Urban Planning
2026 • Volume 11 • Article 11600
https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11600

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Resilience as Community Capacity in a City Under Existential Threat: The Case of Slavutych, Ukraine

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Submitted: 24 October 2025 **Accepted:** 8 April 2026 **Published:** 18 May 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Urban Futures in Times of Disruption" edited by Oksana Zaporozhets (Humboldt University of Berlin / Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography – IfL), Annegret Haase (Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ), and Fenna Imara Hoefsloot (University College London), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i525

Abstract

Community resilience helps cities recover from disasters. We understand community resilience as the capacity of residents to practice community in flexible ways that preserve identities, while adapting to post-disaster realities. This capacity can depend on many factors. Our article explores how practices to share and ritualize memory may contribute to a local self-understanding of resilient agency, through the case of Slavutych, Ukraine. We trace Slavutych's self-understanding as heroic from the closure of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant in 2000 to the blockade and partial Russian occupation in Spring 2022, drawing on semi-structured interviews, a survey, and observations. We argue that resilience may, as in the case of Slavutych, draw on collective memory-making, which enhances a sense of place and shapes territorial identity through notions of endurance, practices of care, and heroic solidarity.

Keywords

Chornobyl; collective memory; disaster; resilience; sense of place; Slavutych; Ukraine; war

1. Introduction

Historically, people concentrated in cities to organize against threats (de Swaan, 1987). Since the Middle Ages, European cities have provided social protection (Mumford, 1961; Sennett, 2017). Yet further demographic concentration and the economic, cultural, and political infrastructures of late modernity have made cities vulnerable to climate change emergencies, pandemics, terrorism, and war. How do cities "live"

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with and recover from such threats? Such questions of urban resilience inspired theories of how socio-economic "systems" handle uncertainty and disruption, a theme to which sociologists of the 1960s and 1970s sought functionalist answers (Parsons, 1970). While scholars have since refuted the idea that any city ever achieves an "equilibrium" or "harmony" (Bailey, 1984; Turner, 2014), it retained urgency as a policy question of urban resilience, especially in times of ecological disasters and urbicides: We expect cities to "function" in the face of and after atrocities. The neoliberal retreat from state involvement and increased expectations for the self-management of local communities (Ward, 2015) may increase urban vulnerabilities (Madden, 2021) and make the pursuit of resilience crucial.

Work on cities coping with climate issues (Fernando et al., 2023), natural disasters (Cottrell & Bushnell, 2007; Goldstein, 2008; Walters, 2015; Wilson, 2013), pandemics (Maruniak & Dronova, 2022; Wright, 2021), and terrorism (Eshel et al., 2020) theorized their adaptive potential. Some discussed the accountability of authorities in disaster management (Diner, 2022; Miller & Rivera, 2010; Wamsler, 2014). Others stressed how community organizations and NGOs become more visible and engaged during hazards (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Wright, 2021). While political science and disaster studies maintained a state-oriented perspective, urban studies scholars showed that there is no homogeneous unit of "the urban community." Each urban context includes interdependent individual, collective, and institutional agents on various scales of governance (Kokx & Van Kempen, 2010; Meerow & Newell, 2019). Each agent has their scale- and context-dependent understanding of how to practice community in the face of threats. Different from the application of adaptive mechanisms of ecological systems to community management (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Zipperer et al., 2011), we understand resilience as a fluid, multiscale configuration of agents, relations, and material conditions. Cities are not fixed systems with clear-cut boundaries, but networked hubs of relations in specific settlements (Gans, 2009), with specific histories.

Policy for community development requires attention to the geographical features and political, cultural, and historical conditions (Folke et al., 2010; Revell & Dinnie, 2020; Vertigans & Gibson, 2020). Community resilience draws on solidarity, care, and mutual interests, desires, and hopes to sustain a city (Mulligan et al., 2016). Shared understandings of what a place is "about" matter to the mobilization of such affects. However, many studies in community development assumed a one-to-one relation between community and spatial locations, failing to reflect this relation. These works took little note of the extensive critique in other parts of urban studies on spatial determinism and ecological fallacy (Blokland, 2017; Gans, 1991). How being *in* a particular place makes an agent care *about and for* a place depends on more than spatial-material conditions *and* more than individual biography or length of residence (Blokland et al., 2023). Rather than positing that historical conditions matter, we want to explore how they matter through collective processes of remembering. Urban studies that are not directly concerned with resilience have pointed out that memory, as collectively shared and embedded in the built environment, contributes to identification processes (Blokland, 2001; Goebel, 2021; Gould & Silverman, 2013). This article aims to advance our understanding of *how* collective remembering feeds historical experiences into capacities for resilience.

Through empirical work on the resistance of the Ukrainian city of Slavutych to the occupation by the Russian army in March 2022, this article shows how memory strengthened resilience in this case. Slavutych was planned and built from scratch after the 1986 accident at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant (ChNPP). We address how collective memory contributed to an ordinary culture of resilience and shaped a sense of place. Narrating a "heroic past" of the inhabitants and patching together memory fragments into a shared,

localized Ukrainian identity shaped a collective memory that strengthened the capability to resist the Russian army in 2022. After the methods, we discuss our theoretical inspirations, followed by our empirically informed argument. The conclusion reflects what can be learnt from the case.

2. Methods

This article draws on research conducted in 2019 and 2023. Dronova and Kononenko (2019) used a variety of qualitative data to examine Slavutych's resilience after it lost employment in 2000 due to the closure of the ChNPP, without resulting in outward migration. The authors used urban resilience as a framework to identify the city's key resources. In 2023, Blokland joined the research group and together they focused their attention on resilience in the face of military emergencies in a social survey after the Russian attack. They collected public records, official information from local authorities distributed via the city's website, and posts on social media networks; they also gathered existing interviews from published media on the Russian invasion and community protests of March 2022, all of which were enhanced by fieldnotes taken in May–June 2023. They also analyzed the documentary *Slavutych is Ukraine*, by Chernihiv Public Television (Suspilne Chernihiv, 2023). Kononenko and Dronova further conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with four employees of the local government and the Regional Development Agency, four residents who were (former) ChNPP employees, and five "newcomers," including three internally displaced persons. Respondents were sought through the city's community groups on social networks (Facebook and Telegram). The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. All participants were given pseudonyms in this article.

The interviews were conducted in 2023, one year after the Russian offensive. By then, the Kyiv region had been liberated from the occupiers, the road connections to Slavutych restored, and some of the residents who had left in early 2022 had returned. The interview consisted of three sections. The first block asked about personal histories in Slavutych and the perception of the city. Participants were asked which places in Slavutych they (dis)liked, what they saw as the city's (dis)advantages, and to describe the city in three words. The second block addressed the events of Spring 2022: How did interviewees connect themselves with earlier history, how did they perceive the city through that period, and what changed after the blockade and partial occupation? We also asked about perceptions of "life of the community" as "a whole": Was there such an understanding? What did the interviewees recall as the most vivid events of recent years? The third block inquired about the future of Slavutych and personal plans. As our data set is limited, we use empirical vignettes to illustrate how including memory in thinking about community resilience may be productive.

3. Theoretical Frame

3.1. Disasters and Community Resilience

Disasters are not natural (Hartman & Squires, 2006; Smith, 2006, as cited in Madden, 2021; May et al., 1958) but are produced by how we design cities and make them work (Tierney, 2014, as cited in Madden, 2021). In addition to material destruction, the existential threat of war includes the risk of losing one's group identity, when "culture, symbols and beliefs are threatened to the point that the group may transform and change into another unrecognizable entity" (Hirschberger et al., 2016, p. 2). Communities risk losing identity and agency ("the capacity to create, reproduce, change and live according to their own meaning" [Bhattacharyya, 1995, p. 61]), as occupations include cultural expansion over time.

As Madden (2021) critically reviewed, urban scholarship on disasters tends to either see cities as on the brink of collapse from disasters or describe urban life as a heroic attempt to face external threats. He follows Tierney's definition of disasters as "triggered by any variety of causes, but…distinguished by the socially-produced damage to human lives, spaces and projects that they cause" because "an earthquake happening in a region where no humans live is not a disaster, it is just a trembling of the earth" (Guggenheim, 2014, as cited in Madden, 2021, p. 3). But as Madden suggested, this literature downplays human agency. As we will see below, Slavutych, for example, would not have been built if no human-made disaster had happened. Without the nuclear plant, there would not have been a disaster; however, the construction of Slavutych served to limit its impact. The plant was meant to produce energy for the expanding urbanization and industrialization of the Kyiv region. The USSR's centrally planned economic management responded quickly to the 1986 disaster by building a completely new city for ChNPP workers in record time. This allowed the ChNPP to supply electricity to consumers in the former Ukrainian SSR without interruption, and to support the power systems of other Soviet republics.

Disasters contain, at least in their narrative (re)construction, damaging events (a dam breaks, a river overflows, a storm rages, a plant catches fire) and have a limited temporality of intensity. They may have long-term causes (as when landslides follow mining for minerals extraction or deforestation), but in urban life, we experience them as disrupting moments. After disasters, cities find themselves in new situations where relations, institutions, norms, and rules of "before" are—or are perceived to be—insufficient to meet the needs that have arisen "after" or "during." Ordinary people may still expect relief to come from the national state. This is in line with the selective provisions of resources and policies that nation-states provide cities with (Kazepov, 2005, p. 20). But responsibilization in neoliberal discourse drives political agents to plead for community resilience as a strategy to limit urban vulnerability without such supralocal interventions. We see this reflected when applied social scientists and planners discuss which features of social systems may most positively balance risks and uncertainty. Resilience has been described as "the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner" (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2009). Such approaches model community as a combination of adaptive capacities (Norris et al., 2008) to successfully cater to the needs of an altered environment after disaster, defining disaster as a threat from "outside." Industrial and war disasters are multi-scalar, man-made, and relationally produced, but in everyday discourse, residents perceive them as from outside. So, we use technology to build installations with ever greater risks if things go wrong, but still frame the disasters that follow as external (Ellul, 1988).

Analytically, this suggests that community practices are resilient if they adapt to disasters smoothly and effectively: "Community resilience is a process linking a network of adaptive capacities (resources with dynamic attributes) to adaptation after a disturbance or adversity" (Norris et al., 2008, p. 127). But the literature on disasters and urban vulnerability has made clear that cities are not isolated systems that adapt to externalities. There is no self-perpetuating urban system independent of powerful agents on the local and other scales (LeGales, 2002, pp. 147–150). Instead of assuming that cities are systems, we propose seeing resilience as a structuration of urban life, resulting from the interplay between individual agency and social figurations and their sedimentation in the urban form. These social figurations are nested in scales of governance and control, as power relations mediate the urban fabric. In other words, resilience follows from the figuration of "the City" (all actors that present themselves to us as the local "state" [Abrams, 1988]) and the fabric woven and knitted by everyday practices of inhabitants. Their constant balancing acts—

without ever achieving a fixity or equilibrium—perpetuate the urban sites that we refer to as "city" in everyday language.

Resilience does not mean subjugation. Rather, resilience means that city agents govern differently and residents change routines, creating a sense of continuity and identity preservation, while making day-to-day things "work" again (Walker et al., 2004). Why do some cities show more resilience than others? This may be approached as a question of how they turn capabilities into practices of doing community. The discussion on this topic includes assessments of the contributions of national or local state agents, community-based social services, and less formal organizations, activists, etc. (Patel et al., 2017). Key components of resilience proposed in other studies include emergency preparation and planning, national and international support, strong roles of citizens or NGOs, and social capital and leadership (Godschalk, 2003; Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Wright, 2021). Community agency requires "connections between people and place; values and beliefs; knowledge, skills and learning; social networks; engaged and collaborative governance, a diverse and innovative economy; community infrastructure; leadership; and a positive outlook, including a willingness to accept change" (Berkes & Ross, 2013, pp. 13–14). Making things work (again) after disasters thus requires open communication, shared orientations, and trust: a willingness to bet on the future actions of others (Sztompka, 1999). Social capital literature has suggested that strong networks produce trust, but sociologists have discussed the pairing of networks and locality critically (e.g., Wellman & Leighton, 1979) and argued that community as urban practice may draw on much more fluid encounters and public familiarity (Blokland, 2017; Blokland et al., 2023). The focus on practice turns the lens on *how* engagement, willingness to change, or openness to collaboration emerge.

3.2. Collecting and Sharing Local Histories as Community Practice

Practices of community draw on collecting and re-telling histories, including those that make "places." People construct the meanings of places through talk and rituals, which may draw on past events. Ruptures make representations in the tales of cities important, as they foster the wish to organize events in time and share a sense of existential continuity. Residents produce collective histories through daily practices of re-telling past events to reinforce beliefs in resilience to violence (Abramowitz, 2005) or to seek adherence to unifying identifications (Hirschberger, 2018). Collaborative narratives that match personal experiences and stories have been found to enhance cohesion, although the concept is difficult to measure and highly contested (Harvey et al., 1995; Liguori et al., 2022; Revell & Dinnie, 2020; Sonn & Fisher, 1998).

Sharing memory may include recalling practices and events that people have not necessarily lived through together. Having "been there" and "seen that" in the same location without having been in the same network, or coming from similar locations but sharing socio-economic, racial, and gender positions, is a collective remembering that is *not* telling each other what we went through while we were together. Instead, it means creating togetherness through sharing memories by "chipping in" with fragments of stories. It means discovering a common location in a social and economic power structure that is not a membership that we can give up, and is not as binding as a close-knit group of people who grew up together (Mannheim, 1952, p. 166). This occurs in ad-hoc social circles and happens where people engage in fluid encounters with people who are not necessarily already part of their personal networks. Urban residents can thus create a togetherness where there may not have been one before, be it memories of good times (Blokland, 2005) or of traumatic events (Abramowitz, 2005; Hirschberger, 2018). Leydesdorff's seminal study (1987) of the

post-war production of collective memory of the Jewish ghetto in Amsterdam before the Holocaust theorized the role of collective memory in redefining identity and community after destruction and disaster. It mattered less whether all residents had participated in past events, as they shared interpretations of the present by appealing to the past. As such practices connect not only contemporary residents, but also residents of the past and future (Kahn et al., 2017), they form place-based identities. When memory practices become ritualized, the well-researched importance of rituals for cohesiveness further adds to resilience.

A localized, shared belief in the community's ability to withstand adversity (Eshel et al., 2020) may thus emerge from a collective experience of the past, narrated as lessons learnt after disasters (Davis & Izadkhah, 2006). The case of Slavutych will illustrate that disaster experiences may generate localized pride and identity, as (in)formal rituals incorporate knowledges and emotions remembered through recalling past events (Wilson, 2015).

4. Analyses

4.1. The Disasters

Slavutych was built by disaster: A city of nuclear workers and their families, it was built near the nuclear power plant in 1987–1988 after the 1986 accident (Figure 1). On April 26, 1986, a chemical explosion at a power unit caused a fire. After the fire, a radioactive cloud covered Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and several European countries. The International Nuclear Event Scale classified this accident as the highest danger level. Because of the radioactive contamination, the government forced the relocation of everyone in the cities of Pripyat and Chornobyl, which were built to serve the plant in the 1970s. Anybody living within a 30-kilometer radius had to resettle. But the authorities also wanted to keep most of them close to the area, as the plant had to continue its production, so it was planned to build a new city. The construction of Slavutych became an all-USSR project, built rapidly by Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia (Gubkina, 2016), with separately built quarters: Kyiv, Baku, Yerevan, Tbilisi, Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Polissya, and Severyansk. Each republic designed residential and public buildings that gave each quarter a national flavor, bringing their own building materials and decorating the houses in their national style.

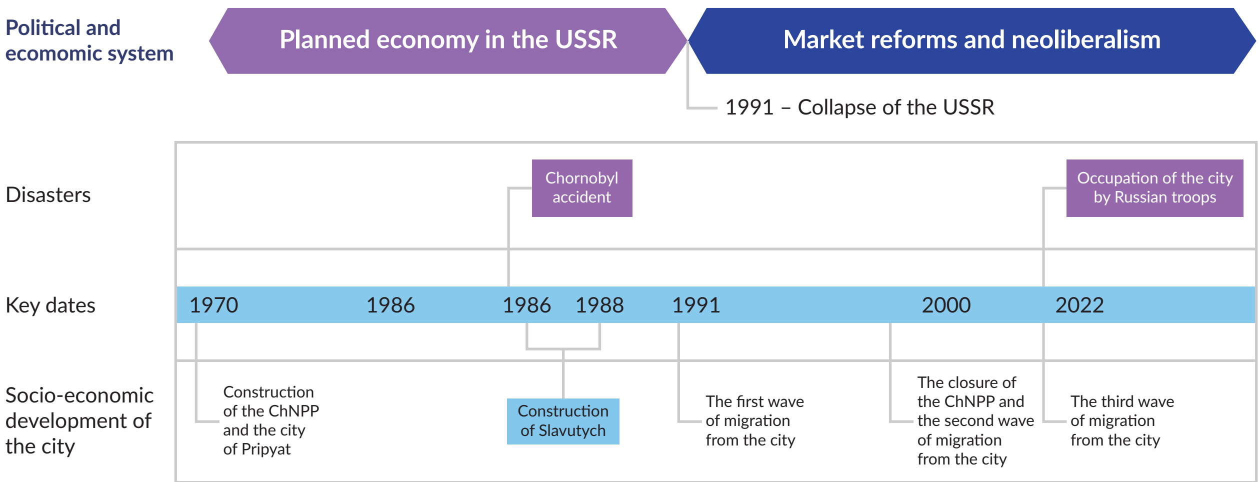

Figure 1. Timeline of events related to the ChNPP and the city of Slavutych.

The design expressed the idea of an ecological, comfortable city set in the forest landscape (Figure 2). The compact planning around the central square made the city accessible on foot. It featured the USSR's first bicycle infrastructure. The government chose its location for its proximity to the ChNPP, as city residents had to service the plant, but on the opposite Dnipro riverbank, where radiation exposure was lower. It became an administrative enclave of the Kyiv regional government.

Figure 2. Aerial view and public spaces.

People settled in the city in 1988: among them, the station's employees, but also people from all over the USSR who had come in 1986 to help address the consequences of the Chornobyl accident, including soldiers and miners. From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, the city grew to around 25,000 residents. Most jobs were at the ChNPP, where 9,000 people worked, as three of the four reactors continued to produce energy. These ChNPP employees were highly educated specialists. Many were *liquidators*, people who received official state recognition as participants in the cleanup in the exclusion zone. The cleanup was complex. Initially, helicopters dropped material to suppress the fire with sand, lead, and clay. The use of robots for clean-up was unsuccessful, so humans did it with their hands instead. They then built a concrete structure around the damaged unit to contain further damage. Power plant operators, emergency workers such as firefighters, and military reservists cleaned up debris, built roads, and dismantled contaminated buildings and forests—often without knowing the risks of radiation exposure. In total, this effort involved several hundred thousand people, from engineers to manual workers, with less than 5% carrying a dosimeter to assess their personal safety during the work (Kostin, 2006).

By the early 2000s, many people had lost their jobs following the closure of the ChNPP in accordance with the 1995 Memorandum of Understanding with the G7 countries. With civil society and business support, the City tried to organize employment to survive economically, which was similarly difficult in other single-function post-Soviet cities. Most industrial cities in Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries were rapidly losing population, facing the problem of deteriorating infrastructure, and had become increasingly dangerous due to rising crime (Ilchenko & Liubavskyi, 2025). Slavutych, on the contrary, opened new enterprises, tourism, and cultural events (Dronova & Kononenko, 2019). The three waves of outgoing migration (Figure 1) were offset by an influx of people from surrounding Chernihiv settlements who were seeking work at new enterprises, and, after 2014, by internal displacement. Slavutych demonstrated the ability to adapt and innovate (Brunn et al., 2020), retaining the population and maintaining its reputation as an attractive living environment. The ChNPP continued to employ 2,500 people, working to make the station environmentally safe. With the full Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many people left. Conversely, more internally displaced persons came to Slavutych from places such as Energodar, a city of workers of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, which was occupied by Russian forces in March 2022.

The occupation of the northern part of Ukraine by Russian forces in February–April 2022 isolated the city, which lost connection with Kyiv and Chernihiv. From March 26 to April 3, there was no regular supply of food, medicine, or fuel. From March 9 to 14, there was no electricity. Life depended on the mobilization of local resources, cohesion, and social capital, and finding support from nearby villages. From the first days, Russian special military forces occupied the ChNPP and held everyone present hostage. On March 26, 2022, when Russian forces entered the city's outskirts and occupied the hospital, five thousand residents held a peaceful rally on the main square. The idea of the gathering came from the city's patriotic (Ukrainian) circles. They had publicly positioned themselves for years, but dominant pro-Russian political actors in the city had long marginalized them. The organizers had not expected five thousand people. The Russians fired shots and threw stun grenades at unarmed citizens. Several people were injured. But the gatherings continued. Russian forces left Slavutych on March 31 after receiving assurance from the mayor that there were no weapons in the city.

4.2. Collective Memory

Memories of the 1986 events reflected a retrospective realization of the disaster's scope, the lack of knowledge about risks and threats, and the tragic consequences for entire generations, who lost the comfortable lives they had before the blast. The focus on heroism and endurance diminishes stories of loss. While performing firefighting and radioactive disposal work, liquidators did not take care of their own safety (Veklenko, 2019), nor did authorities give them adequate protective clothing (Kostin, 2006). They prioritized speed and efficiency, on which many people's health and lives depended. Although many were called to do a duty that they had not signed up for (Kostin, 2006), they were remembered as examples of "true self-sacrifice." Their deeds were remembered as heroic deeds—and people told stories about them. Residents recalled the disaster as a traumatic moment, but also as a moment of validation and societal recognition. The regional significance of the area was visually recognized when all republics of the USSR participated in its construction, leaving a lasting visual legacy of its importance. The perception of the accident as something that must not happen again turned the nuclear workers into people with a special mission—responsible for the safety of their city, but also the country and the world. As 50-year-old ChNPP employee Andreyi said:

> Atomic workers are extraordinary people. I read somewhere that the more knowledge and experience you have, the more responsibility you take. These are people with some kind of responsibility….Once there was such an ideology that Slavutych is a hero city; we overcame such a catastrophe. Many liquidators, those who risked their health and lives, live here….They meet and talk about those they remember from the time of the accident. We have a monument to those who died in the first days of the disaster.

Most residents to whom we spoke knew about the Chornobyl tragedy not from personal experience, but from stories of friends and neighbors. The City kept the memories alive as part of the governmentality of its residents, contributing to collective imaginations of resilient agents through the local museum and educational and cultural events. Dealing with the consequences of the accident reinforced a collective, knotting together past, present, and future residents.

Active remembering happened at ritualized celebrations on memorial days, in which most residents participated. These commemorations always recognized the fate of the liquidators and expressed solidarity between ChNPP workers and other residents. A march of employees, the laying of flowers at the memorial, concerts, or children and youth events became rituals where the city was celebrated as a whole. These rituals transferred historical narratives across generations and established a shared connection with certain sites, thus making such memories spatial (Lewis, 1980). The sites provided visual confirmation of unity and expressed collective place identities. Anton, a 39-year-old ChNPP employee, described City Day, the most important local day of festivities:

> As a child, 20 years ago, when the nuclear plant was working, there were still large-scale events. Big stage, many celebrities. Children were given free ice cream. Previously, before the Covid-19 pandemic, at least half of the city came to the City Day. A festive procession was organized. Collectives of local enterprises were represented in a voluntary-compulsory manner, which looked a bit Soviet. But at the same time, there was something special about it.

The City regularly organized cultural, sports, and educational events related to Chornobyl. A recent cultural event, the Film and Urbanism Festival 86, presented documentaries on urban development, ecology, and energy. The festival combined the desire to discuss local issues, to commemorate the Chornobyl tragedy, and to draw the world's attention to Slavutych. It showed that local agents produced collective memories not only to socially identify and practice community, but also as external reputation management. In Anton's words:

> I really like this kind of art event. I was very happy that it happened here in Slavutych. It was a lively event for me. I waited for it so much that I took a vacation in May….I was very happy to see new creative people arriving who were very different from the locals. It was like a breath of fresh air. Local activists and creative people from all over the world met at the festival; it was a reinterpretation of Slavutych.

Festivals can strengthen local identity through evoking a sense of local pride (Hustedde & King, 2002). The City, especially the Regional Agency, supported large-scale cultural events with creative outsiders that contributed to new narratives and meanings, while continuing to connect to past challenges and the city's history. They believed that such projects stimulated a united memory that had pushed people to protest against their enemies:

> My mother, the director of a kindergarten and a woman of respectable age, put on her heels, painted her lips, and went into the streets to stop Russian tanks in March 2022. (Svitlana, 46, Regional Development Agency employee)

City residents' shared memories of the liquidators' heroism in the 1986 accident have become an important narrative in Slavutych. These memories are woven into everyday life through celebrative commemorations and cultural and sports events dedicated to the Chornobyl tragedy. These recurring, locally ritualized actions fostered a sense of continuity. For city residents, the memory of overcoming major existential challenges together was not distant, but close and relatable, and making its heroism manifest produced a certain sense of preparedness for future crises. While already visible in the overcoming of the socio-economic crisis after the 2000 closure of the ChNPP, this collective understanding contributed, we believe, to the manifestation of solidarity and sacrifice in 2022.

4.3. Community as Practice in Slavutych

As the main employer, the ChNPP gave community practices a particular dimension in Slavutych: The enterprise was, after all, the reason for the city's construction, fostering an identity similar to that of coal miners (Beynon, 1987) or shipbuilders (Cousins & Brown, 1975). Everyday practices had been organized by the rhythms of the plant, and occupational connections expanded far beyond the workplace. Notwithstanding the decrease in staffing levels, the ChNPP was still a major city taxpayer. Most residents were connected to the ChNPP:

> Almost all of us are connected to the plant in one way or another. There are whole dynasties: Parents, children, and grandchildren work there. My parents were the liquidators of the nuclear accident, so I have a direct connection with the plant. (Stas, 34, unemployed)

That losing jobs at the plant came with status loss—the end of "dynasties"—gave importance to remembering the work, which was often highly specialized and skilled and thus did not compare to most coal mining or heavy industries. In contrast to the rough outdoor clean-up of shoveling the debris and covering the contamination in the surroundings, technical work at the plant was scientifically precise, dangerous, but often clean work. This working life, compared to few other occupations, created a shared pride. Residents attributed importance to the ChNPP as a place of work, communication, and decision-making for the whole city.

Asked to characterize the city's community, interviewees gave examples of common practices: work in NGOs and trade unions, involvement in participatory budgeting projects, and participation in sports or creative circles. Some residents describe the community as "rural," as people knew each other, if not personally, then at least visually. With the waning importance of the plant, online and offline networking continued when people started new jobs, enhanced by the city's size and spatial layout:

> Our city is compact, and it is believed that everyone here knows each other. People communicated during isolation not only through online social networks. Many people worked in different companies, changed their place of work, and again made new friends. (Andryi)

The geographical position and the administrative status effectively isolated Slavutych from the surrounding territories and large cities (Walters, 2015). With Kyiv 200 kilometers away, the influence of the national state and regional authorities was weaker than in other cities. This strengthened the importance of the City, whose officials were visible, residing in the same Soviet-era planned districts as ordinary people.

The rally of residents carrying Ukrainian flags and symbols, walking up towards Russian military tanks, became a defining moment. Interviewees described the event as emotional and risky, with pride in its residents, who presented themselves in a new light:

> My wife and I arrived at the rally 15 minutes before 9 because she is…director of the concert complex. She decided that we should hand out the flags stored there. At first, there were only about 15 to 30 people in the square. When we saw that people were coming, and that there were actually a lot of people, we were surprised. (Volodymyr, 37, Atomremontservis employee)

This turnout contrasted with the usual inactivity and indifference of residents in peacetime, which we found in the 2019 study and heard about again in 2023. An employee of the City's Regional Development Agency noted:

> It is difficult to get our citizens involved in events. It is very difficult to stir them up. They either do not hear about what we are organizing or do not know about it. Perhaps it is because the city is usually calm and quiet, and then suddenly, a large-scale event takes place. (Lena, 43)

That officials may classify participation in formalized decision-making, planning, and other town hall practices as a more valuable expression of community engagement than everyday routines of aimless interactions was already noted by Gans (1961). He compared the object-orientation of City officials with the subject-orientation of ordinary residents. The latter's focus on living in the day-to-day and supporting others now did not always align with the future objectives that city planners wanted to pursue. Recently, residents also noted the perception of the community as oriented towards what it was and is, not what could become. We observed a tension between the orientation toward the plant's history and the collective experience of the (memory of) its disaster as a source of identity and commonness, and the need for a future orientation as the locality transformed. Alexander, aged 48, a foreigner and small business-owner, arrived in 2015. He found the townspeople "unpleasant," not innovative: "They don't want to change, they don't want to accept [anything new]."

Other residents did not perceive a reluctance to change but explained that people minded their own business until a problem arose. When there was a threat, they reacted quickly to help people with whom they had had sharp conflicts or different political views. During the blockade and partial occupation, people solved exceptional-yet-ordinary problems together: They brought and cooked food on a bonfire in the yard, gathered firewood, and helped the territorial defense of the city with supplies. Respondents expressed pride in everything that happened in March 2022, for example, the peaceful rally, mutual aid, or the resistance of employees of the occupied ChNPP. Some served on combat duty on Slavutych's outskirts, despite lacking experience and proper weapons:

> Many people came to the military registration and enlistment office, joined the territorial defense, and helped guard the city. The city helped in every way it could. People brought batteries, flashlights, water, and food. (Anton)

The general sense was that support in difficult times was for everyone, regardless of the level of acquaintance. Olga, 39, came to Slavutych six years ago. She had a small network and knew few neighbors. The blockade in 2022 changed her neighborly interactions:

> I got to know my neighbors better when the electricity was cut off during the occupation. We all cooked on fires near our entrance. And that was when we all got together. Before that, not so much….A friend in need is recognized, and so is a neighbor.

4.4. A Sense of Place

For many respondents, comfort and coziness characterized the city. They identified themselves with Slavutych and appreciated the ideas of urban planning set by the architects: compactness, transport accessibility, and environmental friendliness. In their imagination, the city was a holistic unity. They reported knowing the city well, appreciating its comfort and environmental friendliness, and feeling attached. Anton was born in Pripyat and moved to Slavutych at age five. He praised the city's uniqueness and described local life as quiet, boring, and unexciting for some, but not him: "If you know what to do, then Slavutych is generally an ideal city, because the time spent on movement is minimal." New residents also stressed its uniqueness:

> I showed the city to my friend from Novaya Kakhovka. She was delighted. She said that if it were not for her parents, she would live in Slavutych because it is small and compact with incredible nature and a forest. After the hot, scorching south, it is very easy to breathe. (Anna, 49, newcomer)

The uniqueness narrative was supported by ritualized collective memory, too. Slavutych residents mentioned the great importance of the Chornobyl Heroes Monument, erected in 1988 to commemorate the first day of the city, a stone slab with the inscription "bow low and remember forever" (Figure 3b). A memorial plaque was later unveiled at its base, where people continuously laid flowers. In 2012, Slavutych received a stronger symbol, the White Angel of Slavutych, to commemorate the city's 25th anniversary (Figure 3a). These monuments frame the main square of the city from different sides. The White Angel symbolizes the revival after the Chornobyl disaster. It is seen as sacred because of a stone brought from Jerusalem embedded in its base, as Stas explained:

> The cross [that is part of the sculpture] is installed just above the stone, so this place is considered sacred. It's not my favorite place in Slavutych, but it's traditional and special.

Andriy, 50, ChNPP employee, shared a common belief that the White Angel saved Slavutych from complete occupation: "The White Angel saved Slavutych. It is a legendary symbol of the city." Other studies have found younger Slavutych residents in the 2010s, in particular, to be much more critical of the local identity, finding themselves unprotected from market logics in rapidly changing times (Ackermann, 2016); however, our findings suggest that a remarkable combination of religiously motivated or ritualized faith, stories of heroism, and a sense of uniqueness strengthened the sense of place among our sample. As we noted in the

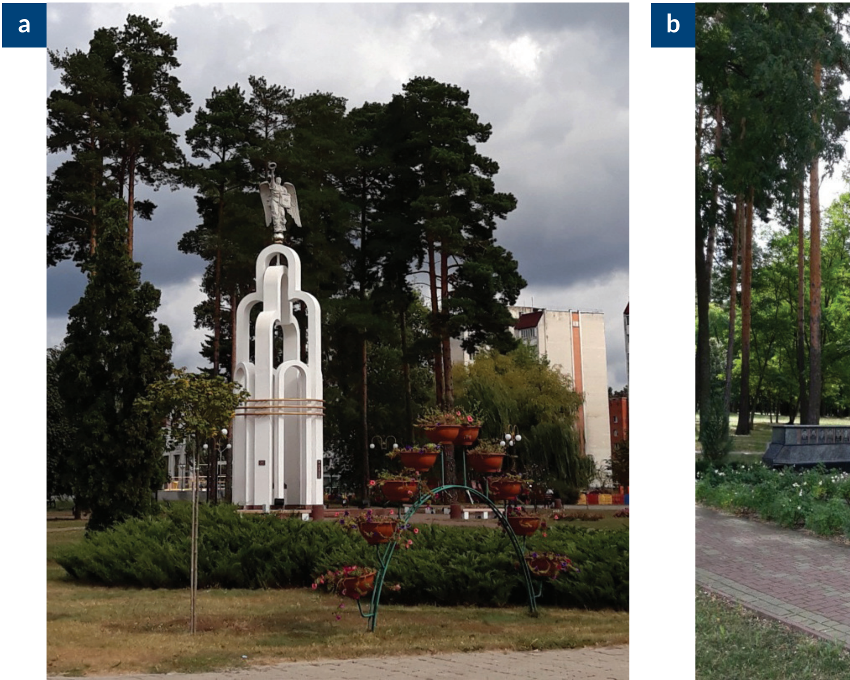

Figure 3. Monuments in Slavutych: (a) Sculpture of the White Angel of Slavutych; (b) Chornobyl Heroes Monument.

beginning, community resilience is embedded in scales of power. The events of 2022 encouraged the City's positioning as having a national Ukrainian identity, thus distancing itself from its status as a pan-USSR landmark—first as a provider of energy, and subsequently as the site of the disaster's aftermath. Many Soviet-era names remained in Slavutych for years after Ukraine gained independence. However, the attitude to Soviet names began to change after 2014, undergoing more radical changes after 2022. Anton describes two waves of "decommunization" in Slavutych:

> The first stage of renaming occurred in 2015. This marked the beginning of decommunization. We renamed two quarters. I remember how many people were dissatisfied: "This is our history!" "It's so expensive!" Still, it all happened, and gradually, everyone got used to it. Last year, the renaming process was more extensive. Everything went smoothly; no one complained.

The name of the capital of the Russian Federation—Moscow—was erased from the stele erected in honor of the republics that built Slavutych (Figure 4). After 2022, Ukrainian symbolism, cultural events, and the use of the Ukrainian language in daily communication became new practices in Slavutych:

> Some made a personal decision and now communicate in Ukrainian. People communicate in two languages: One speaks Russian, and the other responds in Ukrainian. This is something new for our city. (Andriy)

Figure 4. Stele of the Soviet republics (a) before and (b) after 2022.

5. Conclusions

We have examined the construction of collective memories as place-making in what may be an "atypical" city, Slavutych, but the case offers insights into key issues of urban resilience. The residents' practices of sharing memories of overcoming a large-scale man-made disaster informed a sense of community. It had become a mission of residents and city officials alike to remember the Chornobyl tragedy and the heroism constructed as the dominant narrative of its *liquidators*, overlaying stories of loss of pre-disaster life. The literature stresses that knowledge and skills to react in critical moments matter to resilience. We add that in this case, how people collectively remember how they have joined forces at critical moments to solve exceptional problems in the past may be an important source of resilience. But the local actions during the blockade and partial occupation in 2022 did not merely repeat the 1986 events. The memory of community, where storytelling about the past recalled, reminded, and reshaped a sense of shared fate, strength, and protective togetherness, encouraged people to resist, which can only be done together. A belief in heroism and the possibility of self-sacrifice resonated with the history of the liquidation of the consequences of the Chornobyl accident. The spatiality also mattered: When the city was cut off from the world, residents showed agency in conditions in which they could not receive outside help.

A strong sense of place has become an important component of the collective construction of the community of the Slavutych residents, combined with the practice of place-based everyday routines. Paradoxically, the very sense of place that followed from the specifics of the built environment, the centrally placed and collectively valued memorials and their symbols, shifted the self-identification of the multiethnic Soviet community to one of Ukrainian unity. Thus, the community resilience of Slavutych resulted from (at least) three spatial-temporal processes. First, an understanding of identity or self-awareness that

deployed representations of a heroic past, in a specific context of a mono-industry and highly skilled class. Second, a self-identification with the place of residence, culturally and historically, through collective rituals and moments of memory-making, such as festivals and events. Finally, in a simpler, down-to-earth sense, resilience emerged in daily practices.

We started from the assumption that urban community resilience in the face of threats shapes the future life of cities. We defined urban resilience as the capacity of residents to practice community to overcome adversities by protecting their way of life in a flexible yet identity-preserving manner, adapting and transforming it in accordance with new post-disaster realities. Our article showed that specific narrative constructions of community resilience of Slavutych, established by and within those related to or identifying with Chornobyl liquidators, could be traced in the stories told on the overcoming of challenges from the closure of the ChNPP in 2000 and again during the two-week blockade and partial Russian occupation in Spring 2022. This urban resilience drew on collective memory-making to enhance a sense of place through heroism, endurance, and practices of care, recognized and celebrated in the city's festivals and memorials.

Despite its unique history, Slavutych may also suggest answers to urban planning challenges. To date, the city has managed to avoid the neoliberal spatial development policy that manifests as aggressive commercialization and limited public spaces in other Ukrainian cities. Slavutych demonstrated that a compact city with high environmental standards can use public spaces to enhance a sense of place, attract migrants and visitors, and support collective narratives of uniqueness as a strong, resilient community. The city has overcome several acute threats, including military ones, by maintaining its built public environment and encouraging social ties between and within generations. We thus found that our interlocutors connected a strong local identity to resilience through collective remembering of past trials. Like the White Angel's protective patronage, it does not have to be true, nor will it always protect everyone from everything. But it does shape a collective belief that things can be done together in extremely daring times.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who provided us with critical comments and valuable insights, which strengthened the article. We would like to express our gratitude to our interview participants for their willingness to participate in this study and for their valuable time.

Funding

We received funding from the Einstein Foundation Berlin, Academic Freedom Program (EGR-2022-703). Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Humboldt University Berlin and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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