality for all, if only at a lower level, has been eroded, and people live with increased uncertainty, unfairness, exploitation, corruption, and disorder. In this book, we have documented many of these ills and given examples.

Let us hope that when order does arrive, that it comes from within Ukraine and not, as has been the tragic history of the country, one that is imposed from outside. Having an assertive and acquisitive big neighbor next door has made it that much harder to build Ukraine into a truly independent country, and has retarded as well achievement of the national dream that perhaps at last, Ukraine could be both free of foreign rule and prosperous. It has also hurt that, in a lingering vestige of the old Cold War, the West covets Ukraine, too, and would like to drive an ever-wider wedge between the country and its long-term cousin, Russia. Unfortunately, the country’s political leaders have not been talented enough to successfully play off one suitor against the other for the benefit of the nation as a whole. Instead, during the messy period, far too many politicians have concentrated on taking care of themselves and their cronies, have become fabulously wealthy, and in many cases have planted at least one foot (if not both) in a comfortable country abroad in preparation for the time when they will need to emigrate. It is often said in Ukraine that the robbers will eventually run from the law or a change in government, or when there is nothing more left in the country to steal, whichever comes first. Like the American robber barons of the latter part of the 19th century and their “cottages” in Newport, Rhode Island, there are super-rich Ukrainians (and Russians, of whom there are more in this category) who are now prominent new residents in the communities of super-rich expats from around the globe in places like Mediterranean Spain or France, the ski resorts of Switzerland, and prestige neighborhoods in London. I can imagine the opulence of these privileged spaces as being the transplanted wealth of Ukraine (and Russia), as it has also been the product of the oil wealth of the Arabian Peninsula and Nigeria, among other sources of global fortune. I also see these landscapes as the twinned obverse of the depressing “landscapes of struggle” that are now so extensive throughout Ukraine.

A main theme throughout this book has been the injustices that have been aggravated since the end of the Soviet period by rich bizensmeny (businessmen) making huge additional profits for themselves at public cost. Such practices are global, of course, and have gone on throughout history, and are not limited to today’s societies in transition from socialism. They are also not limited to capitalism. They are, however, emblematic of our times. A short essay in the latest book by noted urban scholar David Harvey entitled “London 2011: Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets” makes this point:
We live in a society where capitalism itself has become rampantly feral. Feral politicians cheat on their expenses; feral bankers plunder the public purse for all it’s worth; CEOs, hedge fund operators, and private equity geniuses loot the world of wealth; telephone and credit card companies load mysterious charges on everyone’s bills … A political economy of mass dispossession, of predatory practices to the point of daylight robbery – particularly of the poor and the vulnerable, the unsophisticated and the legally unprotected – has become the order of the day. (Harvey, 2012, pp. 155-157)

Thus, much of what I have said about Kyiv is only one’s city’s twist on a story that is familiar worldwide. There are demons who muscle for what they want in all corners of the planet, and everywhere there are legions of ordinary people who pay the price. From my earlier research, I could elaborate with examples about how top-down redevelopment has taken Japaneseness out of Tokyo, about how incursions by multinational business and development companies from abroad have taken livelihoods from ordinary Khmer and Cham citizens from along the riverfront and lakes of Phnom Penh, and about the toll that developer-led gentrification has taken from community life in neighborhoods in my home base of Philadelphia. My life has now taken me to Kyiv where the pattern continues, but in a framework of transition from Soviet socialism. Because that is a new type of transition that affects a vast region with many cities, it is a story whose details are especially worth presenting.

There was inequality within Soviet society, too, as Community Party leaders found ways to satisfy their own needs while the rest of the population struggled with long lines and shortages of commodities. Now, however, in a fairly short period, the inequalities have become truly obscene. A new class of “millionaires against the people” has taken the country and its capital, and lives as it wants at the cost of the masses. Ironically, this was the case also in the Russian Empire near the turn of the 20th century, albeit under different circumstances, when members of an idealistic intelligentsia began talking about revolution against excessive czarist privilege and exploitation of workers by capitalist industrialists. While it is only a minority of people in Ukraine (and in Russia, too) who would seem to favor a return to communism (and for some of those, the true motive is said to be to return to the special privileges they had lost from when they were communist chiefs), the truth is that communists now have a “we told you so” platform to run on in national elections. It is campaign season for local political offices in Ukraine as I write this, and the Communist Party of Ukraine is optimistic about making gains in
the Verkhovna Rada with election slogans about the unfairness of capitalism. The large red billboard that one sees now across the city that reads (in Russian, not Ukrainian) *Vlast millionam, a ne millioneram!* (Wealth for the millions, but not for the millionaires!) might resonate well with much of the public.

Kyiv, as we have seen, has been a particular object of theft. The transition from state ownership of land and buildings to an environment of private ownership has produced lopsided distributions of profit and other benefits in favor of those who are most aggressive at business, toughest, most powerfully connected, and most lacking in conscience. Many ordinary Kyivans who had happened to live on real estate that a “new oligarch” coveted found themselves to be poorly protected during this messy period and were rudely displaced. The same is true for many museums and other cultural institutions, and countless popular bookshops, cafés, restaurants, and other small businesses. There have been inadequate protections as well for city squares, parks, playgrounds, river frontage, and promontories with prized views, and for the preservation of historic buildings and landscapes. While there are many aspects of “New Kyiv” that are welcome and positive additions to the urban scene, there is so much else that is shamefully destructive of lives, livelihoods, and landscapes that it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the ancient city of Kyiv is once again being pillaged.

I wish the following were not true but it is: there is a children’s board game for “ages 10 and up” (as it says on the box) that is called “Kiev Capitalist.” I have transliterated the title from the Russian language, the language of the game. Hence, “Kiev” and not “Kyiv.” I saw it for sale in the children’s section in a bookstore selling mostly Russian books, and almost bought it until my conscience caught up. It is a takeoff on the board game Monopoly. The object is to move through the tourist landmarks and historical sites of Kyiv, acquiring as many of them as possible before your opponent does, and to wind up with all the property and all the money. The box cover says something about learning about the city’s past, but the title of the game and its definition of ultimate victory are taken from the culture of raiders and not from the culture of those who love cities. To my mind, this is another bit of proof that the capital city of Ukraine is nothing more than a commodity for the new, postsocialist class of oligarch-capitalists, and that in such a context it is perfectly fine for children to be taught such hooey. Yes, indeed, Ukraine is still far from heaven, and there are demons who would keep it that way. Reclaiming the city for the people will take many years, indeed. If I were in charge, I would draw a line around Castle Hill and in the sands of the banks of the Dnipro, and say that it is here that the defense of Kyiv should be concentrated and that from here, the rest of the city can be won.
12.3 A Book Review

It is not unusual for an author to close a book with a review of what has been said. I have done some of that already. But, if I may, since this has been a somewhat unusual book from the start, as well as one that has been quite personal, I close not with a review of my own words, but with a review of another book that, in a very different way, says much of what I have strived to convey. This is an ambitious new book that came out after I had already finished and edited advanced drafts of my manuscript, so this review is an afterthought. It is written just days after the book was presented publicly for the first time in the lecture hall of Ye, the Ukrainian-language bookstore near the Opera House in the heart of Kyiv. As I listened to the various speakers, these afterthoughts began to take shape.

The book is called Kyiv Zhyvopysnyi/Kyiv Pictorial. It is bilingual Ukrainian–English, like the title, and is a large-format, coffee-table book with 255 color reproductions of recently commissioned paintings and engravings of Kyiv scenes by selected artists from all over Ukraine. Almost all of the work was done in 2011. Some of the painters are established stars with global reputations, while many others are young talents whose work is seeing wide exposure for the first time. Some knew Kyiv extremely well, while others, perhaps a little like me, were drawn from elsewhere to a city that they did not know well to record their impressions. The official reason for the volume is to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Ukrainian poet and artist Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), so there are numerous quotations from the beloved bard throughout the book about Kyiv and its river. The goal is also to draw attention to the city’s charms and beauty which are, unfortunately, being eroded. As expressed in the introduction, “just two years from [when the project started in 2010] the Capital looks different. It changed immensely and not always for the better” (Oslamovskyi, Lytvynenko, and Zayika, eds., 2013, p. 10; punctuation error corrected). At the book’s public premier, one of the speakers opined that, these days, young people seem to always have their concentration on their mobile telephones and no longer see and appreciate the city around them or their fellow citizens. But art is a medium that they respond to, and artists have unusual power to sway the public’s thinking.

There are a variety of subject themes in this collection, many of them more or less to be expected: the city’s historic churches and golden-gilt domes; its parks, fountains, and places to sit; high points with panoramic views; and the hubbub of Khreshchatyk both during the day and after dark. There are also paintings of the river and its iconic bridges, popular beaches,
the city in various seasons, famous monuments and other landmarks, and chestnut trees in colorful bloom. The paintings are, for the most part, excellent, and the book is, like Kyiv itself, a joy. I wanted to show the same in my book, too – that Kyiv is beautiful and easy to love. But, also, I wanted to show that Kyiv is worth saving from the demons of destructive urban change that are all too prevalent.

*Kyiv Zhyvopysnyi/Kyiv Pictorial* does this, too. I heard speakers at the book’s opening lament that the city’s cultural institutions are being undermined for profit elsewhere, and that there are significant losses of historic buildings and authentic historical urban texture, and of the city’s outstanding and ample greenery. So, while the majority of the artwork in this handsome volume shows well-executed scenes that are “to be expected,” there are a number of other artists’ contributions that depict a new and unhappy side of Kyiv. There is a painting of the motorcade of President Yanukovych disrupting traffic at the congested “crossroads in Podil” – billboards and all; another painting that is matter-of-factly entitled “Everyday Life in the Capital” that shows two giant billboards on high poles being erected on a new residential district where pedestrians are dwarfed by the distances that they need to walk and the height of the advertising (see my Figure 9.5); and a painting of vernacular architecture in historic Podil that centers on a large vacant lot surrounded by the iconic green wooden fence that anticipates new construction. For most Kyivans, the expectation is of something incompatible with their needs – a “monster” of some sort or other. There are no artworks about sex tourism, official corruption, “Bullies with Bentleys,” or many other problems, but there are paintings of a city full of cars, including an oil of the bell tower of St. Sophia that seems stranded in a sea of automobiles. It is called simply “Evening.” Another painting by the same artist shows cars parked on a sidewalk. Likewise, there are no overt depictions of poverty or other human misery, but there is a painting of a very heavyset and angry-faced old woman sitting alone on a wooden crate on a sidewalk in freezing winter weather and selling sunflower seeds, another of a hungry cat rummaging in the night through a garbage bin, and a third of a stray dog lurking in the dark shadows of a gritty interior courtyard of an old housing complex.

There are not as many of these “alternative” views of Kyiv in the book as there are paintings of happy scenes, but there are enough of them to signify to lovers of the city that, in Kyiv, there are problems. The balance of representations in my book was the reverse. I have written on and on about things that are wrong, and spent only some pages here and there about Kyiv the good. But as I listened to the speakers at the book’s public debut and
began to pore simultaneously through the contents, I realized that despite the differences in media, my book and theirs shared the same message: we have a great city that is enormously undervalued, and that will be stripped of its value unless Kyivans intervene and others help.