Reject or Reframe: Strategies for Grappling with Ukraine's Soviet Heritage in *What Shall We Do With These Buildings?*

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Introduction

For their 2024 Christmas edition, *The Economist* published an article provocatively titled "Tales of Odessa: Cancel culture in Ukraine." The Ukrainian city of Odesa is known as a pluralistic melting pot by the sea, immortalized in works by both the Jewish Soviet writer Isaac Babel and the Romantic Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. In their rationale for adding Odesa's historic center to the World Heritage List, UNESCO specifically called out the city's diverse influences: "Its outstanding universal value is owed to intermingled influences: Italian, Greek, Moldovan, Jewish and Ukrainian, but also French, Austro-Hungarian, Turkish, Russian and Polish" (Azoulay, 2023).

One of these influences is not like the others. In the three years since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been an understandable backlash to Russian culture. In 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky passed a "decommunization" law that singled out Russian symbols for "liquidation." The commission tasked with implementing this law in Odesa seized upon its vague wording and ultimately slated 19 monuments for removal, including a famous statue of Odesa's literary son, Pushkin. Increasingly, the poet has been recast as a "glorifier of tsarism and a marker of Soviet cultural expansion" (Gusiev, 2025), a perception only heightened by Russia's ugly allusions to Pushkin in its own wartime propaganda. Nonetheless, the move—which was planned without any public input—proved controversial. Over 150 cultural figures, most of them Ukrainians, signed an open letter to UNESCO stating that the rushed implementation of the decommunization law "imperils swathes of Odesa's World Heritage and its spirit of polyphonic cosmopolitanism" ("UNESCO open letter for Ode(s)sa," 2024). In a similar vein, *The Economist* argued that Odesa's polyglot identity is threatened not only by Russian shelling, but also by uncritical Ukrainian nationalism.

The *Economist* article caused quite the dust-up. The newspaper's Facebook page received overwhelmingly negative comments, although it's not clear how many commenters were responding to the paywalled article, as opposed to its headline that drew dubious parallels between Ukraine and culture wars in the U.S. Many commenters took umbrage at the author's use of "Odessa," the place name used in Russia, instead of "Odesa," the city's Ukrainian toponym. They also objected to the fact that the author, while not named in the piece (*The Economist* omits bylines), has since been revealed to be a Russian writer. Several Ukrainian-based publications argued that *The Economist* oversimplified the debate over Pushkin, cherry-picked incendiary quotes from decommunization activists, and failed to recognize the importance of decommunization to Ukraine's self-determination.

Contrary to what *The Economist* seemed to imply, decommunization is not a new and radical process in Ukraine. It began shortly after Ukraine gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Opinion on this issue is actually de-polarizing because of the war; the ranks of those who identify with Russian symbols, history, and language are dwindling. After publication of the incendiary article, *The Economist* published a critical letter to the editor from the journalist and historian Anna Reid, who noted that there are plenty of Odesans who switched to speaking Ukrainian not due to "language vigilantes," but simply because they earnestly no longer wish to speak the language used by the enemy (Reid, 2024).

Nonetheless, such controversies raise the question of how public memory is rhetorically constructed in fraught times. How can it be that defenders and critics of the Pushkin statue alike are equally fervent in their Ukrainian patriotism? What are the underlying worldviews that led to such diametrically opposing views on the Pushkin statue? More broadly, how does the battle over which symbols, figures, and values are included in Ukrainian cultural heritage play out in the context of decommunization?

Early on in the war, a work of art was released that models pluralism on this issue. The 28-minute documentary *What Shall We Do With These Buildings?* uses five modernist Soviet buildings as case studies to illustrate the push-and-pull between preserving or destroying remnants of the Soviet era in Kharkiv, a city just twenty miles from the Russian border. In the film, each building is matched with a free-flowing dance sequence. In interviews and edgy on-the-street sequences, however, the film breaks this neat formula to reveal the kaleidoscope of Kharkivite opinions, ranging from Soviet nostalgia to hardcore Ukrainian nationalism. Directed by the British movement director Jonathan Ben-Shaul, the micro-budget film screened on the global film festival circuit in 2022 and 2023.

In part, *What Shall We Do…?* can afford such nuance because of when it was made. It was filmed during the lead-up to the invasion, and was released shortly after the war began. The film is thus a time capsule of a period when Ukrainians lacked a common enemy and were far less united than they are now. Nonetheless, the fissures in Ukrainian society have not gone away, as the backlash to the *Economist* article indicates, and the film remains insightful and worth exploring.

To get at the question of how public memory is constructed around buildings in fraught political moments, I will apply rhetorical methods to understand this on-the-surface puzzling artifact. First, I will break down the film into its major aesthetic components, then demonstrate how each part works to support the whole. These distinct components—namely, the interviews, the dances, and the *cinéma verité* scenes that occasionally break in to the documentary—are neatly demarcated via editing and music. Nonetheless, from an interpretive perspective, they are inextricably linked, as they inform, inflect, and challenge each other.

Given that the film was directed by a British movement director and screened at numerous European and American film festivals, it seems to have been geared towards a global,

English-speaking, non-Ukrainian audience. For this crowd, the film's primary purpose, presumably, is educational. It informs the viewer about an under-considered conflict of cultural memory playing out in a post-Soviet state. On the surface, *What Shall We Do…?* documents the range of views that exist in regards to interwar and post-war Soviet modernism, and Soviet relics in general.

That said, methods of rhetorical analysis reveal the arguments lurking in even educational media, and how seemingly neutral aesthetic choices can, cumulatively, mount a subtle argument. The cacophony of voices in the film ultimately coalesces around a central schism: to erase the past, or reckon with it? *What Shall We Do..?* doesn't explicitly take sides, but its aesthetic choices tilt it in the direction of the latter viewpoint. Furthermore, the film's embrace of ambivalence, paradox, and contradiction in the interviews, not to mention its inclusion of the fluid art form of experimental dance, is a rejection of the black-and-white thinking that often surrounds Soviet-era artifacts.

The Landscape of Decommunization

The first wave of decommunization, which occurred shortly after Ukraine gained independence in 1991, focused on removing large and bombastic symbols, such as the colossal 11-foot Lenin statue that stood in Ukraine's capital, Kyiv (L. Bilaniuk, personal communication, May 22, 2025). (Ironically, a more human-sized Lenin statue was left untouched just a few blocks away.) This process occurred more rapidly in western Ukraine than eastern Ukraine, because symbols of Soviet ideology were far less entrenched in western Ukraine: eastern Ukraine had been under Soviet influence for nearly 70 years, whereas western Ukraine was only subsumed into the USSR after WWII.

The second wave of decommunization was sparked by the Euromaidan in 2014. The

Euromaidan was a series of protests in response to Ukraine's Russia-allied president, Viktor Yanukovych, backing out of an agreement to deepen ties with the European Union. Protesters called out Yanukovych's blatant corruption and crackdown on freedom of expression. In response, police brutally suppressed the Euromaidan, killing over a hundred protesters. On social media, Ukrainians documented their own police force ripping Ukrainian flags from protesters, as though they, like Yanukovych, sided with Russia over their own people. Later, it emerged that 20 Russian FSB security officers had helped to quell the protests (Fornusek, 2023). This only made the public cling to their Ukrainian identity even more fiercely and reject all Russian and Soviet symbols as the antithesis of that identity. A new spirit of national unity and pride emerged almost "overnight" (Revakovych, 2018). Ukrainian identity shifted from an ethnic nature to a civic nature, and speaking Ukrainian emerged as a marker of Ukrainian patriotism (L. Bilaniuk, personal communication, May 22, 2025).

When Yanukovych fled the country, Russia took advantage of the disarray to illegally annex Crimea and begin staging a separatist movement in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine. Russian propaganda has frequently used the mythos and symbols of the Soviet Union to justify military aggression. Russian president Vladimir Putin spread lies about how Lenin "invented" Ukraine, and revived the personality cult of Stalin, who killed millions of Ukrainians in a man-made famine in the 1930s (L. Bilaniuk, personal communication, May 22, 2025). This all-out assault on Ukrainian sovereignty, cloaked in Soviet branding, made symbols of that era newly toxic. Lenin statues could no longer remain "invisible" and unremarked upon (Kutsenko, 2020). Indeed, Ukraine's next president, the chocolatier oligarch Petro Poroshenko, passed a raft of decommunization laws in 2015 banning overtly communist or Nazi symbols, slogans, flags, emblems, or toponyms.

Remove or Reframe? Two Competing Strategies for Reckoning with Dissonant Heritage

What Shall We Do…? uses Soviet modernist architecture as a case study to examine the gray areas of decommunization. According to a review in the online architecture magazine *Greyscape,* the film is "an illustration of the challenges of dissonant heritage; what do cities do with buildings when the political system and dominant culture for which they were constructed, is over?" ("Kharkiv 2022"). While the film presents an array of idiosyncratic views, it ultimately stages a conflict between two diverging viewpoints. These views can be distilled into a choice: Should Ukraine erase all traces of its Russian oppressor, or find ways to reframe and recontextualize its dissonant heritage?

The first view, which has become louder in recent years, believes that decommunization, decolonization, and derussification are key to upholding Ukraine's sovereignty. Decommunization activists point out that Ukraine is fighting forces, both external and internal, that harbor a dangerous nostalgia for the Soviet era. Renaming streets, removing plaques, toppling statues, and revising museums are means to reinforce Ukrainian identity and deny Russia the pretext to claim Ukraine as its cultural brethren. More recently, the decommunization project has been extended to arts and culture, sparking the "cancellation" of Russian composers and other creatives. The polarizing *Economist* article "Tales of Odessa" (2024) quotes a Ukrainian professor who sits on the commission that decides how to implement decommunization laws in Odesa. He states that those who are "holding on to this Russian language, essentially parts of identity, monuments and street names . . . whether they want it or not, help keep the Russian claws in the Ukrainian body." This quote captures the decommunization movement's emphasis on culture and language as a front of the war against Russia, as well as its totalizing approach to artifacts that are tainted by Russian influence. *The*

Washington Post (Mellen, 2023) termed the post-invasion surge in decommunization a "cultural counteroffensive."

Those who hold the second view may be supportive of decommunization in general, but also believe that there are cases where decommunization has overreached. They may have welcomed the destruction of the colossal Lenin statue, but bristle at the hasty removal of the Pushkin one. Decommunization, they argue, has sometimes been wielded to divide Ukrainians who share the same goal of sovereignty, if not the same language or the same politics. One Ukrainian writer argues that "Russian is not only the language of the aggressor, it is also the language of the victim. And the victim is now being shamed for the acts of the aggressor" ("Tales of Odessa," 2024). These thinkers focus on creating a new culture out of the old, rather than erasing every signifier of Sovietism or Russian imperialism. For instance, they may advocate for revitalizing decaying Soviet modernist architecture through innovative uses, as several interviewees in the film do. These thinkers see power in reclaiming history and refashioning once-oppressive symbols through a defiantly Ukrainian lens.

The controversy over an iconic arch in Kyiv offers a neat distillation of these two approaches. Now a tourist attraction, the arch was erected in the '80s as the "Peoples' Friendship Arch," an old Soviet trope to justify colonization. The arch was accompanied by a statue of two workers, one Ukrainian and one Russian, holding a Soviet medal aloft. In recent years, locals have imbued the monument with resistive readings. It was painted in rainbow colors to celebrate Eurovision (and, many believed, to mock Russia's homophobia). Activists plastered a crack-like sticker across the arch to protest Russia illegally jailing Ukrainians for political reasons. Finally, after Russia invaded Ukraine, pressure mounted for the local government to make a permanent change. The legal body of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, an entity referenced in *What Shall We Do...?,* advocated for the wholesale removal of the arch, in accordance with

decommunization laws. Ultimately, however, the Kyiv city government decided to reclaim the monument: they renamed it the "Arch of Freedom of the Ukrainian People" and assented to the demolition of the statue, while leaving the arch intact. According to local officials, "the meaning of the monument has been rethought" (Amru, 2024). In reclaiming the monument, rather than removing it from public consciousness, the city government sent a powerful message: Ukraine need not be afraid of its history.

These dual impulses play out in a specific way in the realm of Soviet modernist architecture. Statues and memorials serve to reify public memory and entrench a particular narrative about a place's history. By contrast, buildings are utilitarian; no matter how avant-garde their design, they still exist primarily to provide shelter and gathering space. Moreover, buildings are far harder to topple than statues or plaques. Architecture tends to inexorably shape a landscape, one building at a time, until it's simultaneously invisible and omnipresent.

In Ukraine, Soviet modernist architecture has undergone an evolution in public opinion. The book *Soviet Modernism, Brutalism, Post-Modernism: Buildings and Structures in Ukraine 1955–1991* (Bykov & Gubkina, 2019) charts this evolution. The architect and historian Ievgeniia Gubkina contributed the introduction, in which she argues, "Within the former socialist republics . . . a powerful conflict of memory rages; people debate how to treat this heritage and how they should relate to their own past. As the internal conflict continues, increasing interest is being shown by a new generation of architects, historians, architecture lovers, and activists, who demand that these buildings be protected" (p. 7). She argues that foreign press tends to interpret this architecture through the lens of the totalitarian Soviet regime, while local preservationists "romanticize" these buildings. These two groups, critical press and local preservationists, loosely map on to the two views I've laid out.

Ukrainian modernism rejected ornamentation and decadence in favor of innovation, function, utility, and form. It was by turns "futuristic, cosmic, optimistic, naive" (Bykov & Gubkina, 2019, p. 7). Like other architectural historians, Owen Hatherley (2025) draws parallels between Ukrainian modernism and the post-war modernism that was bubbling up across Europe and the United States. Summarizing the appeal of this architecture, which is being bombed by Russian forces daily, Hatherley writes, "[T]he Ukraine under threat is one of the most modernist of European countries, a place full of vast, ambitious, futuristic public buildings, mass produced public housing, cosmic public art and neglected public spaces where plants break through granite and concrete" (p. 4). He argues that modernist architecture should be lauded as an achievement of Ukrainians during the Soviet era. In a similar vein, Gubkina (2023) states unequivocally that Ukrainians should feel no reservations about claiming this architecture as their own: "Soviet architecture in Ukraine is Ukrainian architecture built with Ukrainian money in Ukrainian cities inhabited by Ukrainian people" (p. 52). This new generation of historians welcomes the opportunity to reinvigorate Ukraine's Soviet modernist heritage through education, preservation, and scholarship. They decry the threats to this architecture, namely from Russian attacks, but also, more insidiously, from certain corners of the decommunization movement. The *Guardian* journalist Charlotte Higgins (2024) has dubbed this state of affairs the "double threat of Russian bombs and 'blind fury' at Moscow."

A key event in the timeline of this conflict of memory occurred in 2018. In Kyiv, a 1971 Space Race-inspired building in the shape of a flying saucer, designed by the Ukrainian architect and artist Florian Yuriev, was set to be demolished and turned into a shopping mall. According to the *Kyiv Post*, "The controversy over the mall's construction plans has raised the question of whether examples of Soviet modernist architecture even deserve to be preserved in Ukraine" (Talant, 2018). The paper explained that there is a legal carve-out that exempts buildings built

between 1955 and 1991 from protection. Protesters vociferously objected to the attempt to destroy the flying saucer building, and the Save Kyiv Modernism movement was born.

Preservationists describe a repeated playbook: local governments, unhampered by non-existent preservation laws, allow profit-seeking developers to destroy or fundamentally alter modernist buildings. The Kyiv-based architecture magazine *PRAGMATIKA* wonders plaintively, "Why, despite the cultural and educational efforts of architects and journalists, is modernism systematically discriminated against as a 'legacy of the Soviet era'?" (Balashova, 2023). *PRAGMATIKA* cites the example of a 1985 modernist landmark in Kyiv, nicknamed Flowers of Ukraine, that was set to be destroyed. A judge ruled that the building did not deserve status as a cultural monument because it was "an object of Soviet times in a state that does not add aesthetic beauty and value to the historical face of Kyiv."

Dmytro Soloviov is an architecture expert and preservation advocate who runs an Instagram account under the handle "ukrainianmodernism," which boasts over 100,000 followers. Modernist architecture is the casualty of a polarizing decommunization discourse, he argues: "Subtlety and nuance are completely missing from the debate about decommunization generally. And when it comes to Soviet Ukrainian heritage, it gets even messier. People really get blinded by misdirected fury. When you remember we are in the middle of a brutal war which is destructive in itself, it is completely unnecessary to add to that destruction" (Higgins, 2024). For Soloviov, this state of affairs—namely, a dearth of regulation and education—amounts to "casual decommunization." Whatever the multiple causes may be, Gubkina (2023) laments that modernist architecture is being destroyed on an "enormous" scale (p. 149).

A parallel process is taking place with Soviet mosaics. The Ukrainian documentary photographer and author Yevgen Nikiforov (2017) has made it his mission to photograph Soviet mosaics, many of which are stunningly detailed, before they are destroyed under

decommunization laws. While Nikiforov supports decommunization in general, he objects to how the implementation has swept up Soviet artworks, even those that lack the overtly communist symbols singled out by the law. (He supports preserving even those mosaics, albeit with educational plaques.) According to Nikiforov, "We shouldn't cultivate ignorance and pretend that the Soviet period never existed. History brooks no blank pages: they only breed new myths. Preserved testimony of an era leaves more of a mark on society than deliberate erasure" (p. 11). For Nikiforov, the rush to destroy Soviet mosaics has imperiled "the monumental works of Soviet artists" (p. 8), while missing a vital opportunity to use this artwork for the purposes of historical education.

In *What Shall We Do…?,* these tensions surface via fragmentary interviews and explosive dance sequences. The film first destabilizes the very terms of this debate by questioning what makes architecture "Soviet" in the first place, and then lets the cacophony of voices battle it out.

Kharkiv National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre - Interview

What Shall We Do...? opens with an aerial view of Kharkiv traffic set to droning, sinister electronica. The camera pans over the Kharkiv National Academic Opera and Ballet Theater. Seen from far up above, it truly does resemble an aircraft carrier, to use the local vernacular (Higgins, 2023). Maxim Rozenfeld's voice comes as an anchoring point and a relief: we are back on the ground, and the dissonant music has given way to the hum of the city.

Rozenfeld is a prominent architect, historian, and Kharkiv tour guide. As the first interviewee, he gets to set the terms of the debate and color how the viewer will perceive the rest of the film. Placing this interview first is just one way that director Jonathan Ben-Shaul ever-so-slightly tips the scales in favor of Rozenfeld's view—the view that empowers citizens to revitalize and reframe their heritage. Rozenfeld says:

> In terms of how architecture impacts how people think and how they interact with their environment, here, it's a case of attitudes changing. When this building was opened in 1991, it was seen as this gigantic concrete monstrosity, standing in the middle of the city, an eyesore; now, however, it's been taken over by various underground teenage groups, and it's started to be considered an important part of street-art culture in the city center.

Rozenfeld's reference to street art culture is promptly followed by shots of various subcultures, in quick succession. Skateboarders glide across the opera house's plaza; teenagers play marching-band instruments; and rave-goers flail ecstatically in the opera house's grand hall. These joyful, youth-driven subcultures stand in sharp contrast to the foreboding opening shot of the building. The opening primes us to perceive the building as, indeed, a "concrete monstrosity" and an "eyesore"; Rozenfeld's speech and the ensuing shots of people in movement around the building immediately complicates that notion.

Together, the speech and visuals make a powerful case that creative, rebellious use can revitalize a seemingly oppressive structure. The Kharkiv opera house is an apt case study to demonstrate that buildings' meanings are shaped by their usage, and that those meanings can radically transform within a single lifetime.

To better understand this building, it is useful to turn to the historical record, which is not covered in the film. According to the director of the opera house, it was originally intended as a congress hall for the Communist Party. It was switched, midway through the 25-year construction process, to a theatre "on the insistence of an opera-loving member of the Moscow *nomenklatura"* (Higgins, 2023). Dissonance, contradiction, and paradox are intrinsic to this building's DNA, it seems. Designed for speeches from Communist Party loyalists, it wound up

as a haven for fine art. Perhaps, then, the transition from fine art to street art is not so crazy after all?

The opera house has only continued to transform. Even as Kharkiv is ravaged by shelling, and air raid alerts are an unfortunately commonplace reality, the opera house has brought back performances—underground. In a parallel society beneath the surface, sopranos and mezzos give performances in the opera house's former garage (Méheut & Mykolyshyn, 2024).

After immersing the viewer in a sweaty, frenetic club scene, the film abruptly cuts back to Rozenfeld. He says:

> There is a "Soviet past" which is related to an ideology, and there is a "Soviet past" which is related to a period in time. In this case, I wouldn't talk about this building as something "Soviet." Because similar architecture emerged elsewhere at the same time . . . Therefore, it is of its time. It is simply of its time.

Here, Rozenfeld employs the rhetorical tool known as "dissociation of concepts." Dissociation involves taking a popular concept which contains incompatibilities and breaking it down into disparate elements in order to resolve the contradiction (Perelman, 1982). This process involves creating a hierarchy of elements, with the "real" placed above the "apparent." In this case, Rozenfeld breaks down the concept of Ukraine's "Soviet past" into an ideology, which he rejects, and a period of time, which he embraces. The "Soviet past" may appear to be defined by a ruling ideology (the apparent), but Rozenfeld argues that it is actually defined by a time period (the real). By repeating the phrase "It is of its time," he establishes the primacy of temporality in interpreting the meaning of the building.

The editing helps build the film's argument. By juxtaposing Rozenfeld's words with the least-stereotypically-Soviet scene imaginable (a rave), the film underlines his point that a building constructed during the Soviet period is not synonymous with Soviet ideology.

Rozenfeld warns us against using the slur "Soviet" to paint in too broad of a brush. Furthermore, by comparing the opera house with famous European architecture (he specifically cites the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris), Rozenfeld gives Kharkiv's modernist heritage legitimacy.

Derzhprom – Interview

While Rozenfeld seeks to undermine the idea that architecture built during Soviet times is inexorably tied to Soviet ideology, another interviewee, by contrast, uses the term Soviet as a devil term. Vadym Pozdniakov describes himself as a "civil patriot" who is "trying to move Kharkiv towards Ukrainization." In an interview I conducted with director Jonathan Ben-Shaul and his producer in the spring of 2023, he acknowledged that Pozdniakov is a "polarizing figure" who is known for fiercely advocating the removal of Soviet-era iconography—and for taking matters into his own hands when his advocacy does not result in official change.

Pozdniakov is an odd choice, then, to share expertise on Derzhprom, a complex of glass-and-concrete skyscrapers linked by lofty skybridges that is considered a shining jewel in Kharkiv's cityscape. In fact, "Derzhprom is still arguably the most significant architectural object in the identity and cultural heritage of the city for the vast majority of Kharkiv residents" (Duplantier & Shtendera, 2022). For Pozdniakov, however, things aren't quite so simple. He gives an impassioned monologue exploring his fraught, ambivalent feelings towards Derzhprom:

> The buildings in Kharkiv's city center are a bit oppressive. In some parts, I feel like a tiny ant that can't make a difference, because the walls press in on you; everything here is on a larger scale. It's powerful and Soviet. Despite this, I think Derzhprom is an architectural masterpiece. It's one of our national treasures, and a building like Derzhprom needs to be preserved, as should almost the whole city center. Except for the

Soviet symbols which still remain. Some of these Soviet symbols were added to buildings of the Russian Empire—which looks completely wild!

Pozdniakov's speech here is contradictory and jumbled, as he argues that Derzhprom is simultaneously oppressive *and* that it should be preserved. He seems to endorse two mutually exclusive readings of the building. Perhaps unknowingly, he thus highlights the tension between decommunization and preservation. The idea of removing overt Soviet symbols is sensible enough, but his declaration that "almost" the whole city center should remain untouched raises the question of who gets to draw the line.

The observation that Soviet symbols have been tacked on to imperial buildings illustrates another paradox of the Kharkiv cityscape. The city is a "palimpsest," or, less generously, a hodge-podge, of Ukrainian nationalist, Russian imperialist, and Soviet symbols (Malykhina, 2020). Such fragmentation is contingent, as there is no single political body that has had the power to unilaterally remake the symbolic landscape. No one has enjoyed a monopoly on interpretation. Therefore, activists like Pozdniakov, who wish to remake an unruly cityscape in the image of Ukrainian nationalism, have their work cut out for them.

Derzhprom has a rich history, which Pozdniakov curiously ignores in his analysis. It was unveiled, in 1928, as the first Soviet skyscraper and the centerpiece of the brand-new Freedom Square. The 1920s was a period of "Ukrainization," a revitalization of Ukrainian culture and language. The Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia,* or indigenization, encouraged member states to embrace their own culture and language, and promoted local communist groups to administrative positions (Hatherley, 2024). The Bolsheviks had canny reasons for this policy: *korenizatsiia* was a method to create buy-in for the utopian socialist project, and according to the Holodomor Museum (2022), it also served to appease the Ukrainian nationalist movement. When the Soviet Union formed in 1922, Lenin and other Bolsheviks promised former lands of the Russian Empire

autonomy and the right of secession—a dream that unfortunately "ended with the birth of a powerful, bureaucratic, and undemocratic state that killed off the hopes of the Russian Revolution" (Davis, 2022).

When Kharkiv became the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1919, the city's fortunes quickly changed: its population boomed, and numerous factories sprang up. Derzhprom was envisioned as an office building for Ukraine's burgeoning bureaucracy. It was intended as a hub for Ukrainian officials who would rule the Ukrainian SSR explicitly from Kharkiv, not Moscow. For that reason, the architecture critic Owen Hatherley (2024) argues that the building "came out of a unique combination of communism, nationalism, modernism and anticolonialism." At a moment when eastern Ukraine was leaving Tsarist imperialism behind, Derzhprom represented a step towards Ukrainian self-rule.

The building was technologically audacious in design and sheer scale; it dwarfed the other buildings in its vicinity. Derzhprom presaged brutalism by half a decade and looked downright sci-fi at the time. For contemporary national and international press, it represented the bleeding edge, demonstrating that the Soviet Union was not a backwater, culturally or technologically. Therefore, it served a propagandistic role, too (Duplantier & Shtendera, 2022). When Pozdniakov says, "Everything here is on a larger scale. It's powerful and Soviet," he is alluding to the building's propagandistic power.

Constructivist architecture is closely associated with a period of cultural flourishing in Ukraine. This period, from the mid-1920s to early 1930s, is termed the Ukrainian Renaissance or Early Modernism. But it was not to last. Stalin brutally cracked down on Ukrainian artists, including socialist ones, sending many of them to gulags. This generation of executed Ukrainian writers, many of whom resided in Kharkiv, is now known as the Executed Renaissance. Stalin also sought to destroy the legacy of these artists. To that end, he enforced a new state style of

Socialist Realism in visual art and neoclassicism in architecture (Smolenska, 2022). To suppress modernism's legacy, neoclassical decoration was tacked on to many modernist landmarks, including the buildings that surround Derzhprom in Freedom Square.

In the greater context of the building's history, then, Pozdniakov's speech seems like a missed opportunity to reclaim what is useful about Derzhprom for the current moment, in which Russia seeks to obliterate Ukraine's sovereignty. Hatherley (2024) argues that Derzhprom should be reclaimed as a liberatory, anti-colonial symbol; he implores us to "educate ourselves about the Ukrainian socialist artists of the 1920s who were crushed by Stalinism and ignored by Western history." Similarly, Gubkina (2023) argues that the Stalin regime's suppression of modernist architecture amounted to an effort to turn the page on the flourishing intellectual life of 1920s Ukraine: "Buildings that served as evidence of this period's existence, its human actors, and their ideas of autonomy, progress, modernity, and social equality were subject to appropriation through redesign" (p. 51). She concurs with Hatherley that revisiting the heritage of this period would be "very timely" (p. 19).

It may seem odd that *What Shall We Do...?* does not include this liberatory interpretation, when it is favored by several prominent architectural historians. Rather than cataloging all of the dominant interpretations of Soviet architecture, the film takes a subjective approach. It purposefully relies on its interviewees' limited and sometimes blinkered worldviews. Pozdniakov's monologue demonstrates that the film is far from exhaustive—nor is it attempting to be.

Committed to ardent decommunization, Pozdniakov seems almost stupefied by Ukrainians' achievements during the Soviet era. Characterizing Derzhprom as "oppressive" epitomizes the threat that preservationists have identified: modernist architecture is at risk not

because people try to literally tear it down, but because of an insufficient understanding rooted in the excesses of decommunization.

After multiple scenes starring Pozdniakov, the film turns to another interviewee whose perspective is congruent with his, albeit less jumbled. Masha Shumiatska, an English teacher, describes her upbringing in the Donbas, a region in Ukraine where Russia funded and staged a violent separatist movement in 2014. She segues from a description of her lingering trauma from living in a war zone to her opinions on decommunization:

> Personally, I think the restoration of Soviet architecture or any other Soviet remnants is much more dangerous than even very radical forms of decommunization. At the moment, I think there is this pendulum which swings between pro-Ukrainian sentiments and the desire to restore Sovietism. In my opinion, it has to swing towards the pro-Ukrainian side, even if that can seem rather aggressive or even dangerous, because the other side is much more dangerous and intimidating, especially taking into account how the city is today.

Here, Shumiatska crystallizes the reject-the-past view more clearly than Pozdniakov. Her perspective is, to quote Helen Castle's (2022) review of the film in the *RIBA Journal,* "uncompromising." Shumiatska suggests that decommunization can't go far enough, because of the danger inherent in Soviet nostalgia. Her segue from personal trauma to political opining suggests that wartime can accelerate the adoption of this perspective. Understandably, nuance is quickly lost when a country is mobilizing to fight an enemy that is decimating civilians, not to mention priceless cultural heritage.

Students' Palace, School of Nutrition - Interview

The previous two interviews examined cases of buildings being reevaluated in a new era, a kind of organic historical revisionism. While revisionism can have a negative connotation when it suggests that authorities are whitewashing history for their own political ends, this kind of organic historical revisionism is grassroots and bottom-up. In the case of the opera house, new inhabitants and new subcultures gave the "concrete monstrosity" a makeover in the public imagination. With Derzhprom, a shift in Ukrainian self-image—namely, the Euromaidan protests that jumpstarted the civil patriot movement that Pozdniakov is a part of—cast a pall over Soviet-era buildings, even iconic ones. In both cases, this process is organic, as opposed to being imposed by government authorities.

The final interviewee in the film is Oleg Drozdov, one of Ukraine's foremost architects, who also founded an architecture school in Kharkiv. He argues for the deliberate revitalization of aging, increasing irrelevant structures. Essentially, this would entail citizens taking the interpretive process into their own hands. Drozdov encapsulates the second perspective I outlined, which favors reframing dissonant heritage, rather than rejecting it. By giving Drozdov the last word, Ben-Shaul grants his perspective legitimacy.

In the film's interview with him, Drozdov turns his eye to a seemingly abandoned students' center, built in 1974. It's shabby yet striking for its pink hue and distinctive ornamentation resembling giant, stacked picture frames. One of the few sources on this building, a 2015 feature from the Russian-language Kharkiv news site *REDPOST* ("The Sovremennik Cinema," 2015), states that it was originally built as a cinema. It is unclear when the building was turned into a students' center. Oddly, *What Shall We Do…?* neglects to mention the building's pre-history. Given this fragmentary history, it may be more fruitful to apply

Drozdov's words to Soviet modernist architecture in general. He begins by laying out the tension at the heart of Kharkiv's identity:

> Kharkiv is one of few unrealized utopias. This was particularly the case when it was the capital of Soviet Ukraine. Before that time, neither here nor anywhere else in this part of the world, had there been such a rapid materialization of the future. During that time, almost everything was aimed towards a better future, and towards unbelievable changes which ended up actually happening.

Drozdov's description of Kharkiv as an "unrealized utopia" that simultaneously witnessed "unbelievable changes" is paradoxical, and on first glance, puzzling. He appears to be alluding to the cultural ferment that Kharkiv experienced in the 1920s, when it was the capital of the Ukrainian SSR. Drozdov seems to want to recapture some of the spirit of that time, a time that realized unbelievable changes, but was cut short by Stalin's crackdown that turned utopian dreams into dystopian reality.

In a 2022 interview, Drozdov expanded upon his evocative description of Kharkiv as an "unrealized utopia." He pointed to the "unimaginable" creation of a progressive university in Kharkiv in the early 1800s; the erection of Derzhprom, the then-tallest building in the Soviet Union; the creation of the worker housing complex "New Kharkiv"; an open contest to design the largest opera house in Europe, which, sadly, never came to fruition; and, finally, the city's innovative mass housing (Belogolovsky, 2022). Drozdov reflects, "The city saw many progressive ideas realized on a grand scale. It was a true polygon for testing radically new town planning and architectural visions." (In Russian, Drozdov's native language, "polygon" can refer to a testing ground.) Perhaps not surprisingly, given his profession, all of Drozdov's examples of utopian thinking are architectural endeavors. For him, Kharkiv's vanguard, frontier spirit lies in its architecture.

Drozdov's perspective dovetails with that of Rozenfeld, who praises the opera house architects for their drive and ambition: "Here, we can only give credit, to the talent, skills, courage—in order to make something like this you need tremendous courage—to the energy, that we often lack today, of these people who, forty to fifty years ago, created this." Both Rozenfeld and Drozdov, who are prominent figures in Ukraine's post-Euromaidan civil society renaissance, manage to thread a difficult needle: recognizing innovations from the Soviet era that have shaped Kharkiv today, without condoning that era's atrocities. In this way, both Rozenfeld and Drozdov subscribe to the reframe-the-past school of thought.

Drozdov's evocative phrase "rapid materialization of the future" refers not only to Kharkiv's economic development—after becoming the capital of Soviet Ukraine, its population and industry boomed—but also to ideological and cultural transformation:

> These changes were radical. I think a few tragedies emerged at the same time. There was, and there still is, the tragedy of state education, the tragedy of culture, that culture for which these buildings were created, which had a propagandistic side. That culture didn't transform itself into something new. And it's for that reason that this place is vacant. Today, however, the development of civil society following the revolution in 2014 offers a new social agenda. Because nowadays, we can distinguish good from bad architecture by its social mission, and so the Ukrainian architects of today need to realize this agenda.

In this passage, the phrase "that culture for which these buildings were created" is vague, perhaps maddeningly so. Still, it aligns with scholars' assessment of post-war Soviet architecture: "The state was always the 'client' for whom urban planners, builders and architects worked, and the architecture thus reflects changing state policy, ideology and objectives" (Bykov & Gubkina, 2019, p. 8). Here, Gubkina explains that, for good or for ill, Soviet modernism always had a mission and a vision. Drozdov seems to argue that architecture of the post-

Euromaidan era needs to have an equally fierce, albeit different, social mission. He elaborates upon this idea:

> I am convinced that there is no sense in restoration, reconstruction, or preservation, unless it is done for something specific. So what we are really discussing here is that, perhaps, the most important task for buildings like this, is to find new inhabitants, inhabitants who can create some kind of culture for the new generation.

Here, Drozdov again stakes out a nuanced middle ground. He does not romanticize Soviet architecture or fetishize preservation for preservation's sake. But neither does he impose a "stigma" on Soviet-era architecture, to use Gubkina's verbiage. Instead, he proposes the route of the opera house, a cultural renewal that could, perhaps, finish Kharkiv's unfinished business as an "unrealized utopia."

Derzhprom - Dance

If *What Shall We Do…?* were just a compilation of these talking heads, accompanied by evocative shots of the Kharkiv landscape, it would be a thought-provoking and valuable documentary. The film, however, is not content to merely *tell* the viewer what these buildings mean to residents; it seeks to *show* us on an emotional level. Ben-Shaul uses free-form, genre-defying dance to tap into a register that is more emotive, visceral, and intuitive than the interviews.

In so doing, *What Shall We Do…?* confounds viewer expectations. Just when the viewer may be anticipating additional context to round out the interviews, the camera shifts to movement, without any cue or warning. The first sequence, paired with the opera house, is relatively tame, with the exception of a dizzying zoom-out, that, through clever editing, appears to be caused by the dancers themselves. (In fact, I will skip over this dance in my analysis, as it

mostly serves to introduce dance as a device, rather than comment on the previous interview.) By the time we arrive at Derzhprom, the third interview in the film and the second one that I discussed above, the editing has become increasingly surreal.

One critic wrote that the dance "not only creates a pause between the narrative, but also conveys through movement what cannot be said in words" (Castle, 2022). In other words, the dance serves to amplify the themes of the interviews. Dance is a venue to plumb the subconscious, to hyperbolize and experiment. Indeed, the dance sequence paired with Derzhprom exaggerates Pozdniakov's worst fears about the structure, his uneasiness in the face of its supreme stature and grandeur. The choreography reflects an obsession with scale, size, and power. The dancers begin in a crouching position, miming holding a ball to the ground with their hands, while Derzhprom looms behind them. They try, with visible exertion, to hold down the "ball," but their hands keep bouncing back into the air. They keep pressing down, and keep getting flung back, faster and faster. At last, they seem to give up, and the force from the "ball" sends them spinning in circles. This series of moves evokes the power of a mysterious force that can neither be contained nor, perhaps, understood.

The scene transitions as the dancers stumble out of frame. When they stumble back into frame, they are closer to the camera, giving the illusion that they have doubled in size. The formula repeats, except this time, when the dancers re-enter, they have backed away from the camera again. For Pozdniakov, Derzhprom's largeness makes him feel small, like "a tiny ant that can't make a difference." In contrast to Derzhprom's immovability, the dancers change scale at a dizzying rate, and their scale is quite literally a matter of perspective.

Such editing flourishes make as much of an impact as the choreography itself. As the dance continues, Derzhprom distorts beyond recognition. At first, the sky behind Derzhprom is replaced with a static image of the building. Later on, this image starts moving, reminiscent of a

projector looping through images. Simultaneously, the Derzhprom in the foreground—the real Derzhprom—becomes faint and increasingly see-through. By the time the dancers, at last, return to their original crouched position, they have become see-through figures, too. The editing reaches its zenith of surrealism as the dancers and the foreground Derzhprom dissolve into mere outlines of themselves. Then they disappear completely.

Via dance and editing, the structure seems to engulf everything around it, first taking over the sky, and then taking over the dancers' bodies. This is only fitting, given Pozdniakov's observation that "the walls press in on you." Ben-Shaul purposefully employed frenetic editing to highlight the building's omnipresence. As he explained in our interview in 2023, "There was this idea of the building, you know, being almost infinite, having this unbelievable maze of corridors. And so to demonstrate that, we thought it would be fun to replace the sky with even more Derzhprom." Notably, the sequence is playful and irreverent, in contrast to Pozdniakov's somewhat dour monologue. It dares to take a canonical building and deconstruct it. The dance, then, represents the film's own spin on Pozdniakov's description; Ben-Shaul flips it from "oppressive" to "infinite." The dance thus ultimately underscores the polysemous interpretations of the building. Ben-Shaul presents the viewer with the tangible results of reframing and transforming, instead of merely rejecting and removing. His unexpected, experimental methods enact the renewal that several interviewees call for.

Students' Palace, School of Nutrition - Dance

Drozdov calls for the revitalization of Soviet-era architecture via the injection of fresh energy and culture from a new generation of Ukrainians. The dance that follows his words enacts this very vision. *What Shall We Do..?* juxtaposes the fading, aging Students' Palace with a playful, irreverent dance sequence. Canny editing also juxtaposes the gravity of Drozdov's words

with the giddiness of the dancers. As Drozdov tells of radical changes and tragedies of culture, the film cuts to the two dancers practically skipping up the building's stairs.

In contrast to the Derzhprom dance, which is akin to pure movement and pure sign, this dance plays on preexisting tropes. Borrowing from vaudeville, the two dancers (Mykola Naboka and Igor Klyuchnik) stage a game of cat-and-mouse. Klyuchnik hides behind one of the frames while Naboka searches for him; then, their roles reverse. The goofy humor of the scene is born from the fact that although the dancers are physically close to one another, they never make eye contact, and so are able to stay "hidden."

At times, they take a break from hide-and-seek to imitate the building's geometry. At one point, Naboka sticks his arms out, making a rectangle with his upper body that resembles the frame beside him. For Ben-Shaul, the point was to show how "buildings move people," literally. "[Dance] gives us another language to articulate the ways that the buildings move bodies—because they do, that's what they do, they move bodies—and our relationship with buildings is a living one and one that is interactive and constantly changing," he told me in 2023. During these interludes, the dancers' incessant movement ceases. Naboka and Klyuchnik simultaneously meld with this architecture and play with it, as though the Students' Palace is a third dancer.

The dance enacts Drozdov's vision with another flourish: a fourth wall break. With no warning, the location changes. The dancers are now in front of what appears to be a different building in a courtyard studded with trees. They stare upwards, utterly agog, and stumble about until they "discover" the camera. They get close to the lens, tap the camera, smell it. This fourth wall break seems only fitting: the dancers first play with the wooden frames, and then break out of the strictures of the camera frame. While tongue-in-cheek, this moment is also a parallel for cultural renewal. If this building is indeed vacant because it has not been imbued with a new culture, then this moment represents the dancers realizing their own role in creating and

sustaining this alternative culture. The dancers, who are playing the role of exaggerated jesters, at last become aware of the narrative that they inhabit.

Candid Confrontation

The first half of *What Shall We Do…?* establishes a specific rhythm: an interview with a Ukrainian who shares their opinions and expertise on a building, followed by a dance sequence that explores that building's form. Building, interview, dance. The film's aesthetics foreshadow an impending shift, however. Through the course of the dance sequences, the editing becomes increasingly surreal and frenetic. The first sequence, which is tied to the Opera House, employs relatively objective editing, with the exception of a brief and dizzying zoom-out. Just a few minutes later, the Derzhprom sequence abandons reality in favor of see-through bodies and images projected onto the sky. Therefore, the very aesthetics of the film warn the viewer of a destabilizing force.

The Derzhprom sequence heralds another twist. The camera abruptly cuts from the Derzhprom dance sequence to blank white, then to a close-up of a plaque affixed to a beige, nondescript building. Traffic and conversation are audible. This moment is instantly jarring: it is the first instance of unstaged, *cinéma vérité* dialogue. The viewer hears snippets of disorienting, disembodied voices:

PASSERBY *[speaking in Russian].* Are you interested in something?

POZDNIAKOV *[speaking in Ukrainian].* The plaque.

PASSERBY. Ah, and what's wrong with it?

POZDNIAKOV. We're reading what's written.

PASSERBY. Ah, I see.

Clearly, something is off: not only are the men speaking in two different languages, but they are conceptually talking past one another, too. The viewer swiftly learns that the plaque honors the Komsomol, the Soviet Communist Party's youth wing. What follows is a tense, extended argument that is ostensibly about the plaque, but is really about language, identity, and the validity of post-Euromaidan decommunization.

This marks the first moment in the film when clashing perspectives meet, in the flesh. In a sense, the film's canny structure—interview, dance, building—contained the debate by isolating the interviewees in the talking heads format. With this scene, however, that containment breaks down, and the result is messy, edgy, and unsettling. According to the filmmaking team, the purpose of the scene was to reveal the level of tension that was brewing in Kharkiv prior to Russia's invasion. Mykola Naboka, one of the lead dancers and a producer on the film, told me in 2023 that Kharkiv was riven by questions over "which blocks should we have on the streets—Ukrainian ones or Russian ones or Soviet ones? Okay, but which language should we speak? . . . Those questions became so tense, and the dialogue became so violent, that there was a constant confrontation of two parts, pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian, which kept fighting for Kharkiv and for eastern Ukraine."

As Naboka alludes to, the passerby becomes a stand-in for the pro-Russian, anti-decommunization perspective, which is otherwise absent from the film. Perhaps for this passerby, a Soviet plaque is not a dark mark to be erased or reconciled; it is an emblem to embrace. Although the passerby's true political views are unknown, by clashing so fiercely with Pozdniakov, he establishes himself as Pozdniakov's symbolic counterpoint. Elsewhere in the film, the English teacher Masha Shumiatska argues that Ukraine is like a pendulum swinging from pro-Russian to pro-Ukrainian sentiment; this scene shows the forceful, violent swing of that pendulum.

After this brief, confusing snippet of dialogue, the film cuts to Pozdniakov in an entirely different location, explaining the context for the scene:

> A few minutes ago, we approached a building which had a memorial plaque to Lenin's Komsomol. I would like to emphasize that I have myself tried to knock it down about five times. The plaque is just so firmly built in. Neither a sledgehammer, nor a few sledgehammers, nor a crowbar, nor a wrench, wielded by strong men, could get the thing off the wall. We threw paint on it repeatedly.

This monologue adds a wrinkle to the earlier dialogue. Previously, Pozdniakov deflected the question, "Ah, and what's wrong with [the plaque]?" with the curt response, "We're reading what's written." Now, he admits, with no self-consciousness, that he *did* have ulterior motives: he was not reading what was written because he already knew what was written, given that he had already sought to remove the plaque through extra-legal means. The quick-cut editing essentially catches Pozdniakov in an act of deception. In addition to introducing the anti-decommunization view, this scene has a sneakier purpose: it reveals Pozdniakov as an unreliable narrator, sowing doubt about his credibility.

After this admission, the film cuts back to the interaction between Pozdniakov and the passerby. Now, at last, the viewer gets to see the passerby in question: he's dressed in casual clothing, and the filmmakers blur his face. Pozdniakov explains that the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory made an appeal to remove the plaque, but its appeal was ignored by the owner of the building. Then, the man interjects:

> PASSERBY. Can you speak Russian to me?
>
> POZDNIAKOV. No, we can't. Because we live in Ukraine.
>
> PASSERBY. Nobody forbids anyone speaking English, nor Chinese.
>
> POZDNIAKOV. Do we forbid you anything?

PASSERBY. No, but I don't understand what you're talking about.

POZDNIAKOV. You don't understand Ukrainian despite living in Ukraine?

PASSERBY *[switches to Ukrainian].* I understand the Ukrainian language, I speak it well, but I prefer Russian.

POZDNIAKOV. Okay.

PASSERBY. I studied in the USSR.

POZDNIAKOV. Okay, but we're not forbidding you to do anything.

In her review of the film, Castle (2022) summarizes the moment thusly: "The individual intentionally baits Pozdniakov by telling him that he prefers Russian, even though he speaks Ukrainian well, having studied in the USSR. You're left in little doubt that here the choice of language is political." As Castle suggests, the passerby is playing the same game of deception as Pozdniakov. His statement, "I don't understand what you're talking about" is a ruse; as soon as Pozdniakov presses him, he admits that he understands Ukrainian and speaks it well. The revelation that both interlocutors are being deceptive on-camera only heightens the tension.

Language choice has long been political in Ukraine. In Russian Imperial and Soviet times, with the noted exception of the period of Ukrainization in the 1920s, Ukrainian was considered an illegitimate peasant tongue (Bilaniuk, 2017). When Ukraine gained independence, its constitution established Ukraine as the sole state language, a status it has held constant through successive language laws. Ukrainian was thus cemented as an emblem of sovereignty. Nonetheless, the country remained de facto bilingual in part due to force of habit. There was a push-and-pull between promoting Ukrainian and maintaining this "bilingual situation."

The anthropologist and Ukraine expert Laada Bilaniuk argues (2017) that "Prevailing language ideologies have ranged from intense purism and politicization of language choice to a more pluralistic acceptance of different language varieties" (p. 293). This duality, which Bilaniuk

(2016) sums up in another paper as "'language does not matter' versus 'language matters'," is evident in the film. In this scene, both interlocutors engage in purism, politicization, and "language matters"-type thinking. The passerby does so by demanding that Pozdniakov speak in Russian, while Pozdniakov does so by insinuating that the passerby is insufficiently Ukrainian for refusing to speak the Ukrainian language.

The "language matters" view has been codified into law. Ukraine's first president elected after the Euromaidan, the chocolatier oligarch Petro Poroshenko, made decommunization and language reforms key pillars of his domestic policy. His 2019 law requires that Ukrainian publications publish in the Ukrainian language, or else publish an equivalently long Ukrainian version. The law includes carve-outs for English and indigenous languages, but not Russian. Reasons for exempting Russian include "the inundation of the Ukrainian market with cheaper publications from Russia" (Bilaniuk, 2022), as well as Russia's cynical promotion of the Russian language in Ukraine. As might be expected in such a situation, language policies have been a contentious "wedge issue" (Malykhina, 2020).

In *What Shall We Do…?*, the passerby's use of the word "forbids" suggests that he represents the contingent of Ukrainians who believe that policies around language and decommunization have become oppressive. By contrast, Pozdniakov represents the perspective that the Ukrainian language is a key linchpin in Ukrainian identity. His incredulous tone ("You don't understand Ukrainian despite living in Ukraine?") implies that those who speak Russian are not a sizable linguistic minority worthy of respect, but rather insufficiently Ukrainian. When Pozdniakov says, "No we can't [speak in Russian]," he is not speaking literally —he was, after all, able to understand the passerby when he spoke in Russian—but is, rather, making a political statement.

Once again, however, the film's editing undermines Pozdniakov. *What Shall We Do…?* features several prominent figures in Ukraine's post-Euomaidan civil society renaissance who choose to speak in Russian, namely Drozdov and Rozenfeld. In this context, Pozdianiakov's snarkiness and his insinuation that a "real" Ukrainian doesn't speak Russian come across as needlessly antagonistic. After this digression, the two men continue their disjointed, confusing argument about the plaque:

> POZDNIAKOV. There is a legal owner, I don't know their name. I have no idea. But the appeal was made.
>
> PASSERBY. Which appeal?
>
> POZDNIAKOV. The appeal by the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory to dismantle this plaque. I have no idea which person, because, to be honest, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory dealt with it themselves.
>
> PASSERBY. What exactly is the problem with this plaque?
>
> POZDNIAKOV. Well, it falls under the law of decommunization.
>
> PASSERBY. And who else falls…Please do not film me. Film the plaque. Don't film me.
>
> POZDNIAKOV *[In English, un-subtitled].* Please don't take me off-camera.

In this scene, the two interlocutors at last address head-on the true subject of their whole dispute: the unfinished business of decommunization. For Pozdniakov, decommunization can't come fast enough; he's visibly impatient throughout this conversation. For the passerby, decommunization targets not just plaques, but people, which is why he asks "And who else falls" rather than "And what else falls."

Once again, certain of Pozdniakov's claims are hard to take at face value. His assertion that "the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory dealt with [the plaque] themselves" is dubious,

given his own history of trying to destroy said plaque. Pozdniakov denies knowing who lodged the complaint, although it seems plausible that he might have done so himself. The true facts are left up in the air, in another instance of the film toying with the audience's expectations.

As Pozdniakov switches to English to say to the cinematographer, "Don't take me off-camera," the camera swerves to the ground and cuts to black. The scene is left mysterious and unresolved. This moment reminds us that this documentary is present-tense, and that many of the subjects are trying to capture an ongoing, unresolved situation. Ultimately, in this clash of perspectives, no one "wins."

Conclusion

Through the disparate elements of interviews, dance, and *cinéma verité* sequences, *What Shall We Do…?* underscores the fundamentally polysemous nature of Soviet modernist architecture. The broader fissures over decommunization, which I argue boil down to flatly rejecting an oppressive past versus reimagining that past, play out in a subtle way in the film's dialogue around Kharkiv's architecture. The divide is not over whether to keep the buildings or tear them down (as almost no one argues for that), but rather, over how the buildings should be remembered and used today. Ultimately, through a variety of rhetorical strategies, the film advocates for the strategy of reclaiming what is useful about an oppressive past in the current moment.

Within the broader context of Ukraine's unfinished project of decommunization, the reclaiming of select Soviet monuments can be a tool of defiance. In reclaiming a symbol, one can use the past productively, rather than shelving that past and denying its impact on modern-day Ukrainian society. The new version of the monument can become a living record of resistance and generational change. The transformation of the arch in Kyiv is a prime example: by

renaming the arch from the "People's Friendship Arch" to the "Arch of Freedom of the Ukrainian People," city leaders rejected a trope that justified subjugation in favor of a new story of sovereignty and dignity. In so doing, they sent a message to Russia that was arguably more powerful than simply tearing down the arch would have been. It was an act of renewal, not destruction.

The future of Ukraine's sovereignty is still unwritten. Russia is killing civilians, bombing homes and vital infrastructure, and destroying priceless cultural heritage daily, with no end in sight. Culture may seem ancillary to Ukraine's fight, but in fact, it is central: elevating Ukrainian culture and stripping away Russian influence stemming from imperialism is a wartime objective of the government. Ukrainians are collectively interrogating language norms, monuments, and which figures from Ukrainian history to embrace or reject, making *What Shall We Do…?* newly relevant. In the wake of the war, the film reads as eerily prescient.

By the time the credits roll, the viewer may have noticed a peculiarity: the film never answers the question posed by its title. What *should* we do with these buildings, really? The word "do" implies action, seeming to suggest a binary choice between destruction or preservation. However, the interviews themselves rarely touch on concrete proposals; rather, they provide the viewer with interpretations and lenses for reckoning with the past. The film itself is "doing something" with these buildings by imbuing them with new meanings, and using an arsenal of techniques, including music, editing, and dance, to position them as far more than just "Soviet." In that way, the film is an exemplar of the very thing it implicitly calls for: reframing, revitalization, and reimagining of dissonant heritage.

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