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Місто: історія, культура, суспільство. City: History, culture, society

From over-the-coffee ideas to a trendsetter

It was in the summer of 2015, when three friends met for a coffee in *Taras Shevchenko Park* in Kyiv. All of them were early career historians from the *Taras Shevchenko National University* (Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка),¹ which bordered the park. They were discussing problems in Ukrainian academia in general and personal prospects. In 2015, the first aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity (Револуція гідності) was already in the air, in science as well. There was an obvious window of opportunity to bring Ukrainian scholarship to European standards, including the peer review procedure. The idea to establish a journal was born in one of such friendly talks over coffee.

Another important stimulation actually came from the geopolitical situation in 2014-2015, when Russia started to invade Ukraine. Whilst the Crimean Peninsula was occupied with hardly any fighting, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were not a sitting duck for the Russian army and Russia-backed terrorists. The names of big cities, small towns, and huge enterprises' became googleable because of the frontline news. It was striking – how little we knew about the region's past. Ukrainian society suddenly rediscovered Alchevsk (Алчевськ), Ilovaisk (Іловайськ), Avdiivka (Авдіївка), and Donetsk (Донецьк), originally known as Yuzivka (Юзівка). There were ever-increasing calls for learning the history behind those toponyms, i.e. why and how these settlements were connected to Ukraine, happened to be part of Ukraine, and what is so special about them that Ukrainians have to protect them as part of the country against Russian military aggression which started in 2014. The gap in historical knowledge production became palpable – it turned out that historians had not paid enough attention to those urban settlements which in 2014-2015 suddenly became so important on the battlefield. To those three young researchers who met in *Taras Shevchenko Park* it appeared that academia

finally had something to contribute and was even obliged to explain so many things about the past and, even more importantly, the present of Ukrainian cities. We ventured to share the responsibility and eventually created *City: History, Culture, Society*, a platform for researching, thinking together, and discussing the city as a phenomenon. Since 2016, when the journal was founded, we have published 16 peer-reviewed issues containing original research articles, book reviews, and supplementary materials pertaining to urban studies. This paper seeks to present the journal to a foreign audience and serves as an invitation to contribute to the upcoming issues of the city. It traces the development of urban studies in independent Ukraine, mapping its dynamics and key players. In the second and third part the journal's defining features and most important projects are discussed against this backdrop.

Centres, Institutes, and Frontiers: The Emergence of Urban Studies in Ukraine

In 2014, urban studies as an academic field of research were only just emerging in Ukraine. The situation was better with urban history. There were already several centres focusing on research and public activities in this domain. The *Lviv Centre for Urban History* (Центр міської історії у Львові), which has been functioning as an independent research institution since the early 2000s, is the most experienced and established player in the field and still retains a leading position. Its founding father is Harald Binder, historian and cultural entrepreneur, whose research interests have been tightly connected with Galicia. In 2006 he established a private foundation in Lviv, with the idea to accelerate the institutionalisation of urban history. This field of research had been already established in Western academia, but Ukraine and, more widely, East Central Europe, still needed a place to anchor. As a result, the Centre became the first Ukrainian

research platform for the study of the past through the urban lens. Since the Centre was the first of this kind in the region, Binder expected it “to serve as a link between West and East European scholarship in this field”.² To what extent the institution succeeded with channelling the paradigmatic shift abroad and with stimulating historiographies of neighbouring countries to adopt the urban perspective, could be a matter of a separate study. Still, it is undeniable that the *Lviv Centre for Urban History* brought about numerous significant advancements in the Ukrainian academic field, especially in fostering interdisciplinary approaches. The scholarly activity of the Centre bridges urban history with digital humanities, archiving, and public history. Importantly, interdisciplinarity is not limited to research conducted by the Centre. It also means acting as an integral part of the city – by discussing research findings with the wider public, building networks, and engaging in cultural initiatives.

The *Institute for Urban History in Berdiansk* (Інститут історичної урбаністики в Бердянську), established in 2012 at one of the regional Ukrainian universities in the Zaporizhzhia region, was the second initiative that appeared with the aim of institutionally developing urban history in Ukraine. In the light of the Lviv Centre’s efforts, aimed at developing the academic infrastructure for urban history, this initiative represents a local ambition to *urbanise* historical research. Although we can trace a certain adoption and even transfer of the trend, it probably appeared different for the Berdiansk Institute. The very name of the institution presumes that its co-founders, Viktoriia Konstantinova and Ihor Lyman, sought to relaunch the whole process of institutionalisation on the new principles. For Konstantinova, the Lviv Centre did not completely stand as an “either formal or real urban studies centre” because of what she referred vaguely to as its “specific activity”.³ Such a reading of the Lviv Centre’s intellectual endeavour indicates that it was way too innovative to be accepted as a part of national historiography, which at that time still faced challenges of liberating its methodology from the Soviet legacy. For the Berdiansk Institute, an alternative and proper way to develop urban history was enlisting the support of the *National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine* (Національна

академія наук України), thus forming a new branch of knowledge inside of the highest state academic institution, as contrasted to the Lviv Centre. However, the institutional cooperation between the two institutions was rather formal, then fruitful, and most of it was on the personal level (mostly, working within the same projects, such as *Black Sea Port Cities - Interactive history, 1780s-1910s*).⁴ The Institute’s programme, too, focused on the multidimensional and multidisciplinary study of urban history, emphasising the importance of new approaches and working with the wider public. However, it never managed to reach the same scope and quality of activity as the Lviv Centre. As of March 2024, Berdiansk is occupied by Russia, and the functioning of the *Institute for Urban History* obviously faces numerous complications.

Even though both institutions had already been established, recognised, and respected by the Ukrainian academic community in 2015, they never focused on journal publishing. However, several other publication projects started around the same time.

Frontiers of Cities (Фронтири міста), the annual publication at the intersection of history and culturology that had been running in 2012-2016, is one such project, not affiliated to any institution, but published and edited by the initiative group of historians and literature scholars. Following and reinterpreting Frederick Jackson Turner’s (1861-1932) concept within a new context, the journal encouraged the contributors to explore the city through the lens of the frontier, perceiving it as a complex space where various ethnicities, cultures, and social practices meet, interact, and merge. Although the journal was well received by the Ukrainian academic community and even marked as “topically and visually exceptional,” only four issues were published.⁵ This is probably due to the fact that the *Frontiers of Cities* journal was conceived as a forum to connect Ukrainian and Russian authors studying urban history.⁶ After the outbreak of Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2014 the cooperation became increasingly complicated; frontiers were said to turn into front lines.⁷

The NGO *Centre for Urban Studies* (Центр урбаністичних студій) in Kyiv is another institution to be placed on the map of the Ukrainian urban studies

field. The idea behind it was to combine research, publication programmes, education, and public activity. That resulted in four collections of articles, each with a special topic, a series of yearly workshops: *How Do Cities Remember and How Do Cities Forget?* of 2019-2021, an interdisciplinary research project on one of the Kyiv vernacular neighbourhoods – *(Un-)comfortable (Non-)Periphery Chokolivka* and a master's programme in Urban Studies and Spatial Planning at the *Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture* (Київський національний університет будівництва і архітектури).⁸

In 2012 the first collection of articles in the *Urban Studies Series*, supported by Heinrich Böll Stiftung, was published, *Anatomy of the City*.⁹ As compared to *Frontiers*, this publication did not have a historical focus. It centred around the problems of the modern city, particularly Kyiv, with a strong commitment to influence urban development. Three more issues were published over the next few years, the general concept remaining the same. By looking into how renewal processes affect the physical and social reality of today's cities (*City and Renewal*, 2013), examining the role and function of public spaces within various social, cultural, and geographical contexts (*[Dis]satisfaction with Public Spaces*, 2016), and delving into unexpected angles of everyday routines of men and women in the public space (*Urbanism and Feminism*, 2018), the following publications sought to generate knowledge that could be used to improve urban environments.¹⁰ This is probably what makes urban studies different from urban history.

Finding a Niche for the *City* Journal

Despite all these positive changes, the tradition of peer review has not yet been that well-established in Ukrainian academia, nor has communication between the institutions and publishing initiatives mentioned above. The *Urban Studies*' issues lacked consistency in publishing. This is where the initiative group of the *City* Journal saw the gap and managed to turn it into an opportunity for a future journal. The idea was to develop an interdisciplinary journal functioning according to the international standards and conventions of academic publications, published twice a year.

The initiative group worked on the concept during the second half of 2015 and early 2016. The *Institute of History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine* (Інститут історії України Національної академії наук України) and the *History Department* of the *Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University* (Київський національний університет ім. Тараса Шевченка) provided institutional and financial support. The group was looking for members of the editorial and the advisory board, with the idea of equally attracting scholars from two founding institutions.

In 2016 the journal's objectives were to create a platform for studying and discussing urban history topics, intensify research on urban history, contribute to institutionalising urban studies as a field, and promote the idea of an e-journal as one of the legitimate platforms. The main task was to promote urban studies as an important part of the historiographical process.

The journal aspired to create a publishing platform for scholars from different disciplines who were united by the city as their key subject of interest. Anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and ecologists were among the researchers we aimed to attract for publication. The ambition has been to show urban studies as a truly interdisciplinary field. As it was stated from the very beginning, the journal's topical focus includes but is not limited to urban history, urban culture development, and the phenomenon of the city in the global historical process. We encourage submissions in the fields of economic history, historical ecology, urban folklore, and gender studies.

Regarding institutional support and affiliation, *City* still bridges two centres of historical academic knowledge production – the *Institute of History of Ukraine, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*, and *Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University*. The further ambition is to add to this alliance the *Kyiv School of Economics* (Київська школа економіки), which has launched the master's programme in Urban Studies and Postwar Reconstruction in September 2023 and has good chances to develop a research centre around that. Despite that solid institutional support, *City* remains an independent journal and is published by an NGO of the same name. Moreover, it has never

been fully financed by any of the institutions mentioned above. Instead, the NGO constantly raises funds to keep the journal operating. For instance, we were cooperating with *Heinrich Boell Stiftung* (2020-2021) and *Böckler Mare Balticum Stiftung* (2022-2023).

This financial and institutional construction has advantages and disadvantages, but it is working under the specific conditions of Ukraine, where a tradition of academic publishing houses is absent (similar to Oxford University Press, i.e.) and a rigid academic structure, inherited from Soviet times, hardly accepts changes and new initiatives. The advisory and editorial boards were composed of representatives of both founding institutions. The choice of the members of both boards was less based on their contribution to urban research and more on their authority and ability to attract attention to new initiatives among researchers. During the first years of *City's* existence, engaging big names helped *City* gain in visibility and recognition among its peers. This task seems to have been achieved. Therefore, after eight years of journal existence, this strategy seems irrelevant already.

The team managed to attract scholars (mostly historians) who have studied cities from different angles for most of their careers. This group predictably played a more and more significant role in the journal's development. Needless to say, 95% of the board were historians.

The remaining 5% were archaeologists, who were extremely active in promoting the journal among the archaeological community. Such activity resulted prominently in a more or less consistent rubric *Urban Archaeology*. Archaeologists even inspired an unusual topic for one of the issues – *Tanatology* (4/2020).¹¹ This is an issue on the problems of death – its representation, its research by anthropologists, archaeologists and historians, and its theoretical framing (thanatology as a cross-disciplinary field.)

With time, the editorial board was joined by representatives of urban sociology. The idea behind this was to breathe life into the interdisciplinary approach that had been declared one of the journal's cornerstones and fill this idea with real contributions. Essays

in Sociology became an attempt to extend the journal's field to urban sociology.¹²

The board is aware of the limitations and failures of the journal's way towards genuine interdisciplinarity, and many fields are overlooked and have never been even seen, such as urban design history. However, one of the journal's principles is to stay flexible and open to new topics.

Another major aim of ours was to advance and contribute to the institutionalization of urban studies in Ukraine and establish an international network of urban studies-focused researchers. Therefore, the first issue opened with the rubric *Urban Studies: International and Ukrainian Contexts*. By their contributions, representatives of the *Berdiansk Institute* and *Lviv Centre* reflected on the way and challenges their institutions had been through.¹³

Speaking of challenges, *City* also had quite a few. While board members from the sociological community have been active in promoting the journal, attracting contributions from urban economics is still unexplored territory. Achieving true interdisciplinarity remains the goal for the future, but the journey toward it is an ongoing process. To encourage interdisciplinary approaches, we have published issues with topics which are rather unusual for Ukrainian scholarship. We have already mentioned *Thanatology*, while one of the latest issues is devoted to the *Quality of Life* (2/2023).¹⁴ One of the most difficult topics to deal with was *Holocaust and the City: Spaces of Murder – Spaces of Destruction* (2/2020).¹⁵ The issue was devoted to studying the Holocaust within the methodological framework of urban studies. The authors analysed not only the peculiarities of the Holocaust in cities but also the impact this crucial rupture in cities' history had on the transformation of the urban fabric (fig. 1).

Beyond our efforts to establish a network of urban studies in Ukraine, we also endeavour to intensify cooperation with authors outside Ukraine. The issues planned for 2024 aim at continuing this process. The first is intended to discuss the *Medieval City*, while the second is supposed to discuss *Post-war Reconstruction: Experiences for Ukraine from the Baltic Sea Region*.

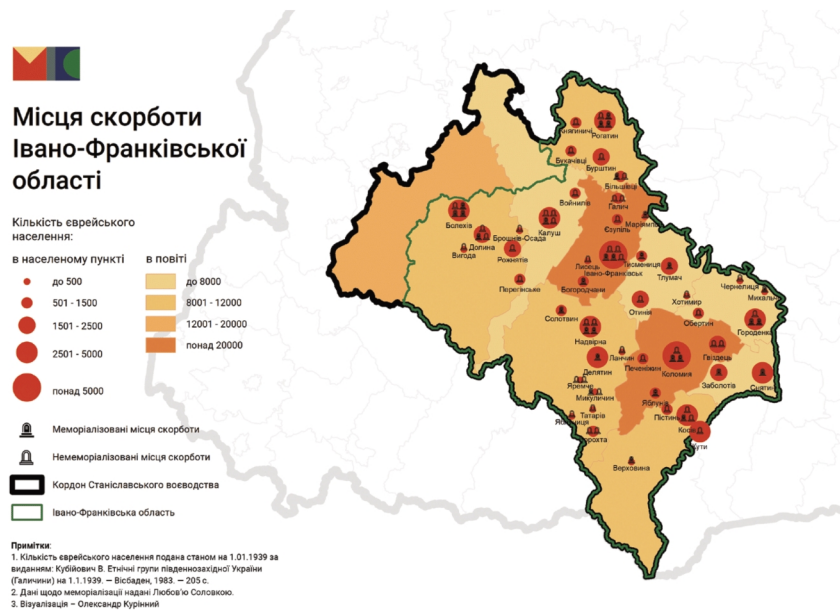


Fig. 1 Micro/City, last page of the issue *Holocaust and the City: Spaces of Murder – Spaces of Destruction* (2020)

It should be noted that *Medieval City* becomes the topic of issue for the second time in the journal's history.¹⁶ The guest editor will be the same (Dr. Oleksandr Okhrimenko), and the idea also remains the same – to provide a platform for young scholars (Masters and even Bachelors) which offers them an opportunity to publish their first papers, this way supporting their academic careers.

Making Urban Studies attractive

Besides our efforts to sharpen the profile of the journal and meet the needs of the academic community, we invest a lot in the journal's appearance. We believe that outside appearance is not less important than the content. Visual language and the search for a unique style of *City* have always been important for the team (fig. 2). We are lucky to have found a congenial match. Designer Dmytro Denyshchuk has been collaborating with *City* since 2021, when the project *After Socialist Modernism* started. The project has been implemented by the *National Art Museum of Ukraine* (Національний художній музей України), and its main idea is to research and represent the concept of

the comfortable urban housing inherited from the recent past as well as to analyse the architecture of the 1980s within its cultural and social context, resulting in a renewal of the debate about the urban environment among citizens. The *City Journal* was one of the project components, along with a conference on the problem of modernist architecture and a set of city tours. Such a unique project required a unique style. As designer Dmytro Denyshchuk explained his idea in a talk with the editors:

“It was autumn, and I went to see the modernist quarter in Kyiv at the Taras Shevchenko metro station. It was a grey, rainy day, so the colours I chose for the basis of the identity of that particular project were the shades of what the coloured places of those buildings and the area I was walking around looked like. It seemed to me that it was just to make these colours the main ones and build on them to add some contrast and find colours that would contrast with them; I found these shades – red, blue, and green. Also, I used white – it was a search for something contrasting”.



Fig. 2 Journal covers. Issues published in 2021-2023



Fig. 3 Mockup of the After Socialist Modernism issue

In addition to this, the designer was looking for modernist fonts or fonts that conveyed the designs of the architecture he saw. Ultimately, it was a combination of modernist and contemporary font forms (fig. 3). In general, the layout, its purity and conciseness, and modernity always come first for the designer. Also the shapes, or rather the colours, used for the design of the journal are not similar to what is available on the Ukrainian market of academic journals.

In 2023 and 2024 *City* was nominated for the *Book of the Year* (2023) and *Book Design of the Year* (2024) awards, which is a recognition of the team's efforts to develop an exclusive and remarkable style of the journal and of the quality of the papers published within the journal.

To finish with some formal statements, we welcome already established colleagues, graduates, post-graduates, and PhD students, as well as urban activists, to submit unpublished manuscripts. However, we also aim to present the achievements of urban studies scholars worldwide. Therefore, we also practise re-publications of high-impact papers that are already recognised as having changed the field¹⁷.

The journal is published twice a year in English and Ukrainian; other languages may also be considered. Cooperation with scholars from the Russian Federation (those who support the invasion or have never spoken out against it, still preserve Russian citizenship) is taboo until Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity will be restored. The editorial team is always open to collaboration and welcomes new topics and ideas that could enrich the field of urban studies.

Endnotes

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Abstract

In 2016, three young Ukrainian historians, inspired by conversations over coffee and the growing need to understand the history of Ukrainian cities better, founded the journal *City: History, Culture, Society*. This journal emerged as a response to the academic challenges in Ukraine and the pressing geopolitical events following Russia's 2014 invasion, which brought attention to historically significant but under-researched urban areas. The authors invite you to embark on a journey through the field of Urban Studies in Ukraine, to witness the evolution of their story—the story of young scholars whose projects have not only grown but also gained strength over time.

Authors

Dr Tetiana Vodotyka holds a BA and MA in History from *Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv*, and a PhD (also History) from the *Institute of History of Ukraine National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*. In 2016, she established the peer-reviewed e-journal of Urban Studies, *City: History, Culture, Society* (mics.org.ua) and has been its chief editor since then. She combines research and public historical activities, and is a non-fiction author. Most of her texts (including books and articles in magazines and web resources) are devoted to Ukrainian economic history, entrepreneurship in Ukraine, and urban history. She has been a senior research fellow at the *Institute of History of Ukraine National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine* (2014–2024) and academic director for the Master in Urban Studies and Postwar Reconstruction at the *Kyiv School of Economics* (since 2023).

Svitlana Dovhan holds an MA in History from *Central European University*. She published her first piece in the *City Journal* and later joined the editorial board in 2022. Her research interests cover the social and cultural history of the Soviet Union, oral history, and urban studies. In her projects she seeks to bridge academic research and public history, experimenting with various ways of presenting research outcomes to the public. She works as an archival editor at the *Post Bellum-Ukraine* NGO.

Title

Tetiana Vodotyka and Svitlana Dovhan, *Micro: історія, культура, суспільство. City: History, culture, society. From over-the-coffee ideas to a trendsetter*, in: *kunstexte.de*, no. 3, 2024, section ostblick, thematic issue: *Appropriation and blind spots. Ukraine cultural heritage in conflict*, ed. by Katja Bernhardt (8 pages), <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2024.3.106997>.