Time of (Not) Simple Decisions – The Experience of Lviv in 2022

Liliya Onyshchenko-Shvets

Lviv is a major city in western Ukraine. It has a complicated history and thus magnificent cultural heritage. During the last 100 years, Lviv found itself within five different states – from being a major city and provincial capital within the Austro-Hungarian Empire to becoming the de facto cultural capital of independent Ukraine. Sadly, over the past months the Russian Federation has been intent on attacking our independence along with our cultural heritage and national identity. Many cities have sustained horrific bombardment and museums have been looted in Russian-occupied areas.

Since 2009 the "Municipal Development and Renovation of Lviv Old Town" programme had been actively functioning in Lviv and had been financed by the German government. Together with our German colleagues, for instance Iris Gleichmann, Andreas Althammer, Christoph Junghans, Dirk Brüggemann, and Annemarie Roth, the programme worked towards renovating Lviv's many historic landmarks as well as supporting other historic towns in Ukraine. When the programme ended, we tried our best to draw on the expertise and legacy of our German colleagues. However, everything changed in February 2022. Russian attacks from the air affected scores of Ukrainian cities, including Lviv with its historic centre, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Shortly after the initial shock of invasion and bombardments in Ukraine on 24th February 2022, some quick decisions had to be made. However, we had neither the relevant experience nor a cohesive strategy. Nevertheless, since then the protectors of historic sites, including architects, conservationists, researchers, scientists and various other interested contributors, have established the Cultural Heritage Protection Center (CHPC) to develop general rules and measures for coordination. There were three immediate challenges:

First and most importantly, they set about formulating a strategy for action and some general rules. There had hitherto been nothing of the kind prior to the Russian invasion. The dramatic circumstances made it necessary to formulate a strategy and rules while taking "protective measures" simultaneously.

Second, the CHPC had to address the pace of action as well as an efficient and appropriate means of decision-making. As we watched how the shelling destroyed landmarks in Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Kyiv, we realised that we had to act immediately. Indeed, very soon after 24th February 2022, explosions also occurred in Lviv, not to mention the enomous humanitarian situation as the city's population doubled due to the arrival of internally displaced people (IDPs).

Third, members within the CHPC had to be brave enough to take their initiative immediately so as not to endanger many of the city's historic sites while chalking out longer-term formal processes. There was simply no time to wait for peacetime decision-making processes, thus formal guidelines and orders from the ministries and their subordinate authorities in Kyiv could not be relied upon in the short-term. It was crucial to act quickly.

Luckily, colleagues from other European countries were also there to help. Polonika Institute, Aliph Foundation, Prince Claus Fund, German Archaeological Institute, Eberhard-Schoek-Stiftung etc. supported us financially, supplied materials, fire extinguishers and various other technologies to take immediate protective measures. Thanks to the Prince Claus Fund we managed to repair the roofs of two buildings that had been severely damaged due to explosions. The German Archaeological Institute provided us with the software for the inventory of sites damaged. Andriy Kutnyi, an architect, offered a series of trainings for Ukrainian specialists. The Aliph Foundation financed 3D scanning of the most valuable landmarks. The Polonika Institute provided us with protective materials for historic and cultural sites.

Lviv has over 2000 architectural landmarks, thousands of valuable historic buildings. Therefore, the most valuable ones had to be selected and included in a short list, and a plan made to protect each of them as a priority. The fact is that none of the protection methods and technologies used would be sufficient to protect the building from a direct hit by a projectile such as a Russian cruise missile or loitering munition (drone). However, these technologies could mitigate the extent of damage – especially from shrapnel, fragments, blast waves etc. – if explosions were to occur in the vicinity of these selected sites. Hence, a decision was made to protect many of the key sculptures and monuments with metal caging. Thus, in Lviv four sculptures in Rynok Square (Fig. 1), six sculptures surrounding the Latin Cathedral (Figs. 2 and 3), the Sykst Chapel (Fig. 4) as well as a number of other monuments received protective cages around them. The sculptures were shielded with a hydro-barrier membrane, a layer of mineral wool or special fire-resistant fabric with a layer of basalt fibres, on top of which a layer of vapour-permeable film was applied allowing the stone to "breathe". All of this at least would reduce and prevent damage to the stone.

The most valuable facades were covered with special protective layers: two 17th century chapels, the former tombs of the Campian (Fig. 7) and Boim families (Fig. 8), the Black Stone House façade, a Renaissance landmark

Fig. 1 Structure to protect the stone sculpture of the Greek god Neptune in Rynok Square. Fig. 2 The first stage of protecting stone sculptures on the fence of the cathedral. Fig. 3 The cage-like structure is installed to protect the stone sculpture on the fence of the cathedral. Fig. 4 Protection of the Sykst Chapel

(4, Rynok sq.). The scaffoldings in front of these objects were covered with metal nets or OSBs and steel plates. The same technique was used on the unique wooden altar-chapel "Golgotha" (15th–17th centuries) located in the Armenian courtyard. The three most valuable sculptures were moved to a shelter. Footage of the 15th century central statue of Jesus Christ being physically moved was broadcast around the world. The coincidental symbolism that the removal of the sculpture from the cross took place during the Easter week of 2022 (Fig. 9) was a powerful one.

Particular attention was paid to stained-glass windows which were secured as soon as possible. The windows were fitted with metal grills on the outside. They were also covered with OSBs mounted on the façade wall. More complex solutions were employed for the far larger stained-glass windows in churches (Fig. 10). A number of stained-glass windows and sculptures were also physically detached and moved to specially equipped shelters (Fig. 11).

At the time of writing this summary, the war has been going on for 15 months since the Russian invasion. Trag-

Fig. 5 Construction for the protection of the monument to A. Mickiewicz. Fig. 6 Construction for the protection of the memorial column of St. John. Fig. 7 The first stage of protecting the stone sculptures of the Campian Chapel. Fig. 8 The process of installing protection on the facade of the Boim Chapel

ically, during the first seven months of war, over 500 architectural or cultural landmarks were ruined or damaged. In Kharkiv alone, the Russian rockets destroyed 142 architectural landmarks, and the buildings of Kharkiv University were destroyed. Two libraries in Chernihiv and the museums in Trostyanets, Okhtyrka, Mykolaiv were destroyed. Every day, new labels are pinned to the "map of damaged and destroyed objects" on Ukraine's Ministry of Culture website. The fine arts and land history museum in Kherson was also looted and archaeological artefacts were stolen from the "Kamyana Mohyla" ("Stone Grave") museum in Zaporizhzhia oblast.

Ironically, the world continues to discover Ukraine and its cultural heritage through the war. The exhibition of stone embroidery of Nova Kakhovka buildings, a town under occupation next to Kherson is travelling across Europe (Figs. 12). It is unclear if the buildings with embroidery have survived in Nova Kakhovka. However, what is known is that the buildings with wooden cobwebs have miraculously survived in Chernihiv, a town in Northern Ukraine

Fig. 9 Dismantling of a wooden sculpture for transfer to storage. Fig. 10 The process of protecting the stained-glass windows of the Latin Cathedral. Fig. 11 Preparations for moving the wooden sculptures to the shelter

which was under constant shelling for the first 40 days of war (Fig. 13).

Ukraine has priceless cultural heritage and our efforts are focused on its safeguarding, not just for the Ukrainians, but for the world to visit and see for themselves. There are many obvious reasons to defend one's homeland, but one of the greatest motivations is to preserve the good, the beautiful and, frankly, the irreplaceable works that bind us together as a nation. These works are not simply relics; instead they are part of the DNA of Ukraine. With the help of partners from Germany and many other contributors, we continue to strive to protect our heritage.

Fig. 12 Street exhibition „Occupied heritage“ about the stone embroideries of Nova Kakhovka Fig. 13 Element of the exhibition „Heritage under fire“ about the wooden lace of Chernihiv

Picture Credits

All images from the archive of the author