

Design for Ukraine's heritage: engaging international students during times of war through design activism

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine - which began in February 2022 - has caused, and continues to inflict, a substantial number of deaths and destruction of buildings, including museums, cultural institutions, and heritage. Despite the instruments of international law put in place to protect cultural heritage, alarming reports of the removal and displacement of museums' collections from occupied areas continue to emerge.

In the amid of this complex context, how can design researchers and educators prompt students towards the development of contributions for emergencies such as war? Can digital platforms be used to support such development? And how can these technologies be employed to safeguard and raise awareness about at-risk heritage?

Drawing from the legacy of design activism and socially responsible design, the research aims to provide an answer to these questions, presenting the results of the Design for Ukraine's Heritage (D4UH) experience. D4UH is an educational project, the first step of a broader strategy that has the goal of creating a network of European institutions and NGOs to envision and develop possible solutions to safeguard the Ukrainian museums' heritage during and after times of war. D4UH pairs 20 Ukrainian museums with 20 international students from architecture and design schools, united by the desire to give support to the Ukrainian heritage. Partners, students and museums are asked to collaborate in the collection of videos, pictures and interviews to design the Virtual Museum of Ukrainian Museums, which acts as a statement of Ukrainian museums' current situation. Offering the chance of engaging, researching, curating and designing the virtual exhibition's narrative space, students and design educators can directly experience how the action of designing can tackle intricate cultural, social and political issues. The expected results of the project are, in fact, not merely to exhibit Ukrainian cultural heritage, but also to consider the relevance of museum institutions themselves as guardians

of temporality to be interpreted and protected, especially in times of war, because of their contribution to the community's progress.

Author keywords

Cultural heritage; digital museums; design activism; design education; design in emergency.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine - which began in February 2022 and is still ongoing- continues to result in losses on both sides (MacFarquhar, 2022) and among civilians (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2023).

Attempts to protect and enhance the Ukrainian cultural heritage have overall been timely and effective, although some worrying news regarding the territories still under Russian control has come to us (Spinney, 2022). Many projects have sprung up to help the cause: Save Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (<https://www.sucho.org/>) — coordinated by an international team and managed by over 1500 volunteers (Majstorovic, 2022) —, Skrynia — a cultural heritage protection programme run by Shadows Project (<https://saveua.art/>) —, the initiatives from the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (*Solidarity Projects Ukraine, 2022*), and the partnership between the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH) and Getty (*ALIPH and Getty Partner to Protect Cultural Heritage in Ukraine, 2022*).

Among these initiatives there is the European Nonviolent Action Movement (MEAN, 2022). After a visit Kyiv in July 2022, MEAN volunteers — including a representative of our design university — received and helped promote support requests from 20 Ukrainian museums to Italian institutions. The idea of involving our students to help raise awareness about the current Ukrainian crisis and the protection of cultural heritage took shape: the Design for Ukrainian Heritage (D4UH) initiative was born.



In the first part of this paper, we will briefly discuss the three main themes around which the D4UH educational initiative has been developed: the protection of cultural heritage, the transformations of museum institutions in recent years, and the role of design activism. The second section will describe the initiative itself through the analysis of students' work, together with a reflection on its relevance and efficacy and the subsequent steps for spreading the results.

Background

The Protection of Cultural Properties as Common Heritage

As a reaction to the destruction inflicted by the Second World War, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted in 1954 under the auspices of UNESCO. It is the first and most significant treaty devoted to the protection of cultural property, which is defined in the same document as:

"(a) Movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people [...]; (b) Buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a) [...]; (c) Centers containing a large amount of cultural property as defined in sub-paragraphs (a) and (b), to be known as centers containing monuments" (*Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954*).

The most significant aspect of the Convention is its definition of cultural property as universal heritage, rather than national heritage, "since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world". Gradually, the concept has been expanded to include intangible cultural heritage, which is of particular significance in armed situations. In fact, one of the goals of wars is frequently the elimination of the historical-cultural identity of the enemy, beginning with questioning those identities while simultaneously establishing new ones and eliminating as rapidly as possible any evidence that may undermine the strategy (Chiodi, 2018, p. 46).

A second important aspect that emerged concerns the need to build respect for heritage. The Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 (1999) encourages the enhancement of the cultural legacy of the territory during times of peace through educational and informational initiatives directed at the civilian population. Nonetheless, as suggested by Chiodi (2018, p. 48), raising awareness of different cultures through the inclusion of propaedeutic subjects for inter- and infra-culturality related to cultural heritage in education programs would be especially crucial for cultivating respect for cultural properties as a common heritage.

The Museum: from object-oriented institution to polyphonic (virtual) space of memory

Historically, museums have centered their interest on the past: their focus on ancient artifacts has made them object-oriented (MacDonald & Alsford, 2009, p. 72) and this viewpoint has been prevalent for a long time.

In recent years though, the definition of museum has been revised to acknowledge, first and foremost, the significance of museum institutions as "democratising, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the future" (Lehmannová, 2020) as well as the relevance of community participation and the provision of "varied experiences

for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing" (ICOM, 2022).

The new kind of audience that the technologies' appearance has shaped over the 20th century has unquestionably played a crucial part in the evolution of the museum institution and in the birth of virtual museums, necessitating a shift in how knowledge is presented to the public (Williams, 2009, p. 16) through different media.

Experiments in the field of memorialization forms, which underwent several alterations in the last century, are of special relevance to this study. While monuments and memorials appear to lose their value with time and become lifeless replicas of a memory they can no longer revive or preserve (Bassanelli, 2014, p. 11), new physical and virtual forms of commemoration have recently emerged. All of them share, albeit in varying manifestations, the desire to engage people by offering chances for intercultural interchange, eradicating national barriers, and facilitating both geographical and political permeability (Bassanelli, 2013, pp. 27-28).

This change in the field of curation, which aims to build a link between the past and the present and start a conversation about current social issues, shows that institutions want to change how they contribute to a better future for society (Janes & Sandell, 2019). An example of the use of this approach can be found in Holocaust museums: they do not merely seek to stimulate visitors' interest in the subject from a purely historical knowledge perspective, but they propose activities, albeit sometimes with questionable outcomes (Popescu, 2019, p. 344), and invite visitors to *actively engage* in political and social actions, connecting past, present, and future not to let certain atrocities occur again.

The Potential Role of Design Activism

The shifts towards digitalization (Bekele et al., 2018) and activism (Janes & Sandell, 2019) happening in the museum field open new possibilities for design and designers. Specifically, starting to collaborate with museums keen to engage with social and political issues - exploring alternative routes beyond their historical (supposed) neutrality (Brekke, 2019, p. 268) - could be an area of interest for design activism and design activists.

With the term "design activism", we indicate a miscellaneous design movement acting on environmental, social, and/or political issues. Born in the '70s from the seminal work of Victor Papanek — *Design for the Real World* (1972) — and drawn from the Italian radical design movement — such as Superstudio and Archizoom — instances (Julier, 2013b), design activism can be nowadays understood as "[...] representing design's central role in (1) promoting social change, (2) raising awareness about values and beliefs (e.g., in relation to climate change, sustainability, etc.), or (3) questioning the constraints that mass production and consumerism place on people's everyday life" (Markussen, 2013). Sprouting from the need for disruption and injustice-revealing activism advocates for (Thorpe, 2011), design activism frames issues and generates better alternatives by "[...] a *designerly* way of intervening in people's lives" (Markussen, 2013), putting at the service of a community its aesthetic practice, its tools and its methods.

The range of action, within the design field, design activism can engage varies from fashion design to urbanism, from service design to architecture, covering different scales and types of projects. The wide in-the-making definition of design activ-

ism and its positioning as a relatively new subject of discussion still make scholars in the field debate about its inner nature, its relationships to design and its limits (Faud Luke, 2009; Julier, 2013b; Markussen, 2013; Thorpe, 2011).

To evaluate, reflect upon and understand the relationships between design and activism Thorpe (2011) proposed four open criteria:

- » It publicly reveals or frames a problem or challenging issue.
- » It makes a contentious claim for change (it calls for change) based on that problem or issue.
- » It works on behalf of a neglected, excluded or disadvantaged group.
- » It disrupts routine practices, or systems of authority, which gives it the characteristic of being unconventional or unorthodox—outside traditional channels of change.

Against these criteria and through the discussion of the D4UH initiative, the next section of this paper tries to reflect on and discuss the role of design researchers and educators in prompting students towards the development of design activism contributions.

Design for Ukraine's Heritage (D4UH)

D4UH is the first step of a long-term plan by MEAN to protect and digitalize the collections of 20 Ukrainian museums, by gathering basic information about their current state. To achieve this goal, an open call has been launched to students of architecture and design schools from different universities. The results of the initiative will give birth to the Virtual Museum of Ukrainian Museums, with the broadened aim of increasing awareness of the situation in which these cultural institutions find themselves, attracting the attention of the public as well as private institutions and individual citizens, and inviting them to an active engagement.

Method

The project adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, following the definition given by Reason and Bradbury: "action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of [...] practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people [...]" (2007, p. 4). Specifically, the initiative used a PAR strategy with the two goals of encouraging student engagement in socio-political concerns and fostering activist participation in emergency situations.

D4UH involved different types of actors: museum directors and their collaborators - partnering since previous months through the coordination of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine-, students, volunteer linguistic mediators, MEAN, researchers and professors from the hosting university and a national council of research.

The initiative engaged 20 students of different nationalities and universities, including two Ukrainian students. Each of them has been assigned to one of the 20 already-mentioned museums, the majority of which are small local history museums that lack the resources to protect their artefacts and disseminate information about their condition to a large audience outside their own country.

The characteristics of the museums and their staff, as well as the unique circumstances, necessitated a heightened level of commitment from the Ukrainian students and other na-

tive-speaking volunteers, who worked as cultural mediators and tried to foster an atmosphere of mutual trust.

The initiative evolved through four online workshops and reviews with the students: an introductory presentation of the project and participating museums, two meetings to verify the work's progress, and one final presentation. It was determined that a digital whiteboard was used so that students could share material and discuss their various research strategies even remotely.

Insights and outputs from students' research

The students' research was organized with a time frame: the past, the present, and the future. Regarding the past, they focused on the museum's history, museological characteristics, permanent collections, and significant temporary exhibitions. The most essential component of the investigation, however, was the analysis of the current situation, from mapping the military condition of the museums' areas to determining whether the museums were currently open and with what activities. The information collected was pivotal to understanding what similar initiatives and strategies were already put in place, and to building a comprehensive picture of how the museums are using their spaces to serve the local communities in the emergency.

The students constantly monitored the state of the museums using social media news and direct connections with collaborators, when possible. Thus, they were able to determine if and when museums were harmed, as well as the extent of the damage and the condition of their permanent collections.

Challenged with the question of the museums' future at the end of their research, students displayed, on the one hand, great respect and sensitivity for the current situation and, on the other, an innovative spirit, insisting on the need for the digitalization of the collections and the creation of virtual educational paths also accessible to foreign audiences. The interaction with the museum directors helped establish actual action steps, beginning with the short-term demand for the conservation of the works and moving to the long-term improvement of museum itineraries.

The narration of the war period has become a focal point of interest, especially in damaged museums. For example, when talking about the renovation of a local history museum that had been badly damaged by bombing, a student suggested "keeping the remnants and mixing them with new pieces as a reminder of the aftermath of the war and how the museum recovers." This shows the importance of including the traces of the war in the narrative space of the museum.

One of the participating students began to reflect on the second phase of the strategy: the design of the Virtual Museum of Ukrainian Institutions, which would store the results of the PAR undertaken in collaboration with students and museums. The virtual museum — the subject of his degree thesis — will be "set up" within the National Museum of the History of Ukraine. The tour will start at the museum's entry with an explanation of the project's goals and instructions on how to explore the virtual space. Each room will be devoted to a specific museum, turning the museum institution into a subject to be narrated and experienced through the storytelling of its past, present, and future. The exhibition will employ the Kintsugi concept and interactive elements to depict the general condition of Ukrainian history and the specific conditions of each museum. The overall installation atmosphere will try to foster a positive attitude towards the future.

Discussion

Using the criteria developed by Thorpe (2011) as guidelines, in this section, we discuss the project results, their relevance, potential and limits. Firstly, the issue D4UH reveals and tries to frame regards the protection of cultural heritage in war zones and/or in countries at war. Through the engagement of local actors and the desk research carried out by participating students, investigations around the 20 museums' situations highlight how — in times of emergency — it is hard to distribute and properly direct resources, both in terms of skills and financial aid. We noticed how small and rural museums struggle more to access support and, despite being guardians of traditions, stories and identities of a piece of territory, make their voices heard by the broader international community. We experienced challenges in getting and keeping in touch with some of the above-mentioned museums: trust issues due to the little time at our disposal to "set the scene" of the project, communication barriers such as language and operational problems as the difficult access to broadband and electricity were just some of the limits we have had to face.

Reporting and researching that specific situation, D4UH tried also to make a claim for change: raising awareness, giving visibility and supporting (less renowned) museums in times of war is a chance to safeguard the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of a population. The "neglected, excluded or disadvantaged group" (Thorpe, 2011) the project aimed to work for/on behalf of was, in fact, the broader community of people who identify themselves or feel close to Ukrainian history and culture.

Lastly, we can see how this project can be considered a design activism action as — with its use of digital platforms and by being carried out in an educational environment — it moved "outside traditional channels of change" (Thorpe, 2011). In the emergency caused by the war, digital tools had been vital to engage with local stakeholders, collecting, elaborating and

disseminating precious information: all communications and material exchange had been made possible mainly via the web (for e.g.: via e-mails, social networks, instant messages apps.); students gathered, analyzed, synthesized and systemically presented all found data on a digital collaborative platform; the final output itself is going to be a digital experience in the shape of a virtual museum. The important use of digital technologies provided us as well with the opportunity of bringing together international students from different universities, giving us the chance to experiment with a sort of remote activism through design research in an educational context. Of course, if on one hand 'digital' makes D4UH possible, on the other it underlined some criticalities such as trust development between stakeholders, and the dependence on broadband and power lines which are at stake in territories in war.

Conclusion

The purpose of D4UH was to include students in the creation of a design activism contribution. The PAR, on which students, volunteers, and museum staff collaborated, demonstrated and made visible the war's impact on Ukrainian museum institutions.

In the week following the conclusion of the initiative, one of the partner museums was bombed, and only a part of its collection was preserved. In light of this last event, it is essential to continue documenting what is happening to preserve the identity of the Ukrainian people and their cultural legacy for the benefit of society as a whole.

The research results will be shared with a wider audience through the implementation of the current Virtual Museum of Ukrainian Museums because, in the words of one of the participating students, museums' "role in preserving and narrating the [...] culture, history, and stories, despite the suffering and danger in which they found themselves, showed to us how that despite perils, there are always stories that must be narrated".

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