

CREATING A SPACE OF FREEDOM

The Museum of the Revolution of Dignity in Kyjiw

by Elżbieta Olzacka

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Photo credit: Ukraine sheds its shackles: a banner in Independence Square, Kyiv, June 2017. Elżbieta Olzacka, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Zitierempfehlung

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The Museum's motto is "We study Freedom! We protect Freedom! We create Freedom!". The institution successfully creates a democratic and creative space that generates social solidarity and activism in wartime conditions. Our guest author Elżbieta Olzacka describes the construction of the museum, its importance for civil society and its function in wartime.

When I came to Kyiw in June 2017, for the first time after the Revolution of Dignity, at the Maidan of Independence, I was greeted by a giant banner with an inscription in two languages, Ukrainian and English. It said: "Freedom is our religion". It was challenging to make a more eloquent declaration, especially since the banner was hung on the building of the Trade Unions, which burned down in February 2014, during the revolution. The Revolution of Dignity, better known outside of Ukraine as Euromaidan, was a true turning point in Ukrainian history. After its victory and President Viktor Yanukovich's escape from the country, Ukraine has decidedly opted for a pro-European, pro-democratic course. It was visible not only in the declarations of the new authorities but also in the active attitude of the society, which began to believe that it could have an impact on its future.

Do you want a museum? Make it yourself!

The Revolution of Dignity was also a revolution in Ukrainian culture. Under extraordinary social mobilization related to the revolution and the war that followed, Ukraine experienced an impressive cultural renaissance. One of the principles advocated by the protesters was "do it yourself", be it barricades, shields and Molotov cocktails, but also - new institutions.

One of them was the Maidan Museum, the idea of which arose during the protests as a grassroots initiative of committed cultural activists, including Vasyl Rozhko, an official of the Ministry of Culture; Igor Poshyvaylo, an ethnologist associated with the Ivan Honchar Museum; and Timur Bobrovsky and Kateryna Chuyeva, both archaeologists involved in cultural heritage preservation projects.

In the autumn of 2014, "Maidan Museum" (Muzeï Maïdanu) joined another grassroots initiative known as the "Museum of Liberty" (Muzeï Svobody), led by Aleksandra Baklanova. The activity of this new group focused primarily on collecting and protecting artifacts and testimonies related to the Revolution of Dignity, as well as developing a vision for the future museum. The first exhibition organized by a joined initiative in October 2014 took a non-traditional format that defined the museum concept.

The exhibition consisted of three independent parts: first, the traditional museum exhibition named “Freedom” (Svoboda); second, a complete program of events, including screening of films, meetings with participants of events, and lectures; and third, a unique space for visitor interaction.

The space was designed to create an opportunity for everyone to reflect on the experience of the last few months in their own way, to share their ideas about what freedom is and what the future museum should look like. As Vasyl Rozhko, who became the chairman of the official working group of the Maidan Museum, emphasized, “Muzeï Maïdanu/Muzeï Svobody is not a traditional museum. In addition to collecting exhibits, it should become a kind of laboratory to understand the unique features of civil society in Ukraine. Combining two initiatives – the Museum of Liberty and the Maidan Museum – gives us the opportunity to realize the dream of a unique museum by creating it together with the community”¹.

Museum Creation: Activating Society

This bottom-up approach to creating exhibitions was unprecedented in the history of Ukrainian museology. As Igor Poshvailo noted, never before have Ukrainian museums referred so much to the concept of “museum with the nation”². Interestingly, this whiff of changes was not limited only to the capital of Kyjiw. The [Museum of the Heavenly Hundred](#) ³ was established in September 2015 in Ivano-Frankivsk, a city in western Ukraine, on the initiative of a local businessman and politician Olexandr Shevchenko and artist Roman Bonchuk.

Local volunteers and artists, who were free to express their artistic visions related to the Revolution of Dignity, actively participated in creating the interior of this small museum. Family members of the fallen, as well as their friends and living protesters, joined the creation of the museum by donating artifacts such as personal belongings of those killed, as well as helmets, shields, and weapons used during the protests.

The result was an unprecedented democratic space that



The interior of the Museum of the Heavenly Hundred in Ivano-Frankivsk is the result of a collaboration between artists, activists and event participants, October 2018. Elżbieta Olzacka, [Free access - no reuse](#)

was open to the ideas and creativity of the people involved. In turn, in Dnipro, a city in eastern Ukraine, the first **museum in the country devoted to the “anti-terrorist operation”** ⁷ conducted in 2014-2015 against separatists and the Russian troops supporting them, was opened in 2017. The museum resulted from cooperation between veterans, social activists, and regional authorities.

Museum as a “contact zone”

This civic involvement also meant that ordinary people, participants in the events, had an influence on the content and shape of the exhibitions. Despite the fact that the Museum of the Revolution of Dignity became a state institution, it retained its democratic and civic character, which was not so obvious in the Ukrainian sociopolitical reality. Museum employees strongly emphasize that the concept resulted from widely conducted social consultations. Participants of the Revolution of Dignity, from such organizations as the Maidan Self-Defense, AutoMaidan, the Maidan Library, and the Maidan Press Center, as well as the families of the fallen, played an important role in creating the vision of the future museum.

The museum’s mission is to create a safe space where meanings are negotiated concerning the recent history of Ukraine, as well as the vision of future Ukraine and its place in the world. As in the case of the museum in Ivano Frankivsk and Dnipro, participants and witnesses of the events became the primary sources of information. They in turn helped shape the public narrative about the history of Ukraine.

In this sense, new museums are model “contact zones”³, where a story about the community is co-created, but also - where the community is created by working together on trauma and memory. The assumptions the new museum creators go far beyond the collection of historical items, and even - beyond the collection of memories and stories.



Artefacts in museums are primarily items offered by participants in events and relatives of those who fell; Museum of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Dnipro, September 2018. Elżbieta Olzacka, Free access - no reuse

Museums as laboratories of civic activism and dialog

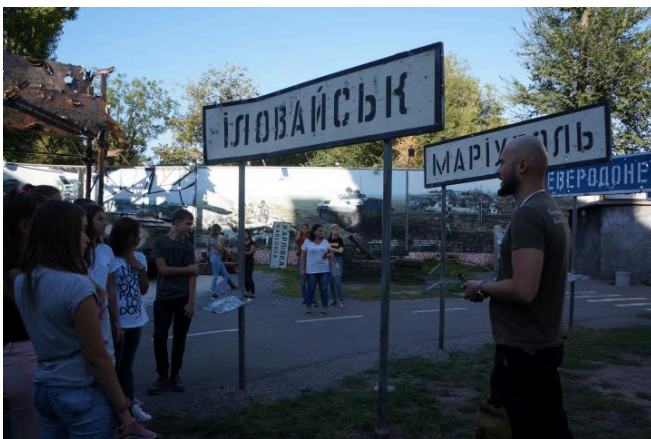
In museums, people are learning about democracy, freedom, and patriotism. However, Igor Poshivaylo, director of the Museum of the Revolution of Dignity, learned through the “Lessons about freedom” project in Kyjiw schools that reaching young people is not easy and requires a modern approach. One of the effective activation strategies is the organization of meetings with participants of the Revolution of Dignity and the war in eastern Ukraine.

Such meetings offer more involvement, allow participants to get first-hand information, establish interaction that enables important questions, and finally confront participants with the question of what they would do in a similar situation. Fighting for one’s own country – as Poshivaylo emphasizes – is a free choice. The presentation of the figures of people who consciously made this choice could be an important and effective element in shaping young Ukrainians’ civic and patriotic attitudes.

Other types of activity include workshops for children and young people; books and comics promotions; movie screenings; poetry and song evenings; photographic, poster and painting exhibitions; meetings with artists; lectures, supportive actions in solidarity with war prisoners; and more intimate activities, such as birthday celebrations of dead heroes and writing letters

to soldiers fighting on the front.

The Museum of the Revolution of Dignity in Kyjiw aims to be “an intellectual and creative hub, the heart of initiatives of all kinds for inclusive reflection on the past and consolidated creation of the future”. Also, new regional museums act as an umbrella for different kinds of social initiatives, as they become centers of civic activity, integrating local communities. As Vadim Yakushenko, the head of the ATO Museum in Dnipro, highlighted, the new Ukrainian museums are “a reflection of the present, witnessing the birth of a healthy and free society”.



Dmyto Koshka, a member of the anti-terrorist operation, conducts a school trip around the museum and, through his own experience, talks about the ongoing conflict in Donbas; Museum of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Dnipro, September 2018. Elżbieta Olzacka, [Free access - no reuse](#)



We are all part of the Revolution of Dignity. The museum tries to activate visitors. The Information and Exhibition Center of Maidan Museum, Kyiv, February 2019. Elżbieta Olzacka, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Museum on the war front

The strength and unification of this society surprised the world when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February this year. The Ukrainians stood up for heroic defense, one of the important fronts of which is the protection of the Ukrainian cultural heritage. The Museum of the Revolution of Dignity has become the national center of activities related to rapid response to threats to museum collections, art, and cultural property related to hostilities.

The Kyjiw museum was well prepared for this task, having taken care of international contacts and developing its paths of dealing with crises in the past few years. As part of the "[Heritage Emergency Response Initiative](#)" established in early March, a few days after the start of military operations by Russia, the Museum helps to disseminate materials on saving cultural heritage, and organizes workshops and webinars for cultural workers.

The museum director, Igor Poshyvailo, is actively involved in coordinating cooperation between Ukrainian museums and cultural institutions, and such powerful actors as UNESCO, ICOM-Disaster Resilient Museums and ICCROM. Museum employees also participate in expeditions in which losses are assessed, the surviving materials are secured, and the certificates of Russian crimes against cultural heritage are collected.

In today's wartime conditions, museum workers call themselves "soldiers of the cultural front". In fact, preserving the legacy of the democratic revolution that changed their country depends largely on their struggle and perseverance.

Footnotes

1. Istorychna Pravda, October 15, 2014 [↑](#)
2. Posyvailo, Ihor, ed. 2017. Maidan: Landshafty Pam'iaty [Maidan: Landscapes of Memory]. Official Museum Prospectus. Kyiv: Natsional'nyi muzei Revoliutsii Hidnosti, p. 28. [↑](#)
3. Macdonald Sharon, 2003, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities", *Museum and Society*, 1 (1). [↑](#)

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