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and Fenna Imara Hoefsloot

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Urban Futures in Times of Disruption

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Abstract

Overlapping crises and pervasive uncertainty make it profoundly difficult to think productively about the future. Navigating this landscape requires new conceptual frameworks to capture the nuances of current and future realities, including the productive potential within moments of rupture. Against this backdrop, this thematic issue explores the relationship between disruption and urban future-making, defining disruption as both an epistemological and political tool. Rather than treating disruption as an abstract concept, it anchors its exploration in the tangible realities of the urban environment and the everyday life of cities. It brings together 12 contributions that examine theoretical and methodological interventions, the structural conditions that shape practical disruptions, and the vital role of residents, communities, and civil society organisations in shaping urban futures amidst disruption.

Keywords

agency; disruption; epistemic and political tool; polycrisis; productive moment of disruption; urban futures

1. Introduction

Current challenges, accumulating and reinforcing each other, at once new and deeply familiar, have outpaced existing vocabularies. So, the search for concepts able to grasp the complexity of the current moment becomes both an analytical and a political urgency. Today, derivatives of crisis dominate public and academic discourse (Beveridge & Davidson, 2025; Hilbrandt & Ren, 2025; McFarlane, 2025, 2026), yet their omnipresence is precisely what exposes their limits—their bluntness, their tendency to flatten rather than illuminate. Besides, the widespread usage of crisis risks to generate legitimacy rather than knowledge, normalizing realities rather

than challenging them. Thus, building alternative conceptual repertoires capable of capturing the nuances and complexity of the current and future situation becomes an absolute must. With this in mind, in this thematic issue, we turn to disruption—a concept that represents the road less traveled and therefore remains open to discovery.

This issue grew out of a workshop organized by the Urban Futures at Risk group at Humboldt University Berlin in December 2023, bringing together scholars whose personal and professional trajectories had been disrupted by war and political persecution, alongside researchers from less affected regions and more stable positions. Hence, while focusing on disruption, we acknowledge that our positionalities as editors and contributors of this thematic issue have shaped our reflection. We embarked on this collective inquiry with a shared aim: to reflect on disruption and its entanglements with urban futures. In the process, we forged new solidarities and deepened existing ones, collectively working to fill the gaps and ruptures that mark current theoretical and empirical terrain as well as life trajectories.

2. The Ambivalence of Disruption as an Opportunity for Studying and Making Urban Futures

In this thematic issue, we treat disruption as both an epistemic and a political tool, since naming something as a disruption is already to take a position and to cause actions in knowledge production and beyond (Hoefsloot et al., this issue). Disruption is a remarkably flexible concept with an impressive academic journey—traveling from a narrow technical term to a concept capable of naming shifts that unsettle structural conditions and challenge long-held assumptions (Greschke et al., 2021). Yet despite this conceptual expansion, disruption has largely served to study other processes rather than being examined on its own terms (Hoefsloot et al., this issue). Here, we seek to reverse that priority.

While the vocabulary for disruption is still emerging, it already captures important nuances and contradictions that blunter concepts tend to miss, including, first, the *complex temporality of change*, encompassing disruptive moments, the accumulation of conditions leading to disruption, and their aftermath. Second, the *ambivalence of change* linked to disruption, which is simultaneously productive and destructive. It operates as a double-edged sword: clearing away the obsolete on one side, and opening space for the new on the other. Disruption, in this light, is never purely loss or gain, but both. Third, the *diverse and uneven impact* of disruption on the actors involved. Depending on their degree of affectedness and capacity for action, disruptions may present an opportunity for some while posing a threat to others, and their meaning and effects may shift over time. Accordingly, disruptions unfold across society in multiple ways, eliciting varied responses: some actors develop agency and mobilise, while others become passive or paralysed and unable to act.

Rather than treating disruption as an abstract concept, we situate our exploration within the urban environment, in the context of cities and urban life. Cities are themselves disruptions as their emergence and development are a continuous breaking of existing conditions (Lefebvre, 2003). But they are also arenas where disruptions unfold and intensify in ways that are distinctly urban. The concentration of people and materiality makes cities ideal centers for producing, testing, and spreading innovations and equally effective theaters of maximum damage in wars, pandemics, disasters, and infrastructural malfunctioning. Urban diversity, tightly connected to inequality, makes the effects of disruption highly uneven, opening

opportunities for some while generating precarity and loss for others. Yet cities do not experience or navigate disruption in isolation, as they are embedded in wider networks. In this sense, how cities navigate disruption reveals broader trends—the capacity of societies for transformation and resilience, and ultimately their ability to move beyond established routines.

Disruption's sensitivity to both generative and destructive registers is precisely what makes it a productive lens for thinking about urban future-making: unlike concepts that foreclose possibility, disruption opens the full spectrum, avoiding a drift toward either purely dystopian or utopian scenarios. Disruption marks the end of a current situation, at times desired and hopeful, such as the collapse of authoritarian rule, and at others, feared, such as wars or disasters. By unsettling existing arrangements, disruptions expose the struggles through which futures are made. Moments of disruption reveal that futures, especially long-term ones, are never equally available to everyone or automatically guaranteed. Rather, futures are a privilege, unevenly accessible and actively struggled over. This unevenness reflects that future-making is always a site of competing interests and power relations: some futures are alienated and foreclosed by dominant groups (Aalders & Müller-Mahn, 2026), while others are built through collaboration and mutual support (Kononenko et al., this issue), remaining with and for those who make them.

In this issue, we trace futures shaped by a wide range of actors across different scales, treating everyday acts of hope, endurance, and resistance as no less significant than large-scale, transformative visions. We focus on the productive and futuring side of disruption, not to romanticize it or dismiss its negative effects, but because it has been largely underestimated and understudied. Across many disciplines, disruption has primarily been associated with crisis and catastrophe, leaving its generative potential comparatively underexplored. By contrast, practice-oriented fields such as architecture, urban planning, healthcare, and social work have long understood disruption as both a challenge and a productive force. Building on this perspective, we explore how disruptions can open pathways for change, innovation, and collective action, even as their outcomes remain ambivalent and shaped by existing power relations.

3. When Epistemological Turns Political: Limits of Disruption

While making disruption our analytical priority, we resist treating it as a universal explanatory model, acknowledging both its conceptual limits and the risks embedded in its use. Most notably, the term risks de-radicalizing scholarly vocabulary. Disruption today tends to describe any significant change. However, framing something as disruption risks pacifying it: what might otherwise be called revolution or radical transformation loses its intensity and edge in the process. This replacement of concepts adequate to sharp, structural change with ones that obscure severity and actively normalize the status quo is a risk we take seriously, not as a reason to abandon the concept, but as a call for greater sensitivity to context and reflexivity about the politics of its use. A further risk stems from the concept's enduring association with technology and management through concepts such as “disruptive technologies” and “disruptive innovation” (Christensen et al., 2018). Uncritically adopted, the term risks reproducing and normalizing technocratic power (Swyngedouw, 2007) by importing not just a vocabulary but the methodological assumptions and power relations embedded in it. However, treated critically, the concept opens rather than forecloses opportunities. Third, disruption carries an unintentional presentist bias, foregrounding past and present states at the expense of future orientations. This, however, is the most readily overcome of the three risks: linking disruption to future-making reveals the variety of alternative futures it opens up.

The contributions in this thematic issue address these risks directly, saturating the concept with empirical materials and theoretical reflections, while also probing its limits and, in doing so, connecting disruption firmly to urban futures.

4. Possibilities of Urban Futures in Times of Disruption in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue brings together 12 contributions that aim to advance our collective understanding of urban disruption and the agency of people in creating more resilient, inclusive, and hopeful futures. The contributions move beyond disruption as a moment of rupture or loss, conceptualising it instead as a material and epistemic shift capable of generating insights into the vulnerabilities and potentials of urban society. The conceptual article by Hoefsloot et al., which opens the thematic issue, provides the theoretical scaffolding for this reframing: positioning disruption not as a force of mere fragmentation, but as a political and creative catalyst that destabilises established thought patterns, elevates marginalised voices, and opens pathways toward collective and democratic urban futures.

The diversity in geographical contexts and urban systems covered in this thematic issue highlights the impact of disruptions worldwide. From conceptualising the wait for the next big earthquake in Kazakhstan, to the responses to incoming refugees in Germany, or navigating the political and discursive disruptions of authoritarian regimes in Turkey, Brazil, and Russia, the articles are characterised by their ability to unpack the globalised drivers of disruption—climate crisis, wars, authoritarianism, and natural disasters—while focusing on the site-specific outcomes of these collated crises and the impact of citizens to create the city they want to inhabit.

We have organised the thematic issue into three sections. The first is the theoretical and methodological interventions. While also grounded in empirical research, the three articles in this section advance our conceptualisations of urban disruption and the methodological approaches for researching future-making in times of disruption. The second section collates the contributions that unpack the structural roots and structuring abilities of disruption in the city. These research articles show how disruptions are never one thing; they are not neutral, a-political, or natural. Rather, as illustrated across the contributions, disruptions emerge from the polycrisis—interlocking forces of conflict, inequality, authoritarian governance, and ecological instability. The third section centres on agency in the midst of crisis, and the ability of people and organisations to work towards better futures. This includes accounts of communities creating solidarity networks, the adaptation of the material city to house new populations, and the work done to maintain continuity and heritage during adversity and the disruption of time.

The first section's theoretical and methodological contributions illuminate different registers of urban future-making under uncertainty. Challenging dominant framings on forced migration and urban resilience, Haase and Pöbneck's commentary argues that forced migration must be understood as a systemic component of urban resilience rather than an exceptional burden. Their reflections call for integrating urban and migration debates, and highlight the struggle between progressive and regressive narratives as itself a site of making urban futures. Lundmark's examination of the Future Bazaar method across thirteen Swedish municipalities similarly emphasises the creation of promise and fragility within disruption. The article shows how participatory futuring tools can challenge institutional path dependencies and stimulate systemic thinking, while also drawing attention to the structural frictions that hamper long-term impact. Together

with Hoefsloot et al.'s conceptual framing, these articles provide theoretical and methodological inspiration for future research on urban futures in times of disruption.

The second section turns to the structural conditions that shape disruptions in practice. Doğanay and Özdemir Taştan's analysis of the Canal Istanbul mega-project situates urban transformation within Turkey's broader trajectory of authoritarian neoliberalism, showing how technocratic narratives seek to naturalise centralised power while municipal and civic actors articulate counter-hegemonic claims to participation and social justice. Antonenko et al.'s study of Kherson, Ukraine, addresses some of the most acute types of disruption: war, occupation, and destruction. Their spatial analysis shows how recovery is non-linear, and requires stabilisation, reorganisation, and transformation. They conclude that urban futures under conditions of polycrisis require not only resources but a fundamental rethinking of planning and governance models. Lazarenko and Haase's comparative study of Ukrainian refugees in Berlin and Leipzig draws critical attention to the double standards that structure the reception of different migrant groups, particularly through the provision of public services. Together, these articles demonstrate that urban disruption unfolds as a structurally uneven terrain where democratic rearticulation is necessary.

The third section foregrounds the agency of residents, communities, and civil society actors in making urban futures from within disruption. Kononenko et al. trace how the residents of Slavutych, Ukraine, have cultivated resilient agency through collective memory, practices of care, and what they call heroic solidarity, a territorially rooted sense of identity and endurance that has sustained the city through the closure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, Russian blockade, and ongoing war. Amer and Canedo examine how the BENN initiative in Berlin opens space for co-produced urban futures through collaborative knowledge production with refugees, showing how temporary activities in public space can generate socio-spatial transformations beyond their immediate scope. Lapina-Kratasiuk et al.'s article on JHQ Rheindahlen, Germany, explores how residents of a former military site engage in future-making through everyday practices and transgressive appropriations of abandoned space—showing that withdrawal from state and corporate control does not suspend but reconfigures agency. Eremenko's article on Toruń, Poland, examines how citizens mobilised to challenge the boundaries of institutional heritage frameworks, creating new urban commons and winning partial recognition for contested heritage sites. Finally, Chernysheva's article on Almaty, Kazakhstan, develops the concept of "configurations of care" to capture how residents, urban planners, and preparedness experts jointly navigate the anticipation of a major earthquake. By moving beyond the binary of activity and passivity and beyond the opposition between state and citizens, the article reveals disaster anticipation as a dynamic, relational process in which actors continuously aim to stabilize uncertain futures.

An important emergent theme across the articles is solidarity. Within and between communities grappling with the effects of disruption in Slavutych, Berlin, Rheindahlen, Toruń, Almaty, and beyond, solidarity surfaces as a crucial element in becoming more resilient and rebuilding common wellbeing. Kalinina and Sartoretto explicitly develop the role of solidarity as the foundation for sustained collective action, even when political or environmental disruptions work towards fragmenting society. Analysing community organising in Favela da Rocinha and humanitarian activism in Russia, they show how collectivities enact solidarity as a communicative practice, strengthened by place-based relations and affective bonds that give macro-political action its practical meaning for individuals. However, as all articles show, solidarity and care networks are not static or stable within disruption. Rather, they are continuously reconfigured, emerging in new forms, among new actors, and in response to shifting conditions.

5. Futures in the Making

This thematic issue explores the epistemic and political potential of disruption—a concept that has been deployed far less than its analytical siblings, including crisis. The wide geography, diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and life trajectories of the contributors of this thematic issue are themselves an argument that difference may generate deeper knowledge and greater capacity to act.

Through theoretical reflection and empirical grounding, the contributors show how disruptions can unlock productive potential, catalyze innovations, and drive meaningful change. This transformative power is examined here through three lenses: the evolution of conceptual frameworks, the dynamics of agency in urban transformation, and the physical reshaping of urban places and materialities. Crucially, none of the authors romanticize these processes, demonstrating that productive disruptive moments are inherently ambivalent, carrying real burdens, causing genuine harm, and distributing benefits and losses unevenly. Yet even amidst deep irritation and systemic rupture, unexpected pathways open toward urban future-making, offering a powerful sense of hope. Such hope is not passive. As Aalders and Müller-Mahn (2026) remind us, future-making is “hard work,” requiring not only imagination but enactment through physical effort, materiality, and related practices. Futures, however hopeful, must be actively made.

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Conflict of Interests

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Reclaiming Disruption: Pathways to Hopeful Urban Futures

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Abstract

Disruptions increasingly constitute urban futures by interrupting established trajectories and influencing how cities are imagined, planned, and realised. This article challenges the prevailing assumption that urban disruption merely produces social fragmentation and catastrophic futures, positioning it instead as a catalyst for progressive urban transformation. Although disruption is widely discussed across politics, management, technology, and infrastructure, these discussions remain compartmentalised. Rather than adopting sector-specific perspectives, we propose an urban-centred framework to understand how disruptions converge and manifest within cities. The article examines how disruption functions to destabilise established thought patterns, revealing how the city operates and how urban actors might think and do the city differently. Drawing on diverse examples, this conceptual intervention highlights disruption’s capacity to create openings for innovation, creativity, and transformative change while acknowledging its potential for ambivalent outcomes. By revisiting existing scholarship on disruption, we argue for studying disruption in relation to the transformations it produces in agency, power relations, imaginaries, and future-making. The potential of disruption to elevate marginalised voices, expand epistemic resources, and foster collective action toward better urban futures is examined. Disruption is thus reclaimed as a political and creative force—one that reorients urban research from diagnosing fragmentation toward exploring pathways for hopeful, collective, and democratic urban futures amid and through disruption.

Keywords

agency; collective; disruption; fragmentation; hopeful urban futures; urban future-making

1. Introduction

The definition of disruption takes on as many formulations as its sources and effects take shape. Across disciplines ranging from environmental sciences and management to transition theory and educational and political sciences, there are many ways to understand and define disruption. In an era of poly-continuous crises (Lawrence et al., 2022), disruption carries with it a certain temporality and imagination for the future. Chappells and Trentmann (2019, p. 206) state that “disruption and normality are inextricably connected in time.” Although disruptions often arise from long-term structural issues, they are acute and urgent impacts that can increase precarity and vulnerability for people, societies, and geographies. However, these disruptions can also create pathways for alternative outcomes, an abrupt interruption for relevant change:

Disruptions give us short, momentary glimpses of the fabric of “normality” as it is fraying and reveal the patterns in which practices and infrastructures are woven together. Rather than being isolated instances, disruptions over time shape expectations of a “normal life.” (Chappells & Trentmann, 2019, p. 198)

Chappells and Trentmann come to this conclusion through a historical analysis of a sequence of disruptions in the 20th century, illustrating how disruptions are as frequent and part of life as “normalcy” is (Graham, 2010). History, in this definition, is a continuous tide of disruptions. As a result, people and institutions that have experienced disruption become acclimated to adverse conditions or find coping mechanisms and social learning, reducing the impact of the disruption in practice, despite its force. Importantly, looking through a historical lens also shows how disruptions are not stand-alone events, emerging out of thin air, but rather structured by regimes and behaviour before and after the “disruptive incident.” In other words, disruption is a combination of the immediate disaster and decades of history. This shows how disruption is relative and situated, not only in relation to normalcy or societal impact, but also in relation to past disruptions and those yet to come (Chappells & Trentmann, 2019). In response to disruptions such as an earthquake, a pandemic, or a war, the distinction between “temporary” and “permanent” becomes blurred, and temporary spaces such as refugee shelters, pop-up malls, and bike lanes emerge and persist for years. Acknowledging these localised and situated effects of disruptions, we focus on the “urban” as a representation of these spatial-temporal entanglements born out of disruption.

Through its situated (im)materialities, politics, and lived experiences, the urban provides us with a rich catalogue with which to frame—and potentially reclaim—disruption as a tool for future-making. Cities are often centres of activity in times of crisis and disruption; disruptive events tend to begin or be resolved there, and those who shape the way disruption is handled or responded to are largely concentrated within them. For these reasons, cities and urban societies play a crucial role in navigating disruption and, ultimately, in shaping possible futures.

In now classic neo-Marxist works on cities, such as Lefebvre’s *The Urban Revolution* (2003) and Harvey’s *The Urbanization of Capital* (1985), urbanisation itself, along with capital accumulation and growth, is viewed as disruptive, altering socio-economic and geographic relations within and beyond the city. For the most part, and despite some texts also recognising disruptive acts as progressive tools for change and resistance (e.g., Amin, 2008; Harvey, 1985), disruptions such as migration flows, pandemics, or wars—as products of urbanisation, capitalism, and politics of power—have often been understood as negative in critical urban

studies. Man-made yet technical interruptions and sudden yet incubated failures, as well as natural causes, lead to unwanted harm, socio-economic consequences, and alterations to established orders. This transforms the technical systems of modernity—energy, sanitation, transport, communication, etc.—into “objects of public anxiety about the possible widespread loss of capacity and interrupted service” (La Porte, 1988, p. 241; cf. Turner, 1978). However, urban societies are constantly changing, making it difficult to predict and plan for the future with any certainty. The recent global impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is a prime example of how cities are vulnerable to unforeseen crises, bringing about disruption in many areas of urban life and functionality (Batty, 2020; Kasper et al., 2025). Due to their diversity, cities and urban settings may respond very differently to disruptions. While urban modernity takes variegated forms, with many post-colonial cities in the Global South having experienced widespread intermittency rather than a universality of basic services (Bruns et al., 2022), disruptions to cities in the westernised 20th century are often classified as disturbances in our economic system or technical problems that require technical solutions.

As a conceptual intervention, this article focuses on how *disruption* can function as *an epistemic tool* unstabilising established thought patterns, showing us how the city functions or not and how urban actors might think and do the city differently. Thinking and doing differently in this case refers to the making of urban futures by various actors out of disruption. Through examples of disruptions in urban space, we unpack the counterrevolutionary or glitchy properties of disruptions and explore where we might find agency and hope for making a better urban future. We are eager to prevent the transformation of disruption into an axiom “for erecting new grand narratives of history, politics or human life in the round” (Holbraad et al., 2019, p. 11). This inquiry becomes particularly urgent when uncertainties, turmoil, and accelerated changes reconfigure the ways disruptions are conceptualised and studied. Thinking about productive disruptions would require us to rethink *who* is disrupting. We use the term *productivity* outside of capitalist logic. We define it in the context of creating meaning and preserving the foundations of life, society, and community. Under this understanding, productivity is not measured by market value, but by its contribution to the common good, social cohesion, and ecological stability. Hence, without blindly following the regurgitations coming from the capitalist market logic, we can explore the smaller spaces of production created through disruptions which give insight into more just urban futures. Considering disruptions in their multifaceted ways and how they are materialising in the current polycrisis, we ask: How can we find hope for better urban futures in disruption?

To answer this question we will first bring together literature from urban and infrastructural geography, sociology, psychology, and innovation sciences to define the broad concepts of disruption, crisis, and future-making. We will continue with presenting two ways to understand the relationship between the city and disruption: studying the city through disruption and seeing disruption as a political strategy within urban future-making. The second half of the article concerns the role of agency within disruption and positions disruption as a generative force for more hopeful urban futures.

Our positionality shapes the analytical trajectory of this article. While acknowledging the multiplicity of disruptions, we draw our inspiration from the cities in which we have lived, worked, and researched.

2. Setting the Scene: Disruption

2.1. *Disruption, Crisis, and Future-Making*

Disruption is a much-needed concept for capturing the nuances of the current situation, which are often lost within umbrella terms such as crisis or polycrisis. As McFarlane highlights: “There are likely to be many cases where the term ‘crisis’ might be better substituted with other terms—‘problem,’ ‘challenge,’ ‘dilemma,’ ‘impasse,’ even ‘issue’” (McFarlane, 2025, p. 305). Disruption can be defined as a disturbance or interference that interrupts the normal flow of operations. It causes a significant or fundamental deviation from the expected or normal state of affairs. In contrast, a crisis is an unexpected event that poses a significant threat to a society’s stability and functioning in a more long-term perspective.

In this article, we focus on disruption rather than on crisis because we are especially interested in how societies (here: urban societies and their actors) respond to disruptive change, the rapid transformation of structural foundations of urban realities, and how they try to imagine, shape, and build strategies for the future in times of change, uncertainty, lack of plannability, and related conflicts. Additionally, the use of disruption as a framework is our deliberate attempt to sidestep the concept of crisis, which has become semantically overloaded and politically weaponised (Roitman, 2013).

Our closer focus is on the intersection of urban future-making and disruption. “Future-making” as we understand it here refers to the active process of shaping and influencing the future rather than passively accepting what may come (Kemmer & Simone, 2021; Zhelnina, 2022). This involves envisioning potential futures, devising strategies to realise preferred ones, enacting them, while adapting to evolving circumstances (Grubbauer et al., 2024). The relationship between disruption and future-making might unfold in different ways. Disruptions may be anticipated and woven into processes of imagining and enacting futures (De Coss-Corzo, 2025). For instance, envisioning some situations as potential catastrophes or disasters can shape urban infrastructure and professional and everyday practices. At the same time, unexpected disruptions that challenge established norms within affected societies and communities may open new spaces for rethinking futures, creating moments when existing systems can be re-evaluated, new possibilities imagined, and new vulnerabilities exposed (Andrighetto et al., 2024).

By shaking existing urban power geometries and relationships, disruptions could create space for diverse perspectives, enhance the involvement of urban citizens and civil organisations in future-making, and foster a sense of collective agency in order to envision alternative futures. This may involve crafting a compelling narrative about the desired future to inspire action and provide direction, while also encouraging experimentation and innovation to develop new solutions and approaches. In this sense, rather than attempting to predict the future, future-making involves imagining a variety of potential scenarios, including those that might not be immediately apparent. By and large, future-making in the context of a disruption means developing a new narrative, productively embracing uncertainty, and, given those conditions, actively shaping a more desirable future. This understanding aligns us with Comi et al.’s (2025) conception of future-making as emancipatory inquiry: “the practising of an inquiry driven by an emancipatory concern and directed at crafting (more) desirable futures” (Comi et al., 2025, p. 2472).

2.2. Studying the City Through Disruption, and Studying the City and Disruption

Current scholarship reveals multiple analytical trajectories of how disruption is investigated. These trajectories are guided by two key questions: To study *disruption* or to study *through disruption*? To *study* disruption or to *change* through disruption? While the latter question poses a somewhat false dichotomy, it nevertheless raises important considerations about the balance between scholarly investigation and transformative practice.

Across diverse fields, including urban studies, scholars have consistently studied *through disruption*, employing it as an analytical lens while rarely examining disruption itself. This research strategy finds its most vivid expression in *defamiliarisation* (Shklovsky, 2017), *breach* (Garfinkel, 1967), and *dérive* (Debord, 2014)—research tools conceived as universal epistemological instruments. Of these, only *dérive* was explicitly developed as a method for reflecting on urban experience, while others were adopted from adjacent fields such as sociology (*breach*), or evolved in parallel, as Benjamin’s “hashish passage” (Benjamin, 2006) did with *defamiliarisation* in literary studies. Despite their differences, these methodologies share a common epistemic logic: They presuppose the existence of a social order, the repetition and routinization of everyday practices, the coherence of the lifeworld (and of the city), and, crucially, the manageability of disruption as an analytical tool. In *defamiliarisation*, attention to previously unnoticed details was meant to interrupt the automatism of perception and reveal the latent assumptions that render habits and norms “natural.” In *breach*, the deliberate disruption of routine social interactions exposed how everyday life is made to appear rational and coherent, and thereby how social order is reproduced (Garfinkel, 1967). The *dérive*, “a technique of rapid movement through varied urban ambiances” (Debord, 2014), sought to elicit psychogeographical effects and, in doing so, to transform ordinary urban wandering into critical exploration, a fundamentally collective practice that produced the solidarity capitalist society so desperately lacked.

The various methodological applications of deliberate and manageable disruption stand in contrast to the idea of disruption as an *accidental epistemological opportunity*. In this perspective, moments of breakdown are valued for their capacity to make visible the otherwise invisible functioning of complex socio-technical systems. Analysing the economic, political, and infrastructural upheavals of the 2000s, such as the War on Terror, the 2008 financial crisis, and the global spread of SARS, Graham’s edited volume *Disrupted Cities* (2010) provides eclectic examples of urban infrastructural disruptions. In line with Star’s (1999) interpretation of infrastructural breakdowns and Turner’s (1978) perspective on disasters as analytical opportunities, these disruptions can serve as “important heuristic devices...through which critical social science can excavate the politics of urban life, technology, or infrastructure” (Graham, 2010, p. 3). These disruptions are largely framed as accidental or deliberate failures of infrastructures to facilitate the ideally networked, now globalised flow of resources and humans. This can be due to natural causes, such as a hurricane (Sims, 2010); technical occurrences, such as a blackout (Luke, 2010); or political or military reasons (Graham, 2010). Here, disruption serves as an analytical tool with several interconnected objectives. Disruption, as an accidental epistemological opportunity as well as a deliberately used one, uncovers hidden patterns and mechanisms of social ordering that typically remain invisible. By destabilising what passes as common sense, these analytical techniques may create openings for alternative perspectives that dominant modes of understanding otherwise foreclose.

But what happens if there is no need to employ disruption as an analytical tool to break what is already fractured or constantly being ruptured? This shift repositions disruption as the primary focus of scholarly

inquiry, as outlined by Holbraad et al. in *Ruptures: Anthropologies of Discontinuity in Times of Turmoil* (2019), in which they propose examining ruptures in their own right, as well as relating ruptures to broader contexts—worlds people imagine and live in. Such an anthropology of rupture does not simply document existing disruptions but actively multiplies them through research practice by articulating disruptions and discovering their transformative possibilities. We argue that this approach is particularly promising for studies of urban life in times of radical change, when urban disruptions overlap with and are amplified by large-scale turmoil such as war (Pilav, 2012) or state collapse (Shevchenko, 2008), which undermine entire lifeworlds and urban living, its affects, and collective emotions. Affective urbanism being attentive to how various modalities of the more-than-rational, including affects, emotions, and feelings, compose urban life (Anderson & Holden, 2008; Paiva, 2024), offers a valuable lens here to approach disruptions through collective emotions they generate. As Ahmed (2004) suggests, emotions are not simply individual states but circulate and intensify collectively, becoming particularly visible in urban settings. Urban anxiety, for instance, often follows disruptions but can also precede them, emerging from the anticipation of inevitable shocks such as those induced by climate change (Marvin et al., 2023). Similarly, anger, an inherently relational and collective affect, surfaces strongly during urban crises (Panno et al., 2023). Affects, feelings, and emotions, as part of assemblages, make cities complex sites of “a being together of existences” (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 28). Ultimately, this shows that disruptions may not only serve as epistemological entry points to research on the socio-spatial and techno-political conditions of cities, but should also be claimed as affective and “productive” agents of the urban in their own right.

2.3. Studying Urban Disruption as a (Political) Strategy

The distinction between analysing disruption and mobilising it as an instrument of (urban) transformation reveals a profound methodological divide embodied in situationist interventions, disruptive pedagogy, and innovation studies. While the Situationist International (1958) and proponents of disruptive pedagogy embrace disruption as an instrument of emancipation and social transformation, innovation studies and related approaches caution that disruptions remain “unpredictable and undomesticated” (Kivimaa et al., 2021, p. 121) and can serve as instruments of domination.

In addition to their use of disruption as a method, e.g., in the form of the *dérive*, the Situationist International aspired to a radical transformation of everyday life, confronting the social and spatial structures that sustained capitalism. For the Situationist International, cities as spaces where capitalism’s spectacle concentrates most intensely became primary battlegrounds. At the heart of the Situationist International strategy lay strategic disruptions—the creation of situations: “moments of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organisation” (Situationist International, 1958). These disruptions were designed to awaken people from capitalist passivity and to generate “the eruption of lived pleasure” (Vaneigem, 1967/2012, p. 171). By undermining monotonous routines, the created situations emancipate urban citizens and open pathways to freedom—the freedom to imagine and create new forms of collectivity and ways of being together. Once initiated, situations unfold spontaneously and creatively through the collaborative engagement of urban citizens. Similarly, but on an individual rather than a collective or urban scale, disruptive pedagogy uses disruption as an instrument of social transformation (Mills, 1997). Yet, it operates primarily on the micro level, without denying its possible macro-level implications. By challenging the legitimacy of school practices that reproduce oppressive power relations, disruptive pedagogy opens up spaces to imagine more equitable forms of education. One example of this approach is the establishment of

school committees or social justice groups that give students a collective voice and enable marginalised perspectives to intervene in institutional decision-making, thereby disrupting hierarchical norms and fostering more democratic participation. In this sense, schools can be seen as spaces where new social patterns emerge, patterns that can spread far beyond the educational sphere, influencing urban and social life in general.

Also in innovation studies, the multi-scalar scope of influence is regarded as one of disruption's defining characteristics, ranging from the production of alternative products and processes that disrupt personal relationships to the transitions of entire systems, economies, and regions. Conceptualising disruption as a strategy at a micro-scale, Parry-Jones and Gay (1980, p. 215) defined disruptive events as "a complex and sometimes protracted inter-personal process comprising a sequence of verbal and non-verbal events which can evolve independently of static, institutional factors." No one is really in complete control; instead, everyone acts with uncertainty about the impact, responses, and outcomes of their actions. Yet, the disruptive power of a single person or a small group—as well as economic or governmental actors—should not be underestimated (Piven, 2008), because disruptions can be the terrain of power struggle connecting individual or niche action to systemic change.

Conceptualising the relation between niche and systemic change in more detail, Kivimaa et al. (2021) make a distinction between (a) disruption in actors and networks and (b) disruption in behaviour, practices, and cultural models. The former captures changes in the constellation of actors within socio-technical systems, including urban societies, as well as the changing distribution of power within the network. The latter refers to how disruptive events can change practices and cultural meaning, altering existing patterns on a more systemic scale and leading to transition. The direction of this change, however, is difficult to predict. Transformation following disruption is often unpredictable and turbulent, unfolding in nonlinear patterns across scales of governance and impacting different actors in different ways (Schipper et al., 2021). Moreover, disruptive innovations are embedded in long-term trends, which can either sharpen or dull their impact (Valenduc & Vendramin, 2017).

Translated into the city, we see the unpredictable and revealing power of disruption in the platform economy—led by Uber, Airbnb, and the like—and in its attempts to reshape the city. While digital technologies have transformed industries, social relations, and economies, they have also merged with pre-existing institutions to entrench their power. In such instances, technology has not so much changed the rules of the game. In cases where technological innovation has profoundly restructured society or the economy, it has often done so by reducing job security and eroding public infrastructure (Chua, 2023). For example, introduced as a housing-sharing platform, Airbnb has disrupted the hotel market in many cities and directly influences the availability and cost of housing for locals. Numerous studies show a direct correlation between the density of Airbnb listings and rising rents. Sublandlords convert conventional rental flats into more lucrative short-term rentals and residential areas are turning into "tourist zones," replacing local shops that sell everyday goods with tourist attractions and destroying the social fabric (Spangler, 2020; Törnberg, 2022).

Taken together, all these perspectives and examples reveal that disruption is inseparable from questions of power, agency, and control. Building on these insights, we revisit the meaning of studying disruption as a political strategy. We argue that disruption becomes political not only when it functions as an instrument of

social change, but also when it turns reflexive—confronting the capitalist and technocratic logics that render it technological and controllable. The politicisation of disruption recognises its grounding in concrete situations, spaces, institutions, cultures, and histories. In reclaiming disruption in this way, we restore its potential as a critical and emancipatory force.

3. Outlining Our Approach: Linking Disruption, Future-Making, and Agency for the Urban Realm

Having emphasised that disruptions are materially, politically, and epistemologically charged, the question arises: How can these moments be made productive and hopeful rather than paralysing? Instead of viewing disruption solely as a breakdown, we propose seeing it as an opening—an invitation to reconsider who creates the urban future, on what terms, and with what forms of knowledge. Accordingly, for this conceptual intervention, we are particularly interested in the “productive function” of disruption. While bringing rupture, danger, and hardship, disruption can also enhance productive change, progressive innovation, and the overcoming of old obstacles. How disruption is responded to is not predetermined; it depends on the actions taken, which shift the balance of forces and shape future outcomes.

3.1. *The Ambiguity of Disruption*

Although disruption is often perceived negatively, it can also catalyse positive change, innovation, and new perspectives, forcing or encouraging societies and communities to adapt and learn. This can lead to innovative solutions and breakthroughs that would not otherwise occur. In other words, a context of disruption can help identify outdated or inefficient practices, prompting a re-evaluation of existing systems and processes. This ambivalent nature of a disruption lies in its ability to destroy and create, tearing down established structures while paving the way for new ways of thinking and futures in the long term (Tawil & Toukan, 2025). Examples illustrating this ambivalence include the aftermath of political turnarounds in former state socialist countries, where disruptive change produced both winners and losers (Atanasoski & McElroy, 2018, Tuvikene et al., 2024), and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, which opened some opportunities for changing routines and establishing new ones, while having harmful impacts on urban societies’ functioning and cohesion (Bourdin et al., 2024; Grasso et al., 2021). The pandemic also exemplifies how disruptions foreground local capacities of care and solidarity, enabling everyday actors to creatively respond to systemic breakdowns (Schipper et al., 2021). Importantly, these disruptions highlighted the need for institutions to prevent the exacerbation of structural inequalities and instead support community-led forms of resilience.

Disruptions underscore both epistemic opportunities and risks. Drawing on strategies of Black Lives Matter, Hayward (2020) explores the disruptive power of political movements to define when, how, and under what conditions disruption becomes valuable. She argues that political disruption may arise not only through active intervention and mobilisation, such as protests and demonstrations, but also through withdrawal from collaboration, including labour strikes and other forms of non-participation. Inspired by McAdam (1996) and Piven (2008), she proposes that disruption unfolds through three steps:

First, a group of political actors coordinates to withdraw cooperation from an epistemic power relationship, which enables motivated ignorance. Second, this act of epistemic disruption brings

latent conflicts to the surface and forces members of dominant groups to take sides. Third, the resulting change in the political agenda enables subordinated actors to negotiate with the politically powerful. (Hayward, 2020, p. 458)

3.2. *The Importance of Agency, Knowledge, and Power for Productive Disruptions*

Crises and disruptive events often necessitate adapting to new circumstances and finding innovative solutions. By doing so, individuals, communities, and societies may build resilience through agency (Newman & Dale, 2005).

But agency is not just about reacting to events; it is also about actively shaping the narrative, influencing outcomes, and, ultimately, emerging stronger and more resilient. As discussed, the interplay between disruptive contexts and their influence on agency remains deeply ambiguous. Disruptive changes can unsettle routines and create a sense of unease, making it difficult for individuals to act decisively (McCann & Selsky, 2012). At the same time, they can enhance agency by highlighting shared vulnerabilities and creating a sense of urgency, thereby strengthening social cohesion and collective action. They may also force communities to develop new solutions and strategies. In some cases, disruptive contexts provide marginalised groups with opportunities to challenge existing power structures and advocate for change. For example, Corburn (2003) argues that communities facing environmental risks often mobilise their first-hand experience to challenge expert–lay distinctions, thereby reshaping planning processes. This is particularly visible in flood resilience efforts, where frontline communities contribute crucial insights into adaptive strategies. As Morris et al. (2024) show, coastal resilience planning in the United States demonstrates how marginalised BIPOC communities, despite systemic exclusion, bring invaluable situated expertise to the fore—expertise rooted in everyday survival and struggles for environmental justice. Here, disruptions elevate previously marginalised voices, compelling planners to integrate diverse forms of knowledge into formal decision-making.

Another instructive example comes from the growing field of citizen science and participatory planning, and, particularly, the “refugee urbanism” approach (Darling, 2020), where displaced populations assert themselves as political actors in urban contexts. Krick and Meriluoto (2022) describe this shifting positionality as “pushing the boundaries of expertise.” Still, they caution against framing participation in terms of “empowerment,” since citizens already possess knowledge and agency without the need for external validation. Knowledge production processes are being transformed by the growing integration of “non-certified expertise.” As a result, evidence-based policy, once dominated by credentialed science, is increasingly pressured to account for lived experience and “anyone’s knowledge” (Stewart et al., 2020).

By positioning urban citizens as active agents and epistemic producers, current scholarship shifts from a critique of expertise to a reconfiguration of knowledge itself—its authority, its methods, and its purposes. One compelling articulation of this shift is Ottinger’s (2023) concept of *careful knowing*. This approach questions the universalising methodologies and reflexive tools favoured by earlier analysts of disruption and instead advances a practice-based and context-specific mode of inquiry. Careful knowing seeks to confront epistemic inequality and injustice by centring the needs and situated knowledge of marginalised communities, affirming their authority as knowledge producers. For Ottinger, careful knowing is not simply the creation of new epistemic resources but an empirically grounded commitment to obligations toward

others. It entails modes of investigation and interpretation that make visible the *responsibility* of different agents for present circumstances and future trajectories.

However, careful knowing and related approaches risk slipping into a binary framing of epistemic power as located either with citizens or with institutional actors. Avoiding such epistemic binarism requires developing practices that enact distributed epistemic authority through collaboration among diverse actors. While these arrangements are inherently fragile and shaped by ethical and political tensions and constraints, they nonetheless resist reductive either/or models of epistemic power.

Critically, the ability of communities and other urban actors to utilise disruptions to create progressive urban futures—whether through political interventions, knowledge production, or other means—is strongly determined by pre-existing power relations. The ability to disrupt, or utilise disruptive moments, is often a question of political connections and available resources. As discussed earlier, this simple truth is displayed by the many urban disruptions caused by tech companies in Silicon Valley and “Silicon Elsewheres” (Pollio, 2026), but the importance and implications of socio-political power are also visible at the micro level of everyday urban life. One of countless examples of this is provided by Porcel (in press), who shows how different communities with different levels of political influence in a Mexico City *pueblo* respond to the disruption of their sewage infrastructure through either collaboration or sabotage. Interpreting this situation through the lens of de Certeau (1984), we see that communities’ attempts to assert their right to the city during and through disruption manifest as either a “strategy” of collaboration from a position of relative power or a “tactic” of improvisation and resistance, i.e., sabotage. Therefore, although we aim to reclaim disruption as a tool for productive urban change, we should not over-romanticise the extent to which actors can do so in the many political, economic, and infrastructural spheres of our cities. Subversive tactics of disruptions must acknowledge power imbalances and capabilities while actively resisting and contesting them, e.g., by acts of sabotage that carry an inherently productive potential for future-making (Aalders & Kioko, 2025).

3.3. *Affect and Hope-as-Method for Progressive Disruptions*

It is important to be sensitive to the *affect* of disruptions on people and communities, as emotions mediate the relationship between agency and action in often ambivalent and contested ways (Zuckerman, 2016). This ambivalence stems from the conflicting emotions and responses individuals experience during a crisis or disruption. In some cases, being able to act productively can mitigate the negative effects of the crisis and pave the way for thinking about and planning for the future. Disruptive circumstances can trigger feelings of helplessness and anxiety, but exercising agency—making choices and taking action—helps individuals and/or communities regain a sense of control over their situation. People may react with panic or heightened emotions, which can hinder rational decision-making but also foster a stronger sense of community. This affective ambivalence is evident in the simultaneous experience of both negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety, arising from the destruction or loss of livelihoods and fading prospects, and positive emotions, such as hope and determination, stemming from self-efficacy through solidarity and helping activities.

Furthermore, a context of disruption may lead to different forms of action or inaction. While some groups may be prompted to take action because disruptive events force them to do so (Hayward, 2020), others may remain passive or reject the idea of disruptive change. Here, hope as a method (Miyazaki, 2004; Pedersen,

2012) becomes a valuable perspective. Hope is not simply an affective response but a way of engaging analytically and practically with the possibilities that disruptions create. It foregrounds how disruptions may elevate the experiences of first responders, local actors, and marginalised groups. Anderson and Holden (2008) conceptualise hope as infrastructural to urban change, exemplifying affective urbanism, where hope is not merely a personal feeling or rhetorical ornament but a material force with performative effects. Infrastructural projects in Rio de Janeiro for the 2016 Olympics exemplify these dynamics: The preparations disrupted “normal” life through evictions, displacement, and reconfiguration of urban space, yet were justified by promises of a better urban future. When much of this infrastructure subsequently fell into decline, it became a reminder of “failed futures”: lost hopes for a promised “future that never arrived” (Bradbury, 2012), and a call for residents to demand priorities grounded in lived needs (Cavalcanti, 2024). In this sense, hopes are multiple and accumulative; they constitute assemblages that are not merely expressive but productive. Hopes can mobilise support for regeneration strategies, extend the reach of urban projects by bringing the future into the present, and require constant repair and maintenance through the articulation of what is hoped for. At the same time, we must remain cautious of romanticising disruption. While some strands of thought celebrate disruption as opening new avenues for imagining futures (echoing situationist traditions), others warn against the immobilising potential of hope. Ringel (2021), for example, shows that hopes for the future can mire people in an unchanging present, preventing them from overcoming current realities. Rather than treating hope as inherently positive or negative, affective urbanism suggests that collective hopes are performative forces that shape how urban communities respond to, resist, and reimagine disruptions.

4. Concluding Remarks: Reclaiming Disruption for Hopeful Urban Futures

Throughout this article, we have outlined the different approaches to understanding disruption in relation to agency and the production of urban futures. Returning to our initial question, of how we can find hope for better futures in times of poly-continuous urban disruptions, we have explained how disruption—defined as situated and relational events with destructive and productive potential—can serve as an analytical lens to observe the city, be mobilised as a political strategy for urban future-making, and function as an epistemic tool in thinking about alternative urban futures.

Urban disruptions have increasingly come to define how cities are lived, governed, and imagined. Rather than viewing disruption merely as a breakdown of systems, it can be seen as a force that exposes and transforms the everyday dynamics of urban life. As argued throughout this article, we need to approach the city as disrupted and disruptor. The city is constantly in flux, where crises, shocks, and interruptions reveal how deeply urban life is tied to wider social, economic, and political processes (Graham & Marvin, 2002). From “water crises” that expose inequalities of access (Anand, 2017) to the curfews and immobilities of the Covid-19 pandemic (Schnittfinke et al., 2024) or the deliberate targeting of cities in war as currently witnessed in Gaza (Ziadah et al., 2025), disruptions make visible the fragility and contested nature of urban existence itself. They unsettle routines, redraw boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and reshape how people inhabit, move through, and make sense of the city.

At the same time, cities themselves can be agents of disruption. Urban transformations—whether through redevelopment projects, speculative construction, or social movements—can unsettle existing orders and produce new forms of displacement, encounter, and resistance. Such processes illustrate what Chua (2023)

calls “disruption from above, the middle, and below,” highlighting how instability is not exceptional but constitutive of urban life. Disruption, in this sense, is both a condition and a catalyst: It reveals the tensions that underpin contemporary cities while also opening possibilities for reimagining them amid geopolitical crises, global health emergencies, and climate uncertainty.

We conclude that, in the context of poly-continuous crises, the study of disruption fosters a more reflexive mode of knowledge production by emphasising questions of epistemic power and justice. Disruptions inevitably raise questions of loss and opportunity, damage and renewal. For urban studies, the value of disruption lies in its analytical potential to reveal the fragilities of existing systems while simultaneously opening up new avenues for transformation. Although unevenly distributed and constrained, we find examples in the literature where agency and hope are mobilised to create more productive urban futures. This is not only through practical or material interventions, but also epistemically, by multiplying the types of futures we can envision. Rather than treating disruptions solely as destructive, they can also be re-appropriated as productive moments in which new forms of knowledge, agency, and participation emerge. This final point, and the disruption’s potential to open new avenues for urban future-making, brings to the fore the importance of paying attention to agency and affect. A promising avenue for further epistemological development lies in elaborating analytical tools that recognise knowledge as a political and ethical project oriented toward social improvement and the strengthening of hope.

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Reframing the Nexus Between Forced Migration and Urban Resilience: Discussing Impacts on Urban Futures

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Abstract

The relationship between forced migration and urban resilience is an under-researched topic within both the local resilience and migration discourses. While discussions tend to focus on institutional and psychological resilience, we argue that forced migration should be considered a systemic component of urban resilience and the future of cities. As resilience is currently understood in many different ways, even in contrasting ways, we contend that true resilience requires counteracting the pervasive “threat” of arrival and its criminalisation. There is a need to establish counter-narratives that replace narratives of fear, hate, and division with narratives that uphold everyone’s human dignity. These narratives should emphasise what urban societies have in common and demonstrate how inclusion can shape urban futures. While there is no reason to romanticise the “productive moments” of disruptions induced by forced migration, these moments are crucial for learning how to navigate urban realities and futures in arrival and postmigrant societies. They are also indispensable for building societal resilience in times of crisis. Likewise, we need to be more aware of the risk of depoliticising the discourse on local resilience by viewing a “broad consensus” as a resilient solution—this tends to silence critical voices.

Keywords

crisis; disruption; forced migration; reframing; urban futures; urban resilience

1. Introduction

In the urban resilience discourse, the subject of forced migration has received little attention. While the relationship between forced migration and resilience is discussed in many global political and climate change

science debates, the discourse referring to the local level is largely dominated by and restricted to topics such as institutional resilience in forced migration governance and the psychological resilience of forced migrants during the process of fleeing, arriving, and settling in a new place.

Drawing on our research experience in EU countries, with a particular focus on Germany, this commentary argues that forced migration should be considered a systemic factor in discussions about urban resilience and the future of cities in times of crisis and disruption. We understand urban resilience as a strategy to ensure local stability and cohesion in turbulent times, and to withstand antidemocratic and authoritarian threats. There has been an increase in both progressive and regressive narratives in the discourse on forced migration, with a struggle between them. In this context, questions arise concerning the direction of local resilience and future-making strategies and how forced migration is being placed and framed within them. Our reflections aim to demonstrate the multifaceted relationship between forced migration and urban resilience. We show that the correlation between both can be conceptualised in various ways. We also address the current and future requirements for research, including the need to reconsider or reframe approaches and concepts, as well as the need for a more systematic integration of urban and migration debates.

2. Forced Migration as a Systemic Factor of Urban Resilience and Urban Futures

To date, forced migration has not been adequately addressed by urban resilience researchers. However, urban migration research has recently begun to establish a stronger link between resilience and coping with forced migration. Scholars started to explicitly look at forced migration in a local/urban resilience framework since, in their view, the urban resilience lens “can improve understandings of how state regulations and structures today challenge the capacities of cities...to absorb migration and ethnic-related pressures” (Zapata-Barrero, 2023, p. 2835). From the perspective of migration studies, the insights on forced migration and resilience are conceptually reframed. They intersect with discussions that have been going on for some time, e.g., on governance of arrival (Hinger & Schäfer, 2019; Werner et al., 2018) or on urban spaces of arrival (Franz & Hanhörster, 2020; Meeus et al., 2019).

A discussion has been initiated regarding how cities can enhance institutional resilience and preparedness for forced migration events (Ratzmann et al., 2024). The concept of “institutional resilience” involves understanding how diverse institutional sectors collaborate to formulate and implement coping strategies and practices. The 2015–2016 and 2022 forced migration events highlighted the vital role of civil society and its resources in fostering institutional resilience.

The debate on institutional resilience centres on the management of forced migration in terms of local governance. However, this approach may be too narrow to capture the complexities of the effects of forced migration on urban resilience today and in the future, including its uncertainties, wickedness, conflicts, practical shaping, and “ownership.” This debate intersects with research on the potential and challenges of using urban resilience as a framework for thinking about the future of cities (Triandafyllidou & Yeoh, 2023). However, the topic of forced migration has not yet played a decisive role in this research.

The issue of forced migration as a systemic factor for resilient urban futures has not received significant discussion. Forced migration requires action at various decision-making levels within cities, as well as in a variety of policy areas. Poor management of forced migration may also affect a city's or a community's

general resilience performance and makes them more vulnerable in a context of crisis and disruption. We suggest a nexus between urban resilience and forced migration, which is of a systemic nature. Therefore, it is imperative for cities, which are the main destinations of forced migration, to incorporate this factor when shaping resilient futures. The term “systemic factor” is defined as the comprehensive, multifaceted domain of urban policy encompassing various sectors, actors, and agencies.

3. Rethink and Reframe: How Urban Resilience and Forced Migration Intersect and Interact

Given that we understand and explain our world through a variety of frames, it is crucial to understand how these frames are built, how they work, and who/what drives them. Rethinking frames, or reframing, involves reconsidering one’s own assumptions and conceptual foundations, as well as challenging the predominant frames or how they are discussed and used. Reframing can thus be an act of resistance (McCall, 2020); the establishment of counter-frames can be understood as a way to critique dominant narratives or the search for alternative ways of understanding (Prendeville & Syperek, 2021); in this way, reframing may also be seen as a method to reshape debates on urban futures.

The discourse on forced migration is characterised by emotional intensity and contrasting positions. Public discourse is widely dominated by discursive notions of forced migration as a “crisis” (Cantat et al., 2023), or as a “threat” (Garcés, 2022). Discussions on how to cope with forced migration mainly take place through these frames. This constitutes a need to rethink and reframe the discourse itself, making it especially important for justice—and dignity-based migration research to: (a) deconstruct the new narratives that pit the resilience needs of receiving societies against the principles of solidarity and human rights; and (b) seek counter-narratives, images, and frames that challenge vulnerabilities and reclaim agency over narratives and the production of knowledge (Prendeville & Syperek, 2021). Such an approach clearly and unambiguously prioritises human dignity and solidarity.

We will now briefly explain the key aspects of the intersection and interaction of urban resilience and forced migration. These are particularly relevant to research on the current situation of the cities in the destination countries of arrival. We view these reflections as thoughts on the topic and building blocks for a future research agenda.

3.1. Forced Migration as a Systemic Factor of Urban Resilience

Despite its “wicked nature,” forced migration has become a systemic factor in today’s urban realities and must therefore be considered a constitutive factor in local resilience thinking and planning. Current debates on urban resilience and forced migration do not yet sufficiently acknowledge this fact.

The relationship between forced migration and local resilience is far-reaching, affecting almost all spheres of urban life. It is a challenge for an intersectional perspective on forced migration and resilience because issues like uncertainty, lack of planning, and unforeseeable futures are too complex to be fully addressed within the scope of resilience strategies. The adoption of a resilience-based approach to planning urban futures in the field of forced migration represents something like “squaring the circle.” By some authors, either forced migration itself or migration governance is referred to as a “wicked problem” (Raadschelders et al., 2019;

Zapata-Barrero, 2023, p. 2839). With the concepts of local resilience and the “local turn” in migration research, we believe that it is essential to consider both the city as a whole and neighbourhoods individually. The ways in which forced migration and related conflicts are negotiated at the city and neighbourhood levels will be crucial in determining the resilience of urban futures (cf. Grubbauer et al., 2024).

3.2. Polarised and Normative Landscapes of Resilience Thinking

The discourse on the relationship between urban resilience and forced migration is characterised by polarisation and contrasting perspectives. This highly normative landscape poses a challenge to urban resilience thinking.

Resilience is often used as a “neutral” concept to analyse how well cities deal with shocks or crises based on defined criteria. However, it is always linked to normative questions (Cote & Nightingale, 2012). Or, as McGreavy (2016, p. 105) put it: “A primary problem with resilience is that it ignores its own discursivity.” This constrains how we might understand and approach resilience differently. The form and outcome of resilience thinking and policies depend on the setting; ideas of resilience may also conflict. Inclusive resilience frames are used in many current scientific discussions on forced migration. They argue that treating forced migrants with solidarity and empathy promotes urban society’s resilience and forms the basis for governance of arrival and integration. Large-scale forced migration events demonstrate this. However, such extensive support is not sustainable in the long term as there is a risk of overload and compassion fatigue (Sharp, 2025). There is also a danger of romanticising a “precarious resilience” based on the responsabilisation of civil society actors or of downplaying challenges (Karakayali & Kleist, 2016), as opposed to long-term, robust resilience. Regressive, negative, or undesired resilience narratives remain underexposed. Therefore, the current concept of resilience and the narratives underlying it in politics, decision-making, and public discourse require critical examination. What is being discussed, how is it being discussed, and who is involved in developing arguments and what roles are they taking? On the one hand, forced migration is often seen as a “threat” to the receiving society, with the arrival of large numbers of forced migrants described as a “disturbing disruption.” The examination of public and policy discourse shows that critics of migration rarely use the term “resilience,” instead arguing that receiving societies are at risk of being overwhelmed by the costs and impacts of forced migration. Migrants are blamed for existing problems, such as a lack of affordable housing and insufficient resources for kindergartens and schools, and are portrayed as scapegoats for issues such as the loss of prosperity and bottlenecks leading to competition for doctors’ appointments and nursery places. While there are real challenges for politics and society in these areas, some attribute the problems to migration. In such views, forced migration must be limited to avoid risking the stability of society. In other words: Avoidance, withdrawal, and rejection may serve as future resilience strategies (Braun & Schwarz, 2025). Consequently, resilience would mean counteracting the “threat” and criminalising arrival.

3.3. Addressing Regressive Shifts on Forced Migration to Create Resilient Urban Futures

In order to address the current shift towards “regressive” understandings of the relationship between forced migration and urban resilience, it is necessary to challenge approaches that problematise, criminalise, racialise, or securitise migration, and replace them with approaches that prioritise dignity, human rights, and justice.

While the aforementioned “threat” and “problem” narratives are indicative of a problematic shift to the right in public debates on migration and arrival, they can also be viewed as an opportunity to establish counter-narratives. These counter-narratives aim to replace narratives of fear, hate, and division with ones that uphold everyone’s human dignity, focusing on what urban societies have in common and how inclusion can guide the shaping of urban futures (Glorius et al., 2021). Rather than focusing on exclusion, such narratives aim to foster a new sense of “us” that embraces and empowers all members of society. These narratives are based on the promise of equal rights for all citizens, enabling social advancement and the fair distribution of opportunities. Diversity, contradictions, and solidarity are seen as key strengths that contribute to this resilience. Migrants are given a voice and showcase the people who welcome them in urban societies. This is an inevitable prerequisite and indispensable ingredient of urban resilience. This highlights that any resilience strategy has normative foundations that shape our understanding of resilience. Therefore, discussions about the connection between urban resilience and forced migration, as well as questions of reframing, cannot be “neutral,” but rather require normative anchor points.

3.4. Productive Moments of Disruption as Groundwork for Learning and Innovation

The debate on urban resilience has gained momentum in the wake of the current polycrisis. While the risks and dangers of crisis and disruptive contexts are widely discussed, the opportunities they present for building resilience are less well known. The “productive moments” of crisis and disruption fostering local-level learning, understanding, and practice remain under-researched and underestimated.

Looking beyond the dominant discourse of forced migration as a threat and a problem reveals its potential to create “productive moments of change,” offering opportunities for innovation and overcoming inertia (Gkeredakis et al., 2021). Crises can foster transformations that would not be possible under normal conditions; for example, the solidarity and support shown to Syrian and Ukrainian forced migrants in 2015–2016 and 2022 (Haase et al., 2024). The pressure to cope with an ad hoc challenge such as forced migration can promote processes that are key to societal resilience, such as overriding established processes, and accelerating the adoption of new ideas. Coping with Ukrainian forced migration in many European cities in 2022 became a “sandbox” for change, providing a context in which even the most unconventional approaches were worth testing (Jelínková et al., 2023). This was evident in administrative responses, cooperation between supporting organisations, and the involvement of significant portions of civil society. It encompassed coping with the influx of forced migrants and, indirectly, addressing the emergencies resulting from an aggressive war, on a local scale in numerous European cities. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of local and upper-level resilience. Disruptive events, such as the arrival of forced migrants, force local societies to confront their limitations in terms of local resilience and to seek alternatives. This creates an environment in which innovation can thrive, ultimately yielding solutions that are more resilient, efficient, and advanced (Kivimaa et al., 2021). Geels and Schot (2007) argue that crises can trigger “symbiotic innovations” which solve local problems and trigger further innovations throughout the system. However, emergencies can also highlight flaws in existing systems, as shown by the lack of shelter for millions of Ukrainians in 2022. New models of “emergency cooperation” between the state, civil society, and intermediaries showed how to cooperate in times of crisis and/or disruption. Innovative governance of arrival can create opportunities for both the receiving society and the forced migrants (Phillimore, 2021). These models could inform long-term resilience thinking, planning, and strategies (Triandafyllidou & Yeoh, 2023). At first glance, the realisation of such benefits may seem very demanding.

In order to recognise them as such, there must be a basic agreement that migration can make shrinking and ageing receiving communities more resilient. Clearly, resilience strategies and measures are inefficient and insufficient without community-wide resilience thinking. That said, we are well aware that there are many uncertainties and that the aforementioned potential benefits do not exist independently of many challenges and negative “companions,” such as compassion fatigue, selective solidarity, and the coexistence of solidarity and rejection. Consequently, much of the theoretical potential cannot be realised, which poses a real threat to resilience thinking and planning. So, while there is no reason to romanticise the “productive moments” of crises or disruptions, these moments are crucial for learning how to navigate urban realities and futures in arrival and postmigrant societies.

3.5. Urban Resilience for Whom? The Need for More Inclusive Approaches

A dignity-based and inclusive understanding of social and societal resilience in relation to forced migration can only arise and persist if it is based on and supported by a fundamental consensus among large parts of the community. This must include the ongoing renegotiation of the consensus, as well as the proactive involvement of various groups within urban societies, particularly domestic civil society and forced migrants.

Taking an inclusive approach to urban resilience would address the question “Urban resilience for whom?” (Meerow & Newell, 2019), answering it with “For the society as a whole.” With respect to forced migration, this would mean integrating a wide range of voices into the development of future resilience structures, facilities, practices, and mindsets. In particular, this would involve strengthening the voices of those who are often marginalised, such as forced migrants themselves. One way to bring this aspiration to life would be to adopt approaches such as local or urban citizenship (García, 2006; Harper, 2023)—a concept that aims to promote the social and political participation of all community members. When talking about forced migration, it may help to change the focus: Instead of seeing migrants as victims, we should see the opportunities they bring to urban resilience and how they shape our cities. Narratives of resilience should give migrants and activists a stronger voice, enabling them to contribute their perspectives and challenge existing narratives if they wish. A broad understanding of who constitutes “societal resilience” has the potential to strengthen the resilience of a city and all its residents, including new arrivals, by empowering them to play an active role in shaping the urban future. However, in the current context of migration policy, it must be recognised that the benefits of urban citizenship and the active involvement of forced migrants in shaping urban futures in their new place of residence often come with conditions. Under the present circumstances, these benefits seem very theoretical and illusory and benefit only a select few. There is the tendency to exclude more underprivileged and quieter voices, ultimately undermining the resilience potential of local (urban) societies as a whole. At the same time, there is a risk of depoliticising the local resilience discourse by viewing a “broad consensus” as a resilient solution that tends to, or even intends to, exclude critical voices.

4. How Do We Move Forward From Here?

There is no simple answer to any of the presented thoughts. Adopting a systemic approach to the interconnection between forced migration and urban resilience requires us to consider different disciplinary perspectives, such as urban studies, migration studies, equity studies, and political participation studies, in tandem. Applying these different perspectives will help us understand the complexity of the issue and “de-centre” the way we view forced migration, incorporating it into a broader discussion on locally based

social, political, and community resilience. Focusing solely on migration can hide deeply rooted issues and patterns of social inequity. This often manifests as competition among disadvantaged groups for scarce resources, such as housing and access to healthcare, in cities. “Migration” is often used as a way of avoiding dealing with these fundamental issues. A more resilient approach based on sustainability, inclusiveness, and dignity is needed to address the underlying challenges obscured by superficial discussions about the “migration problem.” However, current political and public discourse merely pretends to offer a more resilient future with fewer migrants. What is needed here are more nuanced and fact-based discussions that consider the different interests and ideas on how resilient urban futures can be conceived, negotiated, and shaped in times of polycrisis, when forced migration in more or less disruptive form is increasingly likely. Lastly, it is important to stress that resilient urban futures are less likely to be achieved without addressing the difficult issues surrounding forced migration.

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Conflict of Interests

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Co-Designing Futuring Capacities in Municipalities: Futures Bazaar Goes National

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Abstract

In an era marked by overlapping crises, including climate change, democratic erosion, digital disruption, and socioeconomic inequality, municipalities increasingly serve as frontline actors in shaping adaptive and inclusive urban futures. This article examines how Futures Bazaar, a participatory futuring method, can develop future literacy and resilience within municipal governance. Drawing on survey data from a multi-case study involving 13 Swedish municipalities, based primarily on responses from organisers coordinating the events across municipalities, and complemented by an in-depth survey of participants from one workshop, this study analyses how Futures Bazaar workshops engage civil servants, policymakers, and citizens in co-creating tangible future scenarios to address locally defined societal challenges. Framed within theories of participatory design, co-creation, and strategic foresight, the article explores how futures are imagined and negotiated in municipal contexts, and how this reshapes the agency of local actors in future-making. The findings show that Futures Bazaar functions as a temporary yet transformative space for challenging institutional path dependencies and stimulating systemic thinking. Through playfulness, prototyping, and dialogue, the method helped unlock participants’ imagination, enabling them to move beyond existing constraints. However, the study also identifies critical frictions, such as organisational inertia, limited policy integration, and the exclusion of marginalised voices that constrain the method’s long-term impact. By investigating how municipalities can navigate challenges through design-led speculative engagement, this study contributes to a broader understanding of urban planning as both a technical, imaginative, and democratic practice. It argues that participatory futuring tools like the Futures Bazaar can help realign urban governance toward more anticipatory, inclusive, and situated future-making practices, provided they are supported by institutional commitment and structural anchoring.

Keywords

co-creation; design methods; futuring; municipal governance; participatory design; speculative design; strategic foresight

1. Introduction

The public sector and municipalities increasingly face complex challenges in a rapidly changing world marked by societal, environmental, and technological uncertainties (Sjöblom, 2024). These challenges include climate adaptation, demographic shifts, digital transformation, and evolving citizen expectations (Frantzeskaki et al., 2018; Lindvall, 2023; OECD, 2024). Addressing these issues requires innovative and forward-looking approaches that strengthen resilience and enhance strategic decision-making in municipal governance. Accordingly, public organisations need to strengthen their capacity to anticipate change, adapt, and act under conditions of uncertainty (Sjöblom, 2024).

Existing research in futuring and design demonstrates the importance of collaborative methods in fostering innovation and addressing societal challenges (cf. Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Dunn, 2022). However, despite these recognised benefits, their systematic application within municipal governance remains underexplored. Studies have emphasised the need for tools that integrate citizens' voices into strategic decision-making processes while preparing communities for future uncertainties (Dunagan & Candy, 2017; Dunn, 2022; Manzini, 2015).

Futuring is here understood as a set of practices aimed at systematically exploring multiple possible futures to support reflection, learning, and strategic decision-making in the present. Rather than predicting outcomes, futuring involves engaging actors in imagining, discussing, and materialising alternative futures. In municipal contexts, futuring is applied as a participatory and exploratory practice that supports long-term thinking, anticipatory capacity, and collective sense-making.

In line with this, this article explores how Futures Bazaar workshops (Cuttica & Candy, 2022) contribute to resilience-building in the public sector. Futures Bazaar employs participatory methods to co-create future scenarios with diverse stakeholders, bringing together citizens, experts, and decision-makers to prototype tangible artefacts representing alternative futures. Through this process, the workshops create a shared space for learning, reflection, and innovation.

As a participatory method within the design and futures fields, Futures Bazaar combines speculative design, scenario work, and prototyping, making abstract ideas of the future more concrete and accessible. It operationalises this by creating physical artefacts from imagined futures, which are exhibited in a so-called futures market (the bazaar). This enables reflection, discussion, and shared learning around alternative futures and their implications (cf. Cuttica & Candy, 2022). Futures Bazaar has been used in various contexts to support critical and creative futures thinking. The method emphasises accessibility and inclusivity, allowing both citizens and decision-makers to participate as active future-makers rather than passive recipients of future scenarios (Dunagan & Candy, 2017).

The concept of the Futures Bazaar is not yet widely established in the academic literature, but the method draws on principles of participatory design (Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Røiseland, 2021; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), strategic foresight (Barendregt et al., 2024; Bock et al., 2016; Pólvora & Nascimento, 2021; Szczepanikova & Van Crieking, 2018), and co-creation (Light, 2021; Sanders, 2000; Sanders & Stappers, 2014). Through this combination, the Futures Bazaar offers a distinctive space for engaging diverse stakeholders in envisioning and co-creating preferred futures (see Andersen et al., 2021; Barendregt et al., 2024; Bisht, 2017; Light, 2021; Lundmark et al., 2023; Sjöblom, 2024). It prioritises co-creation, learning, and reflection as drivers of transformative change. Furthermore, it integrates systems thinking and exponential thinking to address complexity and explore disruptive trajectories beyond incremental development, encouraging participants to explore innovative solutions to complex challenges (cf. Bason & Austin, 2022; Dunagan & Candy, 2017).

By investigating how Futures Bazaar, as a participatory method designed to engage stakeholders in envisioning sustainable futures, builds municipal capacity to address national and local challenges, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on participatory design and futuring by extending its application within municipal governance.

In January 2025, 13 municipal and public service actors across Sweden organised simultaneous Futures Bazaar workshops as part of a coordinated national initiative led by three municipal innovation leaders. The municipal or public service actors involved varied in size, governance structures, and prior engagement with participatory methods. Each actor arranging a workshop selected a future-oriented theme relevant to their local context, ranging from climate adaptation and ageing populations to digital transformation and community resilience. The initiative marked the first large-scale application of the Futures Bazaar method within the Swedish public sector, serving as both an experiment in participatory futuring and a strategic effort to build local capacities for future resilience and innovation. Based on this initiative, this study investigates how Futures Bazaar strengthens future literacy, resilience, and innovation capacity in municipalities. It focuses on how this participatory method can address national challenges within municipal contexts, such as climate adaptation, digitalisation, and social inclusion, enhance municipalities' capacity for envisioning futures, and foster citizen and civil servant engagement in local governance. The overarching goal is to generate empirically grounded insights into how speculative and participatory methods can support municipal responses to complex, future-oriented challenges.

Responding to the identified research gap, the present study examines Futures Bazaar as a participatory futuring method in municipal governance, contributing empirical knowledge on how such practices are enacted, negotiated, and constrained in real-world public-sector contexts. Accordingly, the study addresses the following objectives:

1. Examine Futures Bazaar's implementation across municipalities;
2. Explore organisers' and participants' experiences of its value and limitations;
3. Analyse conditions enabling participatory futuring to support municipal learning and resilience.

Beyond its methodological contribution, this study also speaks to questions of agency and disruption in urban future-making. By temporarily reconfiguring who is invited to imagine, articulate, and negotiate possible futures, the Futures Bazaar can be understood as an intervention that unsettles established

planning routines and expert-led foresight practices. Rather than producing fixed visions, it foregrounds future-making as a negotiated and collective process where agency over the future is redistributed, contested, and made visible.

The article is structured as follows. First, an overview of relevant background and prior research is provided. Next, the study's methodological approach, including data collection and analysis, is outlined. This is followed by findings on the applications and outcomes of the Futures Bazaar. Finally, the discussion contextualises the findings, and the conclusion outlines implications for policy, practice, and future research.

2. Background

This study is informed by research in futuring and participatory design. Futuring methods, such as scenario planning and speculative design, emphasise the co-creation of visions for preferred futures (Candy, 2010; Curry & Hodgson, 2008).

2.1. Participatory Design Initiatives in Municipal Governance

Participatory design, rooted in democratic ideals originating from Scandinavian design practices in the 1970s, seeks to empower participants by involving them directly in the design process, ensuring that solutions are equitable and inclusive (Ehn, 2008; Simonsen & Robertson, 2013). It is widely used to engage stakeholders, particularly citizens, in co-creating solutions that impact their communities. Participatory design emphasises collaborative processes where designers and users jointly contribute to the development of public spaces, services, and policies. Such initiatives often rely on strong local partnerships and active citizen engagement to enhance public value and community identity (Eker, 2021).

According to Pólvara and Nascimento (2021), co-creation, combined with participatory methods, plays a vital role in stimulating broad social engagement. Their research shows how speculative design and foresight can be integrated into policy labs to enable experimentation and citizen input (Pólvara & Nascimento, 2021). In parallel, Røiseland (2021) emphasises that opening space for multiple perspectives and actively challenging singular assumptions about the future is crucial for cultivating participatory methods in futures work, a prerequisite for equitable and pluralistic planning.

2.2. Futuring and Futures Bazaar as Methods in Municipal Work

Futuring, or strategic foresight, is a methodical practice of exploring multiple possible futures to support decision-making and better prepare for change. In this article, foresight practices refer to structured yet exploratory activities, such as scenario building, horizon scanning, and speculative design, that help organisations reflect on uncertainty rather than predict outcomes (OECD, 2025). Given the accelerating pace of societal and technological change, municipalities increasingly rely on anticipatory methods to navigate uncertainty and plan strategically (OECD, 2024, 2025). Participatory foresight, in particular, is valuable for municipalities because it helps to identify trends and uncertainties, surface diverse perspectives, strengthen preparedness, integrate sustainability, improve policy flexibility, build legitimacy, develop long-term strategies, and foster innovation through co-creation and citizen participation (Nascimento et al., 2016; Rosa et al., 2021).

Previous research on the use of futuring methods has identified both significant advantages and notable challenges associated with participatory futuring in the public sector context. On the one hand, participatory foresight has been shown to increase the capacity to anticipate and prepare for future challenges by enabling the exploration of alternative futures, trend identification, and strategic planning (Rosa et al., 2021). Such methods also strengthen the legitimacy and anchoring of decisions, as citizen and stakeholder involvement makes outcomes more responsive to local needs and enhances democratic buy-in (Dixon et al., 2018). Rosa et al. (2021) show how participatory foresight projects in regional contexts produced citizen-generated artefacts (scenarios, narratives, and visions) that influenced mission-oriented policy agendas by exposing alternative futures and pressing assumptions, underscoring that meaningful participation can expand legitimacy and reflexivity in innovation policy. Furthermore, long-term strategies developed through inclusive futures work tend to support sustainable development, helping public sector actors to address immediate concerns while also considering intergenerational equity and systemic resilience (Dixon et al., 2018; Rosa et al., 2021).

On the other hand, previous research has shown that applying futuring and the Futures Bazaar can be resource-intensive, requiring substantial time, expertise, and financial investment (Dixon et al., 2018). Competence development is another challenge, as municipal staff may lack experience with futures methods, scenario work, or participatory facilitation (Rosa et al., 2021). Moreover, participation in workshops does not automatically translate into systemic transformation. Ensuring all residents can engage equally, attending to power imbalances, and linking participatory events to formal policy are essential to avoid tokenism or superficial inclusion (Dixon et al., 2018; Rodela & Lundmark, 2025; Rosa et al., 2021). Finally, implementation remains a persistent challenge: Without mechanisms to carry insights forward into policy and practice, the potential impact of foresight exercises is significantly reduced (Rosa et al., 2021).

Several countries successfully use futuring in the public sector. For example, the UK Government has a Futures Toolkit which includes several futuring methods and tools, demonstrating how governments can embed futures thinking into policy processes to enhance robustness and strategic flexibility. However, to be effective, these methods have previously been proven to require institutional support, facilitation expertise, resources, and mechanisms to translate insights into concrete policy and practice (Rosa et al., 2021).

Previous research has shown that integrating co-creation, participatory design, and futuring methods presents a promising foundation for the public sector to engage more robustly with uncertainty and complexity. However, it has also been shown that success depends on institutional support, process legitimacy, and effective translation of futures insights into action (cf. Bason, 2017; Dixon et al., 2018; Manzini, 2015). The Futures Bazaar, as a participatory futuring tool, offers potential for engaging citizens in envisioning and co-creating sustainable futures, but further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of participatory futuring methods in municipal governance and to develop actionable insights for their implementation. This study begins to address this need by empirically examining how the Futures Bazaar method was implemented and experienced across a national initiative involving 13 municipalities, focusing on both organisers' cross-municipal perspectives and participants' experiences of the workshops.

The concepts used throughout the article are applied pragmatically rather than exhaustively. Rather than offering comprehensive theoretical accounts, the study employs these terms as analytical lenses to interpret how participatory futuring practices were enacted and experienced in municipal contexts.

2.2.1. The Futures Bazaar Workshop Format

Compared to other participatory foresight approaches, the Futures Bazaar is distinctive in its combination of a bazaar-like, open format, the use of tangible speculative artefacts, and a nationally coordinated initiative implemented through locally adapted workshops. The Futures Bazaar workshop in this study followed a structured yet flexible format designed to support participatory futures explorations. Each workshop is organised around a locally defined future-oriented theme and typically engages municipal employees, local stakeholders, policymakers, and, in some cases, citizens in envisioning future scenarios. The workshops followed a consistent structure, including the following elements: an initial introduction framing the future challenge, warm-up activities encouraging imaginative thinking, scenario-building exercises focused on a defined future horizon, hands-on prototyping using craft and design materials, and a concluding “bazaar” where participants present and discuss their future artefacts. Through this combination of dialogue, playfulness, and materialisation, abstract futures are made tangible and open for collective reflection.

3. Methodology and Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the potential of Futures Bazaar as a tool for municipal work and for fostering future resilience. The study adopts a practice-based and exploratory research approach, informed by participatory research principles, empathising collaboration between researchers and practitioners, and close engagement with real-world challenges in municipal contexts (cf. Reason & Bradbury, 2008). By closely engaging with the municipal context and studying an ongoing participatory initiative, the study aims to generate insights that are both contextually relevant and practically applicable.

While the initiative involved 13 municipalities organising Futures Bazaar events, the empirical focus of this study is primarily on the organisers’ perspectives across the national initiative. The organisers coordinated and facilitated the workshops locally, thereby providing a cross-municipal view of how the method was adapted, implemented, and reflected upon in different contexts. The participating municipalities were recruited through an open call coordinated by the initiative organisers, rather than through a formal sampling strategy designed for research purposes. To complement this organiser-focused dataset, the study includes a more in-depth participant survey from one selected workshop, providing illustrative insights into participants’ experiences with the method.

3.1. Data Collection

The primary data collection for this study consists of two qualitative surveys, one with the organisers and one with participants at one of the workshops, providing complementary perspectives on the process and outcomes.

As complementary data, the author conducted participatory observations during two online meetings with the various organisers of the Futures Bazaar workshops (one before the event and one after, 60 minutes each), as well as two of the workshops to document interactions, decision-making processes, and emergent dynamics. The two workshops were video recorded in their entirety (390 minutes of video recordings), and 247 images were collected. Detailed field notes were maintained to capture qualitative nuances. These materials were analysed to contextualise survey findings.

The surveys were sent out digitally to all organisers responsible for coordinating the workshops, as well as to participants in one selected workshop. In total, 11 organisers responded to the survey, corresponding primarily to one organiser per municipality, with some organisers having responsibility for multiple local workshops within the initiative. In addition, 16 participants from one Futures Bazaar workshop, out of 32 workshop participants, responded to a participant survey. No systematic demographic or professional background data were collected from participants, as the survey focused on reflections on the workshop experience rather than participant characteristics. The organiser survey constitutes the primary dataset of the study, capturing reflections across multiple municipal contexts, while the participant survey serves as a complementary and illustrative dataset providing deeper insight into how the method was experienced at the workshop level.

3.2. Data Analysis

The collected data from the surveys were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2022) to identify recurring patterns and themes across the open-ended survey responses, particularly relating to imagination, participation, institutional constraints, and perceived future capacity building and resilience in municipal work.

The analysis followed these steps:

1. Familiarisation with the data through transcription and repeated reading;
2. Initial coding to identify meaningful segments;
3. Theme development by clustering related codes;
4. Refining themes to ensure they accurately represent the data;
5. Interpretation of themes and contextualisation within the broader literature on participatory design, strategic foresight, systemic innovation, and municipal resilience.

In the analysis, particular attention was paid to tracing how meanings articulated in the empirical material were progressively abstracted into higher-level analytical constructs. Initial manual coding focused on recurring patterns in the open-ended survey responses. These codes were grouped into preliminary sub-themes based on conceptual similarity and shared emphasis. In a subsequent analytical step, these sub-themes were further clustered into broader thematic categories that captured more general patterns across cases. This iterative movement between data, codes, and themes enabled the development of analytically coherent categories while remaining grounded in participants' formulations.

All quotes from the surveys were translated from Swedish into English with the support of ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, and, where necessary, adjusted by the authors to preserve meaning and nuance.

The study focused on participants' reflections on the process and perceived value of the Futures Bazaar rather than on systematic documentation of the speculative artefacts themselves or the observational data. The observational material was mainly used to contextualise and interpret patterns identified in the survey data, supporting the development and refinement of themes rather than generating separate analytical categories.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical research standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Participants, in all data collection, were informed about the study's purpose, their role, and how their data would be used before the data collection began. All data are anonymised, and no sensitive information was collected beyond what was necessary for understanding workshop interactions. The study provides in-depth insights into specific municipal and public service contexts. The participatory nature of the research may also introduce biases, as participants' involvement in co-creation may influence their perspectives on the process.

4. Results

The analysis progressed through an intermediate layer of sub-themes, which served as a conceptual bridge between empirical expressions in the survey material and the broader analytical categories presented below. The thematic analysis of the survey responses from Futures Bazaar organisers revealed several recurring themes that highlight both the strengths and dynamics of the workshops. Six recurrent core aspects emerged in the open-ended survey responses: "ideas," "future," "fun," "together," "participants," and "create" (see Figure 1). The prominence of "ideas" and "create" underscores the workshops' strong focus on creativity, innovation, and hands-on exploration, where participants actively generated new concepts. The frequent mention of the "future" shows that the workshops successfully engaged participants in imaginative and forward-looking thinking, aligning with the overarching goal of fostering futures literacy within municipal contexts. The term "fun" suggests that the sessions were perceived as enjoyable and energising, highlighting the role of playfulness and engagement as enablers of learning and participation. Meanwhile, "together" and "participants" emphasise collaboration and co-creation as central components of the method, illustrating how Futures Bazaar facilitated collective exploration among diverse actors.

These recurring aspects were grouped into intermediate sub-themes (middle row in Figure 1) based on shared meaning and analytical relevance. In a final step, the sub-themes were synthesised into three overarching analytical categories, which structure the presentation of the results. To deepen the

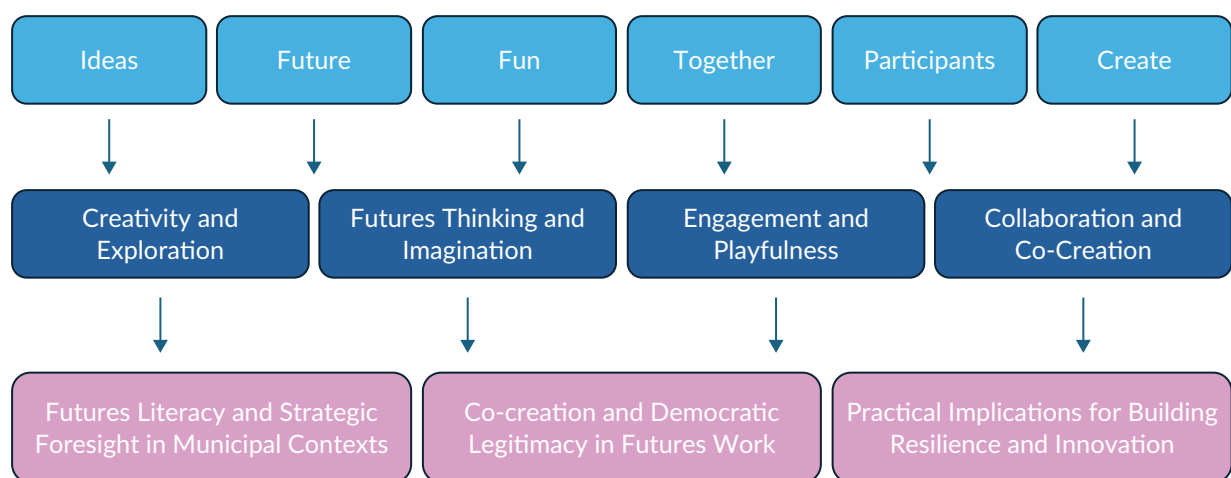


Figure 1. The analytical model illustrating the progression from survey-derived themes to overarching analytical categories.

understanding of these dynamics, the survey results were complemented by participatory observations, follow-up meetings, and workshop documentation. This approach enabled tracing how ideas, practices, and interactions unfolded across different contexts and organisational levels. Through this combined analysis, three broader thematic categories were identified that cut across the various materials. Figure 1 visualises the analytical movement from empirical material to higher-level conceptual interpretation.

By integrating theories of participatory design, strategic foresight, and co-creation, this study organises the results around three themes:

1. Futures Literacy and Strategic Foresight in Municipal Contexts
2. Co-Creation and Democratic Legitimacy in Futures Work
3. Practical Implications for Building Resilience and Innovation

4.1. Futures Literacy and Strategic Foresight in Municipal Contexts

Empirical evidence from the organising participants in the Futures Bazaar initiative highlights the importance of creating a space for unbounded ideation as part of municipal futures work. Several organisers highlighted how the playful and imaginative setting enabled participants to think beyond existing constraints. As one organiser reflected: “It was inspiring to be able to think freely without immediately having to limit oneself by practical obstacles.” Another emphasised the role of playfulness in supporting creative thinking:

The playfulness in the setup and the future fluff [craft materials and playful objects] as de-dramatising props made it easier for the participants to think anew, freely and differently. When it is extra important, then it is extra important that it is fun.

At the same time, organisers acknowledged the challenges of balancing open-ended brainstorming with actionable outcomes. One noted:

This time, they got to brainstorm completely freely on things that actually do not exist today, that might exist in the future. I think we would need to be a bit more limited to actually bring out solutions that we can continue working with.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the workshops functioned as a practical arena for *futures literacy*, an opportunity for participants to train their ability to imagine and articulate alternative futures beyond present constraints. The process of open-ended exploration was experienced as both liberating and generative, fostering creativity and new perspectives on future possibilities. Participants likewise emphasised the empowering aspect of the workshops: “It was liberating to be able to fantasise about a perfect future...and that we as a municipality can help shape it. We must not lose that thought.”

The reflections also indicate an awareness of the inherent tension between imaginative freedom and strategic direction, underscoring the methodological challenge of transforming exploratory thinking into insights that can meaningfully inform municipal planning and long-term capacity building. As one participant expressed:

The thought of shaping rather than meeting the future was inspiring. I felt less inclined to accept that things “are as they are” and more eager to challenge things that previously had been “truths one just has to live with.”

Organisers also reflected on how prototyping helped to concretise abstract ideas about the future. To illustrate what was generated during the Futures Bazaar workshops, one group of participants developed a speculative future scenario imagining a society where the elderly population is valued and a society where citizens' well-being is a given. Based on that scenario, they developed prototypes of their futures artefacts (see Figure 2). One of the organisers noted: “When we started creating physical prototypes, our ideas became much clearer; it helped us see what could actually be possible.”

Another one stated:

It is exciting to experience how powerful a futures prototype can be for making visible our thoughts about the future and fundamental premises for problem-solving in the future....The power of prototyping as a method for making visible thoughts, assumptions, driving forces, is important to make visible both what will be new in the future, but also to put a finger on what will remain, things that are human and that have shaped us as individuals and as a society over a very, very long time.



Figure 2. Images of four examples of the created future artefacts exhibited at the bazaars.

At the same time, participants appreciated the openness and creative affordances of the method, while also emphasising the need for stronger integration between imaginative practices and formal strategic processes. As one organiser reflected: “We came up with lots of exciting ideas, but what happens now? How do we take them further?” Or as expressed by a participant: “I wished for one more step in the form of: ‘Here we have a brilliant idea. How do we make the impossible a little more possible?’” Another highlighted the challenge of translating prototypes into actionable steps: “I thought a lot about ‘and now then, or what happens next, how do we take these prototypes further into the organisation?’” Organisers also pointed to the need for structured follow-ups to embed ideas institutionally:

To take the prototypes from the workshop further within the organisation, a structured follow-up with division of responsibilities is needed, as well as resources and budget to support the development.

A recurring reflection among the organisers was the challenge of translating creative ideas into concrete actions. Many expressed a desire for clearer links between the ideation process and actual implementation.

As one put it: “It would have been useful to end with a planning session where we concretised the next steps for the best ideas.” Or as a participant expressed it: “Maybe work a bit more with the question ‘how do we take this further right now?’ so that it doesn’t stop at fun prototypes.” This pattern indicates that while Futures Bazaar effectively stimulate imagination and creativity, a gap remains between idea generation and operationalisation. This was also highlighted in the survey by an organiser:

What worked less well during the workshop was a lack of clear follow-up and implementation of ideas, as well as an imbalance between creative freedom and structure, which meant that some participants needed more guidance....To maximise the effect going forward, a clearer follow-up plan, more structured guidance, and the inclusion of more perspectives could improve the process.

The balance between creative freedom and structural follow-up appears to be delicate; too much openness risks losing direction, while too much structure may stifle innovation. Future iterations could therefore include built-in mechanisms for prioritising, developing, and implementing ideas beyond the workshop setting.

While the method succeeds in unlocking creativity and new perspectives, participants also stressed the importance of follow-up mechanisms and clearer pathways from ideation to action. As one of the organisers mentioned: “A week after the workshop, I have been stuck on the thought of how we can turn the ideas from the workshop into concrete actions and changes, so that they don’t just remain theories.” A participant quote aligns with this: “I find it difficult to see how one moves from visionary thinking to carrying out a real change. Which method can be used to move forward? Or is that not the purpose?” These reflections underscore that participatory foresight not only requires imaginative capacity but also institutional mechanisms to translate futures thinking into action.

4.2. Co-Creation and Democratic Legitimacy in Futures Work

In the analysis, Futures Bazaar emerged as a platform for dismantling hierarchies and fostering open dialogue between municipal representatives and citizens. As a co-creative format, the method enabled forms of interaction that temporarily challenged established roles and routines, thereby enhancing democratic legitimacy by amplifying diverse societal voices in unique ways. Several participants in the survey emphasised the unique role of the method in facilitating interactions that would not typically occur in formal settings. One organiser noted this in relation to the playfulness of the method:

Playful and rewarding for creating dialogue and collaboration. Professional playfulness opens up for creativity, which is fun, but how do we land this in the everyday life of more people?....The power of being able to arrange things together with others without formal structures. Fun! More of that!

The emphasis on playfulness points to how the informal character of the setting lowered thresholds for participation and collaboration compared to more formal municipal contexts. A participant expresses: “How important it is that we talk to each other across responsibility boundaries/area boundaries. This is an excellent way to also get colleagues to raise their gaze and not just be stuck in the present.” Together, these reflections suggest that the playful environment enabled a different kind of conversation, more relaxed, imaginative, and open, where participants could highlight things they might not otherwise have voiced. Coupled with the collaborative mood of the session, this atmosphere fostered openness, as one organiser

noted: “Togetherness. Getting to know each other in an important conversation about how we want to create the future.” Another organiser emphasised: “There is power in collaborating across municipal borders. There is power in gathering different ages in futures work.” These accounts highlight how Futures Bazaar temporarily created conditions for cross-boundary interaction and shared ownership of future-oriented discussions. In line with this, the analysis also highlighted the importance of working together and creating a shared sense of ownership over the process. Many organisers stressed that combining different perspectives was central to the value of Futures Bazaar. As one put it: “The importance of brainstorming together, and finding shared positive images that we together can work towards for a better world/future.” The format enabled participants to collectively explore alternative futures beyond formal roles. It created a temporary arena where cross-sectoral encounters could take place, broadening participants’ understanding of municipal challenges and possibilities for transformation.

This emphasis on co-creation and shared ownership was also reflected in the participants’ assessments of what they took away from the workshops. As one of the organisers put it:

The participants took with them several important insights from the event: a sense of engagement and participation, a new understanding of futures work, and the value of collaboration and diversity of perspectives.

From an analytical perspective, this indicates that the co-creative setting supported learning across professional boundaries and fostered mutual understanding between participants who might otherwise rarely collaborate. However, the organisers also identified challenges in maintaining balanced participation. Some noted that not everyone found it easy to engage fully and that certain participants required more guidance to navigate the process. Others expressed a wish for a broader inclusion of perspectives, especially from citizens and actors outside the municipal organisation: “There was also limited time to really dive deep into all the ideas, and more perspectives from other groups, such as residents, could have enriched the discussions further.” These reflections point to limitations in how far the co-creative ambition was realised in practice.

A few organisers also observed that group dynamics sometimes led to unequal participation, with some individuals dominating discussions while others remained more silent, and that some ideas got stuck early in the process:

The participants got stuck in earlier ideas. Something that was addressed during the creation of prototypes. It could be handled well by emphasising that the fluff should be used and that they are allowed to change the purpose of the objects. We also received constructive criticism that we should give them time to write off old ideas.

Rather than indicating a failure of co-creation, these observations highlight the active role of facilitation in shaping participation and reopening the space for alternative perspectives. While co-creation was a strength of the Futures Bazaar format, it also demands careful facilitation to ensure that all voices are heard and that participation is genuinely equitable. The need to actively counter dominant ideas and voices illustrated how power relations can persist even within participatory formats. The above quote does not explicitly state that some took up more space than others, but it shows that certain participants dominated the conversation with pre-existing ideas, which required active facilitation to create space for other perspectives.

At the same time, challenges remain in ensuring equitable participation. Despite the method's potential, several of the organisers reflected on difficulties reaching marginalised groups or those not already engaged in municipal processes.

Some noted that while Futures Bazaar was inclusive in format, the actual diversity of participants varied significantly depending on local context and outreach efforts. Without active strategies for inclusion, such as collaboration with local community groups or tailored invitations, certain perspectives risk being underrepresented. Moreover, structural and institutional constraints were cited as barriers to truly equal participation. One of the organisers remarked: "I think they took with them that it is possible to use other methods, but I don't think they themselves will pick it up and do something with it. We are too immature." The reflection points to a perceived gap between participatory engagement and organisational capacity to act on the outcomes. Or as another organiser expresses it:

The prototypes themselves are perhaps difficult to take further, and not necessarily something any of us who participated would work with. But we all work with societal challenges in different ways, so the discussions and input that emerged, especially during the map sheet, are something we can all take further in our work.

Taken together, these reflections point to a gap between the creative energy generated during the Futures Bazaar and the institutional capacity to act on it and the institutional conditions required to sustain their effects. As one participant puts it, "We should do this around a specific issue in my administration. I thought that these are questions and a method that I WANT to work with!" However, while participants found value in the discussions, the lack of clear ownership or follow-up mechanisms risks limiting the long-term impact of the ideas. This underscores the importance of embedding co-creation processes within structures that can sustain and implement outcomes, rather than treating them as isolated participatory one-off events.

4.3. Practical Implications for Building Resilience and Innovation

A prominent theme in the analysis was that Futures Bazaar was perceived as contributing to municipalities' capacity to manage uncertainty by fostering a culture of continuous learning and experimentation. The method appeared to support resilience-oriented practices by encouraging municipalities to step outside routine planning frameworks and explore unconventional ideas. As one organiser explains: "Creativity and fun are needed. Practising for the future needs to be done continuously; we need to try new things." Another emphasised: "More long-term thinking is needed when it comes to our society and our planet." Similarly, a participant reflected: "In the afternoon, I realised how important it is to think outside the box. Are we doing something that really benefits the future? Have we taken in perspectives from the municipality's different operations?" Together, these reflections point to an articulated need to legitimise experimentation, challenge established patterns, and create organisational space for creative reflection within public institutions.

Yet, several civil servants reported challenges in adapting the method to rigid bureaucratic structures or established routines:

Just the crazy shapes were a bit scary, and some said, "Good thing my boss isn't seeing me now..." There is a fear where I work that creative activities will be perceived as a waste of taxpayers' money.

This reflection illustrates how organisational cultures dominated by control and efficiency logics (Bason, 2017) can constrain the space for more open, creative ways of working. Another participant noted that while the workshops generated energy and ideas, connecting these outcomes to formal decision-making processes proved challenging:

I realised the importance of not only engaging the participants during the workshop, but also of following up and ensuring that the ideas lead to concrete changes. It's easy to get enthusiastic in the short term, but long-term commitment and the right resources are required for the ideas to be implemented.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that even though the workshop generated many insights and ideas, their organisational uptake was perceived as uncertain without a clear allocation of responsibility or implementation. As one participant expresses it: "Once again, everything comes down to the municipal management and what they are interested in pursuing." Analytically, this points to a recurring organisational tension: While there was enthusiasm for creative and participatory formats, established governance structures and managerial priorities limited their translation into sustained action. This helps explain why creating durable space for more open, experimental ways of working remained challenging despite the positive experience of the method.

5. Discussion

The findings from the Futures Bazaar workshops indicate that participatory and design-based approaches can enhance municipal capacity for foresight, innovation, and democratic engagement. While the workshops generated creativity and collective learning, their longer-term impact appears to depend on embedding outcomes within organisational structures. Futures Bazaar functions as a tool for enhancing municipalities' futures literacy, creativity, and democratic participation. By engaging diverse actors in imagining alternative futures, the workshops foster shared learning, collaboration, and exploration of unconventional ideas. While barriers and challenges were described by participants in the Results section, this Discussion brings these observations together to interpret their implications and to outline conditions for addressing them in future participatory futuring initiatives.

5.1. *The Tension Between Imaginative Freedom and Institutional Constraints*

Strategic foresight has become an increasingly vital tool for municipalities aiming to navigate complex societal challenges. The capacity to anticipate and adapt to future scenarios is crucial for ensuring sustainable development (Szczepanikova & Van Criekeing, 2018). According to the OECD (2025), building anticipatory capacity through strategic foresight enables public institutions to transform challenges into opportunities by adopting a forward-thinking approach. As such, the Futures Bazaar methodology offers a participatory framework through which municipal actors can actively explore future challenges and opportunities through speculative design activities. As the findings show (see Section 4.1), Futures Bazaar workshops created spaces for imaginative, forward-looking thinking, enabling participants to explore alternative futures beyond current policy and organisational constraints. By engaging in hands-on activities such as prototyping and speculative design exercises, and by making abstract ideas tangible, municipalities were able to identify potential risks and opportunities, making futures work more action-oriented. These

practices support what has been described as “futures literacy” (Dunagan & Candy, 2017; Miller, 2018) and thereby enhance the participants’ capacity to anticipate, reflect on, and negotiate pathways for action. Through this approach, municipalities can strengthen their ability to make strategic decisions and foster a culture of anticipatory governance (cf. Barendregt et al., 2024).

As demonstrated in Section 4.1, the participants highlighted prototypes as a way of concretising and visualising abstract ideas about the future. These reflections illustrate how the act of prototyping operates as an epistemic and material practice that connects imaginative exploration with critical inquiry. By materialising abstract ideas, participants were able to make implicit assumptions visible and collectively negotiate what futures might be desirable or feasible (cf. Dunagan & Candy, 2017; Light, 2021). Thus, prototyping operated not merely as a creative exercise but as a situated foresight practice, linking speculation with organisational reflection.

At the same time, imagination alone proved insufficient. Participants repeatedly noted the tension between imaginative freedom and actionable outcomes. Without mechanisms for follow-up, clear responsibilities, and integration into strategic processes, insights risked remaining exploratory. Analytically, this tension points to a central paradox in participatory futuring: The same conditions that enable openness, creativity, and experimentation also risk detaching futures work from institutional decision-making. This tension echoes Bason and Austin’s (2022) concept of the “design paradox,” where creativity must coexist with administrative accountability. In this sense, Futures Bazaar can be understood as a form of temporary and situated disruption in planning practice. Rather than replacing existing decision-making structures, it momentarily suspends dominant logics of expertise, efficiency, and feasibility, allowing alternative futures to be explored. However, such disruption remains fragile and reversible, and its impact depends on whether insights generated through the process are subsequently taken up within institutional settings.

This analysis suggests that participatory futuring does not automatically translate into organisational change. Embedding participatory futures work within existing planning structures, while maintaining its exploratory character, emerges as a critical condition for sustaining organisational learning and democratic legitimacy (cf. Bason, 2017; Røiseland, 2021).

5.2. Co-Creation as Democratic Potential and Its Fragility

A central feature of Futures Bazaar is its participatory approach, fostering collaboration and emphasising inclusion and co-creation in strategic planning. In line with participatory design traditions (see Ehn, 2008; Simonsen & Robertson, 2013), the method extends co-creation into the temporal dimension of governance by inviting diverse actors to imagine and negotiate possible futures. Through its participatory and imaginative character, the method reconfigures agency in future-making, enabling participants to engage with questions of legitimacy, responsibility, and collective orientation that are typically reserved for expert-led planning processes.

Futures Bazaar can be seen as operating not merely as a participatory workshop but as an experimental governance arena where democratic imagination and social learning are enacted in practice. The setting temporarily suspended hierarchies and enabled cross-boundary interactions. This aligns with participatory design research that views co-design as an “infrastructure of participation” (Björgvinsson et al., 2012), fostering situated collaboration and shared meaning-making. As the findings show, the organisers in this

study emphasised the shared ownership and collective visioning, as well as the unique role of the method in facilitating interactions that would not typically occur in formal settings. Thus, Futures Bazaar may serve as a platform for temporarily unsettling hierarchies and fostering open dialogue between the actors. This form of co-creation enhances democratic legitimacy by amplifying diverse societal voices and challenging unilateral conceptions of the future (Røiseland, 2021).

However, participation was not always equitable. While Futures Bazaar opens up participatory spaces, it also risks reproducing existing power relations if institutional logics, resource allocation, and agenda-setting remain unchanged. In some workshops, certain voices dominated, while marginalised perspectives, particularly those of residents, were underrepresented. Analytically, this points to a core tension in participatory futuring: While the format aspires to inclusivity, it may simultaneously reproduce existing power relations if issues of access, facilitation, and representation are not actively addressed. These moments of openness were fragile and required deliberate facilitation to be sustained beyond the workshop. While the temporary suspension of formal hierarchies can spark creativity and engagement, the key challenge lies in translating this energy into lasting institutional practices without re-inscribing established exclusions. In this sense, Futures Bazaar functions both as a space of democratic potential and as a testing ground for more inclusive and dialogical forms of municipal foresight work. Its democratic promise is therefore conditional rather than inherent, highlighting the need for deliberate facilitation, diversity-sensitive recruitment, and inclusive design strategies to ensure co-creation genuinely reflects a plurality of voices.

5.3. When Futuring Becomes Organisational Learning

Taken together, the findings highlight both the promise and fragility of co-creation in municipal futures work. While Futures Bazaar supported innovative thinking and cross-sectoral dialogue, its democratic and organisational impact was contingent on institutional readiness, facilitation capacity, and follow-up structures. Co-creation formats like Futures Bazaar can enhance legitimacy and dialogue, but their democratic potential and learning potential depend on sustained accessibility, responsiveness, and organisational commitment.

The practical application of the method and its effectiveness varied depending on local contexts, needs, and organisational readiness. While the findings show that workshops generated a great deal of enthusiasm and ideas, a lack of structured responsibility often risked leaving outcomes unrealised. This illustrates the recurring tension between innovation and implementation: Creative ideas are welcomed, but without institutional mechanisms, they rarely inform policy or planning (Pólvora & Nascimento, 2021). Analytically, this tension can be understood as a structural rather than a procedural issue, where participatory formats are introduced without corresponding adjustments to decision-making routines and accountability structures. Thus, municipalities with prior experience in participatory and design-oriented methods tend to integrate the Futures Bazaar more seamlessly into ongoing innovation or strategic planning processes, while others encounter challenges in adapting the method to existing bureaucratic structures and managerial routines. There is also a risk that workshop outcomes may not translate into concrete policy changes without clear mechanisms for implementation and follow-up (Pólvora & Nascimento, 2021). This organisational tension mirrors what Bason and Austin (2022) describe as the “design paradox” in public sector innovation, where creative methods are welcomed rhetorically but rarely embedded in practice. Rather than a lack of ideas or engagement, the constraint lies in how organisations authorise, prioritise, and

sustain experimental knowledge. The variation between municipalities highlights both the flexibility of the method and the fact that its transformative potential depends less on facilitation quality alone and more on institutional embedding.

The Futures Bazaar workshops thus offer municipalities a promising approach for building resilience and fostering innovation. However, their long-term effectiveness depends on internal commitment, follow-up structures, and the recognition of experimentation as a legitimate part of governance. Without these enabling conditions, the method risks becoming an isolated event rather than a catalyst for systemic change. More broadly, operating at the intersection of experimentation and institutionalisation, the temporary design intervention of Futures Bazaar opens new spaces for collaboration and imagination, yet its long-term impact depends on municipalities' ability to absorb and sustain these practices. Institutional readiness, facilitation competence, and leadership are therefore not supplementary but constitutive conditions for translating creative participation into lasting organisational learning (Bason & Austin, 2022).

5.4. Implications for Municipal Resilience and Learning

Previous research has shown that futuring practices (i.e., Futures Bazaar) can be resource-intensive, requiring substantial time, expertise, and financial investments (Dixon et al., 2018). The findings indicate that the integration into existing municipal structures often proves difficult, as it requires adjustments to established routines, roles, and decision-making logics. This suggests that participatory futuring challenges not only practices but also underlying institutional assumptions about legitimacy, efficiency, and authority.

By engaging multiple actors, municipalities can explore interdependencies, test assumptions, and co-create alternative pathways for action (Light, 2021; Szczepanikova & Van Crielinge, 2018). However, participation in futuring workshops does not automatically translate into systemic transformation. Without explicit attention to power relations and inclusion, participatory formats risk reproducing existing hierarchies under the guise of openness. Ensuring that all residents can engage on equal terms, attending to power imbalances, and linking participatory events to formal policy processes are essential to avoid tokenism or superficial inclusion (Dixon et al., 2018; Rosa et al., 2021). Without such considerations, the transformative and democratic potential of participatory foresight risks remaining symbolic rather than structural.

When adequately supported, Futures Bazaar can strengthen municipal resilience by enabling actors to step outside routine planning frameworks, question assumptions, and experiment with unconventional ideas in a protected setting. Such spaces function as temporary arenas for organisational reflection, where dominant problem framings can be suspended and alternative futures explored.

However, these gains are fragile without institutional anchoring. Implementation emerges as a recurrent hurdle: Without concrete mechanisms to carry insights forward into policy and practice, ideas generated through futuring exercises may fail to influence decision-making, thereby reducing their potential impact (Rosa et al., 2021). Clear pathways from ideation to implementation (including follow-up, accountability, and integration into governance frameworks) are therefore essential.

Overall, while futuring and the Futures Bazaar hold significant potential to support strategic planning, innovation, and participation, their ability to create lasting change depends on systematic integration into

municipal operations. This integration requires not only competence development and organisational commitment but also a reconfiguration of how experimental knowledge is recognised, authorised, and acted upon within municipal governance. Future research should explore scaling and systematic integration into municipal decision-making and empirically assess contributions to resilience, innovation, and democratic legitimacy.

6. Conclusion

This study has contributed to research on participatory futuring and municipal governance in three main ways. First, it provides empirical insights from a nationally coordinated initiative involving multiple municipal actors. Second, it conceptualises the Futures Bazaar as a temporary design infrastructure that creates a civic co-creation arena at the intersection of experimentation and institutional governance. Third, it identifies key conditions, such as organisational readiness, facilitation competence, and follow-up mechanisms, which shape whether participatory futuring can support anticipatory governance and democratic legitimacy in municipal contexts. In an era of overlapping crises, municipalities increasingly act as frontline actors in shaping adaptive and inclusive urban futures. This study demonstrates that the Futures Bazaar offers a temporary yet transformative space for exploring alternative futures, challenging institutional dependencies, and stimulating futuring literacy as a collective and situated capacity. By engaging civil servants, policymakers, and citizens in co-creating tangible scenarios, the method unlocks imaginative capacity, enabling participants to move beyond present constraints while simultaneously exposing tension between exploratory freedom and institutional responsibility.

For municipalities considering adopting participatory futuring methods such as the Futures Bazaar, the findings suggest that transformative potential depends less on the creative format itself and more on the surrounding conditions. Institutional anchoring, structured follow-up mechanisms, facilitation competence, and inclusive participation practices emerge as critical enablers for translating temporary futures-oriented workshops into sustained organisational learning and anticipatory governance. Achieving transformative impact requires balancing creative exploration with structured implementation, fostering institutional readiness, and including diverse voices. When these conditions are met, workshops can serve as both a learning platform and a catalyst for systemic innovation, helping municipalities navigate uncertainty and build resilient, adaptive, future-oriented strategies.

The workshops foster collaboration, co-creation, and democratic legitimacy by enabling participants from diverse sectors and roles to engage in shared problem-solving, materialise abstract ideas, surface assumptions, and collectively negotiate desirable and feasible futures. At the same time, the study identifies critical frictions that limit long-term impact. Organisational inertia, limited integration into policy and strategic processes, and underrepresentation of marginalised voices can prevent insights from informing action. These frictions point to underlying power asymmetries and institutional path dependencies that shape whose futures are imagined, prioritised, and acted upon. Without deliberate facilitation, structured follow-up, and institutional embedding, the method risks remaining at the exploratory stage.

By integrating participatory methods, co-creation, and strategic foresight, the Futures Bazaar demonstrates how municipalities can move beyond conventional planning toward more imaginative, inclusive, and democratic approaches to future-making. Participatory futuring tools like Futures Bazaar can serve as a

learning platform, a catalyst for systemic innovation, and a means to realign municipal decision-making toward inclusive, forward-looking, and resilient strategies. In this sense, the Futures Bazaar can be seen not only as a participatory futuring method but as a temporary civic infrastructure that enables new forms of agency in urban future-making. Its disruptive potential lies less in radical outcomes than in its capacity to reconfigure roles, expectations, and imaginaries around who can legitimately speak about the future. Whether such moments of disruption lead to longer-term transformation depends on institutional anchoring, follow-up, and political and organisational support.

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Navigating Urban Futures: Canal Istanbul and Contested Visions of Governance in Turkey

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Abstract

This article examines struggles over urban governance in contemporary Turkey through the intertwined dynamics of authoritarian neoliberalism and democratic contestation. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and recent debates on market-driven urbanism and state-led centralization, it situates Turkey within comparative scholarship on hybrid and electoral-authoritarian regimes. It argues that such regimes mobilize cities as strategic arenas of hegemonic struggle, where executive centralization confronts counter-hegemonic claims to participation, accountability, and urban citizenship. From this perspective, urban transformation projects and governance reforms are not merely policy interventions but sites where political choices are recoded as technical necessity and contestation is displaced into the language of expertise, inevitability, and development. Building on this framework, the article uses the Canal Istanbul mega-project as a lens through which these dynamics become visible. Through a discourse-theoretical analysis, it examines how governmental narratives of technocratic inevitability, moralized service, and performative visibility seek to naturalize centralized authority, while municipal and civic actors articulate alternative claims centered on public interest, participation, and social justice. The Canal Istanbul controversy thus reveals how urban politics under electoral authoritarianism is neither fully depoliticized nor fully emancipatory; rather, it unfolds as a structurally uneven terrain in which authoritarian consolidation and democratic rearticulation are continuously co-produced.

Keywords

authoritarian urbanism; Canal Istanbul; democratic contestation; local governance; neoliberal megaprojects; Turkey; urban future

1. Introduction

Amid the erosion of democratic institutions in Turkey, cities have become key sites where authoritarian-neoliberal consolidation and democratic contestation converge under conditions of ongoing disruption. Since the early 2000s, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), local governance has been reshaped by neoliberal-authoritarian imperatives that have subordinated local politics to central power, turning the city into a locus of regime maintenance that sustains clientelist networks and mobilizes resources for political survival. At the same time, urban space has remained an arena of alternative politics, as civil initiatives, municipal actors, and opposition movements articulate competing visions of urban governance. Electoral shifts in 2019 and 2024, alongside the 2013 Gezi protests and the 2016 coup attempt, introduced successive disruptions to the established relationship between central and local power, unsettling the AKP's claims to uncontested authority. These overlapping disruptions resonate with broader diagnoses of a "polycrisis" in which, as Hilbrandt and Ren argue, "global systemic risks permeate all realms of life in unprecedented ways" (2025, p. 23), demanding new frameworks for understanding how urban futures are contested and made. Canal Istanbul, a planned 45-kilometer artificial waterway linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, emerged as one of the most visible arenas where these disruptions became politically salient, symbolizing competing visions of development, governance, and the urban future. The 2024 elections further intensified these tensions, as the central government increased fiscal, legal, and symbolic pressures on opposition municipalities.

Situating the analysis within broader debates on urban future-making under conditions of disruption, this article examines the Canal Istanbul project as a paradigmatic case of authoritarian urbanism and contested urban governance in Turkey, as discussed in debates on authoritarian urbanism and mega-projects (Aslan & Balaban, 2023; Erensü, 2024; Kuyucu, 2020; Yılmaz & Andız, 2023). It approaches the project through a discourse-theoretical lens, analyzing how competing political actors construct and legitimize large-scale urban interventions through antagonistic discursive formations. From this perspective, large-scale urban projects are not only material interventions but also sites where hegemonic visions of the urban future are articulated and contested, as urban space becomes a strategic arena in which authoritarian consolidation and democratic counter-practices confront one another. The analysis draws on a discourse-analytical reading of political texts and public interventions related to the Canal Istanbul project.

The article first outlines the logics of authoritarian neoliberal urban governance before examining Canal Istanbul as a site where these dynamics materialize. It then analyzes how competing discursive formations contest urban futures through antagonistic articulations. The conclusion reflects on the relationship between authoritarian consolidation and democratic contestation in urban governance.

2. The Hybrid Logics of Urban Governance Under Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Cities have become key sites for authoritarian urbanism, where neoliberal policies and political control are mutually reinforced through clientelist networks and large-scale urban projects (Bayraktar, 2020; Begadze, 2022; Can & Fanton, 2022; Deets, 2024; Koch, 2022; Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2025; Woźniak & İnal-Çekiç, 2023). Such configurations are rooted in the broader trajectory of neoliberal urbanism, which since the 1970s has been advanced through a discourse of market efficiency, competitiveness, and growth-oriented planning. Policies of privatization, deregulation, and the commercialization of public services have reconfigured urban

governance as a technocratic and market-oriented field structured around public–private partnerships and large-scale redevelopment, naturalizing growth as the primary horizon of political legitimacy (Can & Fanton, 2022, pp. 77–78; Keleş et al., 2025, p. 306).

As Harvey notes, the neoliberal transformation of the 1980s and 1990s turned the state into a “prime agent of redistributive policies,” advancing fiscal reforms and privatization schemes that favored capital interests (2006, p. 155). Swyngedouw highlights the concomitant depoliticizing rationality of neoliberal managerialism, which reduces politics to technocratic consensus and expert-driven governance that suppresses conflict under the guise of neutrality (2009, pp. 602–604, 2022, pp. 64–66). Yet under authoritarian conditions, technocratic rationality shifts from depoliticization to political control: Neoliberal instruments are selectively mobilized alongside clientelism, rent redistribution, and political domination, illustrating how market-oriented rationalities are rearticulated to sustain illiberal rule. Through this hybrid formation, state–capital alliances and coercive mechanisms reconfigure the relationship between market and state, producing new hierarchies and deepening the marginalization of vulnerable groups (Can & Fanton, 2022, pp. 81–92; Olt et al., 2024, pp. 14–15). As McLellan notes, decentralization reforms introduced in the name of accountability often generate recentralizing effects, allowing central governments to extend control over municipalities through budgetary regulation, planning oversight, and investment steering (2022, p. 6). Historically, such arrangements rarely produced genuine autonomy; instead, they reinforced technocratic governance and patronage under the guise of local empowerment (Bayraktar, 2007, 2020).

Taken together, the intertwining of neoliberal rationalities, recentralizing control, and patronage-based urban governance can be understood through Swyngedouw’s account of post-political urban arrangements, where technocratic management is combined with populist appeals that demand consent while delegitimizing dissent (2009, pp. 604–605, 2022, pp. 63–65). In this configuration, governance appears less as a site of democratic deliberation than as a domain of managerial performance and affective mobilization, reinforced through megaprojects and exclusionary policies that strengthen executive dominance over local resources and decision-making (Öktem, 2021; Woźniak & İnal-Çekiç, 2023, pp. 314–315). Appeals to efficiency, service, and progress thus normalize centralized authority and redefine legitimacy in terms of managerial capacity and delivery, embodied in the figure of the “project-oriented mayor” and in what Bayraktar calls the “myth of service” (2020, pp. 200–228).

At the same time, the urban realm remains deeply ambivalent. While it can facilitate centralized authority, it also generates forms of social and political plurality that enable contestation (Harvey, 2006; Koch, 2022; Pojani, 2018; Tansel, 2018). Large metropolitan regions, in particular, embody this tension: Their economic centrality and social heterogeneity make them key instruments of regime consolidation, yet also sites where participation and inclusion challenge authoritarian governance (İnal-Çekiç et al., 2024; Koch, 2022; Kohn, 2016; Le Galès, 2021; McLellan, 2022; Pojani, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2022; Zupan, 2023). In this sense, urban contestation does not emerge outside authoritarian-neoliberal governance but unfolds within it, as competing claims seek to define the meaning, limits, and legitimacy of urban rule. In Swyngedouw’s framework, such moments of contestation interrupt the post-political script by reasserting “the democratic” as a disruptive claim to equality against any fixed socio-spatial order (2022, pp. 67–68). Yet, as Zupan (2023) reminds us, these disruptions do not originate from an abstract outside of authoritarian-neoliberal governance but emerge from historically layered state–society relations in which coercion and consent are continuously reworked. This perspective cautions against reading authoritarian urbanism as a one-directional, top-down imposition and instead points

to the city as a terrain where hegemonic projects are stabilized, challenged, and occasionally rearticulated. Following Zupan, the articulation of neoliberal rationalities with authoritarian forms of urban governance can be understood as a historically evolved and contested configuration that leaves room for negotiation and limited openings (2023, pp. 32–33), even as it broadly corresponds to the post-political and post-democratic dynamics identified by Swyngedouw (2022).

Comparative cases across Europe (Warsaw, Prague), Latin America (São Paulo), and the Global South (Mozambique, South Africa) demonstrate that urban politics under authoritarian and illiberal conditions are shaped by ongoing struggles over legitimacy, authority, and the scope of democratic participation at the local level (Gervasoni, 2018; Gümrükçü, 2021; Panzano et al., 2025, pp. 2, 4). The struggle between the central government and the opposition-led Istanbul municipality around the Canal Istanbul project constitutes a contemporary instance of this broader pattern. The following discussion situates this confrontation within Turkey's urban governance regime, tracing how neoliberal reforms and executive centralization reshaped local politics and structured the conflict over Canal Istanbul.

3. Canal Istanbul and the Remaking of Local Politics in Turkey

First announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during the 2011 general election campaign as the “crazy project” (*çılgın proje*—a term used rhetorically to convey daring or audacious rather than “lunatic” in its literal English sense), Canal Istanbul has been presented as one of the largest infrastructure investments in the history of the Republic (Figure 1). The project has been promoted simultaneously as a solution to maritime congestion



Figure 1. Official map of the Canal Istanbul project area showing the canal axis (*Kanal Aksı*), study area (*Çalışma Alanı*), and social impact zone (*Sosyal Etki Değerlendirmesi [SED] Alanı*). Source: Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure (2020).

in the Bosphorus, a driver of economic growth, and a symbol of national ambition. From the outset, it has been framed in a technocratic language of necessity, expertise, and development, portraying the intervention as a matter of scientific planning rather than political choice (“‘Çılgın proje’: İstanbul’a ikinci boğaz,” 2011; Geniş, 2020).

Yet Canal Istanbul is more than a large-scale infrastructural enterprise. Its magnitude, mode of implementation, and the political contestation it has provoked render it a paradigmatic instance of how urban space becomes a strategic terrain where centralized executive authority, speculative capital accumulation, and local democratic claims intersect. This intersection is rooted in the neoliberal transformation of urban governance in Turkey that began in the 1980s, through which privatization and commercialization recast urban governance as a field of speculative investment and rent extraction, limiting meaningful local autonomy and reinforcing central oversight (Bayraktar, 2020, p. 213; Geniş, 2020, p. 7; İnal-Çekiç et al., 2024, p. 62). Harvey’s (2006) concept of “creative destruction” captures this dynamic: the continuous cycle of demolition and redevelopment enabling capital accumulation through urban restructuring.

The trajectory intensified after 2002, when the AKP embedded neoliberal urbanism within an increasingly centralized executive framework, aligned oversight institutions with party priorities, and positioned the state as a principal agent of capital accumulation (Tansel, 2018, pp. 200–205). Centralization was entrenched through legal reforms and political appointments, blurring municipal–state boundaries and rendering mayors structurally dependent on the executive (Alkan, 2015, pp. 866–869). Coercive interventions such as the appointment of trustees (*kayyum*) and the criminalization of elected representatives in Kurdish-majority municipalities under the 2016 state of emergency consolidated this system of executive tutelage (McLellan, 2022, p. 9; Tutkal, 2022, pp. 1169–1170). Within this framework, the AKP’s urban growth model has been driven by land speculation, real estate expansion, and construction, and has often been described as “bulldozer urbanism” (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011, p. 73). It has been operationalized through central agencies such as the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ), originally established as a social housing institution but later repurposed for state-led redevelopment and rent generation, as well as through party-aligned conglomerates.

In this configuration, mega-projects became the paradigmatic sites where technocratic, expert-led interventions fused with affective, populist appeals, translating what Swyngedouw theorizes as “post-political” logics into concrete spatial strategies that reorganized access to land, resources, and decision-making (2009, pp. 603–605). Rather than merely accelerating growth, these projects institutionalized regime consolidation by restructuring the city along class and political lines and embedding patronage networks within large-scale redevelopment (Geniş, 2020, p. 7). Projects such as the Third Airport and the Third Bridge exemplify this fusion of developmental spectacle and clientelist redistribution (Can & Fanton, 2022, pp. 87–88; Demiralp, 2018, p. 93; Keleş et al., 2025, p. 310; Tutkal, 2022, p. 1168). Reading through Adaman and Akbulut’s (2021) Gramscian account, this post-political configuration is not merely technocratic but constitutive of Erdoğan’s “three-pillared neoliberalism,” in which authoritarianism, populism, and construction-led developmentalism are continually mobilized to secure support, legitimacy, and manage opposition (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021, p. 280). Canal Istanbul marks the most far-reaching instance of this dynamic, condensing executive dominance, neoliberal growth imperatives, and patronage-based redistribution in a single project.

Yet this configuration cannot be understood as a stable order secured by consent. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe (1985), it is more accurately grasped as a hegemonic formation structured by ongoing antagonisms. These antagonisms were politically crystallized in the 2019 local elections, when the Republican People's Party (CHP) captured Istanbul and Ankara, while the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) secured several municipalities—many of which were subsequently placed under state trusteeship. These results exposed the fragility of the AKP's urban hegemony, as Istanbul, long described as “the AKP's most important hub of clientelist distribution of funds” and “a central node in the networks of illicit capital flows” (Öktem, 2021, p. 504), shifted to opposition control. This rupture was consolidated in the 2024 local elections, with the CHP retaining Istanbul and expanding its control nationwide, prompting increased central government pressure on opposition municipalities. What began after the 2019 elections as administrative oversight and fiscal restrictions escalated following the 2024 local elections into judicial interventions, arrests, and criminal investigations targeting opposition mayors and municipal staff, culminating in the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in March 2025.

Against growing central pressure, Canal Istanbul has become a key site where these tensions surface most visibly. Since its announcement, the project has provoked sustained opposition from municipal actors, civil society organizations, and professional chambers in Istanbul. Following the 2019 elections, the CHP-led municipality sought to halt its implementation through legal actions and public campaigns while advancing a discourse of “people-oriented local governance” (*halkçı belediyecilik*) that emphasized transparency, participation, and social justice (CHP, 2024; DEM Party, 2024; Doğanay & Özdemir Taştan, 2025). Initiatives such as open tenders, live-streamed council meetings, and digital participation tools like Istanbul is Yours aimed to reassert local government as a sphere of democratic accountability (İnal-Çekiç et al., 2024, p. 71; Szymański, 2025, pp. 12–13). Framed in these terms, opposition-led municipalities evoke Laclau's (2005) conception of left populism as the democratic articulation of dispersed social demands around inclusive notions of “the people” and “justice.” The struggle over Canal Istanbul thus becomes analytically salient as a confrontation between competing claims to legitimacy and divergent discourses of development, public interest, and urban governance.

4. Tracing Articulations: Analytical Approach and the Corpus

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory, the analysis approaches Canal Istanbul not merely as infrastructure but as a political project that contingently fixes meaning by articulating elements such as development, public interest, and urban transformation into a coherent formation while excluding alternatives (pp. 96–127). Central to this framework are the concepts of articulation and antagonism, through which meaning is partially stabilized and contested by competing claims to legitimacy (Laclau, 2005, pp. 68–100; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 105–127). These antagonisms crystallize around nodal points—privileged signifiers such as technocratic necessity, service, national development, participation, and justice—through which competing visions of urban governance are advanced.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach based on a purposive corpus capturing moments when Canal Istanbul's political meaning became visible and contested. Five such moments guide the analysis: Erdoğan's 2011 project announcement; the 2019 local election campaigns; İmamoğlu's first mayoral term; the 2024 election campaign; and İmamoğlu's second term, including the period following his detention, when discursive struggles intensified across press statements and social media.

Across these periods, the analysis draws on publicly available materials, including rally speeches, press coverage, social media posts, and official presidential transcripts. The cited excerpts are illustrative, highlighting recurring patterns of articulation and contestation. The analysis traces how government actors stabilize an authoritarian-neoliberal vision of urban governance by articulating Canal Istanbul through nodal points as necessary and indisputable, and how the opposition unsettles these fixations through competing claims to participation, justice, and democratic accountability.

5. Articulating Authoritarian Urbanism: Developmentalism as a Hegemonic Project

For the government, Canal Istanbul is cast not merely as a large-scale infrastructure project but as a central element of a hegemonic narrative in which development operates as the primary political signifier of legitimacy, authority, and national destiny. Within this articulation, support for the canal becomes synonymous with commitment to Turkey's progress, while opposition is constructed as obstruction. As Adaman and Akbulut's (2021) Gramscian account of Erdoğan's "three-pillared neoliberalism" suggests, developmentalism operates as both an ideological and material vehicle of hegemonic rule, mobilizing a catch-up imaginary that obscures uneven socio-environmental burdens while consolidating political support around large-scale projects (Adaman & Akbulut, 2021, pp. 284–285). In Laclauian terms, this formation structures an antagonistic frontier dividing the political field between those portrayed as advancing national development and those accused of blocking it, making Canal Istanbul a privileged site through which this antagonism is articulated and stabilized.

This antagonistic logic is articulated in President Erdoğan's remarks at the groundbreaking ceremony of the Sazlıdere Bridge, presented as the first concrete step of Canal Istanbul. In this address, development is constructed as a moral and historical benchmark against which political actors are judged, exemplified by the claim that "Turkey's recent history is full of examples of projects being blocked at every stage—from aircraft to engines, from defense to energy" ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan," 2021). Within this framing, the CHP is positioned not as a legitimate alternative with a different understanding of development, but as the embodiment of an obstructive mentality. This antagonism is reinforced through a developmentalist narrative that situates the governing party as the heir to earlier center-right traditions, portraying large-scale infrastructure projects as symbols of national advancement repeatedly hindered by the same actor. Canal Istanbul thus appears as the latest episode in this trajectory, converting political disagreement into a moralized dichotomy between builders and blockers and organizing development as a nodal point around which a hegemonic frontier is drawn.

The following subsections trace how this hegemonic framing is reproduced through interrelated nodal points—technocratic necessity, service, and spectacle—each narrowing the scope of legitimate contestation by presenting a deeply political intervention as the natural continuation of Turkey's developmental trajectory.

5.1. *Technocratic Inevitability: Development as Necessity*

Once development is established as the primary antagonistic frontier separating those portrayed as advancing Turkey's progress from those accused of obstructing it, the government stabilizes this division through a technocratic framing that presents Canal Istanbul as an objectively necessary intervention grounded in expertise and engineering rationality. Within this discursive configuration, development is

detached from democratic deliberation and recoded as inevitability, as alternative futures and environmental risks are displaced by expert knowledge and opposition is reframed as interference rather than a legitimate competing claim to the public interest.

The turn to technocratic rationality reflects broader shifts in urban governance under authoritarian neoliberalism, marked by the concentration of decision-making power in the executive and the marginalization of participatory mechanisms (Geniş, 2020, p. 7). In this context, political disagreement is recast as irrational obstruction, legitimizing executive-led modernization through emblematic large-scale projects.

Since its introduction during the 2011 general election campaign onward, Erdoğan has repeatedly justified Canal Istanbul through technocratic arguments centered on maritime safety and the management of increasing traffic in the Bosphorus. References to tanker congestion, accident risk, and regulatory limits anchored the project in ostensibly objective assessments, reinforcing the claim that the intervention was unavoidable rather than politically chosen (“‘Çılgın proje’: İstanbul’a ikinci boğaz,” 2011). Invocations of scientific precision and engineering expertise positioned the canal as a natural solution to a technical problem, a claim further reinforced in later speeches emphasizing the role of “hundreds of experts” (“Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan,” 2021) and in official infographics presenting it as a scientific necessity (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, 2020a; see Figure 2). Together, these discursive practices articulate security and expertise into a nodal configuration that fixes the canal as an objective engineering imperative rather than a politically contestable intervention.

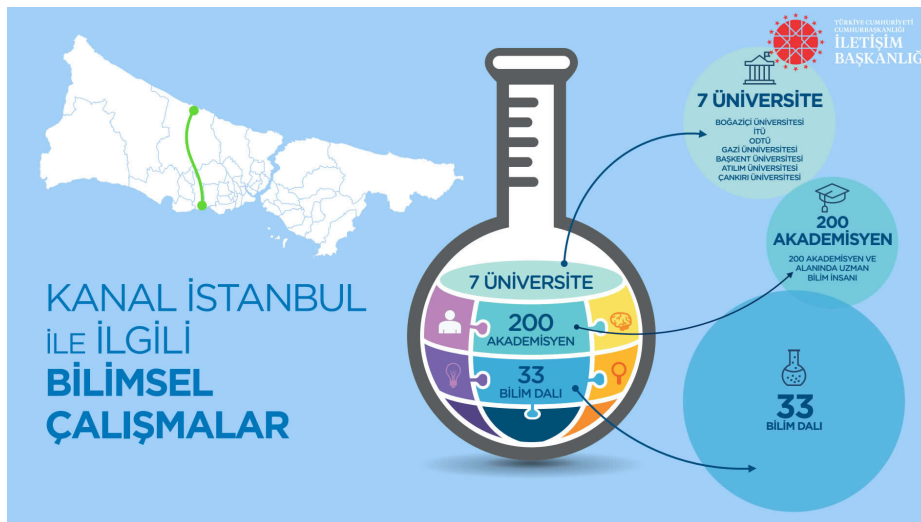


Figure 2. Official Canal Istanbul infographic highlighting research by 200 academics from seven universities across 33 disciplines. Source: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications (2020a).

This mode of depoliticization resonates with post-political governance, where expertise replaces democratic deliberation (Swyngedouw, 2009, pp. 609–613). This rearticulation of technocratic reason under authoritarian-neoliberal conditions reflects the hybrid logic discussed earlier, where neoliberal managerialism is fused with mechanisms of control and patronage. In this configuration, technocratic inevitability functions as a nodal point that binds development to necessity and expertise to authority, a connection explored in the following subsection through the moralized discourse of service and national pride.

5.2. Moralizing Development: Service, Pride, and the Emotional Economy

While technocratic necessity stabilizes Canal Istanbul as a development imperative, government discourse simultaneously mobilizes moral and affective registers articulated through the idiom of service. The project is aligned with other mega-projects within a broader politics of works, through which development is redefined as a moral obligation fulfilled through tangible outputs. Central to this articulation is the equation of service with *eser*—the enduring material work left behind. Erdoğan repeatedly presents Canal Istanbul as both development and service, contrasting those who “only talk” (the opposition) with those who “produce.” Visible construction thus operates as proof of commitment to national progress and as a metric of political legitimacy.

This logic is made explicit in Erdoğan’s frequent invocation of a proverb that defines humanity through the capacity to leave lasting works, drawing a moral boundary between builders and obstructors. In one such speech, he posits Canal Istanbul within this register:

Hey, CHP, your power and strength will not be enough to stop Canal Istanbul; we will build it anyway....We do not deal in empty talk; we get things done. As you know, a donkey dies leaving behind its saddle; a person dies leaving behind their works (*eser*)....As we take these steps, Turkey rises....The country and the nation need a politics of works and services (*eser ve hizmet siyaseti*) such as the one we pursue. (Mutlu, 2020)

Here, “*eser*” refers to the enduring material outputs of governance—concretely built infrastructures such as large-scale housing projects, highways, bridges, and tunnels. Through such formulations, Canal Istanbul is articulated as an *eser*: a visible and lasting output through which legitimacy is measured in terms of construction and inauguration rather than deliberation. In Erdoğan’s discourse, this literal meaning is further embedded within a broader right-wing developmentalist imaginary, where a politics of service recasts politics as a competition over projects and performance rather than as an ideological and conflictual field (Bora, 2021). Under this understanding of politics as service, the relationship between rulers and citizens becomes hierarchical rather than reciprocal, as completed works generate expectations of loyalty rather than participation—a logic resonant with Bayraktar’s notion of the “myth of service” (2020, pp. 211–213). As a result, the idiom of service complements technocratic necessity by anchoring legitimacy in material production and further narrowing the space of contestation. Opposition is thus reframed not merely as technical disagreement but as resistance to service itself.

5.3. Performing Development: Visibility, Spectacle, and Power

Building on technocratic necessity and moralized service, governance around Canal Istanbul shifts toward a politics of visibility in which material production becomes symbolic performance. In this configuration, infrastructure derives legitimacy less from its capacity to address everyday urban needs than from its ability to render power visible. Development is thus performed as spectacle, through which Canal Istanbul is articulated within broader processes of consent formation, as power is not only exercised but also staged as a condition of political belonging.

From its inception, Canal Istanbul has been accompanied by elaborate visual representations—animations and promotional materials—that foreground scale, speed, and monumentality (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, 2020a, 2020b). The project thus exemplifies how authoritarian-neoliberal urbanism transforms planning into a politics of visibility, diverting fiscal and symbolic capital away from citizens' everyday needs toward monumental projections of power. Opposition parties and professional chambers criticized these visualizations, arguing that official animations (Figure 3) depicted a city without people—an imagined future stripped of social and ecological realities where progress and inevitability are rendered visible while the conflicts of development are obscured.



Figure 3. Official Canal Istanbul promotional animation showing a ship navigating the planned canal route. Source: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications (2020b).

Erdoğan's response at an Istanbul rally on June 5, 2011, illustrates how representation substitutes for participation. Responding to objections to the animations, he stated:

Our mistake in the animation was that we had ships sailing through the canal. What we should have done was show people walking along it....Think about this: A canal will be built here, and tens of thousands of people will work on it....On both sides of the canal, we will create new settlements, shopping centers, and places where people will live. (Erdoğan, 2011)

By reframing criticism in terms of construction and settlement, the speech converts representational dispute into a reaffirmation of developmental authority. This politics of visibility articulates Canal Istanbul within a broader antagonistic frontier, positioning proponents of national development and service against obstructive forces resistant to progress. Through this division, nodal points such as development, service, productivity, and greatness are sutured together, while loyalty is naturalized as the appropriate response to monumental achievement. Emphasis on scale and global visibility reinforces this articulation, positioning citizens less as political subjects who deliberate and decide than as workers who build, consumers who inhabit, and bodies that populate the image of progress—thereby redefining participation as visibility.

By converting planning into performance and participation into representation, Canal Istanbul exemplifies how authoritarian-neoliberal urbanism fuses economic management with visual affect. The city becomes

both a stage and an object of power, where legitimacy is maintained through visibility, while everyday concerns such as housing precarity, environmental risk, mobility, and inequality are pushed out of the political arena. Yet this visual regime is not merely symbolic: Spectacular representations are inseparable from the material circuits of authoritarian-neoliberal governance, consolidating loyalty through clientelist networks and generating accumulation for regime-aligned capital (Demiralp, 2018; Tansel, 2019; Tuğal, 2023). Spectacle operates not as a façade but as a mechanism through which domination is materially and symbolically reproduced.

6. From “Crazy Project” to “People’s City”: The Counter-Discourse of Democratic Urbanism

This section examines the opposition’s discourse on Canal Istanbul not as a reactive inversion of the government’s discourse but as a distinct antagonistic frontier that reorganizes urban conflict. While the government naturalizes development as an unquestionable imperative, opposing “builders” to “obstructors,” the opposition does not invert this binary; rather, it dislocates it by redefining both the subject of harm and the locus of political legitimacy.

Following the 2019 local elections, Istanbul became the primary arena in which this alternative articulation took institutional and discursive form. Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu positioned himself as the representative of a political rationality grounded in participation, transparency, and social justice, contrasting with spectacle, technocratic authority, and centralized control. Canal Istanbul was cast not as a development imperative but as a project serving a narrow network of political and economic elites while imposing ecological, social, and economic costs on the city (“Kanal İstanbul bir cinayet projesidir,” 2019). After taking office, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İMM) confronted the project through administrative, legal, and participatory measures, including withdrawing from protocols, detailing anticipated damages, organizing expert workshops, and filing legal challenges (İmamoğlu, 2021; “İmamoğlu: Kanal İstanbul’u tartışamayız,” 2022; İMM, 2020a). These practices presented opposition to the canal as a democratic and civic responsibility, recoding it as a rent-oriented project benefiting a small interest group at the expense of “sixteen million Istanbulites” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Kanal,” 2019). The antagonism is thus reconstituted not between builders and obstructors, but between concentrated economic-political power and the collective life of the city, replacing development, national grandeur, and political authority with an alternative chain organized around public interest, democratic sovereignty, and the right to life.

This counter-discourse stabilizes a single antagonistic boundary through multiple nodal points. As the following subsections show, Canal Istanbul is articulated as (a) an instrument of capital accumulation violating public interest, (b) an imposition bypassing democratic sovereignty, and (c) a form of authoritarian spectacle that displaces everyday social needs. Through these articulations, the canal becomes a symbol of dispossession, democratic erosion, and life-threatening urban governance, forming a counter-hegemonic project that repoliticizes urban space around the idea of the city as a shared space of life and democratic belonging.

6.1. Public Interest Versus Rent: “Either the Canal or Istanbul”

İmamoğlu's opposition to Canal Istanbul redefines who the project serves, establishing an antagonism between public interest and rent-oriented accumulation. Rather than contesting development per se, the canal is recoded as a rent-driven venture benefiting a narrow political and economic network. As İmamoğlu asks, “Who needs Canal Istanbul? Only a handful of people who seek to mortgage the future of our city and country...need this project” (İmamoğlu, 2020).

Within this counter-articulation, public interest operates as a central nodal point binding heterogeneous claims. Evidence of large-scale land transfers is mobilized to expose how nationalist rhetoric conceals capital accumulation: “Since 2011, 30 million square meters have changed hands, and the largest buyers are foreign companies” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Ya kanal, ya İstanbul,” 2019). Development is thus rearticulated as a device legitimizing the commodification of urban land and public resources. The slogan “Either the Canal or Istanbul” condenses this antagonism into a symbolic frontier. Beyond profit, it reframes the conflict around life, environment, citizenship, and sovereignty, presenting land transfers to foreign investors as a threat to collective belonging. As Figure 4 shows, the slogan appeared on posters commissioned by the IMM under İmamoğlu's leadership, materializing this counter-discourse in urban space. Rather than reproducing exclusionary nationalism, this articulation reclaims nationalist language in a left-populist register (Laclau, 2005, pp. 67–72, 93–100), positioning “the people” as guardians of shared life against rent-seeking elites. Canal Istanbul is thus portrayed not only as an environmental risk but also as a regime of injustice undermining democratic accountability. By describing the project as “a murder” and “a betrayal of Istanbul and the nation” (“Kanal İstanbul bir cinayet projesidir,” 2019), the opposition reconfigures urban development from a technical issue into a moral and political struggle over who has the right to shape and benefit from the city.



Figure 4. IMM poster (November 2020), signed by İmamoğlu. The slogan “Either the Canal or Istanbul” appears alongside the questions “Who needs Canal Istanbul?” and “Istanbul or those whose wasteful order is disrupted?” Source: Karaman (2020).

This antagonism is further reinforced at the level of naming: As Köksal (2024, pp. 61–62) notes, “Canal Istanbul” operates as ideological branding that turns the city into a marketable sign, while the counter-slogan “Either the Canal or Istanbul” subverts this move, reclaiming the city’s name as a site of resistance, a shift

consolidated through its adoption by the Either the Canal or İstanbul Coordination, which brought together NGOs, opposition parties, and civic initiatives.

6.2. Popular Sovereignty Versus Imposed Megaproject: “İstanbul Is Greater Than One”

İmamoğlu’s opposition articulates a second antagonistic axis between popular sovereignty and authoritarian control. Rather than focusing on technical issues, he reframes the canal as a struggle over who has the legitimate authority to determine the city’s future. Recalling its announcement before the 2011 elections in what he described as “a poor animation film” and its subsequent dormancy without public debate, he presents the project as emblematic of governance defined by secrecy and centralized decision-making (“İmamoğlu’ndan Kanal İstanbul tepkisi,” 2020).

Against this model, legitimacy is anchored in democratic authorship—Istanbul residents’ collective right to shape their environment. Participation operates as a nodal point opposing neoliberal authoritarian rule with public deliberation: “İstanbul is not anyone’s private property; it belongs to sixteen million people” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Ya,” 2019). This claim is materially enacted through the IMM’s legal challenge to the Environmental Impact Assessment (ÇED) report, turning institutional channels into arenas of democratic resistance.

This antagonism is condensed in the slogan “İstanbul is greater than one,” formulated in response to claims that the project would proceed regardless of opposition (“İmamoğlu’ndan Erdoğan’a Kanal İstanbul yanıtı,” 2021). Grounded in electoral legitimacy after June 23, 2019, it redefines authority as emanating from collective participation rather than unilateral command, countering claims that the project would be built “whether you want it or not” (“‘Kanal İstanbul’a yazın başlıyoruz,” 2021). This framing is further reinforced as İmamoğlu reiterates a participatory vision by calling for a referendum and insisting that “the people of İstanbul should decide the fate of the city” (“İmamoğlu’ndan Erdoğan’a,” 2025). Opposition thus becomes a practice of reclaiming democratic sovereignty through legality, participation, and accountability.

6.3. From Mega Fantasies to Everyday Solidarity: Repoliticizing the Urban Agenda

İmamoğlu’s counter-discourse culminates in a confrontation between everyday life and authoritarian spectacle, repoliticizing urban politics around care, welfare, and material need. Against monumental development, he advances a rationality grounded in social provision, declaring, “This nation does not want canals, yachts, or palaces; it wants jobs, bread, and education” (İmamoğlu, 2019). Spectacle is thus replaced by livelihood as the measure of political legitimacy, presenting Canal İstanbul as a distortion of public priorities. İmamoğlu repeatedly contrasts the government’s prioritization of the canal over pressing social problems such as unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity. He argues that while “so many young people suffer from unemployment” and “children cannot be adequately nourished,” Canal İstanbul “cannot be our priority” (“Ekrem İmamoğlu: Kanal,” 2019). Governance, in this discourse, is redefined as the obligation to safeguard social welfare rather than to stage symbols of power. This understanding was translated into practice through redistributive measures such as expanded metro and flood-control works, municipal nurseries and dormitories, and subsidized social support (IMM, 2020b, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024), centering everyday needs and redrawing the political frontier between the broader urban public and rent-seeking elites.

Within this frontier, the question “Who needs Canal Istanbul?” sharpens the antagonism between unmet social needs and actors aligned with speculative development, condensing welfare and democratic accountability into a shared political claim. This articulation resonates with Laclau’s conception of left populism (2005, pp. 96–100), organizing political conflict around material vulnerability and social justice rather than developmental abstraction. It also aligns with the CHP’s 2024 discourse of *halkçı belediyecilik* (people-oriented local governance), foregrounding participation, equality, and welfare against rentier development, thereby recasting the city as a collective space whose legitimacy rests on everyday needs rather than monumental display.

7. From Consent to Coercion: Canal Istanbul and the Limits of Counter-Discourse Under Authoritarian Urbanism

The 2024 local elections marked a critical moment in Turkey’s urban politics. Ekrem İmamoğlu not only retained Istanbul for a third time against candidates endorsed by President Erdoğan but also consolidated an alternative urban political project that had proven electorally resilient. During the campaign, the opposition’s counter-discourse organized around public interest, democratic sovereignty, and everyday life produced a notable effect: Canal Istanbul was largely withdrawn from the ruling party’s narrative. AKP’s Istanbul mayoral candidate Murat Kurum stated that “what is not on Istanbulites’ agenda cannot be on ours” (Gençdal, 2024), signaling a tacit recognition that the project lacked popular legitimacy. This discursive retreat did not indicate abandonment but rather exposed the limits of consent-building around the canal in the face of sustained opposition framing.

The post-electoral period, however, revealed the structural asymmetries limiting counter-discourse under authoritarian conditions. The AKP-led governing alliance increasingly relied on coercive instruments—fiscal restrictions, administrative interventions, and judicial proceedings—to reassert control over opposition-led municipalities, culminating in İmamoğlu’s arrest in March 2025 and intensified constraints on municipal autonomy. At the urban scale, coercion was coupled with administrative opportunism. Despite earlier disavowal, canal-related construction resumed around the Sazlıdere basin under the “Century’s Housing Project,” advancing the canal route without public consultation or environmental clearance. İmamoğlu called the move an abuse of executive power and a breach of democratic oversight (İmamoğlu, 2025a).

The opposition reframed this turn to coercion as a crisis of legitimacy. During his detention, İmamoğlu called for a citywide referendum: “If you have courage, put the ballot box before the people and let Istanbul decide its fate” (İmamoğlu, 2025b). The appeal exposed a paradox of authoritarian urbanism: Consent is instrumentalized during elections but abandoned when it constrains executive authority. In this sense, the turn to coercion signals not strength but hegemonic fragility—the moment when power substitutes force for persuasion to sustain control over contested urban futures.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined Canal Istanbul as a critical site through which authoritarian-neoliberal urbanism seeks to stabilize executive authority by recoding political decisions as technical necessity. Articulated through managerial rationality, moralized service discourse, and spectacle, the project attempted to reframe distributive and spatial conflicts as matters of expertise rather than political choice, thereby narrowing the

terrain of legitimate contestation. Yet this effort at post-political closure did not extinguish antagonism. Opposition actors redirected the debate toward public interest and everyday life, reactivating political divisions that the project sought to neutralize.

Viewed through a Laclauian lens, this dynamic reveals a hegemonic formation that is neither fully consolidated nor merely reactive. Its durability coexists with persistent contestation, as demonstrated by the electoral reconfigurations of 2019 and 2024. Urban contention therefore unfolds within authoritarian-neoliberal governance as an ongoing struggle over the meaning of development, authority, and public interest, rather than as a conflict that can be absorbed or resolved. Although oppositional articulation reshaped public debate and disrupted claims of inevitability, it did not eliminate structural asymmetries embedded in fiscal, legal, and administrative arrangements; when persuasive stabilization weakened, executive authority relied more overtly on coercive mechanisms, reflecting not the disappearance of dissent but the continuing instability of hegemonic closure under authoritarian conditions.

At the same time, the limits of repoliticization are not only institutional but also discursive. The opposition's reliance on scientific reports, environmental impact assessments, and expert workshops—while normatively significant—did not by itself dislocate the governing articulation. Appeals to expertise unfolded within a polarized political field structured by entrenched antagonisms, where claims to objectivity and technical authority could not operate as neutral arbiters of legitimacy. Rather than indicating an epistemic deficit, this dynamic reflects the uneven terrain on which competing projects seek to stabilize their visions of urban governance.

This instability is reflected in Istanbul's trajectory. Canal Istanbul has not been removed from the governing agenda, yet its advancement has been marked by political hesitation rather than unequivocal momentum. Rather than merely confirming the persistence of contestation, this ambivalence demonstrates that post-political closure remains structurally unstable. Attempts to recast urban transformation as a technical necessity encounter recurrent interruptions that prevent full hegemonic sedimentation. The politics of Istanbul thus illustrates not a completed authoritarian consolidation but an urban field in which executive centralization and democratic claims repeatedly collide, producing outcomes that remain contingent rather than predetermined. The Canal Istanbul controversy thus speaks directly to this thematic issue: It demonstrates that disruption under conditions of authoritarian consolidation is neither unidirectional nor singular, but a multilayered process in which authoritarian and emancipatory agency contest and partially fix the conditions under which urban futures are articulated.

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Data Availability

This study draws on publicly available materials, including political speeches, official documents, and media texts. No new datasets were generated or analyzed for this study.

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Frontiers of Urban Resilience: Multi-Hazard Risks and Nonlinear Recovery Pathways in a Conflict-Exposed City

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Abstract

This research advances understanding of urban resilience amid polycrisis by analysing how continuous military violence interacts with pre-existing urban vulnerabilities. Using Kherson (Ukraine) as a critical case, the research offers a unique lens on urban responses to unprecedented short-term and long-term challenges. It shows how a city that experienced occupation, infrastructural collapse, and depopulation, in the face of constant instability and continuous attacks after liberation, reorganises its socio-spatial systems and shapes its recovery trajectories. Drawing on spatial analysis of destruction, thematic mapping of socio-demographic and logistical changes, and institutional capacity analysis, the study conceptualises recovery as a nonlinear dynamic process that unfolds through absorptive (stabilisation of key functions in partially populated areas), adaptive reorganisation of logistics and service networks, and transformative shifts in the most damaged areas, where conventional models of governance are no longer viable. By situating Kherson in a broader comparative debate, the study offers conclusions relevant to cities in zones of armed conflict, climate disasters, and large-scale social upheaval. The trajectory of urban spatial development in such contexts is characterised by spatial heterogeneity, threshold conditions, and multi-vector processes in which systemic loss, stabilisation, and adaptation occur simultaneously. The case of Kherson demonstrates that continuous military pressure limits traditional reconstruction and urban planning models. The future of cities in a multi-crisis environment depends not only on reconstruction resources but also on rethinking recovery as a new model of socio-spatial development, grounded in absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities, differentiated spatial strategies, and context-sensitive governance.

Keywords

bifurcation; polycrisis; reconstruction; recovery; residential district; spatial analysis; sustainable development; urban planning; urban resilience; uricide

1. Introduction

Modern cities increasingly find themselves in polycrisis, with interlocking economic, social, environmental, and political stressors that co-evolve and amplify one another (Lawrence et al., 2024). This phenomenon has manifested new dimensions of vulnerability (Brosig, 2025) that transcend individual sectors and thereby require systematic analysis (Hoelscher et al., 2022). Economic instability and widening social cleavages, the threat of future pandemics and armed conflicts, alongside uncontrolled migration flows and urban growth, are shaping a new urban reality in which instability has become the norm (Meerow & Newell, 2019). Climate change can exacerbate these crises and further constrain humanity's ability to maintain stability and acceptable standards of living (Rędzińska & Piotrkowska, 2020).

Against this background, “urban resilience” has become a key analytical and practical paradigm—with the comparative capacity of urban systems to absorb, adapt, and recover in response to uncertainty and shock emerging as a core metric of their viability (Soldak et al., 2024).

Despite a significant surge in context-specific studies (Amirzadeh et al., 2022; Büyüközkan et al., 2022), the blanket concept of “urban resilience” remains ambiguous when applied cross-culturally and raises several methodological tensions. For example, who are its stakeholders, what threats does it encompass, what are its temporal horizons, and what are its justifications?

Additionally, how do processes of adaptation, transformation, and recovery relate to one another? How are political, social, and spatiotemporal contexts considered? How can appropriate assessments translate into practical interventions? (Zeng et al., 2022).

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become a hallmark of this era of instability, obliterating Europe's rule-based order established after World War II (Brovko, 2025). The extensive, deliberate destruction of the urban environment by high-precision, low-cost, and relatively low-tech drone weaponry has now reached unprecedented proportions, opening the gates to copycats and ensuring that no city can consider itself immune from analogous threats by nefarious actors. This dynamic has the potential to transform global political, social, economic, and environmental processes (Palekha et al., 2023).

Four years of daily attacks on Ukrainian cities have revealed the limits of their capacity for recovery and urban resilience (Kliuchko et al., 2024). The war has triggered a “domino effect” (Wamsler & Brink, 2016), in which the collapse of one system destabilises others, leading to cascading infrastructure failures (Yan et al., 2025). Failure of infrastructure foments social tensions, while economic stagnation creates urban instability, making long-term planning impossible (Kilcullen, 2012).

In response, we pair a resilience perspective, focused on absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities, with a bifurcation lens that identifies threshold conditions under which routine adaptation fails, thereby

clarifying when and how urban systems must stabilise, reconfigure, or transform in the context of polycrisis. This experience presents opportunities for a global re-evaluation of urban vulnerability and sustainability.

The city of Kherson is emblematic of multidimensional resilience under polycrisis: with pre-war economic stressors, a brutal occupation from March–November 2022, and a brief euphoria of liberation. This quickly gave way to constant shelling, destruction, and the infamous Russian practice of “Human Safari” (Tokariuk, 2025). Under such conditions, urban areas face simultaneous pressures from multiple, overlapping threats—military, climatic, social, and economic (Malchykova et al., 2025).

One of the key limitations of existing approaches is the insufficient attention to the spatial characteristics of urban systems, which undermines the capacity to make strategic decisions about their transformation within a polycrisis environment. At the same time, urban planning tools can indirectly influence emergency management and the effectiveness of crisis response by setting a long-term framework for resilience and creating conditions for more coordinated operational actions.

In this study, we conceptualise resilience and recovery as nonlinear, place-contingent processes shaped by cumulative damage, social disintegration, and ongoing threat. While we recognise the relevance of threshold and tipping-point thinking (Yi et al., 2025), our analytical emphasis is on resilience pathways—how cities manage to stabilise functions, rebuild capacities, and reconfigure identities under polycrisis. This framing anchors our empirical assessment and informs policy-relevant models of recovery tailored to spatial heterogeneity and institutional realities.

Accordingly, the main research questions are as follows:

- What morphological, functional, socio-demographic, institutional-economic, and environmental changes are occurring in urban areas under the influence of the polycrisis, and how is their identity being transformed?
- How do these changes reveal vulnerabilities and adaptive challenges that inform future models of urban recovery?
- How can the experience of Kherson be applied to develop approaches for the sustainable recovery of cities affected by military conflicts, environmental disasters, and social upheavals?

In view of the above, this study aims to explore how extreme violence interacts with pre-existing conditions of urban decay, inadequate infrastructure, and deteriorated public spaces and services, while conceptualising nonlinear models of urban resilience and recovery.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. War-Driven Polycrisis: Urban Resilience and Recovery Pathways

Urban theory has increasingly examined resilience, adaptability, and recovery as core processes through which cities confront and reorganise themselves in the wake of crisis (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Armed conflict, as a driver of polycrisis, pushes urban systems to the brink, requiring innovative recovery scenarios to manage uncertainties across uneven geographies (Kittana & Meulder, 2019). The comparative experience of Sarajevo after the siege by the army of Republika Srpska (1992–1996), causing extensive destruction, isolation, and

humanitarian crisis (Martín-Díaz, 2021), Syrian cities such as Aleppo after infrastructure, heritage, and social fabric destruction (Dimelli & Kotsoni, 2023), and the radical transformations of Ukrainian cities in conflict zones and occupations (Malchykova & Pylypenko, 2023) shows that recovery rarely entails a return to the previous state, but rather a reconfiguration of adaptability, capacity, and resilience.

In this context, we highlight resilience as a dynamic trajectory of urban development that allows for the stabilisation of core functions (Meerow & Newell, 2019), the adaptive restoration of networks and services, and, where necessary, the transformation of urban systems to new functioning conditions (Lowe et al., 2024). Systematic reviews further operationalise this trajectory through three interlinked capacities—absorptive (stabilising critical functions), adaptive (reconfiguring and reconnecting services and networks), and transformative (shifting to new configurations under altered conditions)—which together structure measurable pathways of recovery (Zeng et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2024). Recovery trajectories are nonlinear in both spatial and temporal terms due to existing vulnerabilities, varying degrees of impact, and differences in institutional and economic capacity. To determine when normal adaptation fails and why qualitative changes are likely, we combine the concept of resilience with bifurcation theory (Layek, 2015), since in complex socio-spatial systems, bifurcation dynamics explain the transition through a threshold that alters the system's behaviour under gradual parameter changes, leading to a different mode of functioning rather than a return to the previous state (Ikeda & Takayama, 2024).

In the context of urban development under constant threat, bifurcation complements the concept of resilience by providing the necessary operationalisation within the framework of war-induced polycrisis. The resilience concept forms a procedural logic (available pathways for absorption, adaptation, or transformation), while bifurcation dynamics explain the logic of thresholds, boundary conditions, and early-warning markers of the irreversible exhaustion of resilience potential. In practice, this combination enables controlled prediction of irreversible changes in functionality, the design of re-functionalisation or re-planning of systems, and the assessment of cascade risks, unevenness, and hysteresis. Applying this approach to Kherson under constant threat, we develop a differentiated vision that accounts for changes in social composition, collective trauma, and the evolution of the governance landscape (Antonenko, 2025). Cumulatively, such a strategy recognises irreversible changes where they exist, while outlining realistic, equitable, and sustainable paths to recovery in a polycrisis environment.

2.2. The Urban Context of Kherson: Preconditions, Transformations, and Challenges

Kherson is a city in southern Ukraine, located on the right bank of the Dnipro River, with a multilayered urban history. Founded in the 18th century, its spatial development was shaped by the military-strategic and industrial policies of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. From the 1990s until the onset of the full-scale war in 2022, the city experienced economic decline, depopulation, and infrastructure degradation, which had already called into question its capacity for sustainable development (Ostapenko & Malchykova, 2025). The city's location along the Dnipro determined the logic of its transport and recreational development. Kherson's urban structure reflects Soviet zoning principles: the central area comprises mixed-use development with administrative, educational, and cultural institutions, while industrial enterprises and residential neighbourhoods occupy the periphery. Most residents live in prefabricated multi-storey housing blocks built in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the Tavriyskyi, Pivnichnyi, and Korabel districts (Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Kherson City Council, 2013).

Following its occupation in March 2022 and subsequent liberation in November 2022, Kherson has remained under constant shelling and military threat, creating a unique context of continuous instability. Such sustained pressure has led to the destruction of housing and critical infrastructure, mass evacuation, and profound socio-spatial disintegration. Under these conditions, the question of urban resilience has acquired an existential dimension—not only in terms of the city’s capacity for recovery, but also as a search for a new model of urban existence.

Two residential districts—Tavriyskyi and Korabel—were selected for comparative analysis as representative cases of urban resilience under wartime conditions (Figure 1). Tavriyskyi has a more developed social infrastructure and, prior to the war, served as the urban core for the middle class. Korabel, by contrast, is a district with an industrial past, located near a shipbuilding plant, characterised by a lower density of social services but a high level of local self-organisation. Both areas consist predominantly of prefabricated multi-storey buildings, which makes them comparable in terms of physical resilience, energy efficiency, and social composition. The varying extent and nature of destruction across these districts offer an opportunity to examine the variability of urban resilience within a single city. The district level is chosen as the main analytical scale because it is at this micro-territorial level that residents directly experience the consequences of conflict and that both formal and informal adaptation strategies take shape. At the same time, contemporary studies of urban functional resilience reveal a pronounced scale imbalance: district-level data are almost entirely absent, while most information is aggregated at the city or administrative region level. This lack of micro-scale research is critical, since districts constitute the primary living milieu in which resilience and adaptability become directly observable.

In this study, the term *district* is understood as a spatial-social unit that encompasses: (1) physical infrastructure (housing stock, roads, and networks); (2) social fabric (demographics, communities, and institutions); (3) functional linkages (access to services, transport, and communications); and (4) levels of vulnerability and adaptive capacity. This approach enables assessment not only of the district’s physical resilience but also of its social viability as a system responding to external threats, accounting for the unique role of persistent military turbulence and the microspatial mechanisms of adaptation that remain invisible at larger administrative scales.

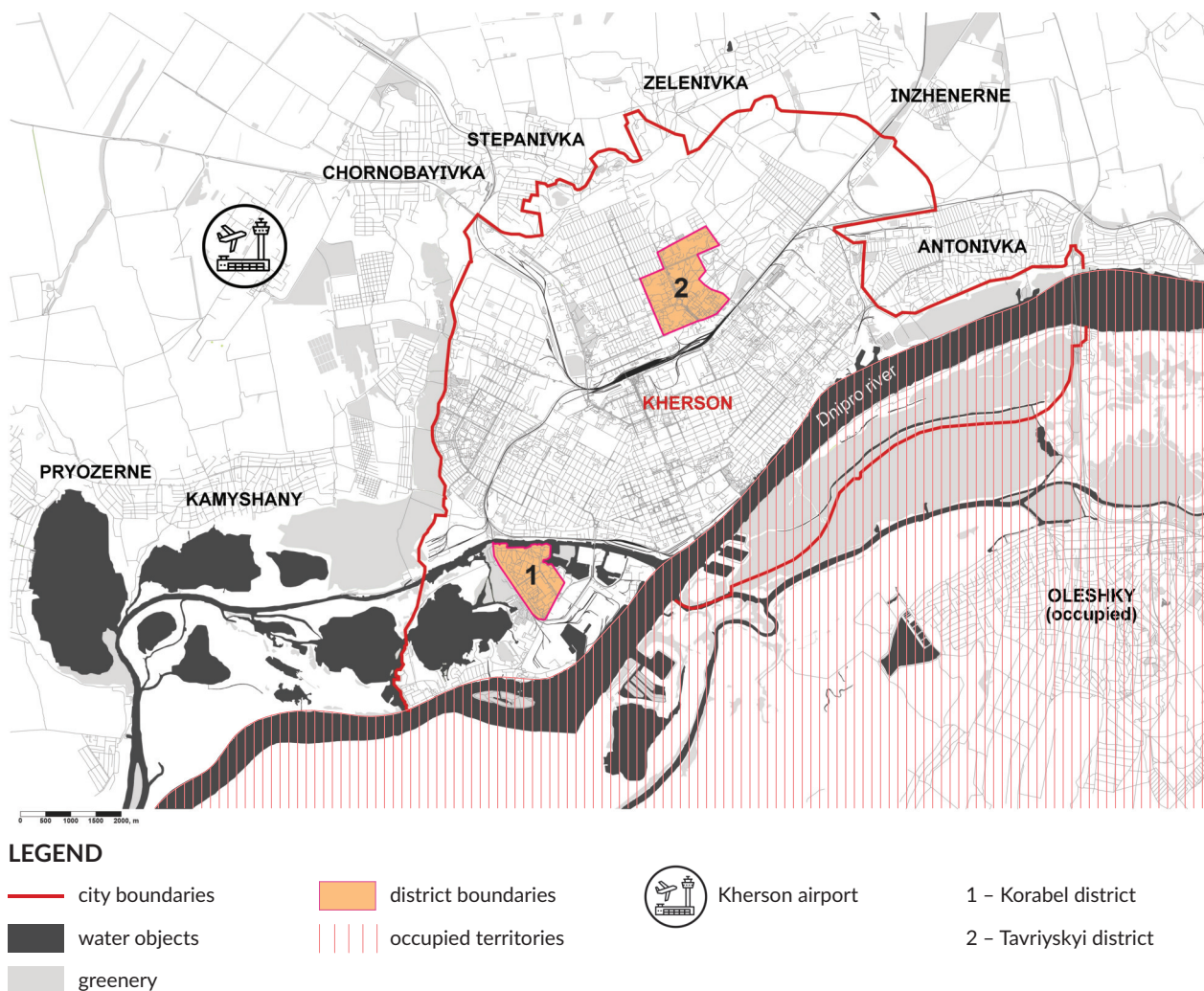


Figure 1. Location of research areas in Kherson.

3. Methodology

The research methodology is based on a multi-level qualitative-empirical approach aimed at studying nonlinear socio-spatial transformations of urban systems in conditions of polycrisis. This approach is justified by its ability to combine the analysis of physical destruction and erosion of the social structure, complex processes that one-dimensional methodological frameworks are often unable to adequately reflect in areas of active conflict. The Tavriyskyi and Korabel districts were selected by focused sampling as typical post-Soviet residential morphological units with a high level of pre-war structural dependence (Gnatiuk & Kryvets, 2018). Their inclusion is based on their typicality, scale, and levels of physical and social deterioration, making them representative for studying the limits of urban resilience in the Ukrainian context. The research design comprised the following stages: data collection, organisation, analysis, and interpretation, considering the limitations arising from ongoing military threats and partially/periodically limited access to the territory.

Primary qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with internally displaced persons, community leaders, and municipal officials. This method was prioritised to capture the “human dimension”

of resilience, documenting adaptive practices and informal institutional responses that are absent from formal datasets. Additional documentary sources were used, including municipal reports and analytical materials from civil society organisations. An important methodological core was the reflective involvement of the authors: a five-month stay under occupation (2022) and subsequent field visits (2023–2025) provided privileged access to informants and a deep understanding of urban trauma. This positioning is critical to ensuring data reliability in a limited information environment. Spatial data on destruction were obtained from publicly available satellite imagery and verified through local communication. This method provides objective evidence of “urbicide” and infrastructure degradation in cases where ground surveys are dangerous. Data gaps and uncertainties, especially at the district level, constitute a methodological limitation of this study. To overcome the fragmentary nature of wartime statistics, a triangulation strategy was applied, using secondary sources as contextual layers to verify the identified patterns. This allows for the maintenance of conceptual validity and empirical reliability despite gaps at the micro level.

The collected materials were organised into analytical blocks to assess resilience, encompassing morphology, mobility, functionality, critical infrastructure, the water-green framework, public spaces, identity transformations, socio-demographic characteristics, and institutional and economic resilience (Antonenko, 2025). The methodology for analysing and interpreting data combines spatial analysis (GIS layers on the destruction of residential buildings and damage to infrastructure) with socio-demographic analysis (assessing changes in population composition, mobility, and access to essential services) and institutional assessment (local government responses, local initiatives, horizontal networks, and community self-organisation resources). This structure enabled the integration of spatial data with qualitative narratives that reflect the complexity of urban sustainability amid ongoing precariousness, constant attack, and polycrisis.

The main method used was situational analysis, which integrates spatial and institutional data to map, in real time, the interactions between internal and external stressors and describe specific problems in the city’s functioning. The results were interpreted through the lens of stability theory and bifurcation dynamics, providing a conceptual understanding of nonlinear recovery trajectories. The methodology generally emphasises situational adaptation and multi-source verification, rejecting utopian recovery models in favour of a pragmatic assessment of urban governance in conditions of extreme uncertainty and social exhaustion.

In this study, the mapping method functions not only as a tool of visualisation but also as an analytical instrument for operationalising the concept of nonlinear resilience at the micro-territorial level. The overlay of layers of morphology, functional structure, greenery, public spaces, and the transport network, in correlation with localised threats and damages, allows for identifying and visualising spatial disproportions, “nodes of fragility,” and zones of potential adaptation. Mapping serves as a methodological bridge between the theory of polycrisis and empirical data, illuminating the interactions among urban environment components under wartime turbulence and outlining spatially differentiated recovery trajectories.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. *Spatial Urban Resilience of Residential Districts in Kherson*

4.1.1. Morphological “Irreversibility” and Trajectories of Urban Development

The morphology of Kherson’s residential districts, shaped during the Soviet period, is a key factor behind the city’s heightened urban vulnerability. The spatial structure of Tavriyskyi and Korabel, developed within the urban paradigms of the 1970s–1980s, relied on standardised housing construction and rigid functional zoning aimed primarily at rapidly providing apartments for the population. The combination of prefabricated multi-story buildings, large unprogrammed open spaces between them, and limited opportunities for reconstruction due to apartment privatisation resulted in structural inflexibility. The low prewar morphological resilience was manifested in the physical deterioration of the housing stock, demographic ageing, degradation of social infrastructure, and spatial non-inclusiveness.

After 1991, morphological transformations were minor, limited to partial thermal modernisation, small-scale extensions, and interior renovations. An additional vulnerability stemmed from the non-inclusive nature of external and internal spaces (including limited accessibility to upper floors during power outages) and the low energy efficiency of high-rise buildings, which amplified the effects of climate change.

During the war, low morphological adaptability has severely constrained the city’s capacity to respond to shelling, evacuation challenges, logistical disruptions, and the functioning of emergency services (Meuser et al., 2023). Since the onset of intensive attacks, the urban fabric has undergone rapid and large-scale changes: approximately 60% of buildings in Tavriyskyi were damaged, and in Korabel, the figure has reached nearly 100%, due to proximity to the port, industrial zones, and the frontline. Following the destruction of the Kakhovka Reservoir—an instance of weaponised water infrastructure—Korabel was almost completely flooded, causing significant damage to buildings, loss of critical infrastructure, and extensive ecological degradation (Hirniak, 2025). The district’s morphology, which once possessed some transformative potential due to its compact size, has now lost functionality; the idea of restoring it in its original form grows increasingly untenable as reconstruction becomes technically complex, costly, and strategically questionable (Figure 2).

The existing morphological and spatial configuration—defining the layout of critical infrastructure and road networks—combined with zonal patterns of destruction and the degradation of inter-building spaces, creates preconditions for nonlinear territorial development within a constrained set of conditions. This allows outlining three potential directions for urban renewal:

- a) repair and restoration of the least damaged and most densely populated buildings;
- b) selective reconstruction of damaged blocks with adjustments to height, floor plans, and ground-floor functions;
- c) densification and redevelopment guided by new planning concepts oriented toward the needs of all social groups.

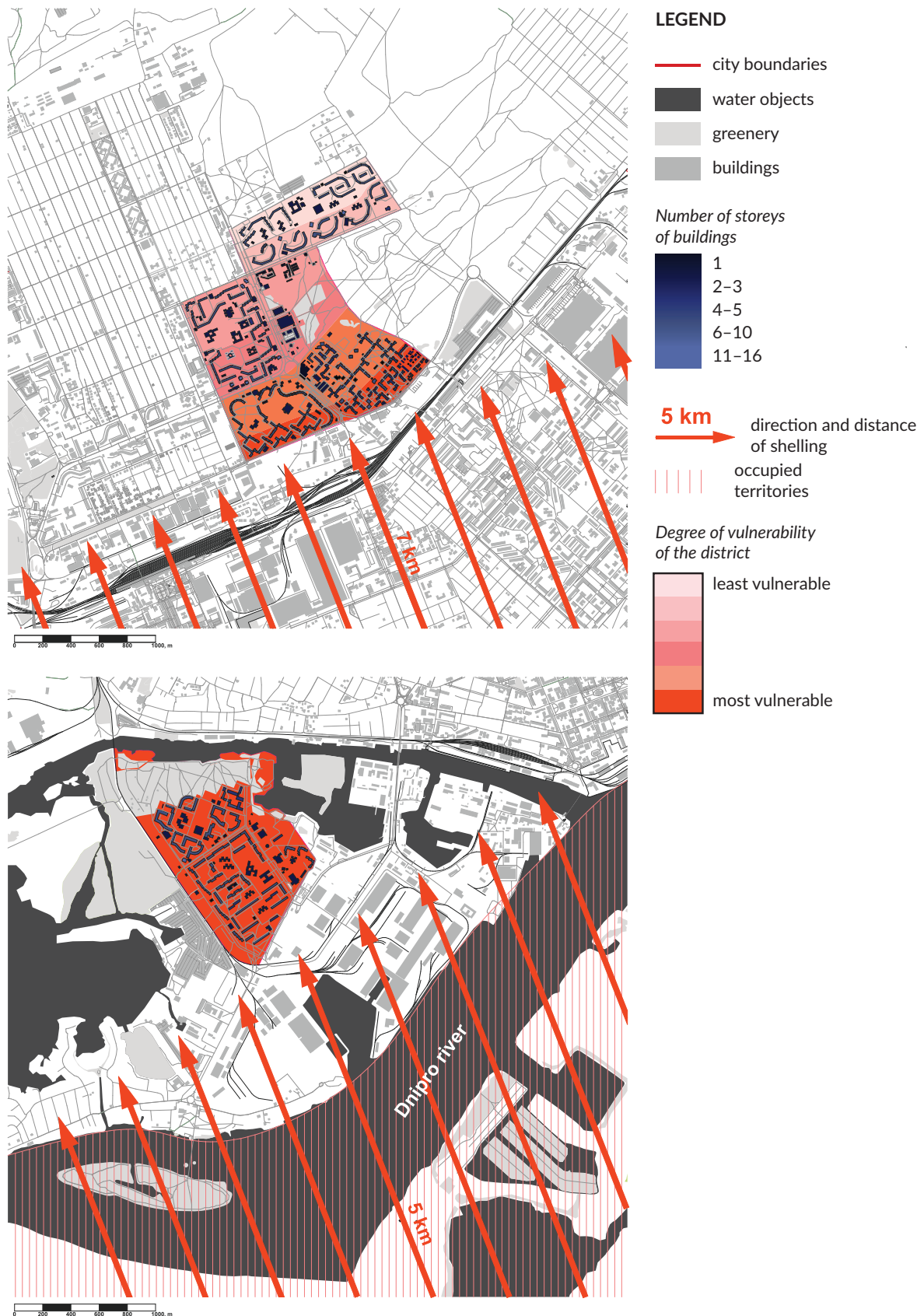


Figure 2. Morphology of Tavriyskiy and Korabel districts under conditions of polycrisis.

4.1.2. Logistics and Transport Structure: Dynamics and Development Scenarios

As of 2022, Kherson's transport system already required fundamental rethinking and restructuring. Excessive commercialisation of public transport, poor route coordination, the absence of cycling infrastructure, and the dominance of private vehicles had generated chronic disorder within the city.

Under wartime conditions, the transport system is being restructured and assumes existential significance (Rossolov et al., 2025), with its primary function being to ensure evacuation and access to essential resources. Private and commercialised public transport, which previously constrained effective mobility in the pre-war city, now provides the most reliable means of movement due to its speed, reduced waiting times, and lower risk of exposure arising from lower passenger density. The number of available public transport routes has been reduced, depending on factors like road quality, route length, and the likelihood of being targeted by occupiers. Similar transformations are observed in the pedestrian infrastructure within districts: routes are defined as the shortest paths to essential facilities or public transport stops, integrate access to shelters, and ensure an adequate level of inclusivity, which is critical given changes in socio-demographics.

Tavriyskyi, located in the northwest of Kherson near key transport hubs, demonstrated relative resilience and adaptation in its transport system, effectively supporting evacuations, humanitarian aid deliveries, and the functioning of emergency services. In contrast, Korabel, which is connected to the rest of the city by a single arterial road, has lost its capacity for self-recovery due to a vulnerable transport network. Following the Kakhovka Reservoir disaster caused by the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Dam, the district was temporarily isolated, and damage to the bridge led to complete isolation, necessitating the organisation of an urgent, forced evacuation of residents (Figure 3).

The existing road network, reliance on private transport, and residents' experience of adaptation under wartime conditions provide a foundation for developing new flexible and resilient transport solutions that address the pre-war vulnerabilities of logistical systems.

The restoration will require comprehensive reconstruction and should include:

- a) safe and inclusive mobility, encompassing road repairs, the creation of pedestrian-oriented corridors, low-floor vehicles, and stops adapted to the needs of vulnerable groups;
- b) sustainable transformation and the development of a hybrid transport model that integrates public, private, and emergency transport with flexible routing for rapid crisis response, including the design of new logistical schemes and the incorporation of bicycle and electric transport potential;
- c) crisis preparedness, including the planning of evacuation routes and logistical scenarios to ensure prompt emergency response.



Figure 3. The transport situation in the Tavriyskyi and Korabel districts under conditions of polycrisis.

4.1.3. Critical Infrastructure and Functional Status: Vulnerability, Adaptation, and Prospects for Recovery

The functional structure of Kherson's districts during the Soviet period was shaped by the principle of providing a minimally necessary yet formally sufficient set of facilities. Urban planning was based on a three-tier service model; however, due to chronic underfunding, many social infrastructure projects were never completed. As a result, many districts were left without a basic range of public buildings. Since the 1990s, this deficit has been partially compensated for by the development of private entrepreneurship, which has responded more flexibly to residents' everyday needs.

Critical infrastructure facilities were designed with reserve capacity; however, low construction quality led to numerous failures already in the post-Soviet period (Ponomaryova & Ryan, 2021). Even before the war, water supply and sewage networks were in poor condition, and stormwater drainage systems failed to meet technical and sanitary standards.

Following the de-occupation of the city, sustained artillery and missile attacks, and the artificial disaster caused by the Kakhovka Reservoir disaster, the Korabel suffered extensive damage to its engineering infrastructure. At the regional level, critical infrastructure remains largely dependent on centralised sources, complicating local management, autonomous operation, and rapid response to damage. Under wartime conditions, the provision of basic services, the partial stability of critical infrastructure, and the uninterrupted supply of essential goods and services have been severely undermined. The water, sewage, and electricity systems were the most severely affected, resulting in the district's functional isolation. Prior to evacuation, utility services were provided only intermittently. In Tavriyskyi, the situation is less critical; nevertheless, the centralised electricity supply remains highly vulnerable. Resilience hubs equipped with generators offer only partial relief and cannot meet the needs of all residents. Private generators offer limited autonomy and are accessible primarily to economically stable households. Centralised heating systems are inefficient under low occupancy, particularly when fewer than 30% of apartments are occupied, making their operation economically unjustifiable. The gas supply remains functional, which creates additional risks for residential buildings during shelling, although it may also serve as a backup heating source. The civil defence alert system is fragmented. Radio broadcasting is absent, while internet connectivity is unstable and entirely dependent on electricity, with no backup channels.

Kherson's critical infrastructure requires urgent modernisation and protection without waiting for the end of hostilities. A key stabilisation strategy has been the rethinking of centralised critical infrastructure. The main priorities include:

- a) decentralisation—the transition to distributed energy resources, modular microgrids, and local water supply systems, which would also ensure the autonomy of critical facilities;
- b) infrastructure redundancy—the creation of alternative supply channels, backup systems, and mobile distribution points to reduce dependence on trunk networks;
- c) public participation and local governance—strengthening the role of local communities and self-organisation initiatives as mechanisms for adaptation and for maintaining the functional stability of critical infrastructure.

The modernisation of critical infrastructure remains fragmented, while recovery measures are poorly coordinated and largely ineffective. The lack of reserve capacity and systemic redundancy, together with continuous shelling, high levels of centralisation, limited adaptability, and outdated technologies, significantly increases the vulnerability of infrastructure systems and accelerates their further degradation. This deepens the humanitarian crisis through deteriorating living conditions, making a return to the pre-war functional model impossible. At the same time, analysing the preservation of critical infrastructure systems and evaluating the effectiveness of fragmented experimental solutions may provide a foundation for post-war innovative modernisation, including the implementation of energy-efficient technologies, digital monitoring, and intelligent resource management systems.

Regarding service functions, the war has significantly weakened functional interconnections within the districts: some facilities have been destroyed, while others have ceased operations (Figure 4). Tavriyskyi has largely retained the essential facilities that meet the basic needs of residents—shops, pharmacies, several medical centres, and a market. During the occupation, small-scale, often mobile retail outlets and informal services, despite the risks of criminalisation and legal uncertainty, formed an elementary grassroots economic infrastructure that continued to supply the population with essential goods and services (Mikhalkov, 2025). Spontaneous street-based economic activity thus remains a crucial element of a social “safety buffer” during crises. Under conditions of intense missile attacks, underground spaces have increasingly been repurposed to accommodate vital services; in particular, projects for underground schools, medical facilities, and social hubs are being implemented. The situation in Korabel followed a similar trajectory but was further complicated by spatial isolation, a lower density of functional facilities, and the presence of industrial heritage. The ingenuity and solidarity of the Kherson community were especially evident after the Kakhovka Reservoir disaster, when, within a short period and under acute crisis conditions, street kitchens emerged to temporarily compensate for the loss of centralised services (Hirniak, 2025). Nevertheless, forced evacuation ultimately rendered even basic service provision impossible.

The functional provision of the districts demonstrates varying levels of resilience, largely determined by the capacity and resources of local businesses, which can act as key drivers of recovery. The most promising forms of microbusiness and social entrepreneurship are highly adaptive, mobile, and community-oriented, reflecting the new gender and age composition of the population (Belitski et al., 2024). These changes provide a basis for a comprehensive rethinking and the formation of a new functional structure of the territories, outlining potential trajectories for recovery and development:

- a) functional revitalisation—restoration and expansion of key functions with priority given to local, inclusive, and transformative facilities;
- b) mobile and temporary solutions—deployment of mobile clinics, social hubs, and dual-purpose shelters for rapid response to crises;
- c) integration of the informal economy—legalisation and support for street trade, crafts, and local services as sources of employment and social stability;
- d) formation of new centres of attraction—creation of multifunctional public spaces on the sites of destroyed or abandoned facilities, capable of functioning as market–social hybrids that combine commerce, services, recreation, and community support.



Figure 4. Functional content of Tavriyskyi and Korabel districts under conditions of polycrisis.

4.1.4. Blue-Green Infrastructure and Public Spaces: Ecological Vulnerability, Climate Adaptation, and Development Potential

The design of Soviet residential areas envisioned extensive blue-green infrastructure (BGI) and the integration of greenery into broader urban and suburban ecosystems. BGI was integrated with transport and functional planning, forming public spaces for daily use. On the island, the Korabel waterfront and a nearby small island served recreational purposes, featuring a water park, beach, and zoo. In Tavriyskyi, the BGI remained incomplete: the central park was never constructed, and greening efforts were fragmented. This led residents to plant trees and maintain their own front gardens, resulting in a significant increase in green space over the course of three decades. After 1991, the planned park site became a wasteland, later reorganised into a landscape park. Some green corridors were built over, and the lack of connectivity with larger natural areas limited ecological circulation, self-purification, and climate regulation. Until 2022, greening efforts in both districts were uneven, with the main focus on courtyards and school grounds. Functional diversity was low, and some green spaces were privately owned and inaccessible, limiting public use.

Kherson is exposed to extreme weather events annually, including dust storms, droughts, squalls, and freezing rain, which are expected to intensify due to climate change (Ballarin et al., 2025). The lack of shaded areas, water-retentive vegetation, and adaptive infrastructure such as canopies, awnings, and green walls reduces thermal comfort and poses significant health risks, particularly for vulnerable groups. Overheating has become systemic and cannot be mitigated by existing measures. Moreover, the prevalence of impervious surfaces contributes to flooding during heavy rainfall, soil erosion, and pavement degradation.

War has irreversible consequences for the environment and exacerbates an already vulnerable situation with respect to climate adaptation. Soil, air, and water are polluted with chemicals; ecosystems are degraded; biodiversity is lost; and vegetation is destroyed, all of which have negative repercussions for human health (Leal Filho et al., 2024). The maintenance of green spaces is fragmented and predominantly carried out by residents. Municipal services provide only basic upkeep, and in extreme danger, there is no systematic intervention. The complex and intensive deterioration of living conditions contributes to a hazardous epidemiological situation, thereby increasing the risk of chronic diseases (Figure 5).

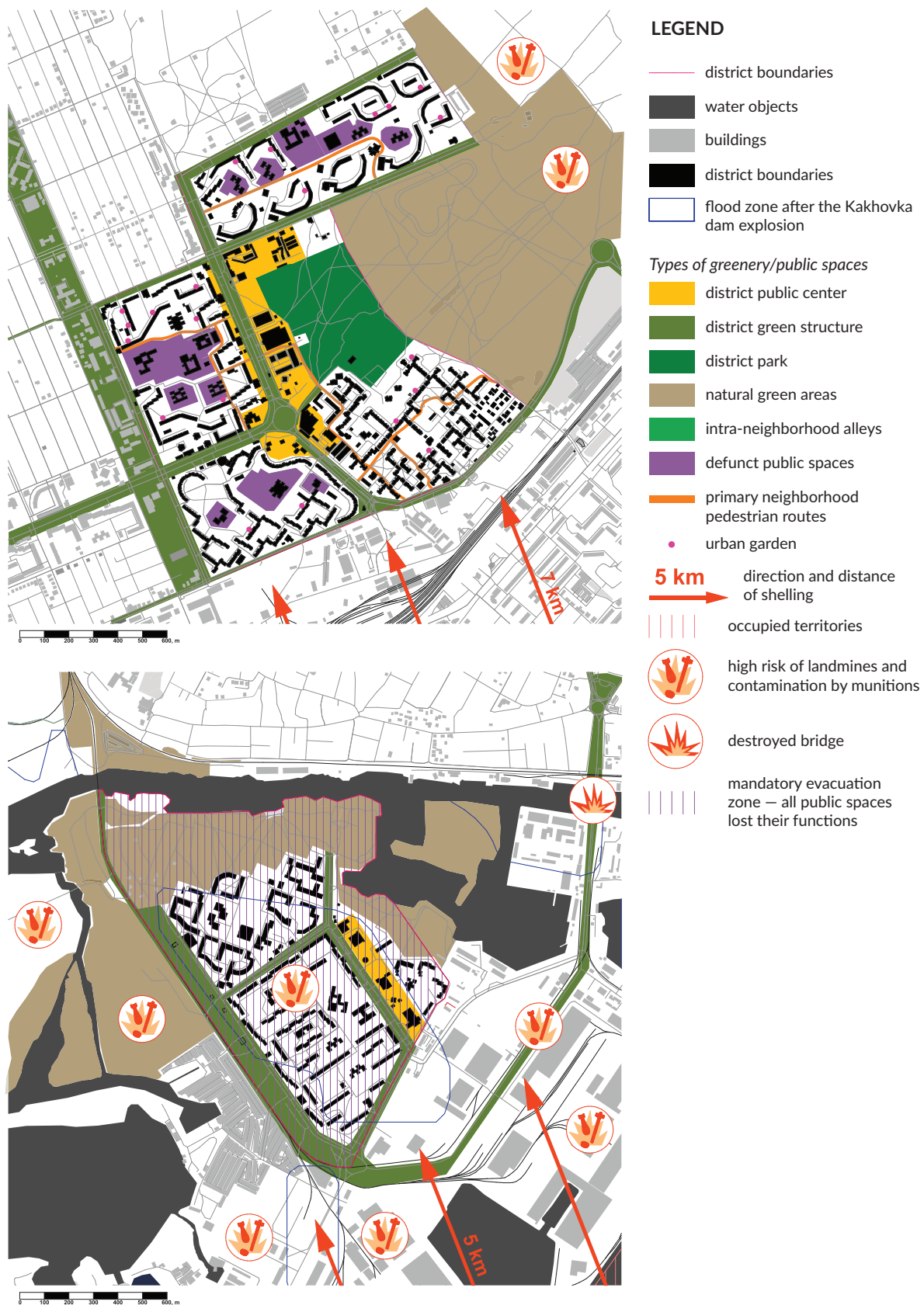


Figure 5. Water-green framework and public spaces of Tavriyskyi and Korabel districts under conditions of polycrisis.

In Korabel, the situation was further exacerbated by flooding following the Kakhovka Reservoir disaster, which destroyed a substantial part of BGI (Figure 6). Many green and public areas have become unusable. The district currently faces both transportation and environmental isolation, and its water and green infrastructure have deteriorated significantly. Green spaces have been destroyed or inundated and are not currently maintained. Korabel has reached a critical threshold, where the combined effects of flooding, destruction, and pollution make restoring its BGI possible only through a comprehensive environmental audit, soil remediation, and the establishment of entirely new, climate-resilient urban ecosystems.

Public spaces in Tavriiskyi are used only to a limited extent, while significant portions of natural landscapes remain inaccessible due to mined areas. Some socio-cultural functions have shifted to basements and underground shelters, where exhibitions, concerts, library activities, and school classes continue, providing a limited but vital continuation of social and cultural life. However, in the event of a ceasefire, the district retains potential for ecosystem restoration and considerable spatial opportunities for climate adaptation. Active community engagement, including urban gardening during wartime, combined with systematic institutional support, can serve as a foundation for developing sustainable, climate-resilient, and socially engaged urban districts (Kononenko & Trusii, 2025).



Figure 6. Consequences of the Kakhovka reservoir disaster for the Korabel district under conditions of polycrisis.

4.2. Socio-Demographic Assessments and Institutional-Economic Resilience

Socio-demographic factors and institutional-economic resilience form the foundation for urban sustainability (Giulia, 2023). They determine not only the quality of social ties, the level of community cohesion, and the psycho-emotional well-being of residents, but also the capacity of urban areas to maintain essential services, respond to crises, and recover under conditions of limited human, financial, and administrative resources (Soldak et al., 2024). In contexts of war, occupation, ecological disasters, and social exhaustion, this component of resilience becomes critical for the survival of urban structures (Reznikova & Korniiievskyi, 2024).

Both studied districts are experiencing a profound demographic crisis, driven by mass population outflows, mobilisation, and resident losses. The population, particularly children, youth, and working-age adults, has declined significantly, while the proportion of elderly residents and people with disabilities requiring additional support has increased. The reduction in economically active residents undermines the local labour market and community self-organisation, while the loss of professionals in healthcare, education, and the public sector diminishes service quality and complicates post-crisis recovery.

The integration of local communities has been accompanied by a breakdown of horizontal ties—between neighbours, families, and professional groups—and the disappearance of everyday practices of social interaction. The social environment has become fragmented, with new groups forming that lack a strong emotional connection to a particular place, leading to a decline in local identity. In Tavriyskyi, the potential for local agency is maintained through the efforts of active residents, whereas in Korabel, evacuation and transport isolation have effectively deprived the community of human resources, rendering basic urban functions unviable.

The institutional structure of both districts is fragmented and vulnerable. Housing associations remain the only effective forms of local governance. The absence of integrated development strategies, cross-sectoral coordination, and digital management tools diminishes the capacity for adaptation. Local administrations operate under constant threat, relying on community and volunteer organisations to compensate for limited funding and staffing shortages (Keudel et al., 2024).

The economic foundation of districts during wartime has been destroyed or severely weakened by business closures, bankruptcies, relocations to safer areas, widespread job losses, and a general decline in household incomes (Zhalilo, 2023). Microbusinesses and the informal economy have become the primary sources of employment; however, they are unstable, under-supported, and often operate outside the legal framework. The institutional and economic resilience of the studied areas is critically low, though it exhibits varying potential for recovery.

Tavriyskyi, with its preserved social fabric and active local initiatives, has the potential for gradual recovery through the support of condominium associations, the development of microbusinesses, and resident involvement in management. Korabel, by contrast, requires a new institutional architecture, an economic restart, and integration into the urban system via targeted recovery and reconstruction programmes.

War, occupation, flooding, destruction, displacement, and isolation have generated both individual and collective psychological trauma, manifested in chronic anxiety, depression, and frustration—particularly

among children, the elderly, and women—as well as loss of trust in institutions, feelings of powerlessness, social apathy, disruption of intergenerational ties, breakdown of family structures, and loss of social capital. Collective trauma generally reduces the capacity for collective response, recovery, and community participation in both districts during crises (Ramsay, 2022).

Conditions of polycrisis necessitate deep social rehabilitation, without which no urban model can be sustainable in the long term.

4.3. Spatial and Social Identity: Between Loss, Transformation, and the Search for a New Subjectivity

The identity of an urban district is reflected in spatial forms of residents' interactions with space, encompassing everyday practices, social ties, cultural codes, and collective memories (Ziyadee, 2018). In the pre-war period, the studied districts underwent a latent transformation of post-Soviet identity: despite the preservation of spatial frameworks, symbolic cohesion was eroding—Soviet symbols disappeared, and thematic bas-reliefs and monumental compositions were dismantled or destroyed. Changes in everyday practices influenced the morphology of development, public spaces, and functional content, resulting in the visual heterogeneity characteristic of post-Soviet cities. Over time, the public's demand to reject the "Soviet" was reflected in legislative initiatives aimed at decommunization, desovietization, and the de-imperialization of urban space (Lazarenko, 2022).

In 2022–2023, districts experienced deep, destructive impacts that affected their symbolic structure and residents' modes of self-identification. These changes were especially pronounced during the Russian occupation of Kherson, marked by the deliberate replacement of Ukrainian meanings with Russian ones: renaming of streets, monument destruction, imposition of Russian cultural agenda, and the use of public spaces for propaganda (Homaniuk & Gabowitsch, 2024). Such practices intensified the erosion of local self-awareness, disrupted sociocultural continuity, and inflicted deep trauma on collective memory.

New symbolic markers of urban resilience began to emerge in the urban environment—patriotic murals, signs of resistance, restored facades, and well-kept courtyards. These elements reflect survival and solidarity, forming a new urban language rooted in experiences of war, loss, and resistance.

In this context, Tavriyskyi emerges as a space of both resilience and vulnerability. Once seen as a peripheral yet stable district, it is now perceived as relatively safe compared to the city centre. However, this shift has not resolved deep-rooted structural issues, including economic decline, weak social infrastructure, and a lack of cultural anchors. Mass migration has eroded traditional social ties, yet a core of active residents—apartment owners, homeowners' association members, and garage cooperative members—continues to demonstrate self-organisation. They invest personal resources in maintenance, courtyard improvements, and shared spaces. These practices foster a new communal identity and support emerging forms of local engagement. In Korabel, the destruction of infrastructure, housing, and water systems, coupled with forced mass evacuation, has led to its stigmatisation as a "disaster zone" or "enclave of isolation," deepening social fragmentation and alienation.

However, even during crises, new foundations of local identity have emerged—shared experiences of survival, mutual aid, volunteer efforts, and support for vulnerable groups. The district's space has acquired a musealised character, with inscriptions documenting catastrophe, loss, evacuation, and hopes for return. The trauma of

losing one's home has entered the collective memory of displaced residents. These practices of solidarity and interaction may serve as a basis for revitalising community life.

5. Discussion: Bifurcation Dynamics and Nonlinear Models of Resilience, Adaptation, and Recovery

This study demonstrates that the recovery of urban environments in a polycrisis is a multidirectional, contradictory process. Rather than a linear “return” to a prior equilibrium, post-catastrophic recovery entails constructing a new urban order in which trauma, survival practices, and the appetite for change become the substrates of a reconfigured reality (Sengupta, 2023). Foregrounding nonlinear models of resilience, adaptation, and recovery shifts the analytical lens from cumulative damage to thresholds, feedbacks, hysteresis, and cascades. Debates on crisis decision-making highlight how, at such critical junctures, governance, spatial organisation, and social relations must be recomposed to sustain functionality and dignity (Jafar, 2025). This approach moves beyond “domino-effect” framings to trace how systems toggle between distinct operational regimes.

The spatial and social shifts in Kherson resulting from war, occupation, and destruction demonstrate the interaction of absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities, leading to an urban order moving toward an unstable yet functionally viable configuration that combines temporality and resilience. Absorptive capacity manifests itself in maintaining basic functions despite challenges, preventing the complete collapse of everyday life. Adaptive capacity is manifested through the reconfiguration of urban logistics and service networks, which can take hold and influence the post-war structure of the city. Transformational capacity is most evident in the most damaged areas, where environmental and infrastructure crises and depopulation render previous models of governance impossible and give rise to new forms of local identity and self-organisation. Taken together, this shows that bifurcation dynamics manifest themselves not only in destruction but also in the situational reformatting of the urban order, where instability becomes a tool for renewal.

The three systemic capacities of the city are manifested through four interrelated dimensions. The morphological-spatial dimension reflects the erosion of the urban tissue, combined with environmental degradation, and characterises the limits of the city's absorptive capacity to maintain its basic spatial infrastructure. Functional and logistical reflect the processes of functional erosion and the cyclical “reassembly” of services, networks, and administrative capacities, which fragment everyday life. The socio-demographic dimension becomes an arena of transformational capacity, where new social identities and roles emerge, aimed not at reproducing stability but at maintaining survival and minimal coordination. The institutional and economic dimension captures the weakening coordination between governance and market mechanisms, which directly undermines the system's ability to provide basic services, leading to threshold effects and potential bifurcations. Collectively, these dynamics disrupt the symbolic geography and generate new markers of memory, resistance, and survival.

The trajectory of spatial sustainability of cities in conflict zones loses its linearity, consistency, and predictability when a complex system of transformations is characterised by:

- a) irreversibility of physical destruction—the scale of damage exceeds the capacity for local restoration;

- b) loss of functional integrity—disappearance of key services, infrastructure, transport connections, and administrative capacities;
- c) social disintegration and disorientation—mass migration, critical shifts in age-gender structure, disruption of traditional ties, emergence of new crisis-driven forms of identity, and rising collective fear and uncertainty about the future;
- d) exhaustion of adaptive potential—local initiatives and external support are no longer sufficient to compensate for systemic losses and ecological irreversibility;
- e) transformation of the symbolic language of space—emergence of new value markers that document experiences of catastrophe, resistance, and survival, replacing previous ones.

These markers show that the urban system is not returning to its pre-war state but is recreating itself in a new hyper-fragmented and structurally disintegrated configuration. The Kherson experience is transferable to cities affected by military conflict, environmental disasters, and social upheavals through principles that respect nonlinearity and spatial differentiation: phased, vulnerability-informed recovery with practical approbation; adaptive governance that iterates with feedback; ecological rehabilitation aligned with risk governance; restoration of functional connectivity via resilience hubs; co-production of memory and identity in public space; and spatial justice to prevent the lock-in of uneven recovery.

Future research should deepen the analysis of bifurcation dynamics by developing predictive models that integrate spatial heterogeneity, network fragility, and socio-institutional feedback. Comparative studies across conflict-affected cities could refine indicators of nonlinear resilience and identify early-warning thresholds for cascading failures and bifurcation points.

6. Conclusion

The study proposes a new approach to assessing urban spatial resilience in the context of polycrisis, defined as catastrophic events that undermine the functioning of urban systems and nullify their adaptive capacity. An analysis of the resilience of two residential districts in Kherson during the war reveals new dimensions of urban instability and reconsiders post-catastrophic recovery through the lens of nonlinear urban development, focusing on key dimensions that define urban resilience.

The study examines the (im)possibility and (un)necessity of restoring pre-crisis functionality even after major threats have subsided. The concept of resilience and adaptive potential should consider:

- a) morphological flexibility—the ability to replan and reorganise urban spaces during crises, adapt them to new functions, and compensate for spatial constraints;
- b) decentralised infrastructure and hybrid mobility—ensuring the autonomy of critical services, alternative supply and evacuation routes, and the independent functioning of district segments regardless of centralised networks;
- c) functional diversity and inclusivity—ensuring that public spaces support the quality of life of local communities, meet urgent needs, and provide protection;
- d) community engagement and local governance—fostering social resilience through self-organisation, mutual aid, and adaptive management in affected districts;

- e) economic capacity—ensuring sufficient resources to maintain exchange and overall urban system functionality.

Rethinking urban functions in the context of catastrophic events establishes a new approach to resilience that accounts for spatial destruction, community fragmentation, resource scarcity, and collective trauma. Instead of restoring pre-war structures, the study proposes a selective implementation of nonlinear strategies to stabilise the most vulnerable elements of the urban environment.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

LLMs Disclosure

During the editorial phase, digital tools were employed to enhance the clarity and style of the manuscript. Specifically, Microsoft Copilot (GPT-4) was utilised for stylistic refinement and ensuring alignment with academic conventions. Grammarly was applied for final language editing, including grammar, punctuation, and stylistic consistency.

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Refugees as Urban Stakeholders: Lessons From Reception of Ukrainians in German Cities

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Abstract

This article examines how reception and participation practices shape urban futures in Berlin and Leipzig, highlighting Ukrainian refugees as agents of urban change. We adopt a comparative approach to summarise and re-analyse research carried out in several projects on the two cities. Through the lens of urban citizenship, we explore how civic engagement and participation among refugees can facilitate dialogue among urban stakeholders and support the implementation of sustainable, long-term solutions. Unlike refugees from other countries, those from Ukraine have been granted temporary protection, which affords them a broad spectrum of rights. These include immediate access to the labour, healthcare, education, and housing markets, freedom of movement within and beyond the European Union, and the ability to commute between Germany and Ukraine. Concurrently, German host communities have demonstrated an impressive ability to communicate with Ukrainian authorities and stakeholders, facilitating collaborative discussions on long-term solutions and the co-creation of strategies for the future. While the proactive engagement of Ukrainian refugees in Germany invites a critical reassessment of the role of civil society actors as agents of urban transformation, this discourse should also consider double standards regarding the reception of different migrant groups. From the perspectives of forced migration research and urban future-making, this complex scenario requires new conceptual approaches to assess its impact, challenges, and opportunities.

Keywords

agency; Berlin; Leipzig; participation; solidarity; Ukrainian refugees; urban citizenship

1. Introduction

Upon the arrival of more than 1,270,000 Ukrainian refugees after the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 (Eurostat, 2026), German host communities have exhibited a remarkable capacity for communication with Ukrainian stakeholders, fostering discussions on long-term solutions and co-creation of strategies for the future (Haase et al., 2024). While proactive engagement of the Ukrainian refugee community in Germany invites a critical reassessment of the role of civil society actors as emergent agents of urban transformation, this discourse should be aligned with critical reflections on the double standards regarding the reception of different migrant groups. From both the perspectives of forced migration research and urban future-making, this complex scenario calls for new conceptual approaches to assess its impacts, challenges, and opportunities.

The idea for this article emerged during the 2023 workshop "Urban Futures in Times of Disruption," in which both authors presented their research into the agency of Ukrainian refugees in their respective case cities—Berlin and Leipzig. During the discussions, we identified both numerous similarities and important differences between our empirical contexts. This prompted us to adopt what Robinson (2011) describes as a "comparative gesture" rather than a systematic comparison, through which we bring together secondary data generated within ongoing research projects. Against this backdrop, the article critically explores the nexus of belonging, participation, and the struggle for long-term solutions as central challenges of urban future-making. Focusing on the reception of forced migrants from Ukraine in Berlin and Leipzig, we conceptualise refugees as urban stakeholders and active agents of urban transformation, rather than passive recipients of social support.

While migrant-serving organisations are already seen as key agents of migrant urban citizenship-making (Blokland et al., 2015; Holm & Lebuhn, 2020; Krüger et al., 2024), there is a need to look deeper into the processes of how refugees become urban stakeholders in times when urban citizenship is shaped by shifting political constellations and changing relationships between various actors. The question of "who owns the future?" (Urry, 2016) becomes particularly relevant in the cities where forced migrants are already reshaping urban landscapes (Collier et al., 2013; Hamann & Türkmen, 2020; Wilson & Darling, 2016). Even though migrant activism in Germany has been conceptualised through the lenses of visibility and protest movements (Bhimji, 2016), scholarly activism (Huschke, 2015), solidarity in resistance and transnational cooperation (Bauder, 2020; Siim & Meret, 2021), and impact on the policy-making and border regimes (Perolini, 2023), the issue of seeing refugees as urban stakeholders (who, in a more general sense, contribute to urban future-making by going beyond their personal and/or community interests) leaves a conceptual gap we aim to address with this article.

Unlike the other contexts of origin, refugees from Ukraine have been granted a unique set of rights in the receiving countries, with the Council of the European Union activating the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for individuals fleeing Ukraine. Debates have been unfolding regarding the naming of people arriving from Ukraine. Although Ukrainians in Germany do not hold formal asylum seeker or refugee status, receiving instead a specific set of rights guaranteed by the TPD, the term "refugee" is used in this article to describe those hosted in Germany following the outbreak of the full-scale war. This choice serves two purposes: First, it simplifies a complex landscape of legal and political classifications, such as visa holders, asylum seekers, refugees, and forced migrants, which, while materially significant, are not our primary focus of study. Second, this terminological approach makes a political point by situating Ukrainians alongside others who have fled war, persecution, or natural disasters (Daoust & Dyvik, 2024).

The unique status of Ukrainians under temporary protection has sparked debates about double standards and the racialization of refugee reception, with Ukrainians perceived as white and Christian, and therefore more deserving of solidarity (Alsbeti, 2022; Frank, 2025; Nowicka et al., 2025). Compared to refugees and asylum seekers from other countries, Ukrainians received a more extensive set of rights guaranteed by TPD, including a residence permit for the duration of the protection period, and immediate access to employment, housing, education, social welfare, and healthcare, as well as freedom of movement within the EU. In addition, Ukrainian nationals retained the ability to return to Ukraine without risking the loss of protection in the host country. However, unlike legal refugee status, temporary protection is not intended to serve as a pathway to permanent residence. Instead, “exit strategies” toward other statuses (including naturalisation) require a change in the legal basis of stay, for instance through employment or studying.

Despite facilitation of employment being celebrated as an exemplary (and scalable) solution, some of the aspects of implementation of the TPD have, over time, raised concerns. One of the examples is the logic of “temporality” of the protection. Since the directive was initially adopted for a time span of two years, and subsequently prolonged every year, the question has arisen on the subject of: How long is “temporary”? Time can be seen, following Foucault, as a technology of governmentality, used to discipline and control migrants (Griffiths, 2013). The logic of “temporary” protection, thus, is one leaving the Ukrainian migrants in a structural and emotional limbo of “permanent temporariness” (Lazarenko, 2024), preventing them from forming strong belonging to the hosting environments (Frank, 2025).

Recent scholarship has examined how temporal regimes structure refugee lives, with a particular focus on the hidden political possibilities and forms of agency embedded within the politics of time (Kallio, 2019; Reneman & Stronks, 2021). The instrumentalisation of uncertainty regarding legal status and prospects produces precarious employment conditions and fragmented integration trajectories (Spada, 2024). Within dominant Western imaginaries, refugeeness is often conceptualised as a linear trajectory—progressing from an unsafe past, through an uncertain present, toward an anticipated future of stability. Yet, for many refugees, temporal experience is more fragmented: Displacement constitutes not only a disruption of the past but also an ongoing condition in the present and a source of further rupture through decisions about return or integration (Leutloff-Grandits, 2025). Despite that, even within the nonlinear timings of their experiences, refugees nevertheless engage in creating alternative spaces of belonging (Kirndörfer, 2024).

In the case of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, both the structures of governance and the refugees’ own orientations frame their stay as temporary, and oriented towards the future return to Ukraine as soon as the security situation allows. Nevertheless, with the protracted character of the invasion and the TPD prolonged till March 2027 (Council of the European Union, 2025), it is important to understand both the liminal position of the refugees in the receiving countries and the fact that their everyday presence and participation are already reshaping the social, economic, and political futures of the cities that host them. With this article, we aim to present our cumulative knowledge on what this looks like and in which way the urban citizenship perspective helps us to understand the agency of Ukrainian refugees in the described context.

Yet, the discussion of civil society actors as emergent agents of social transformation cannot be examined in isolation from the double standards that structure refugee reception. These hierarchies have been increasingly noted in academic literature, particularly through comparisons between the expedited,

rights-based reception of Ukrainians and the protracted asylum procedures faced by refugees from other countries (De Coninck, 2023). These differentiated policies produce what Frank (2025) terms a “stratified system of differential non-belonging.” While refugees with different legal statuses inhabit some form of liminal position, their manifestations vary sharply. Those seeking refugee status experience prolonged document processing while being denied the right to work or move freely. Ukrainians, meanwhile, lack a direct legal pathway to permanent residency and experience additional pressure to return to the war-torn country: both from the host state, through the logic of the “temporary” nature of their status, and from the Ukrainian government, which actively communicates expectations of return. Such disparities reflect broader patterns of “differential inclusion,” generating hierarchised experiences of (non-)belonging reinforced through a “neoliberal deservingness” logic (Fontanari, 2022), whereby states confer greater rights on some groups while restricting others, producing identities and categories rooted in racialised constructions.

The social consequences of these disparities and “reproduction of whiteness” are profound. Refugees who perceive themselves as being treated as “less human” than white, presumably Christian Ukrainians may experience resentment and exclusion, thereby eroding solidarity among refugees, weakening social cohesion, and obstructing collective action (Barwick-Gross, 2025; Frank, 2025).

2. Urban Citizenship Through Civic Participation

Cities can be seen as key laboratories for democratic practices and social innovation (Silver et al., 2010; Swerts & Oosterlynck, 2021), and thus should not be viewed merely as instruments for enforcing international norms but as autonomous actors with growing political influence. In the context of the war in Ukraine, many cities have gone beyond implementing national policies to actively advocate for stronger sanctions and uphold principles such as territorial integrity and the prohibition of unlawful force (Szpak et al., 2023). Through these actions, and by mobilising local communities, cities have demonstrated their capacity to translate international norms into concrete practices across local, national, and transnational scales.

The concept of urban citizenship is central to understanding how migrants, often excluded from national political frameworks, engage in city-based activism and resource organisation. Historically, cities have relied on non-state forms of support, and contemporary urban settings continue to demonstrate innovative, often improvised ways of organising resources (Schilling et al., 2019). Migrant activism, therefore, serves as a form of belonging through participation that challenges the dominant portrayals of migrants as either helpless victims (Ticktin, 2011) or stigmatised outsiders (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). An ongoing debate concerns which forms of urban citizenship are regarded as more or less “desirable” within urban societies, for example, whether claims addressing inequality and discrimination are perceived as less acceptable or legitimate than those that emphasise cultural diversity or participation in migrant councils aligned with local policy agendas (Garcia, 2006).

In much of the Global North, restrictive national immigration policies have increasingly limited migrants’ and refugees’ access to essential services and security (Bauder, 2020). In response, municipalities have formulated their own policies and developed local practices of inclusion designed to facilitate newcomers’ participation in the social and political life of the city. These initiatives, variously described as “sanctuary cities,” “solidarity cities,” or “cities of refuge” (Ataç et al., 2016; Bauder & Darling, 2019), are frequently seen through the lens of solidarity (García Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021), which takes multiple forms on the urban scale, shaped by the

geopolitical configurations, national legal regimes, and local socio-political conditions (Bauder, 2020). While their political objectives and operational strategies vary, research has drawn attention to the persistence of patriarchal and charitable relations between migrants or refugees and their urban “hosts” (Bagelman, 2019; Lazarenko, 2025). Nevertheless, many urban solidarity practices explicitly seek to confront and transform such asymmetrical relationships, working toward more reciprocal and equitable forms of engagement (Haase & Schmidt, 2024).

Bauder (2021) observes that diverse understandings of solidarity circulate not only in scholarly debates but also among urban actors such as activists, NGO workers, municipal politicians, and administrators who rarely follow a single “script” of solidarity. Instead, they coalesce in locally specific configurations shaped by political context, institutional arrangements, and social dynamics. For instance, in Berlin, the election of a left-wing coalition enabled the activist discourse of the “Solidarity City” to enter official policy debates—a shift now being reconfigured under a more right-leaning administration.

Darling (2017) offers a complementary perspective through the concept of *refugee urbanism*, which examines how governance, agency, subjectivity, and urban life intersect. The term does not imply a uniform refugee experience in cities; rather, it highlights the contingent ways in which refugee subjectivities are both shaped by and constitutive of the urban. Drawing on Magnusson’s (2011) framing of the city as a “political production” constantly in the making, *seeing like a city* is understood as a political ontology that foregrounds the potential of urban life to challenge sovereign authority and open new political possibilities. Massey’s (2005) notion of *throwntogetherness* adds further nuance, describing how heterogeneous elements are brought into proximity in urban space, generating relational connections and demanding negotiation. Such encounters with difference may be disruptive but also hold transformative potential (Wilson & Darling, 2016). For them, fully engaging with *refugee urbanism* requires supplementing *seeing like a city* with a critical focus on the intensities, reach, and influence of urban governance in constituting “urban refugees.” This approach cautions against romanticising collective claims-making, recognising the limits of authority emerging from such processes (Magnusson, 2011).

3. Migrant Agency in Urban Settings

Connecting the temporality of “limbo” under temporary protection to the concept of agency allows for a more comprehensive understanding of refugee lives and their capacity to act. Paret and Gleeson (2016) emphasise that migration offers a powerful vantage point to examine the structural processes that produce inequality and shape social change, and advocate for focusing on the institutions and mechanisms that generate and maintain such inequalities. The dominant trend in migration scholarship has associated migrant vulnerability with “illegality” and “displaceability,” that foreground the power of the state to surveil, detain, and remove migrants from national territory (Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2013; te Lintelo & Hemmersam, 2024). However, the experience of “limbo” of uncertain futures bridges this discussion with the debates on “agency-in-waiting.” Brun (2015) defines it as “the capacity to act in the present, in everyday time, based on the experience of displacement from the subject’s history and a critical reflection of the future possibilities framed as waiting and hope” (p. 24). Waiting, in this sense, is not a passive interval imposed by bureaucratic processes, but an active and situated practice involving reflection, resilience (Conlon, 2011), and at times even resistance (Scott, 1990). “Spaces of waiting” thus become spaces of struggle, action, and political possibility (Gill, 2018).

Kallio (2019) further extends this approach by identifying forms of “thin political agency” grounded in what Lear (2006) terms “radical hope.” Many asylum seekers and refugees consciously distance themselves from overt political activism, either due to scepticism about its efficacy or because everyday survival in uncertainty demands most of their energy (Meier & Donà, 2021). Yet even outside of public protest, they engage in subtle, often unrecognised political practices: sustaining community networks, maintaining cultural spaces, or contributing to the upkeep of public environments such as green spaces, actions which, though not labelled “political” by their actors, nonetheless influence the social and material fabric of the city (Frank, 2025). Radical hope here is not oriented toward a fixed or fully attainable future, such as secure status, education, or medical treatment, but toward an open-ended, unsettled horizon. By focusing on what can be sustained and negotiated in the present, refugees resist the closure of their futurity, thereby creating room for alternative subjectivities and everyday forms of agency.

This reframing invites a reconsideration of activism. As Scott (1990) noted, much political action among subordinated groups operates through “weapons of the weak”: quiet acts of refusal, disengagement, and selective compliance, which can be as politically significant as visible mobilisation. In this light, visible refugee activism, whether embodied protest in public space, transnational rights campaigns, or collaborations with activist organisations (Gabiam & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017; Owen, 2016; Sandri, 2018), represents only one register of agency. The less visible, everyday forms of care, solidarity, and mutual aid may be equally important, particularly in urban contexts where such practices contribute to social cohesion and material well-being.

4. Analytical Framework

4.1. Case Study Selection

Germany has received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees—1,274,955 people, accounting for 29.4% of the total in the EU (Eurostat, 2026). In the weeks following the start of the war, Ukrainian refugees in Germany could choose where to live without restriction. Since then, those seeking state support have been distributed regionally among the federal states according to the existing legal framework. However, the majority of refugees who secured private accommodation remain exempt from these official distribution policies.

This arrangement made the German context unique compared with other EU member states. Although about 70% of Ukrainian refugees expressed a preference for living in large cities, by the end of 2022 only 42% actually resided there (Kosyakova et al., 2025; Siarova & Mulvik, 2022). Nevertheless, urban areas continued to attract refugees due to existing social networks, employment opportunities, and more flexible housing markets (Sauer et al., 2023). These factors suggest that settlement patterns are gradually shifting as refugees transition from social assistance to labour market participation and relocate to metropolitan areas.

Our analysis relies on official statistics from late 2025, presented in Table 1.

To provide empirical grounding for our argument, we draw on insights from these two cities—Berlin and Leipzig—based on three years of collaborative research conducted through several projects addressing different aspects of refugee reception by the two authors. Leipzig and Berlin can be portrayed through a lens

Table 1. Ukrainian population in Berlin and Leipzig.

City	General population	Population of Ukrainians	Share of Ukrainians	Share of people with migration background	Largest groups of people with migration background
Berlin ¹	3,913,644	75,867	1.78%	24.96%	Turkey (108,077) Poland (50,967) Syria (41,180)
Leipzig ²	632,562	13,109	2.07%	20.81%	Syria (14,104) Russia (8,282) Poland (7,274)

Sources: ¹ Statistischer Bericht Berlin-Brandenburg (2025); ² Stadt Leipzig (2024).

of contrast. Their migration histories differ significantly: While Berlin's trajectory has been shaped by division and reunification in 1990, Leipzig's migration history is primarily rooted in the GDR period and marked by the profound ruptures following 1989. Berlin, as the capital city, occupies a distinct political and symbolic position, whereas Leipzig functions as a regional hub. The scale and density of actors involved in migration governance, civil society, and urban politics are considerably greater in Berlin.

At the same time, framing the two cities solely in terms of difference would be misleading. Both are large urban centres with established, though differently configured, migration histories and can be understood—albeit to varying degrees—as post-migrant urban contexts, meaning urban settings in which migration histories are embedded in institutions, social relations, and everyday practices (Foroutan, 2019; Haase & Schmidt, 2024). Each hosts a vibrant and diverse civil society landscape, including numerous NGOs and migrant self-organisations (MSOs). Building on these reflections, we approach Leipzig and Berlin not through comparison but through a “comparative gesture” (McFarlane, 2010; Robinson, 2011). Rather than seeking to measure similarities and differences systematically, this approach allows us to place the two cities in conversation to generate analytical insights, and to use their differences and resonances to illuminate broader questions of belonging, participation, and future-making.

4.2. Methodology

The empirical insights presented in the following sections are based on the secondary analysis of existing qualitative data collected within the framework of the authors' respective research projects. Our decision to rely on secondary analysis is not only methodological but also ethical. Given the intense research attention directed at Ukrainian refugees since 2022, we seek to avoid the risk of over-researching and over-interviewing vulnerable individuals. Re-analysing previously gathered material allows us to generate new analytical perspectives while exercising responsibility in knowledge production and minimising additional burdens on participants.

The data were originally collected by the authors in the course of their individual research projects using qualitative and participatory methods. In the Berlin case, data collection included participatory observation (April–August 2022); in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugee women in a longitudinal design (November 2022–November 2024); interviews with Ukrainian refugees focusing on conditions of remote work and its intersections with participation in neighbourhood life (August–September 2025); and three focus groups with

Ukrainian refugee women and Ukrainian MA students (November 2025) addressing experiences of integration under temporary protection.

In Leipzig, the empirical material was likewise generated through qualitative research conducted within three projects: one completed project focusing on the housing integration of refugees across Europe (2021–2022); and two ongoing projects focusing on the governance of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw and Leipzig (2025–2026) and on reframing refugee migration discourses (2024–2027). Within the framework of these projects, empirical evidence was gathered between summer and autumn 2022, in autumn 2023, as well as between autumn 2025 and early 2026 using various methods, such as expert interviews, document and media analysis, workshops, and other dialogue formats within the context of Urban Living Labs. All projects addressed the topics of the arrival, settlement, and sense of belonging of Ukrainian refugees in Leipzig, as well as related challenges and conflicts, albeit from different perspectives.

Finally, our collaboration is shaped by distinct positionalities. The first author shares a Ukrainian refugee background with many of the research participants, which facilitated privileged access to the field and a nuanced understanding of context-specific experiences. The second author is an experienced migration scholar without personal ties to Ukraine. This combination of insider proximity and analytical distance provides what we describe as “two sets of eyes,” helping to mitigate potential blind spots and strengthen reflexivity in the interpretation of the data.

5. Insights From the German Cities' Response

We examine three dimensions that demonstrate various aspects of agency. The first dimension is governance, which demonstrates how Ukrainian refugees are being settled and how this enables them to become active members of the local society. Secondly, we consider their presence in city life and the public sphere, how they organise themselves, and how they experience participation. The third dimension concerns their visibility as a new part of urban society, their active involvement in shaping the present and future of the cities in question, and the roles they and others define in relation to future-making.

5.1. Governance

Leipzig organised the reception of Ukrainian refugees through established arrival centres, concentrating municipal services such as registration, housing, employment counselling, and social insurance in one place (Werner et al., 2018). This integrated approach reflected a coordinated local strategy, benefiting from close cooperation between administrative bodies and civil society. The city residents and voluntary organisations also demonstrated an extraordinary level of solidarity. Spontaneous initiatives such as Leipzig Hilft der Ukraine combined logistical assistance with emotional and social support. Many of these networks have since become more organised and continue to operate (Haase et al., 2024).

During the first months of 2022, most Ukrainian refugees in Leipzig were privately hosted within German households. While some of these arrangements persist, the majority now live in private flats, sometimes sharing with other refugee families. Integration into schools has progressed relatively smoothly, with many children attending German schools while continuing to receive remote lessons from their Ukrainian teachers (Haase & Schmidt, 2024).

However, the strong initial wave of solidarity in 2022 gradually gave way to what observers and practitioners describe as “compassion fatigue.” By 2025, this shift was evident in both public discourse and among civil society actors. Alongside this, narratives have emerged portraying Ukrainians as “ungrateful,” “abusing welfare,” or “commuting” between Ukraine and Germany. These narratives echo stereotypes and, at times, Russian disinformation about the causes and character of the war.

Local support organisations are facing an increasing challenge in managing the consequences of differentiated rights granted for Ukrainian refugees compared to other asylum seekers. These double standards and forms of selective solidarity have led to frustration among NGOs, volunteers, and other refugee communities (De Coninck, 2023; Haase & Schmidt, 2024; Näre et al., 2022). They also highlight a broader ethical tension: how to maintain fairness and empathy in a stratified system of protection.

By contrast, Berlin faced an immediate and large-scale influx that required emergency coordination. Help centres and information points were set up at major railway stations to organise arrivals. Initial support was provided by volunteers, city employees, and NGOs, who directed newcomers to collective shelters. By mid-March 2022, the city’s official capacity had been exhausted. Soon, reception depended heavily on private networks: Residents registered refugees at their addresses, hosted them temporarily, and facilitated access to basic services (Lazarenko, 2025). This demonstrated the central role of interpersonal relations and community mobilisation in sustaining the city’s humanitarian response.

Despite Berlin’s reputation as a “city of refuge” (Hierro & Maza, 2025), the capital’s housing market presented severe obstacles for newcomers. While private accommodation initially alleviated pressure on public shelters, many refugees struggled to transition to stable housing, encountering administrative barriers and legal uncertainty. Over time, cases of host fatigue and eviction have exposed the limitations of volunteer-based models, intensifying the debate on the need for sustainable institutional solutions (El-Kayed, 2025; Lazarenko, 2025).

A particularly revealing case in point is the conversion of the former Tegel Airport into a large-scale reception facility. Initially intended for short-term housing, it evolved into a semi-permanent settlement for approximately 3,000 individuals, primarily comprising vulnerable groups and individuals requiring medical care. Reports have highlighted issues such as overcrowding, a lack of privacy, and uncertain prospects for transitioning to independent living (Ünsal & Lushankina, 2025). While most Ukrainians in Berlin live in private housing, the Tegel example highlights persistent inequalities in the reception system and raises questions about the moral legitimacy of long-term collective accommodation.

5.2. Representation

In Leipzig, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees led to the rapid emergence of new MSOs, such as Oseredok, which focus on community support, housing mediation, and psychological assistance. Some Ukrainians have joined established NGOs, contributing to the city’s already diverse associational landscape. However, many Ukrainian MSOs remain largely inward-oriented, concentrating on the needs of their own community rather than on broader inter-migrant cooperation.

Ukrainians have also become increasingly visible in local participatory structures. In the most recent elections to Leipzig’s migrant council, several candidates of Ukrainian origin were elected, leading to debates

about possible “over-representation.” While this demonstrates significant civic engagement, it has also prompted discussion about the pace and extent of Ukrainian inclusion in local governance. Interviews conducted in 2023 and 2025 revealed additional tensions within Leipzig’s post-migrant society, particularly in encounters between Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking communities. Conflicts arose around the use of Russian for translation, accusations of insufficient gratitude, and suspicions of welfare misuse. Such disputes reflect differing perceptions of equality and belonging: Many Ukrainians reject the image of the “grateful refugee,” instead asserting their right to be treated as equal urban residents.

In Berlin, the presence of a well-established Ukrainian diaspora facilitated an immediate and organised response. The Alliance of Ukrainian Organisations provided an institutional backbone for coordination, while new associations emerged to meet the specific needs of recent arrivals. Mentoring programmes, cultural initiatives, and social projects have proliferated, including Kwitne Queer, which supports LGBTQ+ Ukrainians, and community-based organisations that assist with healthcare and employment (Kashnitsky et al., 2025). This expansion of Ukrainian civil society in Berlin reflects a broader transformation from individual trauma to collective empowerment (Byelikova & Mykhailenko, 2025).

At the same time, internal and external tensions have surfaced over the decolonisation of cultural practices, and autonomy from Russian-led institutions. These debates have encouraged new alliances across communities. Ukrainian organisations increasingly collaborate with feminist and migrant groups such as KuB, International Women Space*, Women in Exile & Friends, and Bikeygees, thus redefining urban solidarity beyond national and ethnic lines.

Ukrainians’ political participation in Berlin operates within the framework of the Berlin Participation Act, which establishes advisory councils for residents with migration backgrounds. While there are no dedicated seats for Ukrainians, targeted initiatives, such as the Senate’s Mij Berlin fund and programmes by Migrationsrat Berlin e.V., have expanded opportunities for engagement. Politicians of Ukrainian descent have also become visible advocates for refugee rights and Ukrainian interests in local politics.

5.3. Visibility in Urban Life

In Leipzig, the Ukrainian presence has become increasingly tangible in everyday urban life. Ukrainians now constitute one of the city’s largest national minorities. Their language, symbols, and cultural expressions are widely visible in public spaces, particularly during national holidays such as Ukrainian Independence Day, when demonstrations and cultural events are held. Since 2022, cooperation between Leipzig and Kyiv has intensified through municipal visits, joint projects, and financial assistance. Local media initially provided extensive coverage of these activities, though attention has declined over time.

Uncertainty regarding the duration of the war and future return remains a central challenge for both refugees and local authorities. Municipal representatives in Leipzig emphasise that questions of return are central in dialogues with their partners in Kyiv, yet the expectations of both cities are diverging. Leipzig perceives well-integrated Ukrainians with stable employment as potential long-term residents, whereas Kyiv continues to prioritise their eventual return. This divergence complicates local planning, particularly in housing and education, where projections depend on refugees’ intentions (Lakševics et al., 2024).

In Berlin, expressions of solidarity with Ukraine have become integral to the city's political and cultural landscape. Public demonstrations have played a key role in maintaining visibility for the Ukrainian cause. Since early 2022, large rallies have been held at iconic locations such as the Brandenburg Gate, Alexanderplatz, and Potsdamer Platz, coinciding with major dates like Independence Day and the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion. These events attract thousands of participants, including members of the Ukrainian diaspora, Berlin residents, and public officials such as Ambassador Oleksii Makeiev. Ukrainian activists have also integrated their presence into broader urban events—for example, by organising a Ukrainian float at Berlin's Christopher Street Day parade, which highlighted solidarity between queer and displaced communities.

Urban symbolism has further reinforced Ukraine's visibility. In January 2023, an unnamed square in Lichtenberg was officially named Odesaplatz to commemorate Berlin's partnership with the city of Odesa. Similarly, in October 2022, a green space in Steglitz-Zehlendorf was renamed Kharkiv Park in recognition of solidarity with Kharkiv.

Temporary but high-profile initiatives have complemented these permanent acts: In February 2023, the Café Kyiv event transformed the historic Café Moskau venue into a symbolic "Ukrainian embassy of culture," combining artistic performance, political discussion, and activism. This event raised questions about how local toponymy and urban symbolism reflect contemporary political realities. Together, these performative and material interventions extend Ukrainian visibility beyond community activities, linking cultural participation to broader questions of belonging, representation, and citizenship.

To summarise the case study insights: Both in Berlin and Leipzig, Ukrainian refugees have already altered the social, cultural, and political landscapes of their host cities. Their arrival has diversified urban demographics, tested support infrastructures, and sparked new discussions about solidarity and inclusion. Refugees have formed and joined organisations, influenced local governance, and introduced new cultural and symbolic elements to urban spaces. However, these developments have also revealed tensions surrounding deservingness, representation, and the sustainability of solidarity. The experiences of Leipzig and Berlin illustrate how refugees, through their everyday practices and civic engagement, have become not merely recipients of aid but active participants in shaping the evolving urban futures of German cities.

6. Concluding Discussion: Refugees as Agents of Urban Transformation

Building on earlier discussions of solidarity, refugee urbanism, and agency, it is essential to consider how the processes of building urban citizenship are embedded within broader frameworks of urban governance and social transformation. Inclusive urban governance cannot be achieved through top-down policy design alone but requires the active participation of a wide range of actors. Such governance depends on the collaborative engagement of migrant organisations and city officials, with mutual trust emerging as a precondition for negotiating shared visions of a common urban future (Brun, 2015; McFarlane, 2025). Equally important is the question of which forms of urban citizenship are considered desirable for co-producing urban futures and how fragile or less visible forms of citizenship can be better recognised (Garcia, 2006).

The experiences of Leipzig and Berlin illustrate that the arrival of Ukrainian refugees can offer a significant opportunity to advance migrant integration policies with the support of non-governmental actors. However,

as Jelínková et al. (2024) observed in the case of Czechia, such opportunities also carry the risk of regression if “good practices” are not scaled up or institutionalised. The reception of Ukrainian refugees has brought the intertwined issues of empowerment and participation to the forefront. The Ukrainian community represents a group that is both vulnerable—having faced trauma and challenges in housing, education, and adaptation—and resilient, as demonstrated by its strong organisation, collective agency, and the widespread narrative of national resilience. However, as we observed in the case of Leipzig, their agency can also be viewed as somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, their networking, mutual support, and assistance, including through newly founded MSOs and digital platforms, is highly valued by the municipality, as it eases the process of settling in, finding accommodation and employment, and fostering the sense of belonging. On the other hand, stakeholders in the host community are wary of Ukrainian refugees expecting to be treated as equals rather than supplicants and seeming to lack gratitude for the help and support they have received. These challenges confuse the widespread perception of refugees’ behaviour and reactions. Not only are active engagement, expectations, and the desire to play an active role in shaping one’s own future in the host society (i.e., acts of citizenship) welcomed, they are also met with scepticism, astonishment, and rejection. This observed “duality” may contribute to the general debate on how host societies might deliberately support the development of local citizenship, and actively use this approach to encourage the effective settlement of newly arrived refugees, inviting them to play an active role in shaping the local future through a sense of belonging, involvement, and responsibility.

However, these dual characteristics have given rise to three key concerns. The first involves ongoing debates on *deservingness*, particularly regarding refugees who actively advocate for their rights, seek recognition of qualifications, or pursue better employment opportunities. The second concerns *participation* and the politics of belonging that underpin refugee reception in Germany (Frank, 2025). Here, the key questions revolve around whose voices are heard in governance, and how inclusion is structured and governed within formal and informal frameworks. While the transition from protection to participation has created opportunities for Ukrainian-led initiatives, it has also risked reframing solidarity in conditional terms—linking it to productivity, integration, and gratitude (Zuntz & Columbu, 2024). The third concern relates to the significant *uncertainty* faced by Ukrainian refugees and host societies regarding the duration of the war and how people will address issues of return and commuting (transnational lives). It also considers the extent to which this uncertainty affects the power and motivation of refugees to become active citizens and actors in the host society. This is relevant not only for Ukrainian refugees—a similar situation was also observed following the political changes in Syria in 2024/2025. Uncertainty and a lack of planning are constant risk factors that undermine refugees’ motivation to become active members of their new communities (Haase et al., 2024; Lapshyna, 2026).

At the same time, this evolving landscape has enabled Ukrainian organisations to establish themselves as recognised actors in urban governance. As state resources and public enthusiasm wane, migrant organisations increasingly fill gaps in welfare provision, advocacy, and representation. Their institutionalisation through participation in migrant councils, partnerships with municipal administrations, and transnational networks illustrates the emergence of refugee-led urban governance, in which displaced communities not only adapt to existing structures but also contribute to reshaping them. Yet, the professionalisation of solidarity through project-based funding may dilute its grassroots and political dimensions, transforming solidarity from a mutual practice into a managerial framework.

The key challenge for both Ukrainian and German actors lies in sustaining a form of cooperation that preserves the transformative potential of solidarity while avoiding its co-optation by bureaucratic or assimilationist agendas. Recognising refugees as urban stakeholders means moving beyond charity towards genuine co-production—valuing their knowledge, experience, and networks as integral components of inclusive urban futures.

Overall, the reception of Ukrainian refugees in German cities has not only tested existing models of arrival governance and integration, but also redefined how cities and urban societies imagine belonging, participation, and future-making. Taken together, several key lessons emerge from the comparative analysis of Berlin and Leipzig. Firstly, Ukrainian refugees are already transforming cities through both their visible and everyday practices—advocating for their interests, engaging in civic and cultural life, and contributing to new forms of collective organisation. Secondly, the ambiguity of solidarity remains: While indispensable during the initial phase of arrival, solidarity has sometimes reproduced paternalistic and exclusionary dynamics that limit refugee agency. The persistence of these hierarchies underlines the importance of developing inclusive, non-patronising frameworks of support. Thirdly, the Ukrainian case shows that when state-led solutions prove insufficient, new civic partnerships can emerge to fill the gap. Finally, as the war continues and the prospect of return remains uncertain, Ukrainian refugees are increasingly likely to settle long-term in Germany, further embedding their presence within urban social and political life. Yet, these processes remain fragile: They can only be sustained where solidarity is mutual rather than paternalistic, and where temporariness does not preclude engagement. The challenge for urban governance lies in maintaining this openness, ensuring that migrant and refugee voices are recognised not as provisional or exceptional but as constitutive of the city's social and political fabric. As the war endures and temporary protection becomes increasingly indefinite, Ukrainian refugees are likely to remain central to shaping Germany's urban futures. Their evolving role invites broader reflection on how cities can serve as laboratories of inclusive citizenship—spaces where the boundaries of belonging are continuously renegotiated and where displaced populations, through their resilience and participation, co-produce more just and sustainable urban futures.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the information and ethical obligations to protect participant confidentiality.

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

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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”

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 responsabilization 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.

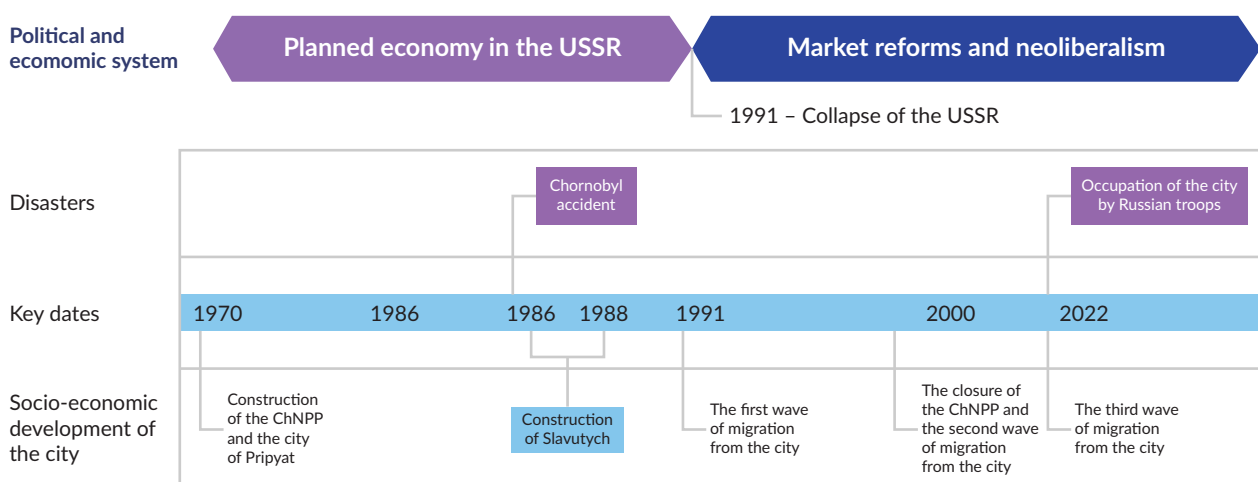


Figure 1. Timeline of events related to the ChNPP and the city of Slavutych.

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 Chernobyl 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 & Liubavskiy, 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl. 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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

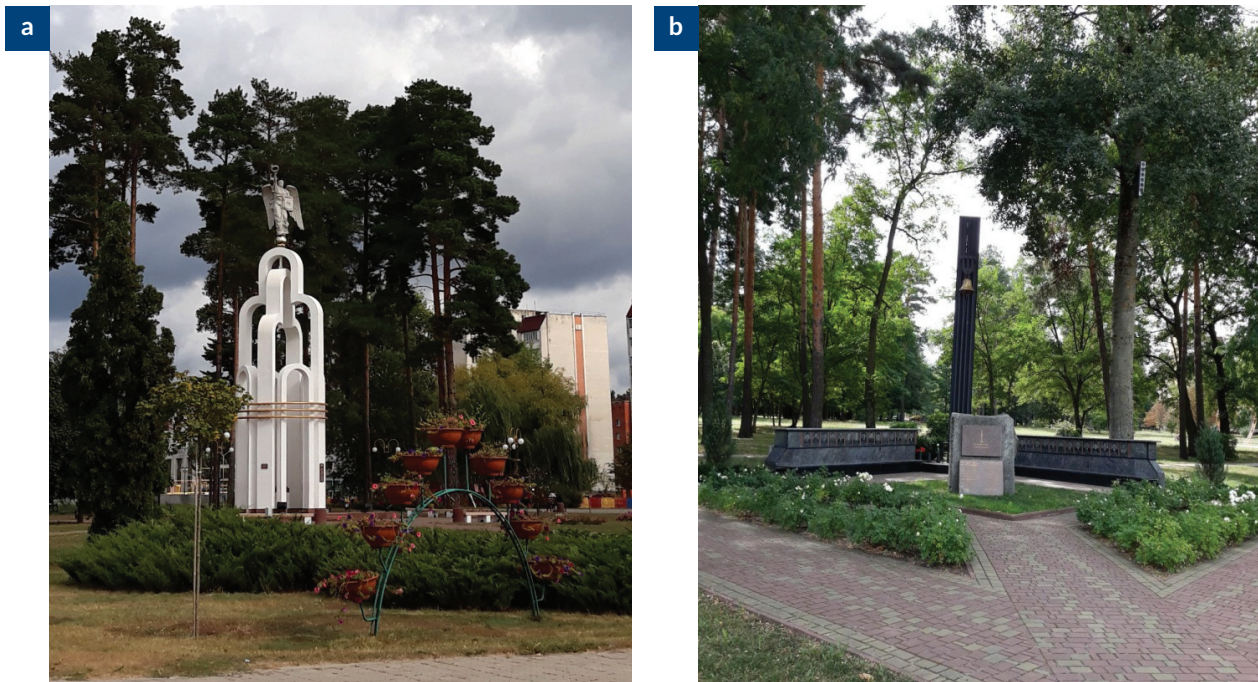


Figure 3. Monuments in Slavutych: (a) Sculpture of the White Angel of Slavutych; (b) Chornobyl Heroes Monument.

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)

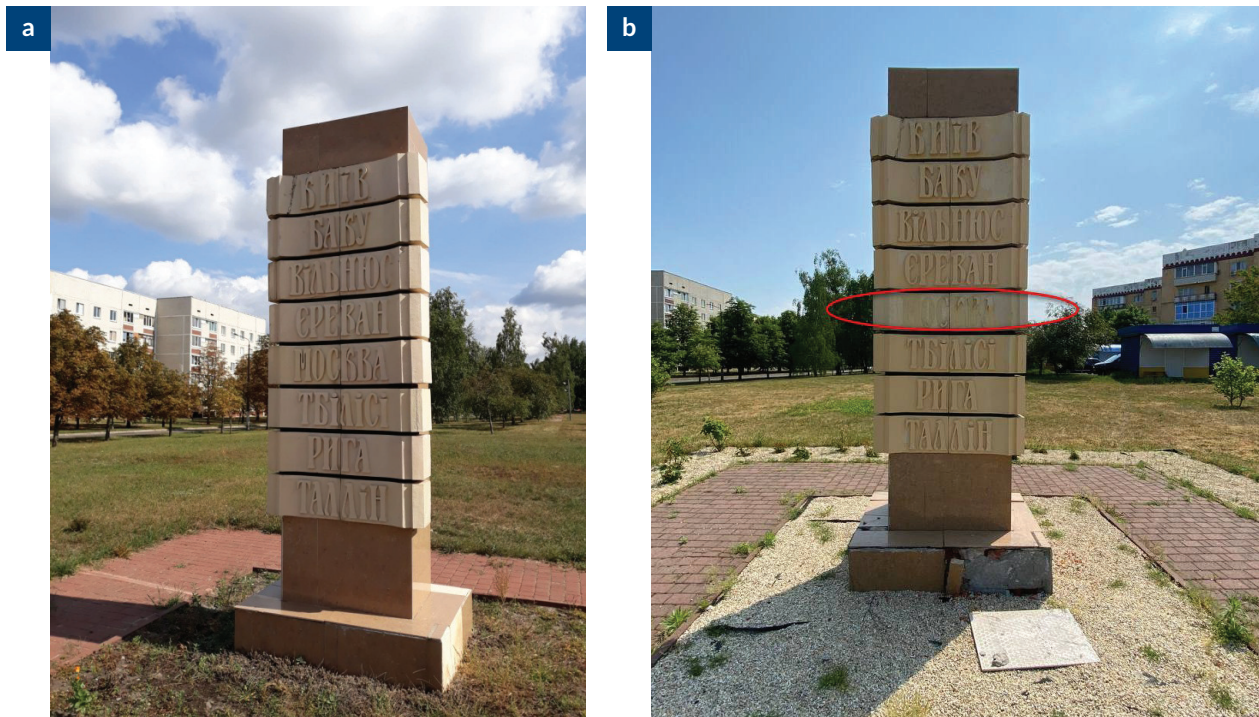


Figure 4. Stele of the Soviet republics (a) before and (b) after 2022.

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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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.

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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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Co-Producing Urban Futures in Berlin: Temporary Urban Practices in Refugees' Space Production

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Abstract

The challenge of refugee settlement in urban areas is a pressing issue globally. While Germany hosts the third-largest refugee population worldwide, around 33,530 refugees live in state-owned accommodation in Berlin. In this context, various institutional bodies have emerged to address the settlement of refugees and their broader integration into urban neighbourhoods, including initiatives that focus on the development of temporary activities in public spaces. Focusing on one such initiative in Berlin—BENN (Berlin Develops New Neighbourhoods)—this article builds on collaborative knowledge production involving researchers, students, and refugees to critically reflect and examine the potential and limitations of state-led efforts to co-produce alternative urban futures. By critically engaging with the literature on tactical urbanism, we argue that these initiatives can be understood as a form of urbanism that has the potential to produce socio-spatial transformations beyond the scope of the proposed activities. Through engaging with different design vocabularies, methods, and temporalities, the research seeks to demonstrate alternatives for collectively producing knowledge and spaces that contribute to more inclusive urban environments. Ultimately, the article aims to enrich ongoing debates on urban transformation and refugee integration, highlighting the dynamic interplay between institutional actors, communities, and academia.

Keywords

BENN; Berlin; insurgent urbanism; refugees; tactical urbanism; urban planning

1. Introduction

The challenge of refugee settlement has become an increasingly urgent global issue due to the rapid rise in displaced populations. While policy frameworks often address refugees as a temporary population, this perception significantly shapes how refugee spaces—predominantly located in urban areas (UNHCR, 2023)—are designed, often emphasising containment over inclusion. Within this context, political negotiation and informal practices can be understood through refugees' agency, as tactics deployed to overcome barriers produced by policies that frame them as temporary residents.

The notion of temporariness, and its implications for everyday life, has been widely contested. Agier (2011) argues that the condition of waiting experienced by refugees produces an “endless present,” suspending them in liminal spaces and undermining both autonomy and the capacity to imagine the future. However, refugees are not passive subjects; they actively engage in informal practices that reconfigure their relationship to time and space, navigating and negotiating restrictive structures (Dalal, 2022; Steigemann & Misselwitz, 2020). These acts, often unnoticed by formal systems, constitute resilience, resistance, and adaptation, revealing a more complex geography of migration. Refugees' practices can be interpreted as expressions of spatial and temporal agency (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022), suggesting agency emerges not only from formal governance but also from the micro-politics of space and temporal strategies to reclaim control over their lives. The intersection of temporal uncertainty and spatial negotiation shows displacement as a deeply situated, dynamic process of making place and time meaningful within constraints.

According to the UNHCR (2025), Germany is the country with the third-largest number of refugees in the world. The most significant recent influx occurred between 2015 and 2016, when approximately 890,000 asylum applications were registered (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2015). This influx prompted shifts in governance frameworks and institutional structures, particularly in Berlin. In response, various institutional initiatives were established to address refugee settlement and integration within urban neighbourhoods, including BENN – Berlin Entwickelt Neue Nachbarschaften (Berlin Develops New Neighbourhoods), a program that was implemented in 26 different areas of the city, each one with its specific office and team. Funded by the Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing (SenStadtB), BENN aims to strengthen neighbourhoods where refugees reside by fostering social cohesion through four key areas: (a) encounter and active cooperation, (b) empowerment and participation, (c) communication and dialogue, and (d) networking and neighbourhood development (BENN Marzahn-Süd, 2025).

The latter area focuses on the development of temporary activities in public space. As identified through our interviews with BENN team members, accommodation staff, district officials, and representatives of SenStadtB, the programme emerged in 2016 when the Berlin Senate sought to build on the experience of neighbourhood management to support refugee integration. BENN was conceived as a socio-spatial intervention at the neighbourhood scale, embedded within the Senate's broader integration master plan, which coordinated efforts across multiple administrative departments.

This article focuses on the interrelations between migration governance, refugee agency, and urban development emerging from collaborative research with BENN. It aims to identify strategies for urban future-making in the context of the ongoing polycrisis, while contributing to the development of alternative planning vocabularies and methodologies that prioritise collaborative processes over predefined outcomes.

The research draws on close collaboration with refugee groups from diverse backgrounds, as well as an examination of projects developed—particularly since 2015—within the framework of migration governance. The central research question is: What is the potential of temporary socio-spatial interventions, implemented by localised, state-led initiatives in collaboration with academic actors, to mobilise refugee agency in the co-production of alternative, flexible, and more inclusive urban futures?

To address this question, the article engages critically with literature on tactical and insurgent urbanism, examining both the potential and the limitations of state-led approaches to co-producing urban futures in collaboration with civil society, academic institutions, and local initiatives. The analysis draws on two years of collaborative research with one of the offices of BENN located Marzahn-Süd, in the eastern part of Berlin, and refugee communities in their neighbourhood. This work involved mapping pathways for the collective production of knowledge and space through experimental design vocabularies and methods.

The article approaches BENN Marzahn-Süd's practices from a spatial perspective, arguing that initiatives embedded within institutional frameworks, yet closely connected to local refugee and migrant communities, can mediate between situated needs and broader urban planning agendas. Collaboration with researchers and students in architecture and urban studies enabled the development and testing of methodologies and pedagogical approaches aimed at generating longer-term impacts through small-scale, temporary interventions.

2. Between Temporary Actions and Suspended Lives

Agier argued that displacement produces a temporal condition of suspension in addition to spatial marginalisation. He writes:

The refugee camps are always hybrid organisms, not reproducing any socio-spatial form that already exists; they are new experiences for the locality in which they are established, if only for the permanent paradox that their existence expresses, between an indefinite temporality and a space that is transformed because its occupants necessarily appropriate it in order to be able to live in it. (Agier, 2011, p. 53)

The in-between time, as Agier described it, is a condition in which refugees reside in an ambiguous present that is perpetually extended and in which they are neither fully temporary nor fully settled. Their lives and routines are structured around waiting, uncertainty, and restricted mobility—the result of a temporal suspension frequently reinforced by humanitarian and bureaucratic policies. Spaces of refuge (e.g., camps or refugee neighbourhoods) become places where new identities, solidarities, and forms of politics can emerge. The temporality of these spaces is thus processual: these spaces are not fixed but in flux, where people improvise, contest, and create futures (Agier et al., 2002, 2010, 2011; Dalal, 2022). Within these conditions of uncertainty, new temporal practices of space emerge in many forms, such as resistance, adaptation, and conflictual practices. According to Steigemann and Misselwitz (2020, p. 646), these spatial practices:

Often result in such permanently temporal grey spaces, through the ongoing oppression by the state agencies and their official architectures of asylum and regulation regime, but [the authors] also saw

how refugees' agency is exercised 'descending into the ordinary and reclaiming liveable spaces' (Sanyal, 2014, p. 569).

The connection between the temporal conditions of people—defined by waiting and uncertainty—and their temporal practices allows us to move beyond this binary of permanence and temporariness, recognising their complex entanglement. We emphasise that these practices are not simplistic reactions to precarity, but rather interventions that establish futures within constrained contexts.

Temporary uses of space can be understood as one manifestation of tactical urbanism, a set of low-cost, small-scale, and non-permanent interventions that seek to test alternative spatial arrangements and provoke change in the built environment (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). Tactical urbanism operates through experimentation, informality, and short timeframes, allowing actors to explore possibilities that fall outside formal planning instruments. This implies a space for experimenting and for pursuing solutions not addressed in master plans. Bråten (2025) further discussed the concept of "meanwhile use" (*Zwischennutzungen*), where temporary occupation of vacant sites functions as a testing ground for future development while also generating cultural visibility and economic interest, for which Berlin is well known, an example where temporary uses of space are employed to attract capital investment in under-used sites (Bråten, 2025, p. 13). In this sense, tactical urbanism is positioned strategically within development processes, not primarily to enable inclusion, but rather as a mechanism that can prefigure, accelerate, or legitimise longer-term urban transformation and is often aligned with market-oriented objectives.

On the one hand, tactical urbanism can be understood as part of an effort to operationalise the notion of the open city (Abou Jaoude et al., 2024). On the other hand, critical engagements with tactical urbanism suggest that when such practices reconfigure, reappropriate, and temporarily revitalise space in ways that align with dominant planning or development strategies, they are absorbed into those strategies and therefore lose their tactical character (Mould, 2014, p. 533). In this regard, Seldin et al. (2020, p. 772) argue that temporary interventions should be considered genuinely "tactical" only when they are bottom-up and support collective struggles for access to basic rights, enacted through the insurgent practices described by Miraftab (2009). Correspondingly, in cities shaped by strongly neoliberal urban development agendas, such practices are often co-opted by dominant development logics. As a result, creative urban interventions are frequently absorbed into processes of urban capitalism, where they function less as tools of transformation and more as new modes of capitalist control (Mould, 2014, p. 529).

By linking tactical urbanism with the temporality of refugee spaces and positioning time as a central analytical category, this perspective exposes the embedded power relations that determine what is defined as temporary, by whom, and for how long. Refugee accommodations function as instruments for reshaping the expectations, wishes, and desires of asylum seekers according to the host country's regulatory frameworks and perceptions of new arrivals. This phase constitutes a latent period in which asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are monitored, categorised, and familiarised with policing and administrative practices that will shape their lives as refugees within the host society (Agier, 2011).

In our research, we documented the efforts of BENN in Marzahn-Süd, Berlin, to implement temporary, low-cost interventions aimed at enhancing public spaces, encouraging community engagement, and facilitating social interaction. Although not explicitly framed as such, we argue that BENN's actions can be

understood as forms of tactical urbanism, operating through the activation of social networks and the empowerment of refugees by promoting temporary spatial interventions. However, drawing on critiques that highlight how tactical urbanism is not inherently transformative and may risk reproducing hegemonic and oppressive power structures, we propose moving beyond temporary spatial interventions alone. Instead, we suggest developing new methods that combine action, teaching, and research in order to foster alternative and counter-hegemonic ways of inhabiting and producing space.

Building on the work of scholars such as Miraftab (2009) and Roy (2011), Canedo and Andrade (2024) propose a discussion of insurgent urbanism as a way of shifting hegemonic spatial knowledge structures and repositioning the local knowledge of marginalised communities at the centre of the production of space. Within this framework, co-production is understood as an experimental field in which alternative ways of living are investigated, analysed, and tested in practice, enabling the collective imagination of futures grounded in the perspectives of historically invisibilised voices. Canedo and Andrade (2024) define insurgent urbanism as an approach that understands planning and design as forms of knowledge production emerging from lived experience and validated through practice. This dialectical process, which begins and ends with action, as described by Friedmann (1987), requires continuous critical reflection and transformation in the tactics and subsequent actions of all actors involved.

Canedo and Andrade (2024) proposed, for the understanding of an insurgent urbanism, three key learning aspects for collaborative activities between city-building professionals and communities that could lead to potential forms of insurgent urbanism: (a) experiments using different knowledge and technologies, (b) the approximation of design and building through a learning-by-doing process, and (c) the development of mutual learning environments. The authors have often pointed out that these aspects provide a critical perspective on the hegemonic hierarchies of knowledge that validate certain types and formats of knowledge while disregarding others (Andrade & Canedo, 2019; Friedmann, 1987; Illich, 1973). Moreover, they have highlighted the production of imaginative futures (Miraftab, 2009) by giving space for experimentation with different knowledge and technologies. These mutual learning environments have been an attempt to balance or critically address the existing power structures and interests when working with different groups of actors and are understood as having the potential for contesting dominant spatial logics and enabling more transformative forms of urban agency (Canedo & Andrade, 2024).

In this context, this article draws on empirical work involving researchers, students, BENN Marzahn-Süd, and refugees living in state-run accommodation in Marzahn-Süd to explore the potential interconnections between temporality and insurgency. While tactical urbanism highlights small-scale actions aim at empowering people and transforming spaces, as previously discussed, insurgent urbanism emphasises the capacity of marginalised groups to actively shape their environments and challenge hegemonic power structures (Canedo, 2025; Canedo & Andrade, 2024). This concept is grounded in the understanding that people have the ability to creatively transform and critically reflect on their own spaces, and that their knowledge should be integrated into planning and design processes (Canedo, 2025). In the following sections, we apply these perspectives to the collaborative work developed between BENN, refugees, students, and academics, highlighting the crucial role of insurgent urbanism in the collective transformation of urban futures.

3. The BENN Programme and the Governance of Refugee Integration in Berlin

Throughout the last decade, Berlin has received a large number of refugees, resulting in increased pressure on existing infrastructure. According to the State Office for Refugee Affairs, around 41,369 refugees have been housed, with 33,530 living in state-managed accommodation distributed across the city (State Office for Refugee Affairs, 2025). Among the strategies developed by the state to address these challenges is BENN, established in 2018 as part of the Strategies and Overall Concept for the Integration and Participation of Refugees, initiated by the Senate Department for Participation, Integration, and Migration (2025). The programme aims to strengthen neighbourhoods hosting refugees by promoting integration between refugees and their neighbours. Phase one of BENN ran from 2017 to 2021 in 20 areas of the city, while phase two (2022–2028) operates in 23 areas, with each office managed by a designated operator (SenStadtB, 2025).

The location of BENN offices is determined by districts that host large refugee accommodation sites and are considered to lack adequate infrastructure. As stated in the programme description:

In urban areas that do not yet have the necessary infrastructure, meeting places must be developed and expanded as a matter of priority. Funding through the urban development programmes BENN (Berlin Develops New Neighbourhoods) and FEIN (Volunteering in Neighbourhoods) of the Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing (SenStadtB) will be examined on a location-specific basis. (SenStadtB, 2025)

BENN was funded through the SenStadtB programme Social Infrastructure, which provided construction funds accessible across Berlin. In Marzahn-Süd, where our research took place, the BENN team—according to our interview partners from the Marzahn district office—is connected to the Urban Development Office. In many other districts, however, the coordination team is linked to the Organisational Unit for Social Space-Oriented Planning Coordination (Organisationseinheit Sozialraumorientierte Planungskoordination) or directly to the Integration Office.

As a result, approaches to coordination and collaboration with other Senate offices vary, depending on the district in which each BENN office is based. Coordination took place through district-level steering committees comprising representatives from the district office, the Senate Administration for Urban Development, and the BENN team. These committees discussed local needs and oversaw the implementation of construction measures.

In her study on post-migrant spatial justice using BENN as a case study, Jahre (2021) emphasised that BENN adopted many of the structures established in Berlin's Neighbourhood Management Programme (Quartiersmanagement), including local teams, steering groups, and participatory decision-making processes for residents. According to Jahre, despite various critiques, the programme demonstrated a degree of progressive emancipation from federal policy by allocating state funding to address spatial injustices in refugee accommodation and to foster the participation of refugees, local residents, and civil society actors.

Berlin, as a city-state, combines the responsibilities of the state and local authorities and offers both initial reception centres and long-term accommodation. Migration governance is structured between the federal

government, which controls the asylum procedure and distribution at the national level, the federal states, which are responsible for distribution at the district level—as shown in Figure 1—as well as the standards and funding of accommodation, and the municipalities, which implement the reception policy.

The researched neighbourhood is located within the district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf, situated in the eastern part of Berlin and is known for its post-war socialist architecture, Plattenbau (large-panel-system buildings), as part of the East German Housing Programme. The urban development was influenced by the Soviet concept of the Mikroraiion, the modern high-rise apartment towers inspired by Le Corbusier's International Congresses of Modern Architecture and new urbanist ideas (Sammartino, 2018).

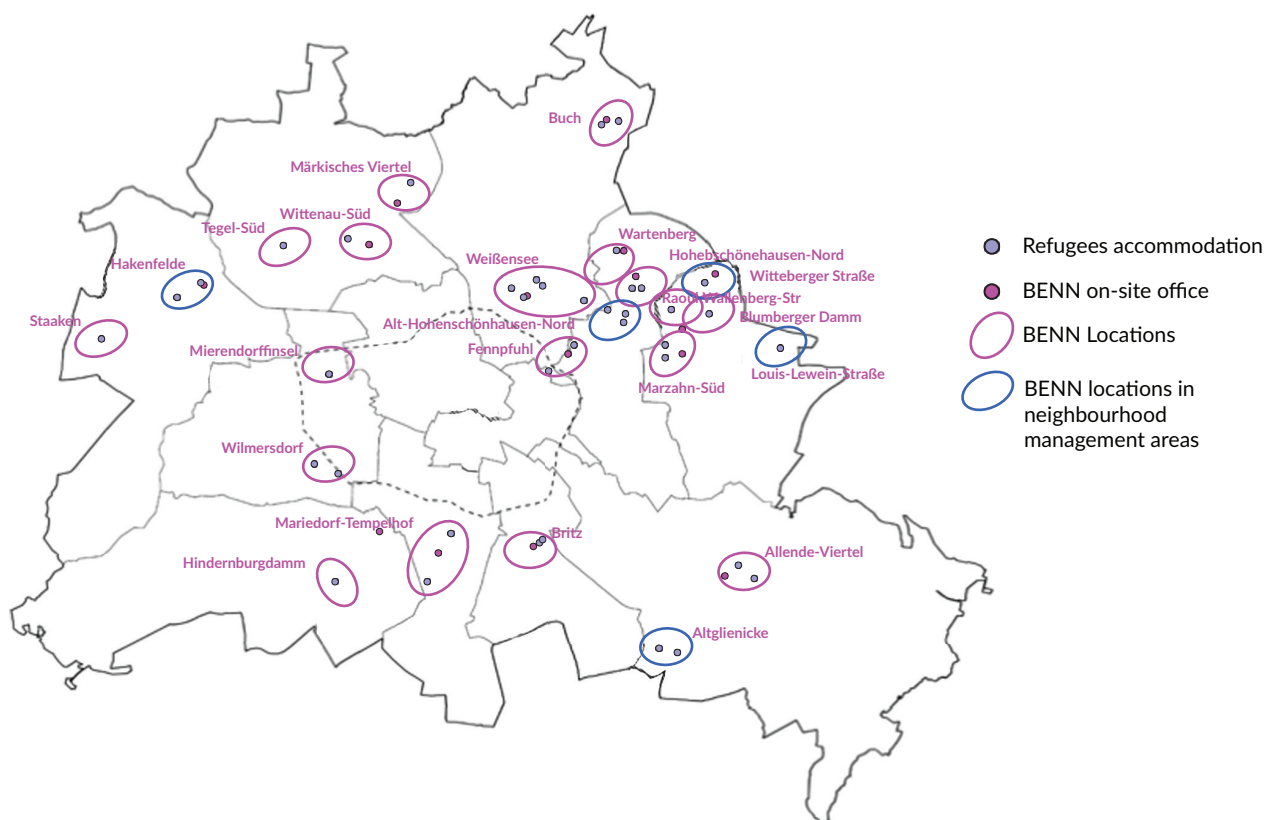


Figure 1. Locations of refugee accommodations and BENN locations in Berlin. Source: Adapted from State Office for Refugee Affairs (2025).

After unification, the district underwent many changes. The most significant of these resulted from the privatisation of the estates and their integration into the open housing market, which led to an increase in rents and pushed residents to move away for socio-economic reasons. As a result, many dwellings became vacant and infrastructure was deconstructed (Trilling, 2014). In the late 1990s, housing vacancy rates reached record levels. Between 1993 and 2003, nearly 70% of dwellings were refurbished, and by 2010, around 300,000 dwellings had been demolished.

Since 2015, structural redensification in Marzahn has caused significant population growth, and compared to other Berlin districts, it has more potential development areas (District Office of Marzahn-Hellersdorf, 2017). The district previously had a relatively low proportion of inhabitants with a migration background compared to other Berlin districts; however, this has changed in recent years. In 2024, there were a total

of 35,400 refugees in Berlin shelters, 4,233 of whom were in Marzahn-Hellersdorf—11.96% of the Berlin total. This is a relatively high percentage compared to other Berlin districts, with only Pankow and Treptow-Köpenick having higher proportions.

BENN operates through the development of temporary activities, such as festivals, language cafés, organised tours, gardening actions, and film exhibitions, among others. The activities aim to create networks and connections between refugees and neighbours and support refugees in their daily needs, ultimately to understand the main demands and wishes of the residents of the neighbourhood. These demands are collected through various means, then systematised by BENN and presented to different state structures. BENN itself does not have the power to develop policies or specific actions according to residents' needs but acts as a mediator between them and over-bureaucratic state structures.

This article is based on the research we have been conducting over the past two years, as well as some actions that were developed through the collaboration between BENN Marzahn-Süd and students and researchers from TU Berlin during a design studio in 2024. The next sections aim to describe those actions and their impact by dialoguing with literature on temporary spatial interventions and the temporality of living of refugees in Berlin.

4. Collaborative Research as a Methodological Tool to Collectively Build Urban Futures

Our collaboration with BENN combined research, teaching, and outreach activities to develop a dialogue between BENN's goals and our research objectives. Together, we planned a series of neighbourhood interactions, including refugees living in two accommodation sites in BENN Marzahn-Süd (Figure 2). Students mapped the different actors, clustered by activities rather than influence, with the shared accommodation as a central reference point (Figure 3), distinguishing decision-makers, support providers, and sources of indirect influence. The interactions aimed to deepen understanding of the neighbourhood from the refugees' perspective. BENN functioned as a meeting point, offering space, organisation, and orientation for activities such as food and cooking festivals, open-air cinemas, language cafés, bazaars, and urban gardening. This collaboration allowed researchers, lecturers, and students to engage with complex social issues while enabling BENN to expand its scope. The project's success also relied on personal connections with the BENN team, particularly Marzahn-Süd, which was open to experimenting with collaborative tools to explore integration and liveability.

Besides the use of qualitative research methods (interviews, focus groups, case studies, visual and participatory methods, narrative and biographical methods, etc.), the design studios experimented with a series of collaborative methods embedded in the discussion of insurgent urbanism, toward a co-produced space (Canedo, 2025). Insurgent practices become an alternative epistemological lens that challenges hegemonic hierarchies and emphasises the historically embedded character of urban knowledge through decolonial perspectives.

Using this methodological framework, we—as researchers and students from architecture, urban planning, and urban design—developed and tested collaborative methods for mapping, design, and building. This was applied with different groups of refugees living in two shelters in Marzahn-Süd over four academic semesters. In cooperation with BENN Marzahn-Süd and the shelter administrations, we conducted a series of activities



aimed at engaging, consolidating, and co-designing with various refugee groups (men, women, children, and youths). For this research, we focused on the voices of refugees living in the accommodations and did not include those of neighbourhood residents, as our approach aimed to address the group affected by transitory living spaces and understand how BENN's actions in public space particularly impacted them.

The activities and workshops unfolded in different phases, allowing for adjustment, adaptation, and reflection after each event, rather than leading to a fixed final product. Throughout the process, we questioned the role of architects and urban planners in vulnerable contexts. Our focus lay less on tangible outputs than on the process itself, which we understood as a form of design. The main goal was to deconstruct hegemonic ideas embedded in planning and design practices and to foster an environment of mutual learning—and, most importantly, unlearning.

Through a set of collaborative methods and tools for mapping and design, participants were encouraged to develop a critical understanding of the role of architects and urbanists, especially in marginalised contexts and communities. The students had the opportunity to engage with a range of actors and to develop activities together with refugees. Furthermore, they reflected on their professional formation and everyday practices—both within the university and in their current work in architectural offices. The aim was not to replicate BENN's work, but rather to expand the horizon of possibilities for engagement between refugees and local residents through the testing of innovative and creative tools. In other words, we intended to shift the perspective toward more inclusive practices within our field, where marginalised groups are often disregarded in planning and design. The tools ranged from the use of artefacts and games to artistic explorations and collective mapping strategies.

In our understanding, collaborative design leads to outcomes that prioritise processes over products. Fostering a shared vision and establishing new social bonds—or strengthening existing ones—are integral parts of these outcomes. More than learning experiences, we, as a collective, underwent lived processes of unlearning, challenging our assumptions and knowledge while seeking to create dialogue among different forms of knowing and perspectives. As the students emphasised in the final report of one of our design studios: “No design authority; different forms of aesthetics; questioning our role as planners.” Another student, reflecting on her personal experience, noted: “We are not so different, and maybe if we can dig deep into our lives, we will find that we share similar stories...stories that can help us build a cohesive neighbourhood.” A third student commented on expectations and project management: “By scaling down expectations and remaining open to the process and outcomes, we avoid imposing our own ideas and instead gain unexpected, valuable results.”

Similarly, we were challenged to understand ourselves as actors within the process of spatial design and development, which provided us with an opportunity for critical reflection on our own role. This, in turn, helped us recognise the factors affecting the community we were working with and to bring marginalised and silenced voices into the discussion. As both instructors and researchers, we facilitated the workshop sessions with the students, who were responsible for organising the workshops themselves, thereby creating a space where participants could critically engage with the subject matter.

This type of work comes with particularly challenging ethical considerations. In order to address this, we prepared students through a set of inputs by experts on ethical work with marginalised communities and

also discussed together literature on the topic, developing our own set of ethical principles. Among those, we highlight: (1) transparency in the communication of the goals and scope of the activities with the participants; (2) assuring anonymity of the participants, also in the way the pictures were taken and treated by the students; (3) voluntary participation based on the assumption of all participants' right to opt out at any moment; and (4) constantly reflecting on power unbalances and "parasitical relationship" between researcher and researched (Clark-Kazak, 2021; Gaete Cruz et al., 2022; Kelly, 2019). Ethical concerns and issues were also constantly debated throughout the class, from both the perspective of the participants and the students on some occasions, and they were faced with challenging situations that they were not always prepared to deal with. We consider these challenges and ethical considerations also part of the process of interacting with local communities, especially those affected by trauma, and needs to be constantly addressed and further developed according to each context, instead of being understood as a fixed set of guidelines.

Furthermore, we took part in the data generation process by engaging in collaborative activities, discussions, and written reflections. In terms of research methods, the student groups employed a combination of surveys, mapping, and collective drawing. The use of multiple methods proved more effective than relying on surveys or mapping alone. Likewise, combining individual and group work was found to be particularly productive in generating informed results that respected each participant's comfort level. The collected data included recorded interviews, drawings and maps done collectively with the refugees, personal diaries of the students, and photographic material. These data were shared among all students and researchers and later compiled into an eBook that also included the findings and reflections of the involved groups. These findings were later incorporated into our own research, where we intentionally moved beyond survey-based approaches to include more active and diverse activities that encouraged participants to feel comfortable and willing to take part.

To conclude this section, we refer to the work of several scholars (Canedo, 2025; Canedo & Andrade, 2024; de Souza, 2007; Escobar, 2018; Miraftab, 2009, 2017) to define key criteria for insurgent practices, as follows:

1. Autonomous: Linked to decentralised, self-managed, and horizontal forms of power; they are also understood as anti-capitalist in their attempt to reclaim social life from state control.
2. Counter- or anti-hegemonic: Challenges dominant power structures beyond state control and is often rooted in marginalised or oppressed communities, led by grassroots actors.
3. Transgressive and relational: Builds alliances across struggles and promotes participatory democracy, requiring the invention or reclamation of spaces beyond those sanctioned by authorities.
4. Imaginative and transformative: Adaptable to shifting sites of power; involves defending, transforming, or inventing new practices to envision alternative futures and spatial justice.

By focusing on refugees' perceptions of integration in Berlin and working in close collaboration with local actors and institutions, the project aimed to promote a transdisciplinary debate. It encouraged students to reflect on the integrative and co-productive roles of city-building professionals by developing scenarios for transforming the current situation. The project addressed issues such as spatial conflicts and negotiation, insurgent planning and design, the right to the city, and the tension between housing and shelter—examined through the lenses of institutional barriers, architectural and infrastructural elements, and social-spatial dynamics. The students developed their work in three phases, described in the following subsections.

4.1. Preparation Phase and Collaborative Methods

In this phase, the students experimented with a variety of collaborative methods and tools for approximation with the local community. The goal of those activities was to introduce ourselves to the residents and to test what would and would not work. This intensive interaction generated a process filled with frustration, expectations, emotions, new ideas, learning, and unlearning for everyone involved.

Depending on the context, the collaborative methods varied to serve the specific purpose of each workshop. These included the imaginary map, in which participants positioned themselves in relation to others; thematic round-tables, where a topic of interest was proposed and the group was encouraged to lead the discussion; walk interviews with individuals or groups along their favourite paths while taking field notes; presentations with objects and/or photographs, through which participants explained their personal connections to them; initiating games that integrated spatial aspects of the areas where participants lived; and the organising of visits (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Workshops with refugees at the accommodation in Marzahn-Süd.

4.2. Design Phase

The students conducted a variety of collaborative actions with different groups of refugees, including men, children, women, and youths. Whenever possible, activities were co-designed with the participants and were continuously re-evaluated and refined by the students. The activities were designed to exchange social-spatial knowledge with the different groups and to build trust, extending beyond the purely design-oriented dimension. During this period, students co-developed games, explored the neighbourhood through the perspectives of children and youths, documented Berlin using photography as a design tool, co-designed a bazaar with women (see Figure 5), and developed interview tools such as the “dream journey.” The dream journey is a method consisting of one-to-one interviews, where the interviewer asks the person

to close her eyes and imagine her favourite place. The interviewer would then ask the woman to describe what she saw and how she felt, and, through guiding questions, would create visualisations of this ideal space. This helped to understand participants' memories and imaginations of space, among other activities.

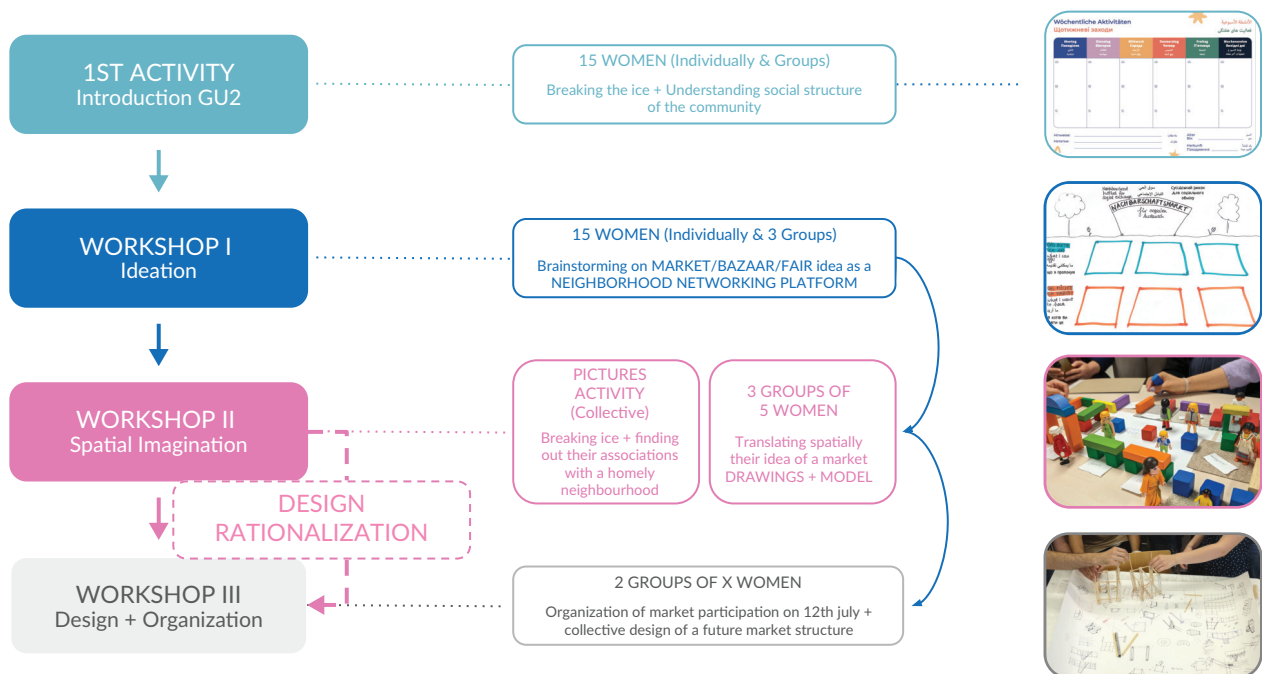


Figure 5. Participatory process for the co-design of a bazaar. Note: GU2 = Gemeinschaftsunterkunft für Geflüchtete (Shared accommodation for refugees).

4.3. Building Phase

Rather than focusing on products or outcomes, we aimed to explore the process and experiment with different formats for engaging and interacting with society. Neither the sequence nor the manner of implementing the proposed methods is ever fixed. In each design studio, students were able to adapt and develop new tools within these methods. While the main structure and objectives could often be predetermined, the building phase functioned as a continuation of the design phase, during which the validation of ideas and concepts with the involved actors persisted.

In this sense, action-based processes are crucial for the development of insurgent urbanism. While acknowledging the particularities and specificities of the local context, these processes create opportunities to challenge hegemonic discourses and practices. Beyond promoting equitable and inclusive planning and design strategies, insurgent urbanism, as we understand it, seeks to reflect on and experiment with alternative ways of engaging with the built environment.

5. Potentials and Limitations of State-Led Efforts in Co-Producing Alternative Urban Futures

As argued by Agier (2011), the temporality imposed on refugees generates a condition of paralysis, in which their lives appear to be on hold. Strategies aimed at the long term often fail to effectively enhance their sense

of belonging or the quality of daily life, particularly in over-bureaucratized contexts such as Berlin (Kreichauf, 2018; Steigemann & Misselwitz, 2020). We contend that BENN's temporary interventions in public space influence the perceptions and lived experiences of refugees in the Marzahn neighbourhood. Although BENN's primary objective is not to develop temporary urbanism, this article argues that the small-scale and short-term actions implemented by BENN have the potential to foster socio-spatial transformations in the experiences of refugees living in Berlin. As Jahre (2021) notes:

The BENN programme is inherently spatial by considering the following: Firstly, it is unique to the city and state of Berlin; secondly, it works with a conception of the local as neighbourhood and even carries neighbourhood in its name; and thirdly, the programme is tied to the need [for the] existence of a refugee shelter.

Our studies suggest that collaboration between state-led actors and academics—particularly researchers and students in architecture and urbanism—can create alternative ways of addressing both the practical and symbolic dimensions of refugees' everyday lives. Information gathered through interviews with representatives of BENN Marzahn-Süd highlighted the importance of community-oriented and bottom-up approaches that focus on everyday social interaction rather than formal institutional management. Interviewees explained that their work prioritises understanding residents' needs and fostering opportunities for neighbours to meet, interact, and become familiar with their local environment. In contrast to more official neighbourhood management structures, these initiatives were described as more flexible, creative, and grounded in community participation.

One example discussed in the interviews was UnbezahlBar, a project established three years ago that functions both as a redistribution initiative and as a social meeting point. Residents are encouraged to donate items they no longer need, which others can then take free of charge. Beyond material exchange, the project also serves as a space for social connection and offers free support and advice on social issues. The initiative is jointly supported by several organisations, including Volkssolidarität e.V., the German Red Cross Berlin Nord-Ost e.V., BENN Marzahn-Süd, and BENN Blumberger Damm. As described by interview participants, the project demonstrates how solidarity and mutual assistance can be actively cultivated at the neighbourhood level.

The exchange between refugees—with their knowledge of the local context and perspectives—and students, bringing creativity and technical expertise, combined with the mediation and trust-building facilitated by BENN and the residents, proved capable of generating alternative ideas, ranging from small-scale interventions to broader proposals for the area.

During a design studio in the summer semester of 2024, students built upon previous research conducted in collaboration with BENN, to develop design proposals for the neighbourhood in engagement with three distinct groups—children, women, and youths—across two types of refugee accommodation in Marzahn-Süd. By cross-referencing these prior outcomes with the proposed urban interventions, the students evaluated how well community needs had been addressed. Based on this analysis, they refined their projects into more comprehensive proposals that responded to a broader range of community needs.

One of the groups of students focused specifically on the needs of migrant women, identifying that the primary challenge was the women's disconnection from their neighbourhood. In collaboration with the participants,

the group developed a concept to create a tool for building social networks within the community, which resulted in the bazaar/pavilion (Figure 6)—a space intended for the exchange of goods, services, and practices rather than commercial activity. This initiative sparked a productive discussion about the types of spatialities that could emerge from such a structure, including features such as a gate or entrance, areas promoting privacy where women could gather away from public view, and spaces for children, acknowledging that caregiving responsibilities remain predominantly associated with women. Based on these findings and experiments, a manual for the bazaar was developed and handed over to BENN. As the student group noted:

If BENN in turn decides to fund the building of the pavilion, the women will have a tool to regain ownership of their neighbourhood. It will not just give them a platform to represent their skills individually or as a group, but also the opportunity to connect to the neighbourhood. It will be a social tool to connect to each other, a place that clearly belongs to them. BENN could use a wall of the pavilion as an information board for local businesses, so that there is information that would be useful for the women gathered comprehensively in one place. Equally, these amenities could be offered the opportunity to use the pavilion [by other groups of refugees] at a future bazaar.



translating ideas



embracing diversity



prioritising collaborative processes



valuing of meaningful social moments in process

Figure 6. Participatory process for the co-design of a bazaar.

BOLLERWAGEN

OUTCOME

Kids identify with the Bollerwagen and recognise ownership...



Concept Workshops Findings Reflection



BUILD A PICNIC!

WORKSHOP 2

Methods:

Active Participation

Project-Based Learning

Problem-Solving



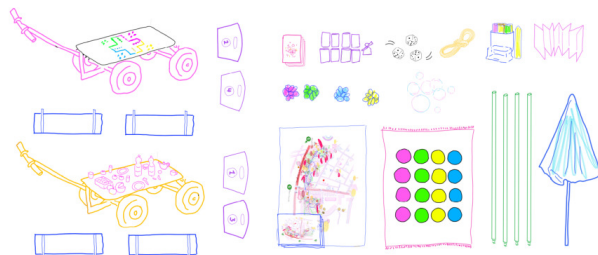
+ One-on-one conversations

+ Hands-on implementation of kids' ideas on the Bollerwagen and see how it interacts with their surroundings

Concept Workshops Findings Reflection

BOLLERWAGEN

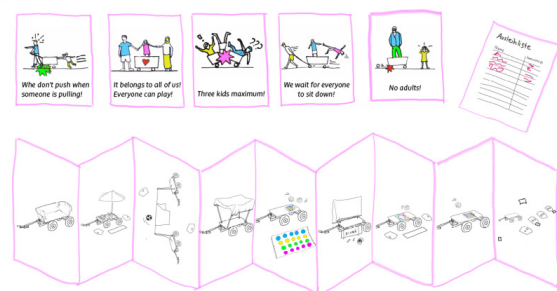
OUTCOME



Concept Workshops Findings Reflection

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OUTCOME



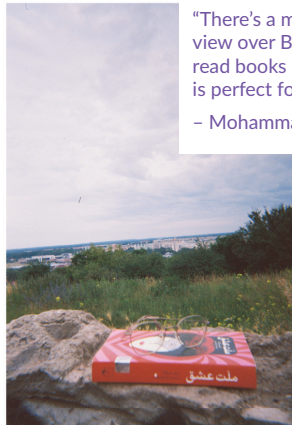
Concept Workshops Findings Reflection

Figure 8. Mobile playground workshop with children living in the accommodation.

Another group worked with youth, focusing on understanding their perspectives and challenges in navigating Berlin through the use of photography as a planning and design tool. The students described the act of capturing photographs as a brief, fleeting moment, which provides insights into the photographer's life perspective; these visual perspectives are unbound by language and can be understood by anyone. To gain an authentic understanding of the lives of refugees in Berlin, the group conducted several workshops with residents of the shelter on Paul Schwenk Straße. The students noted:

At the end of the workshops, everyone received a disposable camera to capture moments from their daily lives, which were later exhibited during the neighbourhood festival in the shelter. Our aim was to have a fluid and flexible process in place to answer a specific research question: How can photography be a tool for insurgent design?

Over the course of the semester, the students not only developed workshops with the refugees but also built relations and friendships, identifying shared interests and values. This trust-building process yielded deep insights into social-spatial practices and knowledge, connecting the everyday struggles of participants with strategies for coping with feelings of isolation, exclusion, and segregation. The photographs taken by the refugees, along with selected quotes from their conversations, were exhibited in the shelter on the final day of the studio (Figure 9).



"There's a mountain in Marzahn with a good view over Berlin. I go there twice a week to read books and to enjoy privacy. This place is perfect for me – I don't need any more."

– Mohammad

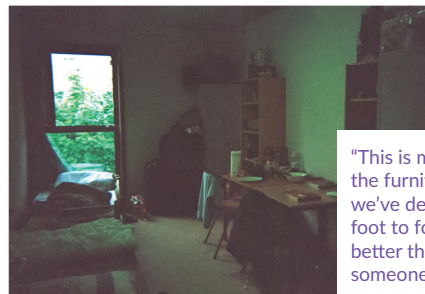


"We tend to forget just how epic our lives could be."

– Shabnam

"This is my German course and I'm learning B1 there. I go there every day and have made good friends like Igor. I speak a lot of German with him because in my previous class I didn't speak to anyone – I don't know why. I often can't find topics to talk about with people."

– Mohammad



"This is my room. We can arrange the furniture however we like we've decided to have the beds foot to foot. Living together is better than being alone, because if someone has a problem, the other person can help. It would be much more difficult on your own."

– Mohammad



"Some musicians were singing together, everyone was in love with it. I wanted to take this moment in my memories. Like a ... I don't know how to say it ... A gathering moment ? I like that."

– Naveed



"I take the train every time to meet my friends in Berlin. I found a nice spot in Berlin to chill together, near to the Spree and in front of the DDR museum. We go there every time."

– Usman



"The TV Tower. I love its unique and towering structure. Is it the tallest tower in Germany? I enjoy seeing it during the Light Festival; it looks like futuristic architecture."

– Naveed

"This is my favourite place near to Friedrichstraße. Especially at night. I took the picture from the station, on my way of the german class."

– Shabnam

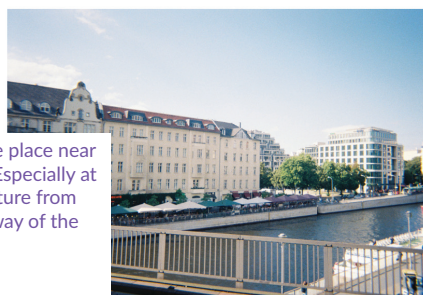


Figure 9. Photographic collection created by refugees documenting everyday life and lived experiences.

6. Towards Insurgent Alternative Urban Futures

Circling back to the temporality of these contested spaces, the actions by state-led initiatives aim to address the issue of broader integration of refugees into urban neighbourhoods and appear to shift the focus toward more inclusive urban futures. As this article seeks to address these spatial practices through the lens of insurgent urbanism and decolonial methodologies, it situates collaborative design in between state-, civil society-, and academic actors and examines the related negotiations on hierarchies, authority, and agency.

The literature on tactical urbanism provided an access for identifying the actions undertaken by BENN and offered a theoretical background for interpreting their nature. By contrast, the co-production methods demonstrate how space can be reinterpreted and appropriated by participants. Within the dominant ways of planning knowledge, these perspectives emerged as epistemic intervention, through emphasising unlearning approaches, and transdisciplinary exchanges of knowledge that is created through interactions between refugees, students, and institutional actors, and presented refugee spaces as continuously co-constructed through social and spatial negotiations.

By bringing together insurgent urbanism with state-led efforts toward migration, this study contributes to the reconceptualisation of refugees' spaces as a relational and contested field. Our research, in line with Jahre (2021), has proven that the tactical approaches by BENN are a progressive emancipation from the federal policy. According to Jahre (2021, p. 87), "BENN allocates state funding to focus on problems related to spatial injustice of refugee shelters and it aims for the participation of inhabitants and [the establishment of] networks to achieve social cohesion." This article proposes a framework for understanding refugee spatial production through insurgent urbanism as a struggle over the conditions that enable alternative urban futures, inclusion, and agency, rather than a problem of design or management.

By centring the voices and actions of refugees, this research sought to critically reflect on top-down urban development processes while experimenting with alternative modes of inclusion that embrace a diversity of actors, practices, and forms of knowledge. Approaching this from the perspective of architecture and planning students, and in collaboration with local, state-led actors such as BENN, the project highlighted the need to further develop tools and methodologies capable of addressing the persistent challenges and limitations embedded in contemporary planning practice.

During the field work, we were able to document numerous challenges and limitations through collective reflections and discussion rounds. A recurring theme was the lack of adequate tools within our fields to initiate truly collaborative design processes. This shortcoming became evident in the struggle to identify suitable approaches for engaging the focus groups—particularly children—who tend to receive and communicate information in more abstract ways than adults. As architects and planners are traditionally trained to prioritise technical expertise and control outcomes, it proved challenging to step back, provide guidance, and offer incentives rather than predetermine results. Canedo (2025) notes that many practitioners consequently struggle to meaningfully incorporate diverse perspectives into their projects, lacking the skills required to facilitate open dialogue, listen actively, and adapt to the evolving needs of communities. Throughout this process, students emphasised the difficulty of avoiding the imposition of their own vision on the groups—a tendency deeply embedded in their academic training.

Furthermore, shifting the focus from end products to a process-oriented approach—and understanding design as a collective effort—proved essential for managing expectations and fostering transformative practices. This deeper understanding also revealed contradictions between practical research and the rigid frameworks of academia, particularly in relation to time and budget constraints that hindered the building of trust within the research context.

Communication barriers—including language differences and diverse communication styles—posed additional challenges, prompting continuous efforts to find alternative strategies and seek support from the community. Equally significant, the cultural diversity and age differences among target groups underscored the need for more tailored participatory methods.

7. Conclusion

Returning to our theoretical framework, the emergency condition of temporality—and its exceptional character, which often serves to justify the existence of camps—was the starting point for understanding the agency of marginalised communities in the co-production of alternative urban futures. In Berlin, refugees are not only bound to an endless present; the city's rigid social-spatial structures and norms deny them the right to imagine and transform their spaces and neighbourhoods.

Within this context, actors such as BENN, who operate both within the institutional framework of the state and on the ground in direct contact with refugees and their needs, offer a means of overcoming these barriers. Their actions can provide short-term, concrete responses to refugees' aspirations. We argue that this potential, when combined with the involvement of academic actors from the fields of architecture and urbanism, can generate alternative urban futures grounded in the perspectives, wishes, and needs of marginalised communities—in this case, refugees in Marzahn-Süd—while also incorporating the viewpoints of students and researchers. Moreover, we aimed to understand how those findings and spatial knowledges could challenge hegemonic structures of power in the production of cities and spaces.

In this context, small-scale temporary actions in space can act as catalysers and mobilise communities and their wishes, and the longer-term impacts can be assured by actors such as BENN and the academia. In our cooperation with BENN, all results from the students' work were used by BENN in their dialogue with other state actors. Besides, the role of universities in this context is also to expand the reflection beyond the particular context and produce further scientific knowledge that can inform and inspire further practices.

This co-production of spatial imaginaries functions as an insurgent urbanism, inviting all participants to critically reflect on hegemonic, top-down approaches to spatial planning and design. It also challenges us to rethink our built environment in ways that not only respond to the current polycrisis but also contribute to the construction of resilient and solidary futures founded on equity and justice (Canedo, 2025).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, provided that access complies with the participants' consent and institutional data protection regulations.

LLMs Disclosure

Since we use programs such as the LanguageTool plug-in of Microsoft Word, and Zotero, which all work with AI nowadays; we use AI search engine such as the google with AI mode, and ChatGPT; and since the article has been sent for copyediting service, where the use of AI is growing, we would like to acknowledge that the style of writing has been improved by AI, but we are fully responsible for the content and are liable for any breach of publication ethics.

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Found in Lostness: Community Visions for Multiple Future-Making

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Abstract

The question of what becomes of urban future-making when a city loses its institutional anchor has received insufficient scholarly attention. This article addresses this gap through the concept of lostness—developed here as an analytical alternative to deficit-oriented frameworks such as shrinkage or decline. Lost cities are settlements that, following large-scale disruption, have been displaced from the purview of state or corporate control and expert-driven urban development, and find themselves in search of new trajectories. Rather than a condition of passivity or failure, lostness may engender distinctive, place-based forms of agency—and, in some cases, a deliberate resistance to being “found” and absorbed into systems that do not serve local interests. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at JHQ Rheindahlen, Germany—a former joint headquarters of British Forces and the NATO Northern Army Group, operational from 1954 to 2013 and now poised between abandonment and a deferred state and federal development agenda—the article examines how residents continue to enact futures despite their marginalisation from formal planning. Engaging theories of minor futures, projective grammars, and temporal disenfranchisement, we demonstrate that institutional withdrawal does not suspend future-making but fundamentally reconfigures its character. Expert visions tend toward conclusive futures with defined endpoints and abstract assessments of value, while residents articulate minor futures through transgressive spatial appropriations, informal memory practices, and a persistent prioritisation of use-value and accessibility. These two orders of future-making rarely enter into direct dialogue, producing an asymmetry of recognition we term “limited inclusion”—with significant implications for inclusive urban planning and governance.

Keywords

future-making; lostness; minor futures; post-military landscapes; projective grammars

1. Introduction

Across urban studies and social theory, a growing consensus holds that futures are not simply anticipated or predicted, but actively made, negotiated, and contested (Anderson, 2010; Mische, 2014; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). Future-making involves diverse actors operating across multiple temporal horizons, articulating and debating future possibilities. Yet critical questions remain: Whose futures matter, which agents are empowered to shape urban trajectories, and what happens when future-makers exist outside or at the margins of dominant planning structures?

We address these questions through the concept of a “lost city,” a settlement that, following large-scale disruptions such as deindustrialisation or demilitarisation, has been removed from the purview of state or corporate control. Adam and Groves (2007, p. 13) observe that when futures become “decontextualised and depersonalised,” they detach from lived experience and grow susceptible to abstraction and external control. Lost cities, by contrast, may enable more place-based, community-driven forms of future-making. We hypothesise that disconnection from expert-driven development frameworks has the potential to foster rather than foreclose locally grounded urban futures.

Drawing on fieldwork at Joint Headquarters (JHQ) Rheindahlen—a former military base in Mönchengladbach, Germany, which served as the headquarters of British Forces in Germany and the NATO Northern Army Group—we demonstrate that institutional withdrawal does not terminate future-making but fundamentally transforms its character. Rather than producing passivity or resignation, residents respond to structural ambiguity through transgressive appropriations of abandoned space and a persistent desire for order, prioritising use-value and everyday accessibility over coherent long-term master plans. This productive ambiguity generates what we term “minor futures”: open-ended, embodied, and place-specific visions that coexist alongside, but remain largely unrecognised by, expert-driven planning narratives.

The article moves from theoretical grounding through the case study and its methods to empirical findings and broader conclusions. Intended for concise, focused presentations of current research rather than exhaustive accounts, it introduces the problem and invites further discussion rather than offering definitive answers.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Projecting Futures: Agency, Articulation, and Coordination*

A key development in debates on urban futures, drawing on social theory and futures studies, is the recognition that future-making should be democratised (Urry, 2016), challenging earlier assumptions that confined it to the exclusive domain of institutions or experts.

Kemmer and Simone (2021) show how urban futures are actively shaped through everyday practices in Rio de Janeiro and Jakarta. The authors conceptualise these practices as “acts of anticipation”—embodied and material arrangements that may not be explicitly recognised as future-oriented, yet do shape urban trajectories. Such practices constitute “minor futures”: scenarios that “never manage to implant themselves fully, but interrupt, redirect, and render a seeming stasis something else” (Kemmer & Simone, 2021, p. 575).

In contrast to the long-term temporal horizons of institutions, these minor futures are sustained through residents' embodied and ongoing commitments to what might yet come.

This insight resonates with Zhelnina's (2023) study of Moscow's Renovation programme—a large-scale state-led initiative to demolish thousands of socialist-era prefabricated apartment buildings and relocate residents to new high-rises. Faced with this top-down imposition of change, Muscovites engaged in future-probing across a range of arenas, from public hearings and homeowner assemblies to private conversations around the kitchen table. Zhelnina calls this latter practice “kitchen future-making”: In domestic spaces, residents developed imaginary responses to imposed change, as memories, anxieties, and hopes converged into alternative visions of urban life. Crucially, such future-making was not confined to formal channels of participation: It unfolded as a polyphony of individual perspectives and personal trajectories, in which the intimate and the political were inseparable.

Heightened attention to future-making has sharpened sensitivity to its nuances and processuality. Anderson (2010) argues that futures are inherently present through anticipatory actions—preemption, precaution, and preparedness—each involving distinct temporal orientations and forms of intervention. He argues that futures can be grasped through articulated forms (insights, trends, models), materialities, and anticipatory affects (fears, hopes, anxieties). Anderson's work reveals that anticipation actively intervenes to bring certain futures into being while foreclosing others.

Focusing on articulations of futures, Mische (2014) develops the concept of “projective grammars”—the communicative structures through which actors articulate envisioned futures and mobilise support. She demonstrates how different temporal framings (short-term vs. long-term, progressive vs. cyclical) and scalar orientations (local vs. global) shape which futures become politically salient. She raises a crucial question: How to bring together well-articulated futures produced by experts with less-articulated futures embedded in everyday actions? Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) advance this analysis by examining how actors coordinate multiple futures through ongoing interaction, negotiation, and strategic deployment of temporal horizons.

These approaches inform our analysis of how futures are made, navigated, and contested in contexts of urban lostness.

2.2. Situated Future-Making: The Potential of Lostness

Cities, once sustained by industrial production, extractivism, successful social projects, or military installations, and whose trajectories have been disrupted, are commonly described as undergoing urban decline or shrinkage (Leyshon, 2021; Oswalt, 2005; Ryan, 2012). In contrast to these narratives, which assume a unilinear shift from abundance to scarcity, the concept of “lostness”—departing from, but extending beyond, Reckwitz's notion of *Verlust* (Reckwitz, 2024)—is open-ended, multiple, and contingent. *Lost cities*, in our definition, are those that, due to large-scale transformations, were removed from the purview of state or corporate control and expert-driven urban development, and are in search of new paths. Lostness does not imply passivity or failure; crucially, sometimes being “lost” can constitute an active choice on the part of residents and communities, a form of resistance to being “found” and absorbed into systems that may not serve local interests or values—echoing Scott's (2009) argument that marginalised communities

deliberately evade state control to preserve their autonomy. Our fieldwork, as we show further in this article, offers concrete examples of such residents' choices.

While the concept of "lost city" is most commonly approached from an archaeological perspective (Zimmermann, 2023), we find urbanistic, historical, and metaphorical framings of this term no less productive. We mobilise the concept not as a neutral descriptive label but as a deliberately emancipatory and unstigmatizing analytical lens, one that offers an alternative to the deficit-oriented vocabulary of shrinkage and left-behindness, and that opens space for attending to local agency and future-orientation.

This perspective aligns with broader theorisations of how marginalised or peripheral positions can enable distinctive forms of knowledge and practice (Datta, 2019), allowing communities to envision futures rather than remain immersed in what Davis (1979) terms "simple nostalgia"—a backward-looking entrapment in a prosperous past. Urban lostness, in this sense, can become both a politically and generatively productive condition. It rests on an understanding of crisis not as a barrier to futurity but as a moment of political reordering and redistribution—an understanding that directly aligns with Hilbrandt and Ren's (2025) call for methodological innovation in the study of crisis-affected urbanism and with our own grassroots approach to future-making in "lost cities."

3. Case Study: JHQ Rheindahlen, Germany

3.1. Historical Context

JHQ Rheindahlen (joint headquarters of British Forces in Germany and the NATO Northern Army Group) was established in the 1950s, on approximately 380 hectares of forest in the western district of Mönchengladbach, to house the combined military command of British and NATO forces in Western Europe. At its operational peak, it accommodated up to 12,000 people across 2,000 buildings connected by 36 kilometres of roads bearing British names such as Queens Avenue, Buckingham Way, Oxford Walk, and Londonderry Drive. It functioned as a self-contained urban entity: Three churches, four schools, a theatre, a cinema, a shopping centre, a fire station, an open-air pool, and over 20 sports facilities gave it the texture of a small town. Physically, JHQ occupied a sealed block of land on the western edge of the city, separated from the adjacent settlements of Rheindahlen to the south and Hardt to the north by a perimeter fence and controlled entry points (Figure 1). Over 300 additional dwellings for German civilian employees were built in the surrounding settlements, creating a zone of entanglement between the base and its neighbours that persisted long after the military's departure.

Following the end of the Cold War, the major NATO headquarters were progressively dissolved between 1993 and 1994. The final British withdrawal concluded in July 2013; the site was formally returned to the Federal Republic of Germany in December of that year. Since then, JHQ has existed in a condition of accelerating dissolution: Part of the compound has served as refugee accommodation since 2015, sections have been used for customs and police training exercises, and long-term federal and state plans envisage a Bundeswehr expansion alongside migration infrastructure, nature conservation, and energy generation. The site is formally registered as its own Stadtteil (Hauptquartier) within Mönchengladbach's western district, located roughly eight kilometres from the city centre. Recognised by the Rhineland Regional Council (LVR) as a significant cultural landscape, JHQ today exists in an indeterminate state—too intact to be a ruin, too abandoned to be a



Figure 2. Interior of JHQ Rheindahlen, showing decaying structures.



Figure 3. JHQ Rheindahlen's current state.

Our research partners are classified into three partially overlapping groups. The first and largest consists of local residents: current inhabitants of the settlements surrounding JHQ within Mönchengladbach, who constitute the majority of our interviewees. The second group comprises former residents of JHQ: individuals who lived within the confines of the base itself prior to its closure, some of whom have remained in Mönchengladbach while others have since relocated elsewhere. The third group consists of enthusiasts: individuals with a strong personal investment in the topic, as evidenced by membership in local societies concerned with JHQ's future, active participation in online communities, or engagement in amateur historical research. These three categories partially overlap—most enthusiasts are also current Mönchengladbach residents, and several were formerly residents within JHQ itself. One participant, Magdalena, represents a particularly dense intersection of all three categories. Her family moved into the adjacent settlement for German civilian employees in the 1950s, several family members worked at the base, and as a child she frequently visited JHQ before eventually working there herself, where she met her future husband, a British soldier—leading her to describe JHQ as “a second home.” Rather than an exception to the typology, Magdalena might be understood as its most complete embodiment.

Eight interviews followed an expert interview methodology (Meuser & Nagel, 2009); the remainder were conducted as semi-structured ethnographic interviews, though in practice the two approaches frequently overlapped, with expert informants also sharing personal narratives and experiential accounts.

4. Empirical Findings

4.1. *Ambiguous Agency and Unclear Responsibility*

What is lost in JHQ Rheindahlen is clarity about who is responsible for the place and its future. Sixty-seven-year-old Renate, for instance, remarked that “it’s already been decided that the city or the federal state will....They want to knock it down, don’t they,” reflecting a broader uncertainty surrounding the allocation of responsibility. At the same time, there is a widespread perception that responsibility is readily deferred or avoided altogether. As noted in a field diary entry during a meeting of the local JHQ society, “No one feels responsible.” Our research revealed that this ambiguity of responsibility—a primary concern for local actors ranging from decision-makers to residents of nearby areas—produces, in turn, an ambiguity of futures. As 81-year-old Claire, a regular visitor to the former JHQ, put it, “nobody really knows what they’re going to do with it.”

Some visions and narratives are explicit and publicly negotiated (e.g., the desire to reconnect the area to local traffic flows), while others take the form of enactments—the gradual appropriation of space through everyday practices, which coincide with what Kemmer and Simone (2021) call “acts of anticipation.” Unauthorised forays into the fenced-off area, repeated enquiries about the moves of more powerful actors, and private collections of newspaper articles speak to the atmosphere of confusion, speculation, and concern. These are not merely acts of backward-looking, “simple nostalgia” (Davis, 1979), but active attempts by city dwellers to pay attention: to find out what is going on, to predict how it will relate to their lives, and what prospects and opportunities are emerging—a form of collective urban attentiveness that resonates with Simone’s (2010) understanding of residents as active interpreters and makers of urban possibility.

Competing versions of the future are therefore not only well-articulated anticipations or coherent strategies, but also less obvious yet powerful statements made by residents through their everyday engagement with the place. Because of their limited narrativisation, these actions are less noticed in public arenas or recognised channels where the place's future is negotiated. However, they constitute powerful claims to agency—nascent projective grammars (Mische, 2014) through which minor futures take shape and find their voice.

Residents repeatedly attempt to identify responsible agents with whom to collaborate, a search marked by what locals themselves call “annoyance” at the impossibility of doing so: “Since it basically belongs to the federal republic and the federal republic isn’t interested in it, nobody is interested” (Renate, 67 y.o.). The only shared knowledge is that BImA (the Federal Agency for Real Estate) currently patrols the site and limits access. However, BImA is not perceived as a future-maker, but rather as an actor projecting the current condition into the future: “Very little was happening with regard to this redevelopment. It’s also a situation involving the Federal Agency for Real Estate [BImA], which owns the site” (Arnd, 73 y.o.). This role is viewed critically by residents, as they interpret the present condition as alienation of the place from local communities: “Then I say, that’s part of our city. It’s our duty to reintegrate it” (Oskar, 71 y.o.).

Residents openly and bitterly acknowledge their lack of agency: “There is no chance for us to participate” (field notes, August 2025). This perception resonates with what Adam and Groves (2007) describe as temporal disenfranchisement, whereby certain actors are excluded from shaping futures that profoundly affect their lives. Yet this exclusion is not total: Residents participate actively in the culture of remembrance—organising, for example, exhibitions of historical photographs in churches—while remaining largely absent from political decisions concerning the site’s future: “Personally, I can’t decide what should happen to it” (former civilian employee at JHQ). This asymmetry constitutes what we term limited inclusion: meaningful participation in memory-making, alongside systematic exclusion from planning processes. Nevertheless, residents speak extensively about JHQ’s future on a small scale: through everyday, informal articulations of desires, concerns, and practices grounded in their lived experience rather than in the plans of urban development experts.

Our research uncovered diverse trajectories of imagining the future among various residents and groups, revealing what Mische (2014) terms “projective horizons”: differing temporal scales, spatial boundaries, and normative commitments that do not necessarily align with one another.

Whereas large-scale futures produced by experts and institutions are typically imagined as defined and desirable visions, minor futures articulated by locals emerge as composites of desired states, concerns, and uncertainty. Minor futures take the form of intuitive orientations emerging at the intersection of desirable and undesirable developments, closely tied to available resources and existing practices. Rather than reflecting merely what is wanted, they reflect who wants it—constituting residents’ claims for recognition, grounded in current circumstances and in reliance on their own capacities rather than external intervention.

In the following two sections, we examine how minor futures unfold alongside—rather than in direct dialogue with—the large-scale futures produced by experts and institutions.

4.2. The Desire for Order

A central theme in residents' discussions concerning JHQ Rheindahlen's future is the desire for order, yet this aspiration proves ambiguous upon closer examination. Locals perceive the site's current state as disorder—fenced off, decaying, unclear in both status and trajectory: “You don't know what's happening right now,” said 40-year-old Mara, who lives within walking distance from the fences and whose father worked at the headquarters when she was a child. Local residents want the space reintegrated into everyday life, but not through simple repetition of past practices. This reintegration is already enacted through quiet appropriation: entering the fenced territory to inspect buildings, take photographs, and walk dogs. Thus, their fundamental aspiration for order is paradoxically expressed through rule-breaking and trespassing (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Gaps in the perimeter fencing of JHQ Rheindahlen used for unauthorised access.

The desire for order also expresses itself as an aspiration to restore a sensory order. The area's current state of sensory disorder is primarily identified by those living closest to the site. It is associated with uncontrolled noise generated within abandoned areas: Many doors and windows in deserted houses, and especially the heavy metal doors of garages (Figure 5), stand open, and during windy weather slam loudly, producing an unbearable soundscape for nearby residents who want at least basic control over the closure of windows and doors. “I'm not entirely comfortable with this taste of the unfamiliar,” Mara mused. Yet, residents cannot adequately address the problem themselves due to limited site accessibility and insufficient resources. The disruption of sensory order is thus directly linked to the alienation of the territory.

This reveals how future-making capacity depends not only on imaginative or discursive resources, but also on embodied knowledge and material access. Minor futures divide not only local residents from official

authorities, but also different groups among locals. The aspiration towards a sensorially ordered future is not considered important by those living further away, not experiencing the auditory disturbance. These latter groups sometimes dismiss the former as overly sensitive or “ghost hunters” (hearing something that does not exist), revealing how proximity shapes both the content and legitimacy of future claims.



Figure 5. Heavy metal doors of military vehicle garages in JHQ Rheindahlen, a source of uncontrolled noise for nearby residents.

Our case demonstrates that marginalisation from dominant institutions does not eliminate future-making, but transforms it—specifically by foregrounding usage as the primary value. As one local resident explicitly put it, “I would be really happy if the area were used, regardless of the form” (Matilda, 76 y.o.). Residents accept even alternative uses that maintain vitality, such as police training: “The Federal Police carry out their exercises there and keep the place going. I’ll put it positively for a moment” (Oskar, 71 y.o.). By avoiding fixed images, this perspective remains open-ended, embracing different forms of future-making.

Rather than a singular, definitive future state, residents prioritise keeping the site in circulation through diverse uses. This emphasis on “being used” over “being planned” suggests that for lost spaces, vitality and accessibility in the present may matter more than coherent visions of future development.

Questions of order connect strongly with questions of responsibility and agency. Residents repeatedly ask: Who is responsible for JHQ Rheindahlen? The passive constructions used in interviews—“it should be,” “could have been done,” “would have to be”—bear testimony to their lack of agency and the power attributed to politicians, planners, and investors. This demonstrates that locals do not consider minor futures, immersed in lived experience and embodied knowledge, equal to the coherent visions articulated by experts.

4.3. Heritage Site or Back to Nature: Envisioning Futures Differently

If futures are narrativised, then how exactly, and by whom? Among those engaged in discussions of JHQ Rheindahlen's future, we identified what might be termed "culture" and "nature" teams: groups and individuals who frame the site's future primarily through cultural preservation or ecological succession. Crucially, both visions were initially developed and articulated by experts.

On the cultural side, a retired heritage specialist responsible for assessing the site's significance described frequent conflicts between public authorities concerned with landscape conservation and those focused on heritage preservation. Her perspective as a heritage professional clearly positions nature as a potential threat to JHQ as a "built historical document": When nature encroaches on abandoned structures, the appropriate response is not wholesale clearance but selective trimming—intervening just enough to keep the underlying form visible and legible. This is the logic her own words enact: "If nature covers something up...then it's in the sense that you trim things back, or that you try to keep the old, existing structure visible." Supported by historians, the "culture team" envisages JHQ as heritage, proposing the preservation of historically significant structures and their conversion into cultural spaces or a themed post-war park.

By contrast, the "nature team," drawing on ecological expertise, advocates demolishing JHQ and allowing the territory to return to forest, framing natural succession as both inevitable and desirable. This vision is reinforced by a number of regulatory frameworks: Almost the entire western section falls within a landscape or nature reserve, while the border strip is designated as a Fauna-Flora-Habitat (FFH) site under the European Union's Nature Conservation Directive. While expert-driven in origin, the nature vision has since gained broader support among some engaged local residents: The local JHQ association, for example, has organised botanical walks which, according to the organisers, attracted more than 50 participants.

These competing expert frameworks operate according to a shared logic: They offer seemingly fixed, conclusive futures—a heritage site or a forest—with clear endpoints, project timelines, and abstract assessments of value and potential. Oriented outward, they imagine the space as a destination for external audiences rather than as a living part of everyday local life.

Minor futures articulated by residents follow a different logic. Rather than comprehensive visions, they emerge as partial, open-ended practices grounded in lived experience and attachment to the site. The following example illustrates minor futures oriented towards cultural preservation. Through an Erasmus school exchange involving students from Gesamtschule Hardt and a partner school in Spain, the idea emerged of establishing a British pub within preserved or refurbished buildings as a means of fostering a culture of remembrance—an idea that was subsequently discussed with local stakeholders and brought before the city and district councils. Later discussed with a conversion officer and a liaison officer, this vision is not entirely removed from professional planning discourse—yet it operates on a fundamentally different scale, driven by community attachment and everyday use-value rather than by abstract assessments of heritage significance or ecological potential.

Practices of remembrance have also expanded into the digital sphere: A local JHQ enthusiast, together with a vibrant Facebook community and an IT specialist—himself a former JHQ resident now living in England—contributed to the creation of a digital 3D map documenting all houses present at JHQ before its closure.

Significantly, digital memory preservation of this kind may offer a potential common ground between the culture and nature teams: It allows the built heritage of JHQ to be documented and kept alive in collective memory without standing in the way of ecological restoration. These are futures imagined not as destinations, but as extensions of ongoing everyday life, whose beginnings and endpoints remain undefined.

Mische's (2014) concept of projective grammar helps explain why these two orders of future-making—expert planning frameworks on one hand, and the minor futures articulated by residents on the other—rarely enter into direct dialogue. The two are structured according to entirely different logics: one oriented toward institutional legitimacy and external audiences, the other toward everyday life and personal attachment. As a result, neither fully registers the existence of the other—and this mutual invisibility is not symmetrical. Expert visions remain suspended in institutional negotiation, difficult to implement but nonetheless legible within formal planning discourse; residents' futures, by contrast, remain largely unnoticed by planning actors altogether. It is residents' imaginings, rather than expert frameworks, that are systematically overlooked. This asymmetry of recognition is what we identified earlier as *limited inclusion*: Residents participate actively in memory culture while remaining excluded from the planning decisions that will ultimately determine the site's fate. In this sense, the future of JHQ Rheindahlen remains genuinely open—not because all voices are equally heard, but because no single vision has yet proven capable of being realised.

5. Conclusions

Our research points to several key directions for rethinking urban futures in times of significant disruption.

First, planning practice should expand its attentiveness to agency as expressed in everyday practices, informal conversations, and spatial appropriations, not only as captured in formal consultation processes. Recognising these as legitimate inputs to urban decision-making requires both methodological innovation and institutional willingness to listen differently.

Second, lostness merits reframing, not as a deficit condition awaiting resolution, but as a potentially generative space. Disconnection from dominant development systems can sustain alternative visions and practices that remain unavailable within conventional frameworks (Datta, 2019). Interventions that rush to “resolve” lostness risk foreclosing precisely the situated knowledge and adaptive capacity it produces.

Third, Mische's (2014) concept of projective grammars invites attention to how multiple, parallel future visions circulate and interact—or fail to engage. At JHQ Rheindahlen, expert narratives and residents' minor futures currently coexist without meaningful dialogue. Designing deliberate spaces for such potential encounters may be a more productive planning goal than imposing any single vision.

Finally, the grassroots methodologies that made this research possible—go-alongs, digital ethnography, informal conversation—deserve wider adoption as tools for rendering the forms of future-making legible that dominant institutions routinely overlook (Hilbrandt & Ren, 2025). Post-military landscapes are not unique in generating conditions of lostness; the insights developed here could be applied to any situation where communities navigate institutional withdrawal and the uncertainties it leaves behind.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations. The data contain information that could compromise the privacy and anonymity of research participants. Requests for further information may be directed to the corresponding author.

LLMs Disclosure

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The Future of World Heritage Cities: Heritage Governance and New Urban Commons

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Abstract

In cities with World Heritage status, considerable attention is devoted to officially designated heritage properties and their immediate surroundings. As a result, other heritage sites, particularly those located outside the protected zone, may be perceived as less significant and become vulnerable to underfunding, weak legal protection, or lack of expert evaluation. This article examines how residents shape urban futures through the creation of new urban commons outside officially protected World Heritage zones. Using the case of Medieval Town of Toruń, Poland, a World Heritage city since 1997, this article investigates how urban futures are shaped through grassroots heritage activism. The article analyzes two situations in which citizens challenged the boundaries of institutional heritage frameworks and asserted their right to shape the city’s cultural landscape and future. Empirically, the study is based on a combination of semi-structured expert interviews and a contextual analysis of local and regional media publications, official statements, and planning documents related to the contested heritage sites. The study shows that despite constraints related to the Covid-19 pandemic, Toruń residents succeeded in making their expertise count, either by joining decision-making bodies or by involving experts whose authority was recognized by institutions. This allowed for the creation of new urban commons and led to the partial preservation and official recognition of contested heritage sites.

Keywords

commons; public good; UNESCO; urban future; urban governance; World Heritage Sites

1. Introduction

The future of cities is neither linear nor singular; its multiple trajectories are produced in different presents and rooted in different pasts (Adam & Groves, 2007; Datta, 2019). Future-making, from this perspective, is a collective process of imagining and bringing about desirable futures, understood as “collective, value-based judgments of what the future might and should be” (Comi et al., 2025, p. 2468). In urban contexts, these judgments are actively negotiated among residents, experts, institutions, and community groups, each bringing unique perspectives and priorities (Davies & Burgess, 2004; Zhelnina, 2022). The governance of these urban futures involves a broad range of city-makers: “policy-makers and developers who build, promote, and design urban spaces, as well as ordinary citizens whose daily actions and interactions both influence and are affected by urban change” (Molho et al., 2025, p. 6). The influence of this range of actors on different future trajectories highlights that urban change is not only a technical process based on planning, but also a social and cultural negotiation over values and visions of what a city might become.

In this context, World Heritage Cities represent complex urban systems in which the tension between preservation and development shapes the direction of change. The status of World Heritage, initially established to guide cities toward a “bright future” (Assmann, 2018), has become a framework for negotiating what heritage means today and who has the right to define it. These cities, while often perceived as guardians of the past, face the challenge of making choices with limited resources and under conditions of urban crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Each decision reflects how they define what is important for their urban futures.

This article examines how residents participate in shaping the urban future through the creation of new urban commons, understood as shared spaces of value and meaning that emerge beyond official heritage protection boundaries. It explores how everyday practices and local initiatives redefine what is considered heritage, and how these bottom-up processes respond to and counter the disruptive effects of crisis, contributing to more inclusive and participatory models of urban governance. The following sections focus on two such cases to illustrate how these negotiations unfold in practice.

The study builds on the concept of urban commons, a term that has been used in various ways and can refer to “economic goods, property rights, or social dilemmas” (Hess, 2008, p. 21). At the same time, similar to other forms of collective engagement for the public good, commoning can be understood as a form of civic participation (Lohmann, 2016). However, unlike other forms of collective engagement for the public good, urban commons rely on solidarity and cooperation, which generate added value for the community (Dellenbaugh-Losse et al., 2025). This perspective reflects our understanding of the commons as “a social regime for managing shared resources and forging a community of shared values and purpose” (Clippinger & Bollier, 2005, p. 263). In conceptualizing urban spaces and assets as urban commons, most scholars refer to “urban green commons” such as lakes, parks, and gardens (Colding et al., 2013; Feinberg et al., 2021). Ostrom (1990), a number of scholars (Carlone et al., 2022; Makashini et al., 2023) argue that analyses should extend beyond “urban green commons” to include urban commons more broadly. Building on the argument of Pablo Alonso González, this study moves beyond a focus solely on “urban green commons” and instead examines heritage as a commons (Alonso González, 2014). In this sense, urban heritage can be seen as a form of residents’ commons, created and expressed through social processes that produce and represent a meaningful and collectively shared past within the present (Cermeño & Mielke, 2023). New heritage

practices are continuously generated through evolving heritage formations that emerge from shifting material conditions and changing temporal and meaning orders (Harrison, 2015). From the perspective of the commons, shared heritage constitutes an urban resource that enables local communities and their networks, including civil society initiatives, to participate in processes of future-making.

2. Materials and Methods

This research employs a case study approach focusing on the Polish city of Toruń, whose historic center was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997 under the name “Medieval Town of Toruń” (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 1997). The heritage zone covers 48 hectares and is surrounded by a 300-hectare buffer zone. Founded by the Teutonic Order in the mid-13th century, Toruń developed as a major Hanseatic trade center, preserving an exceptionally well-integrated medieval urban layout that remains visible in its contemporary cityscape (ICOMOS, 1997).

Within this broader historical and institutional context, the study focuses on two cases that illustrate how heritage values are discussed and negotiated at the local level. The first case, the urban development of Philadelphia Boulevard (Bulwar Filadelfijski), concerns a large urban project located within the World Heritage zone, where tensions arose between modern architectural designs and the preservation of the medieval cityscape. The second case, Helena Grossówna House (Dom Heleny Grossówny), addresses the relocation and reconstruction of a late 19th-century residential building outside the heritage zone and highlights how civic activism and local engagement can influence decisions to protect more recent layers of urban heritage.

Although the two cases differ in historical period and location, their networks of actors are similar, particularly among representatives of the city administration, local communities, the City and Voivodeship Monument Conservators, and members of heritage organizations such as the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, Toruń Branch (Towarzystwo Opieki nad Zabytkami, oddział w Toruniu; hereafter Society for the Preservation of Monuments). The first case concerns a site directly connected to the 14th–15th centuries, the same period represented by the World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń.” It is located within the buffer zone and historically integrated into the city’s medieval structure and identity. The second case, by contrast, originally lay outside the buffer zone and belongs to the 19th–20th centuries, a period not directly related to the historical and architectural context of the World Heritage property. Its protection, therefore, required a different kind of justification, rooted in civic activism and the recognition of more recent layers of urban history rather than the city’s medieval landscape.

Both cases were selected for comparative analysis because they share a similar temporal framework and reflect broader shifts in urban heritage governance. While the initial planning and conceptual work for both projects began in the 2010s, the effects of the transfer of areas of responsibility between the City and the Voivodeship Monument Conservators became most evident after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was the period when, on the one hand, restrictions were introduced, and, on the other, substantial funds were allocated after the end of the restrictions to mitigate the pandemic’s consequences. As a result, the implementation of the projects and the most intensive public engagement took place between 2021 and 2024. In both instances, the pandemic served as a turning point, reshaping funding priorities, public participation practices, and institutional decision-making.

The study is based on a combination of semi-structured expert interviews and document analysis. Between 2023 and 2024, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts representing a wide range of institutional and professional backgrounds. Snowball sampling was used to reach further informants within the same professional and civic networks. Interviews were conducted in person. The interviewees can be grouped into several main categories according to their professional affiliation and field of expertise. The first group included representatives of local and regional administration, such as members of the City Administration, the Office of the City Centre, and the Urban Planning Office. The second group consisted of heritage and conservation professionals, including members of the Voivodeship Heritage Office, the National Heritage Institute, and monument conservators. The third group represented the academic and research community, primarily scholars from Nicolaus Copernicus University. The fourth group comprised civil society representatives and cultural experts, including members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, local NGOs, journalists, and independent specialists who took part in expert assessments and public consultations related to urban and heritage projects. The final group included representatives of public institutions and project partners, including the Public Transportation Company and the State Archive. Additionally, a contextual analysis was applied to local and regional media materials and institutional reports to identify key practices through which residents contribute to shaping urban futures and establishing new urban commons beyond officially protected heritage boundaries.

3. Heritage Management in Toruń

In the Republic of Poland, monument protection is implemented through a multi-actor system comprising state authorities, local governments, property owners, users, investors, and, in a broader sense, all institutions and individuals (Government of Poland, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2003). The Polish heritage management system is characterized by a hierarchical structure of authority that extends from the national, through the regional, to the municipal level. At the top of this structure stands the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which defines national policy and overall strategic priorities for heritage protection. Policy implementation is entrusted to the *voivode* (governor), who acts as the central government's regional representative and oversees the execution of national directives within the voivodeship.

All four Polish cities that are home to World Heritage cultural properties—Kraków, Toruń, Warsaw, and Zamość—possess county (*powiat*) status and are administered by a mayor (*prezydent miasta*). Within this administrative arrangement, the Voivodeship Monument Conservator serves as the principal regional authority, tasked with supervising heritage conservation and ensuring adherence to national legislation. At the municipal level, the City Monument Conservator operates within the local government structure and remains subordinate to the city's executive leadership. As a result, heritage-related decisions are integrated into municipal governance and day-to-day administrative processes. Furthermore, in accordance with the Act of 8 March 1990 on municipal self-government, the responsibilities of municipal authorities encompass, among other aspects, the promotion of culture, protection and maintenance of monuments, spatial planning, real estate management, public education, sport and recreation, and tourism. This hierarchical arrangement generates a multi-layered governance structure, in which responsibilities are distributed across various administrative levels. The degree of influence and autonomy, however, is contingent on the specific nature and scale of heritage interventions.

In Toruń, unlike the other three cities, more significant powers were transferred from the voivodeship to the municipal authorities after 2004. This shift resulted in a new arrangement wherein the mayor gained direct influence over heritage decisions, including funding and priorities. The reform of heritage management in Toruń is best understood as a redistribution of practical responsibilities between the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator. While these categories are not formally defined by law, documentary analysis and expert interviews for this study make it possible to distinguish two main spheres of competence.

The first sphere, which we can refer to as the city-level sphere of authority, includes everyday operational responsibilities for heritage care: ensuring proper maintenance of monuments, issuing expert opinions and approvals for renovation or modification projects, monitoring the condition of heritage sites, halting works that endanger monuments, and ordering corrective or preventive measures. The second sphere, which remains at the voivodeship level, covers functions that require specialized expertise or have broader spatial and legal implications. These include archaeological and excavation works, management of historically designed greenery areas, monument export, and monument-related spatial planning and real estate transactions.

In this sense, the Toruń case illustrates how decentralization in heritage governance does not merely transfer formal authority from one institution to another but rather redistributes practical power between the regional and city levels, reshaping how decisions about heritage are made in practice. This reconfiguration has also created a system in which residents, through various institutions and participatory mechanisms, act as mediators between the Voivodeship and City Monument Conservators, influencing both the interpretation of heritage values and the everyday management of the city's cultural assets. In a context wherein responsibilities for heritage management have been redistributed between regional and city levels, this research shows that residents shape urban futures through participation in various forms of institutional organization.

The first key actor is the Society for the Preservation of Monuments. Established in Toruń in 2015 as part of the National Heritage Protection Association, the Society continues the tradition of collaboration between civic activists and heritage professionals engaged in the protection of cultural heritage (Society for the Preservation of Monuments – Toruń Branch, 2018). It operates as a non-governmental, non-profit organization open to civic initiatives and public participation in heritage protection. Members of the society must pass an exam administered by the City Monument Conservator, after which they are granted the right to visit monument sites and to issue warnings to individuals who violate legal regulations concerning the protection and care of monuments. They hold their status indefinitely and can only be dismissed following a petition from the Voivodeship Monument Conservator.

The second key actor is the initiative We Have an Impact on Toruń (*Wpływamy na Toruń*), a coalition of organizations run by the NGO Fundacja Stabilo. The main aim of the project is “to strengthen civil society in the City of Toruń” and “increase the influence of residents on local laws concerning environmental protection and support for endangered social groups” (Active Citizens Regional Fund, 2023). While the initiative initially focused on areas located outside the historic city center, it gradually expanded its activities to engage with heritage-related issues within the World Heritage zone.

4. Urban Development of Philadelphia Boulevard: Expanding the Boundaries of World Heritage

The first case examines the urban development of Philadelphia Boulevard, a riverside area and popular recreational space included in the buffer zone of the World Heritage site situated between the medieval city walls of Toruń, which define the boundary of the World Heritage site, and the Vistula River. The idea for redeveloping Philadelphia Boulevard first emerged in 2011, when the city administration organized initial public consultations on the future of the riverfront area. After several years of debate, in 2014 an architectural competition was officially announced, aiming to transform the boulevard into a modern public space that would reconnect the Old Town with the river. In 2016, the competition results were announced, and a design contract was signed with the winning team.

Construction was originally planned to begin in 2017, but was postponed due to financial difficulties and the reallocation of municipal funds to the renovation of the city bridge. The situation was further complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The project remained suspended for several years and was revived only after financing was secured in late 2021–early 2022. Additional funding became available through the Polish Governance Fund's Strategic Investment Program (Program Inwestycji Strategicznych Polski Ład), a national program that was politically framed as a response to the crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Construction of the pavilions began in close proximity to the historic city walls and gate, which form part of the Old Town complex (Figure 1). This was poorly received by the residents and sparked public protests, as the big size of the pavilions blocked the view of the World Heritage site. City activists wrote official letters, including



Figure 1. Philadelphia Boulevard pavilions. Photograph by the author (2023).

to the mayor of Toruń and the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Local experts also argued that the newly constructed but not yet opened low-rise, glass-fronted pavilions positioned on the embankment immediately below the historic brick wall and in immediate proximity to the historic city walls obstructed the view of the World Heritage site from the opposite side of the river and, due to their glass surfaces, strongly reflected sunlight.

In the summer of 2022, the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, represented by the General Conservator of Monuments and the Deputy Minister, sent an official letter to the mayor of Toruń. The Ministry expressed concern over the potential risk of the Old Town of Toruń being removed from the World Heritage List. Excerpts from this letter were published in several Polish media outlets at both the local and national level. In the letter, the General Conservator of Monuments stated the following:

The proposed building's mass and height, in my opinion, constitute a serious interference with the panorama of the Old Town of Toruń—a unique landscape recognized by the international community as having exceptional and universal value on a global scale. Moreover, the structures are located within the buffer zone established to protect the heritage values of the World Heritage site, as observed from the perspective of Philadelphia Boulevard. ("Sellin: Toruń może zostać usunięty," 2022)

In August 2022, an open letter from the academic and cultural community of Toruń was published, protesting against the planned construction on the Philadelphia Boulevard in Toruń. It was signed by 74 people, 32 of whom are professors at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. In this letter, the signatories stated that the city authorities were acting against the spirit and values of the city:

The unrestrained and arbitrary intervention of the mayor, Michał Zaleski, in the material fabric of the boulevards is, consequently, also a brutal intrusion into Toruń's symbolic space. The overwhelming concrete pavilions—which could stand anywhere in the world, from Cape Town to Saigon—destroy the unique *genius loci* of this place and profane a space that is important to all residents of Toruń. The commercial function of these invasive structures reveals that the primary goal of the investment is to turn common heritage into a commodity. This provokes our firm opposition. A city should be perceived above all as a place for people, not as an economic resource serving merely as a tool for generating profit. (Sygnatariusze listu, 2022)

Under public pressure, the city administration commissioned an expert assessment and an investment feasibility study from an independent specialist. The resulting report recommended replacing the wooden cladding and dismantling the balustrades on the roofs of the pavilions. These recommendations were consistent with the position of the National Heritage Protection Institute.

At the beginning of 2023, the design was revised to incorporate local expertise and partial citizen participation, and the city introduced limited design changes prepared by another architectural office. As revealed by the expert interviews, the community feedback and expert consultations influenced the adjustments to the materials, layout, and visual integration of the new structures with the historic landscape.

When work began on laying the new pavement, workers soon discovered human bones, which led to a temporary suspension of the project. Later, an entire group of burials was uncovered. Fragments of

structures were also discovered, which were initially identified as storage facilities used for trade. The discovery of the burials, along with the continuation of construction work, deeply concerned residents after a series of publications in local newspapers. The issue gained media attention not only at the local level but also nationwide (for example, “Archeolodzy przejmą Bulwar Filadelfijski,” 2023; Więclawski, 2023).

During subsequent archaeological investigations, archaeologists discovered the remains of a medieval Gothic monastery complex (the Church of the Holy Spirit and Benedictine Monastery, which was in use from approximately 1242 to 1656) near the Monastery Gate. The site included foundations, wooden panels with preserved ornamentation, and parts of storage buildings. The existence and approximate location of this structure had previously been attested on the historical map of Toruń dating to 1641, as well as on several other early maps of the city, all of which accurately depict its urban city structure (Figure 2).

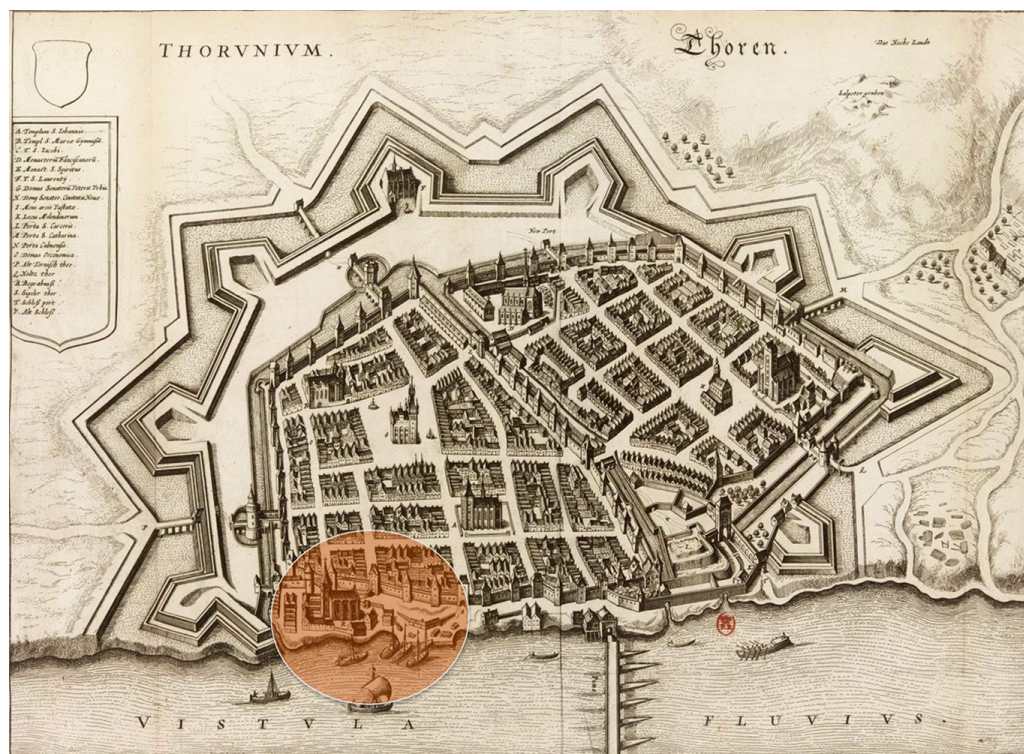


Figure 2. Map of Toruń, with the highlighted area indicating the location of the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Benedictine Monastery. Source: Adapted from Zeiller (1652, pp. 470–471).

The archaeological work also exposed tensions between heritage protection requirements and the city’s interest in completing the redevelopment on schedule. Because the interests of the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator differed, the residents of the city played a crucial role through their participation in two organizations: the Society for the Preservation of Monuments and the We Have an Impact on Toruń coalition, as well as through the involvement of other local activists. In their petition, local activists emphasized that the boulevard redevelopment plan allowed for modifications under “extraordinary circumstances,” which the archaeological discoveries clearly represented. They proposed rerouting the road slightly to preserve the ruins in situ and to present them as a visible element of Toruń’s historical landscape, reinforcing the city’s identity as both a living and layered heritage site.

To preserve the discoveries, residents of Toruń proposed creating the Archaeological Museum of the History of the Vistula River. The concept included an underground exhibition space on Philadelphia Boulevard. The idea was supported by members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, who shared the vision of creating a new public space.

The first important protest concerning the Church of the Holy Spirit and Benedictine Monastery took place on September 29, followed by another on October 10, 2023. The We Have an Impact on Toruń coalition rallied under slogans such as “Don’t bury Toruń’s heritage!” and “Let’s save our Pompeii.” Later, on October 23, 2023, the Society for the Preservation of Monuments played an active role in organizing a meeting with city officials and stakeholders. They created a platform for dialogue between the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator. Experts from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the City Museum were invited to discuss the most appropriate strategy for proceeding with the project.

An important outcome of this meeting was the decision for experts from the City Museum, later joined by specialists from the university, to carry out archaeological work within a defined timeframe. As shown in Figure 3, the archaeological excavation is located in an open and highly visible urban setting, which contributed to public awareness of the discoveries. The proposal received support from an expert at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, who warned that covering the findings would result in a major loss for the city. Scholars from Nicolaus Copernicus University also endorsed the initiative and strongly opposed the burial of the archaeological remains. Several professors publicly advocated for comprehensive research and the postponement of the roadworks, arguing that establishing the Archaeological Museum of the History of the Vistula River could ensure the long-term preservation of these unique heritage assets.



Figure 3. Archaeological excavations and the discovery of historical building structures. Photograph by the author (2023).

The city authorities prioritized improving the boulevard's infrastructure, focusing on modernizing the transport system and restoring vehicle access along the riverfront. The construction works also blocked transportation routes for cars and public transport, which had previously run along the city's historic walls. Another argument against the museum proposal was the insufficient municipal budget and the reallocation of funds to other infrastructure projects. As a result, the authorities decided not to implement the concept, and an administrative decision was made to cover the archaeological site rather than preserving it in situ, which, in turn, intensified public criticism. Ultimately, only a temporary exhibition of movable artifacts was organized at the regional museum, leaving the broader vision of an archaeological museum unrealized.

The flooding of the archaeological remains in November 2023 revealed not only the fragility of the uncovered material but also the limitations of the existing governance structure. Despite the urgency of the situation, no collective decision was made to establish the museum. In this sense, the post-Covid recovery framework that had enabled the redevelopment also narrowed the room for alternative civic proposals once the investment was already underway. This demonstrates how competing institutional interests (especially in contexts where city and regional authorities have constrained capacities, diffused responsibility, and fragmented authority) can impede the development of shared public goods. As a result, the potential to transform the archaeological site into a new urban common was lost, showing how governance complexity can prevent local initiatives from becoming part of the city's officially recognized cultural landscape.

5. Helena Grossówna House: World Heritage as a Tool for Protecting New Urban Commons

Helena Grossówna (1904–1994) was a Polish actress and dancer born in Toruń, best known for her roles in silent films during the interwar period. The house in Toruń where she lived has been preserved and dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is part of a complex of similar residential buildings, some of which have been demolished and replaced by new developments.

In 2020, a decision was made to demolish the Helena Grossówna House, situated outside the designated World Heritage zone. This decision met with strong opposition from local communities, who recognized the building's architectural and historical significance. The case highlights the emergence of new urban commons, that is, shared spaces of value and meaning that develop beyond the boundaries of official heritage protection. Members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments prepared a comprehensive expert report that elucidated the building's integral role in the historical development of the cityscape and highlighted the broader significance of 19th- and 20th-century architecture in shaping Toruń's urban identity. On March 14, 2021, these findings were presented to the public during a civic event, "Citizens Say Goodbye to the Building." The presentation took place outdoors in front of the house, as Covid-19 restrictions precluded gatherings in enclosed spaces. Figure 4 illustrates the Helena Grossówna House after posters had been installed on its facade as part of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments' efforts to draw the attention of local residents.

During the event, portraits of Helena Grossówna were prominently displayed on the building's facade, transforming the site into a locus of shared remembrance. Subsequently, members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments delivered a presentation from across the street, maintaining a safe distance from the audience in compliance with pandemic-related restrictions. The members wore protective face



Figure 4. Helena Grossówna House. Photograph by Szymon Spandowski (March 14, 2021).

masks and used printed materials, including maps, which served as key visual aids in contextualizing the building within the broader urban landscape. In their remarks, the speakers articulated the significance of the building's historical connections to Toruń and its architectural heritage.

The Society had prior experience in advocating for the recognition and protection of 19th- and 20th-century architecture in the city, emphasizing its historical and cultural value for the urban environment. They argued that such buildings, while not formally protected under heritage legislation, constitute an integral part of Toruń's historical landscape and often suffer from insufficient funding for restoration and maintenance. Members of the Society already had experience in counteracting unauthorized alterations to historic buildings and used their membership in the organization to gain the right to access private property, which often proved more effective than relying on the official procedures of the City Monument Conservator and the Voivodeship Monument Conservator:

In a situation where someone is working on scaffolding and it is clear that they are adding some decorations or making changes without permission, and the conservator knows about it, they still have to sit down at the desk and write a letter. They have no right to warn the person verbally. But we, as social guardians of monuments, have the right to approach the person, show our ID, and say, "Stop, you're breaking heritage laws, and you could get a fine from PLN 5,000 to half a million." And it works. (Member of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, interview, 2023)

In the case of the Helena Grossówna House, the City Monument Conservator and the Voivodeship Monument Conservator took opposing positions. The former supported demolishing the building and implementing the developer's project, arguing that the property lacked historical value. In contrast, the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Centre for Heritage (Kujawsko-Pomorskie Centrum Dziedzictwa), following the active involvement of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments and their expert analysis

demonstrating the building's historical significance and its connection to the city's development, adopted the opposite view.

When members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments learned that the demolition of the building had been scheduled, they immediately initiated the procedure for entering the house into the register of monuments on behalf of their organization:

On Saturday we decided that we would submit an application to add the building to the register of monuments as the Society for the Preservation of Monuments. We have such a right. We had already studied the history of this house earlier, so all the documents were ready. We wrote the application on Saturday and I sent it to the Voivodeship Monument Conservator, because it is the Voivodeship Conservator who is responsible for such entries. (Member of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments 2, interview, 2023)

According to the Law on the Protection of Monuments, launching this procedure automatically suspended construction or demolition work for 30 days, giving time for further action and negotiations. However, since the procedure was initiated only two days before the planned demolition, it was unclear whether the official documents would be signed in time:

I went there [to the Helena Grossówna House] and waited for them [the City Monument Conservator and the Voivodeship Monument Conservator] to arrive; I was on the phone the whole time, talking and asking them to issue the paper as quickly as possible. I went to the guy and told him that he couldn't demolish the house because the registration procedure had started and so on. Of course, he laughed at me, I don't think he had any idea what that meant—the procedure for entering a building into the register of monuments. It was very tense. The Voivodeship Conservator arrived, and we called the police twice. (Member of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments 2, interview, 2023)

As a result of sustained civic pressure and institutional collaboration, without which the Voivodeship Monument Conservator would likely not have been able to complete all the necessary procedures in time, a decision was made to relocate and reconstruct the building within the World Heritage buffer zone, on Wola Zamkowa Street.

Deconstruction was completed in 2022, and reconstruction was finished in April 2024 (Figure 5). The building is now used as a local history museum and is dedicated to Helena Grossówna (officially named "Dom Heleny Grossówny w Toruniu"), operating as a branch of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Heritage Centre. Although questions remain about material authenticity, this project preserved the building and transformed it into a new cultural site. The museum project was debated among residents due to discrepancies in the structure's color. However, the historical plans used and the materials presented in the museum substantiated its connection to the original building. The original plot has been converted into a parking area (Figure 6).

This case highlights the emergence of new urban commons—shared spaces of value and meaning that develop beyond the boundaries of official heritage protection. Such commons are forged through everyday practices and grassroots initiatives, which challenge and expand conventional understandings of heritage.



Figure 5. Reconstructed Helena Grossówna House at its new location. Photograph by Zuzanna Lewandowska, Kujawsko-Pomorskie Centrum Dziedzictwa w Toruniu (2024).

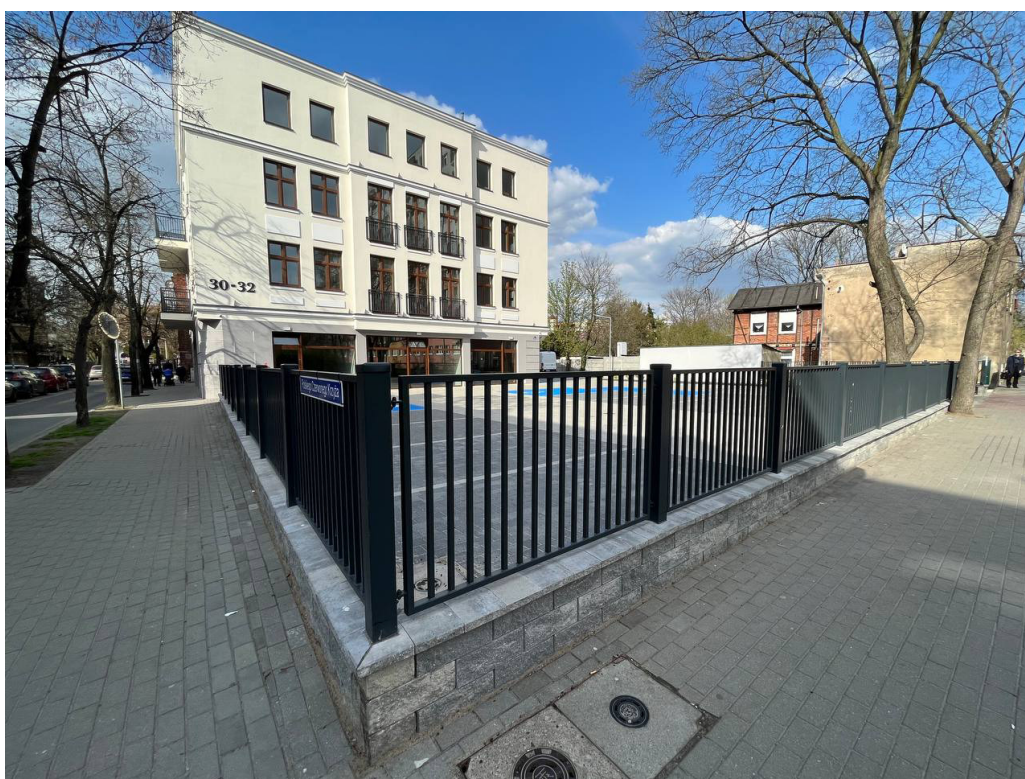


Figure 6. Former site of the Helena Grossówna House (now a parking area). Photograph by the author (2024).

These bottom-up processes foster more inclusive and participatory approaches to urban governance by enabling local actors to redefine what is regarded as culturally significant.

As illustrated in Figure 7, both heritage sites discussed in this study are situated within the buffer zone of the World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń.” In the case of the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Benedictine Monastery, the precise location of the ruins was unknown at the time of the World Heritage nomination, resulting in their exclusion from the 1997 inscription, despite their demonstrable relationship to the broader historic complex inscribed as World Heritage. In contrast, the Helena Grossówna House, while not historically connected to the medieval heritage, was nonetheless physically incorporated within the buffer zone boundaries. This inclusion could be understood as a mechanism for safeguarding a site that local residents conceptualized as a new urban common, a shared space imbued with collective value and meaning, emergent from grassroots initiatives and everyday practices rather than official heritage frameworks. The constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, encompassing both public health mandates such as mask wearing and physical distancing and the prohibition of traditional indoor gatherings, did not, however, diminish residents’ engagement and further underscored the importance of this new urban common to them.



Figure 7. Map of the World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń” and its buffer zone (scale 1:33,500). Beige area: World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń.” Purple shaded area: buffer zone of the World Heritage property. Purple circle (top): original location of Helena Grossówna House. Red circle: new location of Helena Grossówna House. Green area: Philadelphia Boulevard, where archaeological remains of the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Benedictine Monastery were found. Source: Created by the author based on OpenStreetMap data.

6. Discussion: Reimagining Heritage Through New Urban Commons

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was an important factor in both cases, as it significantly restricted traditional forms of civil mobilization due to social distancing, isolation, and lockdowns, thereby limiting opportunities for public protests against the implemented projects. Under these circumstances, the traditional means of collective action such as gathering in the streets to protest or meeting with others to discuss strategies became practically impossible (Coen et al., 2022).

For example, public gatherings, in-person collection of signatures for public petitions, and face-to-face meetings to discuss collective action became virtually impossible in Toruń, as in many other cities (Lorch & Sombatpoonsiri, 2023). As a result, new forms of community-based urban mobilization emerged, centred on community members producing and circulating knowledge among other actors. This included archival research, photo analysis, and the presentation of collected materials.

This form of mobilization enabled the community, under very limited time constraints, to successfully submit an application for obtaining heritage status for the Helena Grossówna House. It also allowed community members to act as recognized experts during the organization of a meeting between the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator. In a situation where responsibilities for heritage protection had been redistributed between municipal and regional institutions, the local community effectively assumed the role of mediator between them. Such a level of civic involvement had no precedent in the city's recent history. For instance, in the 1970s, when an important decision was made to preserve historical heritage by creating an arch through one of the buildings in the historic center to extend the tramlines, local residents were not engaged in the process (Eremenko & Kraski, 2024).

The comparison of the two cases shows that the scale of public and institutional attention does not necessarily determine the outcome of heritage interventions. For Philadelphia Boulevard, plans were made to extend the World Heritage boundaries to include the site. The project received considerable media coverage and drew the attention of national authorities. The discovery of significant archaeological remains also involved the local university, whose specialists in restoration and conservation contributed to the site assessment. Despite this high level of institutional and expert involvement, the citizens' initiative to create an underground museum and culture park as a new urban common was not realized.

At the same time, the case of the Helena Grossówna House received far less national attention. The local university was not directly involved, the site was located outside the World Heritage buffer zone, and the subject of concern was a building from the late 19th to early 20th century that was not originally considered historically significant. Nevertheless, this project proved more successful in generating a new urban common. Through the persistence of local activists and residents, the building was relocated, reconstructed within the World Heritage site buffer zone, and reopened as a museum that now serves as a shared cultural space for the community.

This contrast demonstrates that the visibility and historical significance of a site do not necessarily correlate with the success of community-based heritage initiatives, particularly in contexts of disruption wherein local capacities for action become crucial. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that a high level of public participation faces various barriers and consequences depending on the contextual and political conditions of a project, and therefore does not always lead to success (Foroughi et al., 2023).

Researchers argue that, in Poland, protection and care provided by local self-government may prove more effective than that of the central government. They justify this by arguing:

It is precisely the features and patterns of distinctiveness embodied in monuments that constitute values around which local communities may integrate. It is this category of monuments that should be afforded particular care by local self-government authorities and supported through municipal budgets. Such care is especially necessary, since these are often monuments that are not of the highest value on a national scale. In the queue for funding from the state budget, they usually occupy the last places. (Pawłowska & Swaryczewska, 2002, p. 135, translation by the author)

World Heritage sites represent a unique category in that they are recognized not solely at the national level but also possess international acknowledgment. Nevertheless, they remain within the purview of local self-government, similar to other heritage monuments. This dual recognition frequently results in municipal attention and resources being directed toward World Heritage sites, potentially to the detriment of other heritage assets. Therefore, local communities are often the most interested and engaged group regarding other monuments. Being closest to the object of protection, they are best able to recognize its needs and the specific conditions that influence its preservation. In this context, local communities can be conceptualized as co-stewards of heritage, mobilizing collectively around it as a form of new urban commons, treating heritage and associated public spaces as collectively managed resources necessitating shared responsibility and collective action.

Urban heritage commons can be understood as locally recognized heritage resources whose value and care are collectively negotiated and enacted by communities beyond formal protection regimes. They may draw the attention of municipal authorities to other heritage assets by linking them to the World Heritage property and its buffer zone, thereby increasing their perceived significance and strengthening the case for municipal support and resource allocation for their preservation. This willingness to invest effort and resources may stem from emotional attachment to locally situated monuments, which can increase readiness to bear the personal and financial costs of their maintenance and care (Rouba, 2013). In this context, residents may pursue “linking” practices that can be interpreted as a “commons-making” strategy: By framing non-designated sites as part of the shared value system associated with World Heritage, residents attempt to expand the locally recognized commons beyond the formally protected World Heritage zone.

The physical or symbolic linkage of new urban commons to the World Heritage property is shaped by their relationship to established heritage frameworks as well as by the period in which they emerge. Regardless of whether they correspond to the same historical period or reflect different layers of urban development, such sites are frequently exposed to competing interests and often lack consistent protection. In this context of vulnerability, and particularly in situations of crisis and disruption, the role of local actors becomes especially critical. Local actors shape urban futures through the creation and defense of new urban commons as forms of collective response to these conditions, mobilizing heritage institutions, legal frameworks, and coalitions to support their initiatives, though not always successfully.

7. Conclusion

World Heritage status introduces nuanced challenges for the development of new urban commons, whether these sites are historically associated with World Heritage sites or originate from other periods. Instead of ensuring broader protection, the designation often directs municipal attention and resources toward internationally recognized landmarks, possibly sidelining other significant heritage sites. This dynamic amplifies the importance of locally rooted initiatives for monuments deemed “non-priority.” The examined cases indicate that the formation of new urban commons depends less on the formal designation or the scale of institutional engagement, and more on the ways residents and local actors deliberate and co-create shared spaces of meaning under evolving governance structures. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that heightened public visibility, expert involvement, and media or national attention do not guarantee effective community-led outcomes, as local political and contextual factors can hinder progress even amid robust participation.

In both cases in Toruń, residents proposed the establishment of museums as a means to safeguard and institutionalize emergent urban commons. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly constrained traditional forms of collective action such as street demonstrations, face-to-face assemblies, and signature drives, prompting a shift toward practices rooted in community expertise as a response to the crisis. The Toruń case illustrates that the reallocation of authority between regional and municipal levels has fostered new avenues for civic engagement, particularly through mediation. Within this framework, residents assumed novel roles as co-stewards and intermediaries, bridging municipal and regional heritage agencies and thereby contributing to the evolution of urban heritage governance.

The Covid-19 pandemic generated a complex and ambivalent opportunity structure. Although public health restrictions diminished the possibility of public assembly and facilitated the progress of construction projects with reduced direct opposition, they did not eliminate resistance. Even amid stringent limitations, local residents did not cease to act as future-makers: They demonstrated a sustained commitment to defending their vision for the city’s future, employing a variety of strategies to achieve their goals.

Through the institutionalization of their own roles as active participants in heritage-related initiatives and decision-making processes, residents may seek to formalize the forms of heritage they perceive as new urban commons. They recognize that inclusion within the World Heritage buffer zone does not guarantee preservation, and therefore attempt to protect such places by institutionalizing them through the creation of museums. At the same time, communities may pursue “linking” practices, symbolically or physically associating less-recognized sites with World Heritage status and its buffer zone, as a commons-making strategy aimed at increasing administrative recognition and strengthening the case for municipal support. Taken together, the cases described in this article suggest that urban heritage commons are best understood as locally recognized heritage resources whose value and care are collectively negotiated and enacted beyond formal protection regimes, with outcomes shaped less by status than by residents’ capacity to mobilize institutions, legal frameworks, and coalitions in contested and vulnerable urban contexts. In this sense, commons-based practices demonstrate how collective forms of urban future-making remain possible in times of disruption, highlighting the agency of local actors in shaping more plural urban futures.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Eremenko, I., & Kraski, T. (2024). *HERIEXPERT dataset: Local experts in Polish and German World Heritage Cities: Understanding their role in polycentric governance of heritage sites* [Dataset of expert interviews]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14185640>

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Who Cares When the Ground Shakes? “Standing By” Uncertain Urban Futures Through Configurations of Care

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Abstract

In this article, I elaborate on how different urban actors strive to create *certainty* while living in anticipation of a major destructive earthquake. Turning to the category of *standby* mode, I study attempts to stabilize uncertain futures beyond professionalized practices of preparedness. Instead, I include a broader range of actors in the analysis of waiting for catastrophe and avoid a binary of activity/passivity in anticipation of disaster. I approach everyday life in Almaty, Kazakhstan, a city prone to potentially dangerous earthquakes, as a form of standby, or an ongoing state of waiting for a destructive earthquake, while living through smaller, non-destructive yet tangible ones that occur once every few years and trigger broad public discussion. One such earthquake, which struck on January 23, 2024, is the main case I study in this article, focusing on the forms of organizing anticipation before the earthquake, during, and after it. In doing so, I question the opposition between state institutions and local residents, widely presented in disaster studies, and suggest focusing on the interdependencies among the actors involved in disaster anticipation and on how they jointly shape (in)security through relations of care. I introduce the concept of *configurations of care* and demonstrate that anticipating a disaster is a dynamic process of redistributing care, in which the actors involved situationally shift their roles and intensity of engagement, forming different configurations and thereby transforming the mode of waiting. Drawing on interviews with urban planners, preparedness experts, and residents, I demonstrate how an earthquake (or lack thereof) transforms configurations of care in waiting for uncertain futures of Almaty.

Keywords

care; earthquake; future; preparedness; standby

1. Introduction

During the night between January 22 and 23, an earthquake measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale struck 200 km from Almaty, Kazakhstan. In the homes of Almaty residents, chandeliers swayed, furniture shook, and dishes clattered in cupboards. Frightened people rushed into the freezing streets. Several people even jumped out of windows and were injured.

While the earthquake caused no infrastructural damage, it “spawned a wave of memes” as residents tried to “recover when being scared, with laughter afterwards” (Inf. A). Irina, a native of Almaty, shared her favorite meme referencing a scene from the series *The Boy’s Word* (*Slovo Patsana*, a Russian TV series that premiered in 2023), where a group of street hooligans is waiting for a fight with another group and is being scolded by their leader while standing on a frosty street: “I’m looking at you, you’re not prepared!” In the picture Irina shared, this quote was written over a photo taken on the night of the earthquake in Almaty. It resembled the scene described: In the courtyard, among the other people, a man in a hat and a winter coat, but without any pants and shoes, stood on the snow, completely frozen yet scared to go back home.

Unlike the residents, the city administration (*akimat*) and emergency services did not classify the event as an emergency. Seismological services recorded a magnitude of 5, below the threshold (5.5) for mandated response. Yet in residents’ eyes, local authorities were also “not prepared”—not just for this incident, but for future destructive earthquakes. The meme’s joking critique of the city as “not prepared” for an earthquake thus raises broader questions: What does it mean to “be prepared” and what exactly does one need to “be prepared” for? Who should “prepare” the city and how? And what role does the “absent transformer” (Deville, 2021)—an earthquake similar to the one in Almaty on January 23—play in this “preparedness”?

Built on tectonic faults, Almaty is highly vulnerable to seismic events, and future earthquakes could reach magnitudes of 9–10. Earthquakes are disasters of the built environment, as the vast majority of casualties and victims are caused not by tremors, but by the collapse of buildings and infrastructure (Angell, 2014). A major earthquake could result in up to 8,000 casualties and 17,000 buildings destroyed (Amey et al., 2021), yet it is almost impossible to accurately predict the location, magnitude, or timing of such events (Tapia-Hernández et al., 2019). Earthquakes represent an inevitable, uncontrollable, and unpredictable uncertainty for the people of Almaty: “Whether you are preparing or not, you still cannot foresee everything” (Inf. B).

Uncertainty, which is deeply embedded in everyday life, is one of the key characteristics associated with the perception of the future of cities (Amin, 2013). Professionals—state agencies, NGOs, experts—attempt to manage it by transforming it into calculable risk or preparedness technologies (Lakoff, 2007; O’Malley, 2012; Samimian-Darash & Rabinow, 2015). Other actors—particularly urban residents—are often seen as passive or irrational actors in risk frameworks (Gugg, 2019; Reddy, 2023) despite playing a crucial role in disaster response (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Twigg & Mosel, 2017). Their knowledge, which emerges from everyday contexts, is dismissed in favor of expert knowledge (Tironi & Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017). Yet urban dwellers and communities play no less a role in imagining the future than other actors (Zhelnina, 2023), and their ways of living alongside earthquakes are important for understanding how a city prepares for disaster.

In this article, I follow those scholars (Reddy, 2023; Samimian-Darash & Rabinow, 2015) who move away, first, from the risk frameworks and, second, from expert work on “preparedness,” and propose focusing instead

on how different urban actors strive to create *certainty*. I employ the concept of *standby* mode (Kemmer et al., 2021), which expands the analysis beyond professionalized preparedness and avoids equating inactivity with passivity, or preparedness solely with visible mobilization. I approach everyday life in Almaty—where small, almost imperceptible earthquakes occur throughout the year, and non-destructive yet tangible ones that trigger broad public discussion happen once every few years—as a local form of standby, looking at how waiting was organized before the earthquake on January 23, during, and after it. Thus, in this article, I address the question of how waiting for a destructive earthquake that could occur at any moment is organized, and how a minor earthquake transforms this waiting.

Although many texts focus on the relationships between different actors in the preparedness process, in this article, I move away from the common opposition between residents and the state (and its expert institutions) and focus on the interdependencies of different actors involved in anticipating disaster and their joint efforts to shape (in)security. To explore it, I introduce the concept of *configurations of care*, building on an assemblage approach and understanding of care as a situated relational practice (Mol, 2008; E. R. Power, 2019). This allows for an examination of how different actors are included in—or remain excluded from—networks of distributed responsibility for the urban future. In this context, I consider anticipating disaster a dynamic redistribution of care, in which actors continuously move between different care-related roles and levels of engagement, thereby reshaping the mode of waiting.

This study is based on 18 semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted in Almaty in November 2024 (in Russian). Informants were purposively selected to reflect diverse experiences related to earthquake preparedness; they included experts in construction and urban planning ($n = 6$), volunteers ($n = 3$), civic activists ($n = 2$), journalists ($n = 3$), and residents not professionally involved in the field ($n = 4$). All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative thematic coding. In addition, the study analyzes regulatory documents on seismic safety and urban planning in Kazakhstan, as well as 32 national and local media publications on earthquake preparedness, particularly the January 23 earthquake. These materials were examined through qualitative content analysis to identify key actors and framings of responsibility and preparedness.

Based on these materials, I analyze how an earthquake without destruction still triggered a transformation of politics and practices of waiting for a potential disaster. By opening up new questions about who and how takes care of or does care-giving or care-receiving, and what is cared for or about (Tronto, 2020), I examine how disaster—or the absence of one—becomes a focal point for reassembling the city (Angell, 2014) and reimagining urban futures (Anderson, 2010).

2. From Preparedness to Standing By the Disaster: Active Inactivity of Anticipating the Future

Words such as “preparedness,” “resilience,” “risk management,” and “security” play a significant role in contemporary discourse on urban futures. This vocabulary reflects the fact that urban policymakers accept the uncertainty of the future as an integral part of modern urban life (Amin, 2013) and look for ways to transform an uncertain future into manageable and controllable phenomena (O’Malley, 2012; Samimian-Darash & Rabinow, 2015).

When the calculation of risks is impossible or limited—as in the case of some natural phenomena, including earthquakes—urban administrations resort to the technology of preparedness (Lakoff, 2007), which includes scenario planning, various simulations, and training exercises. Preparedness assumes that the disaster is not preventable and its possibility is built into the design of the system itself (M. Power, 2010)—or into the urban materiality (Angell, 2014). Preparedness technology suggests shaping a negative image of the future to shift attention from the threat itself to the vulnerabilities of confronting it (Lakoff, 2007), thus influencing the future (Collier et al., 2004).

The aforementioned meme “you’re not prepared!” refers directly to the concept of preparedness, but at the same time questions the ability of this concept to be sensitive to the analysis of what has happened in Almaty. As researchers note, the concept of preparedness assumes that key roles in planning, assessment, and action are assigned to state-related institutions (Lakoff, 2007), which shape the concept of preparedness and organize it through standardization mechanisms (Deville et al., 2014) that rely on expert knowledge (Barnett, 2012; Lakoff & Klinenberg, 2010). The state of “being prepared” is based on very specific infrastructure indicators that experts consider important for reducing vulnerability, while other aspects—including public perception of danger—remain outside the political discourse on the future in the face of disaster (Lakoff, 2007). The mocking statement of being “not prepared,” made at a time when an emergency had not been declared by experts but was considered to exist by urban dwellers ready to act, highlights the need to talk not only about emergency professionals and authorities, but also about broader publics, their understanding of the future, and their (in)ability to create certainty in situations where they live alongside a potential disaster.

Preparedness also implies developing systems of responsibility attribution (M. Power, 2010), which are centered on state institutions and place other actors—particularly urban residents, both as a collective entity and as individual actors—into an ambiguous position. While they are considered rational enough to be held responsible for the potential consequences of disasters through insurance instruments (Lakoff, 2007), their political significance is reduced to that of passive recipients of protection organized according to experts’ visions (Barnett, 2012). Residents are required to share the experts’ vision and demonstrate awareness (Gugg, 2019), while diversity of experiences of dealing with uncertainty is hardly relevant in the face of the judgments of “objective” experts (Jasanoff, 2010), who gain power because they possess knowledge, accreditation, and a “neutral” status that conceals the hierarchies and power inherent in knowledge production (Barnett, 2012). Politicians and experts often accuse people of failing to recognize risks and therefore behaving irrationally, or of overestimating risks and being prone to dramatization (Gugg, 2019; Jasanoff, 2010).

The perception of people’s passivity stems from the aforementioned dominance of the concept of preparedness, which renders invisible the practices of waiting for a disaster beyond those of experts. Contrary to this framing, “common” people often play a significant role in disaster preparedness and response (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Cheshire, 2015; Twigg & Mosel, 2017). By interacting with urban infrastructure and the physical environment, they build preparedness alongside state institutions (Deville et al., 2014) while remaining in a waiting mode rooted in their everyday lives (Deville, 2021).

As an alternative to analyze waiting, characterized by not always rational or well-designed strategies, passive vigilance, and blurred boundaries of participation and responsibility, I will refer to the concept of *standby* (Deville, 2021; Kemmer et al., 2021). This concept rethinks the logic of action beyond technocratic

goal-oriented practice and captures social, material, and affective forms of life in a state of waiting for some event, including natural disasters (Deville, 2021). This mode of “active inactivity” requires (and generates) energy, resources, and relationships and can be transformed at any moment into action. Standby thus shifts the focus from the extraordinary to the everyday nature of possible earthquakes and analyzes how socio-material worlds are organized in the presence and absence of disaster.

Since the standby concept is equally attentive to the practices of emergency professionals (Deville, 2021) and to residents shaping their own futures (Kemmer & Simone, 2021), I find it a productive tool for analyzing urban life under the shadow of a potential disaster in Almaty. Drawing on this concept allows for moving beyond the dichotomy of activity and passivity, including a wider range of actors in the analysis, and avoiding the interpretation of the January 23 earthquake as a singular catastrophic event. Instead, I will consider it part of a broader process of preparing for greater destruction in a potential future.

3. Care-Full Standing By

Although research on disaster preparedness and response highlights the importance of local residents, its authors often draw a clear boundary between state institutions/emergency services and local residents, contrasting state actions with local community interests. These works argue that state-led, technocratic preparedness logics often reinforce vulnerabilities and cause responsabilization (Barmina et al., 2025; Cheshire, 2015; Gagné, 2019; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021; Welsh, 2014). This research demonstrates that local knowledge can be more effective than expert knowledge on preparedness (Gaillard & Mercer, 2013), and that grassroots networks enable more effective action than state agencies (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Cheshire, 2015; Twigg & Mosel, 2017). In such papers, city residents articulate political demands by openly opposing authorities over preparedness measures (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021) or substitute for state functions when they are neglected (Tironi & Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017).

The standby concept follows a similar logic: Papers that draw on it describe a pronounced opposition between the state and local residents. The state appears as a source of instability and a perpetrator of political violence (Müller, 2021), making empty promises (Kemmer & Simone, 2021). As a result, the authors show how actors without institutional power succeed in “outwaiting and outwitting” powerful actors (Kemmer & Simone, 2021, p. 13; Müller, 2021).

I find such a dichotomy limiting when dealing with the complex phenomenon of disaster anticipation. As other studies have shown, disasters create situations in which actors do not necessarily oppose one another but may, in specific contexts, combine different logics: They may conflict, cooperate, act autonomously, or complement one another (Büscher et al., 2017; Carrero et al., 2019). In this article, I aim to approach the anticipation of a catastrophe from another angle—not as a confrontation between “strong” and “weak” publics (Fraser, 1990), but as a state of interdependence among actors awaiting a disaster. To do this, I turn to the concept of care, making it a central analytical lens for understanding disaster anticipation in Almaty.

The choice of care is not accidental. On the one hand, disaster studies refer to the concept to demonstrate solidarity among local residents (Tironi & Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017) or to define the paternalism performed by governmental bodies and international NGOs (Barnett, 2012). On the other hand, the authors of the standby concept explicitly refer to care (Kemmer et al., 2021), emphasizing the concept’s capacity to capture

“forms of improvised, and situational practice that are opposed to standards and rigid protocols” (Mol et al., 2010).

Indeed, the two concepts—standby and care—intersect in important ways. Both reveal ways of practicing endurance in times of crisis (Kemmer et al., 2021; Tironi & Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017), highlighting the importance of invisible work and interdependencies. Standby refers to a specific type of connections between elements: They are “loose bonds” that are not severed but are also not fully active and remain invisible at first glance (Kemmer et al., 2021). Care shares a focus on relations and pays close attention to invisible work (Mattern, 2018) and invisible relationships, including those unfolding across significant geographical distances (Milligan & Wiles, 2010). These aspects of care resonate with how the notion of standby focuses on what initially appears to be an “absent” element (Kemmer et al., 2021), and open possibilities for understanding this “absence” differently.

However, the concept of care can also significantly enrich standby, revealing the geometries of power that emerge in the context of anticipating disaster beyond the opposition between the state and local residents. It allows for a more detailed and nuanced understanding of complex relations among different actors involved in waiting. Care reveals the inequalities embedded in social structures and is directly linked to exploitation, domination, and the uneven distribution of burden among different intersectional categories of people (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2020). This means it raises questions about who cares for whom and to what extent: which systems require what kind of maintenance, and who cares for those who maintain them (Mattern, 2018). At its core, care is rooted not in dyadic or individualistic relations (Tronto, 2020) but in interdependencies (Lawson, 2007; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2013). These interdependencies involve varying degrees of intensity and engagement—from *caring about*, meaning recognizing a matter of concern, to *taking care of*, meaning assuming responsibility for someone’s need, and up to the direct work of *care-giving* (Tronto, 2020). In this way, care is not a linear, one-directional activity but a dynamic distribution of interchangeable roles between *care-giver* and *care-receiver* (Tronto, 2020), where the efforts of both sides are necessary for an act of caring to occur (Tronto, 2013). Care thus challenges the dichotomy of activity versus dependence (E. R. Power, 2019) and allows attentiveness to complexly organized power, shifting roles, positions, and involvements.

Thus, the optics of care develop the standby concept further. Care supports its already-articulated move away from the simplified image of “powerless waiting-for” (Kemmer et al., 2021) and from the dichotomy of activity/passivity. At the same time, it visibilizes the power relations embedded in preparedness as a tool for governing life and vulnerability—precisely the direction in which the creators of the standby concept propose developing it (Kemmer et al., 2021). Care is sensitive to how power and agency of active-inactivity are distributed, extending beyond discussions of dependence on authorities, resistance to them, or the creation of autonomous alternatives.

4. Configurations of Care

To analyze the organization of the standby mode, in this article, I propose the concept of *configurations of care* and trace how these configurations emerge and change around a matter of collective concern: the earthquake in Almaty. Care as a configuration resonates with the concept of “caring-with” (Tronto, 2013), describing “the co-constitution of caring and the distribution of (un)caring agencies that shape the capacity

for care” (E. R. Power, 2019, p. 2). Configurations of care build on the idea of assemblage thinking (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011) and on the understanding of care as a relational and situational practice, manifested in a diversity of socio-technical networks of interdependence (Mol, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Vogel, 2021). Care in such configurations represents a “distributed and relationally afforded mode of ‘doing good’” (Vogel, 2021, p. 3)—a mode in which relations between different elements, including nonhuman ones (Buser & Boyer, 2021; Kullman, 2014; E. R. Power & Williams, 2020), work collaboratively toward creating a favorable future under specific circumstances.

The concept of configurations of care adapts the understanding of care as an assemblage (E. R. Power, 2019) to a specific temporal condition—the “active waiting” for a future earthquake—showing how care relations constitute anticipation. While E. R. Power (2019) asks the question, “What makes care possible?”—that is, how various elements come together in an assemblage to create (or limit) the very possibility for or capacity of people to care for themselves and others—I take this line of inquiry further, examining how this capacity is organized and reorganized in a mode of disaster anticipation. Within a configuration of care, actors may shift their involvement in caring: They may *care about*, recognizing the need for care and the risks associated with the future; *take care of*, assuming responsibility for others’ needs and determining how to respond to them; perform *care-giving*, carrying out the direct work of meeting those needs; and, finally, be *care-receivers*, allowing themselves to be regarded as those who require care (Tronto, 2020). Situationally constructing certain objects as dangerous (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982), the actors may define which care-related roles and forms of care to reduce vulnerability are acceptable and feasible under specific conditions. Thus, configurations of care consider not only the distribution of responsibility (who is included in an act of care?), but also how participants—by changing their understanding of (un)safe, by joining or withdrawing, and by shifting their modes of engagement—transform the mode of waiting.

Thus, the concept of configurations of care analyzes how the standby mode is organized and reorganized, diversifying its states and demonstrating its heterogeneity. Configurations of care help move beyond a paternalistic understanding of preparedness, making visible the inclusion of diverse actors in the networks formed around the earthquake as a matter of concern, and showing how situational “care collectives” (Alam & Houston, 2020) are formed. The concept is sensitive to complex power relations beyond the dichotomy of state and residents and is able to show the interdependencies and collaborative efforts of different actors in achieving care and safety. Ultimately, this notion allows us to see how, through “the actors and relations bound up in any act of care” (E. R. Power, 2019, p. 2), the mode of active waiting for a future earthquake becomes possible and undergoes transformations.

5. Before the Earthquake

One of the preparedness directions in Almaty focuses on immediate earthquake response. This is regulated by a set of documents (Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Committee for Emergency Situations, 2015; Republic of Kazakhstan, 2014) specifying the bodies involved in disaster management (including the president, the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Committee for Emergency Situations, the city administration, local rescue teams, and civil volunteer associations), their authority, responsibilities, and resources. These documents include instructions for action before, during, and after a disaster and outline training exercises—an attempt at “relevance-making” (Deville, 2021) to sustain a link between preparedness and potential disasters.

Another direction addresses urban planning and construction control to prevent destruction and casualties. Over the last 20 years, construction norms have become stricter and now follow international standards (European Macro-Seismic Scale, EMS-98; Inf. C). In tectonic fault zones marked on city maps, special regulations apply (Ministry of Investment and Development's Committee on Construction and Utilities, 2017). The state-led KazRICA (Kazakh Research and Design Institute of Construction and Architecture) monitors the seismic safety of constructions by installing seismic stations on 14 city buildings (Inf. C). The city also strengthens social infrastructure and runs a housing program, which involves demolishing old Soviet buildings and replacing them with high-rise, earthquake-resistant ones.

This overview represents a model of preparedness in which the state considers itself as the central actor *taking care of* the city, organizing it through local administrations, rescue teams, monitoring institutions, school teachers, and others. As for "common" residents, the state's preparedness plan assigns them the role of relatively passive *care-receivers*. They are expected to follow official guidance to prepare for emergencies, but "in practice, when the [training] siren goes off, of course, no one does anything" (Inf. A). They unauthorizedly remodel their privatized apartments, creating potential threats to seismic safety: "In the 1990s–2000s, no one cared—if someone wanted, they turned the living room into a kitchen, or vice versa. These remodelings affected the building's ability to withstand [seismic] loads" (Inf. C). Thus, the state's *care-taking* role, which proposes expertise in safe housing and offers training activities, turns out not to be in demand among residents—they do not assume the role of *care-receiver*, and care is not enacted as intended. At the same time, no other role is envisioned for urban residents within this configuration. For example, residents are not envisioned as responsible actors through mechanisms like home insurance. Most housing is privately owned, but there is no insurance market to insure "the walls and the building itself" (Inf. I), only the apartment, so if the building is destroyed, "it becomes a direct burden on the state" (Inf. I).

The configuration of care that emerges instead of the one described above assigns a much more active role to urban actors besides the state or city administration. These include, first, experts who do not work in the state-led seismic construction institute. The key concern they raise is the unregulated development boom in the post-Soviet years and the construction of high-rise buildings (over 15 floors) near tectonic fault lines. Architect Alexander, with 30 years of experience, states that earthquake safety requirements conflict with urban development policies focused on densification that seek "to free developers as much as possible from any restrictions" (Inf. F). To resolve this contradiction, the city administration, developers, and KazRICA establish special "technical conditions"—workarounds that enable construction in more dangerous and previously undeveloped areas and allow for loose control over buildings' capacity to withstand an earthquake, since "every [regulation] is relaxed to the extreme" (Inf. F). Another issue discussed is the potential obstacles to emergency vehicle access in the city and the feasibility of evacuation, since the designated earthquake gathering areas in Soviet-era courtyards have been taken over by infill developments (Inf. A, F, G).

Such critical narratives by experts and urban activists are also supported by private developers: One company hired a Japanese engineer to design low-rise buildings (Japanese expertise is highly valued in Almaty); others use a very costly machine to shake a newly constructed high-rise building and simulate a magnitude-9 earthquake. Some office building owners practice regular evacuation drills for office workers since "it's a huge responsibility, there are so many people [working here]" (Inf. A). Developers must persuade apartment buyers and office residents that they indeed *take care of* their safety (Inf. C, F).

Experts and private companies thus integrate themselves into configurations of care and demonstrate that they, too, *care about* potential futures and *take care of* safe life and work in the city. Their care is expressed by highlighting the “fragility” and unreliability of existing state-led measures—and by proving that they can take responsibility alongside the state. Activists *care about*, too, but also strive to “repair” the state’s efficiency at *taking care of*, urging stronger state engagement or escalation to higher-level institutions: “We identify all these [vulnerabilities], explain, prove them. It goes upward [to the president], and at the top level, the issue is resolved” (Inf. G).

However, even this intention creates another important effect: When experts “start writing something [about earthquake risks], everyone starts worrying again” (Inf. A). By embedding themselves in care configurations and demonstrating local authorities’ “weakness,” these actors push residents to *care about* rather than only be *care-receivers*. As a result, residents are highly skeptical about the state’s ability to take responsibility for their safety. Despite stricter norms, many still view Soviet buildings as safer, products of a more “caring” state, while new high-rises are described as “future mass graves” (Inf. E).

For care to be realized, the efforts of both sides—*care-giver* and *care-receiver*—are required (E. R. Power, 2019). Yet during periods without small tangible earthquakes, residents often reject the *care-receiver* role—the state-designed configuration of care does not function as intended. At the same time, experts, activists, and other public actors encourage residents to engage with the configuration of care in a more active role by *caring about* the potential danger posed by buildings in the city.

6. During the Earthquake

Did an emergency situation occur on the night of January 23, 2024? On one hand, there were tangible tremors that made people “jump together with the sofa” (Inf. D) and frightened even long-time residents of the city, who had grown accustomed to small earthquakes. On the other hand, local guidelines set the emergency threshold at magnitude 5.5, and this quake was rated at 5.0. As a result, it was not classified as an emergency. Emergency services followed strict algorithms, and “very often people don’t understand how the [emergency service] staff operate” or why apparent inaction has internal logic within rescue practice (Inf. H). The sirens did not sound—again, due to the threshold. Specialists argued that 5.0 cannot damage buildings or threaten lives, so “there’s no need for it, and it would only cause even more panic” (Inf. H).

When the tremors forced people out into the streets, they were more ready than ever to assume the role of *care-receivers*: to follow instructions and to feel that their lives were being kept safe. However, the emergency services initially did not transform the *taking care of* role into *care-giving* as they did not consider the situation dangerous. This caused even greater fear and disappointment among residents, who did not know what to do on a cold night. A few hours later, city authorities responded by quickly organizing an emergency headquarters, reporting on the situation, opening safe gathering points in schools, and finally sending belated SMS alerts about the danger. According to my informants, residents considered this “productivity theatre” that had nothing in common with “proper” *care-giving*, and were even more deeply irritated and disappointed.

In what one informant called a “sub-emergency” (Inf. H), alternative care configurations emerged. First, there was a shift in roles: Residents became *care-givers* for their families and neighbors. A mass “self-evacuation”

(Inf. D) took place: Many chose not to return home but instead got in cars or drove to the outskirts or to relatives, considering their low-rise houses safer (Inf. A). The city turned into one huge traffic jam.

Some informants labeled this as “panic,” criticizing the self-centered logic where “everyone only thinks about their own [interest]” (Inf. J). Placing this critique in the broader context of the city’s development policy—which promotes automobilization in a material environment that cannot accommodate excessive car usage—it becomes clear that configurations of care, centered around individual actors caring for themselves and their families, come into conflict both with the state’s infrastructural policy and with its claim to dominance as the main *care-giver* that failed to justify residents’ trust. Informants voiced fear that “if something truly catastrophic happens, no one will be able to go anywhere. Because...the whole city [will] just [get] stuck in these cars....Ambulances, fire trucks, cranes, all that heavy equipment won’t be able to pass anywhere” (Inf. -A).

Second, volunteer networks—independent of official emergency services—stepped in. Having prior experience with crises, they contributed significantly to the work of safe gathering points in several city schools opened by the municipalities to accommodate people overnight. Volunteers quickly formed a headquarters (Inf. H), set up a hotline, and took on the role of *care-givers* by “welcoming people, explaining things, offering food, drinks, and warm blankets if they ran out in just their underwear, so to speak” (Inf. B). While only active in some parts of the city, these initiatives were effective in caring for those who were “afraid to stay at home” (Inf. K).

The tremors on the night of January 23 caused no destruction or casualties but transformed the configurations of care: Residents were ready to enter into a care relationship with the state, but instead became *care-receivers* from volunteer organizations and, in turn, transformed into *care-givers* for themselves and their loved ones. This configuration worked in the moment, but it deepened concerns about the state’s ability to act as a *care-giver* not only in immediate response to a threat, but also in terms of *taking care of* planning urban infrastructures.

7. After the Earthquake

The day after the earthquake, state institutions began reasserting their position as the main actors in charge. The president’s statements, widely cited in the media, clearly demonstrated the state’s primary role in preparedness and response: Even residents’ lack of emergency kits and knowledge of how to behave was framed as a failure on the part of local officials (“Tokayev raskritikoval,” 2024). Following this logic, the city administration became more active, visibly *taking care of* residents: installing informational boards about evacuation points at every building entrance, organizing citywide drills (“Okolo 600 tysyach,” 2024), providing schools with shelter tents, strengthening the alarm system, and launching weekly alert checks. The new measures complemented those initiated before the earthquake, such as centralizing expertise in construction and building approval processes (Inf. F) and in the inspection and certification of residential construction (“Boleye 13 tys,” 2024). Residents remain skeptical, describing these efforts as having merely “made some noise” (Inf. K) or representing “grotesque, caricature-like initiatives, with no consistency” (Inf. A).

Experts strengthened their place within the configuration of care after the earthquake. They not only continued their critique of the existing preparedness system and co-produced the built environment as a matter of concern, but also “calm[ed] everyone down” (Inf. K), performing as *care-givers*. Activists exposing

construction violations perceived the earthquake as an opportunity to make visible the fragility of the local administration's *taking care of* role: "It actually worked to our advantage" (Inf. G). Their goal was not to oppose the state, but to strengthen the configuration of care by involving the presidential administration. However, they neither took on the *care-receiving* role nor believed others had to do so. Instead, they encouraged residents to take greater responsibility for their own housing choices: "The main problem of our ordinary people is that they're convinced their housing complexes are well built—that since construction was permitted, it must be safe. They can't grasp the scale of this potentially corrupt system" (Inf. G).

In this discourse, still carrying the memory of the recent earthquake, residents began *taking care of* their future by assembling personal emergency kits, downloading fault zone maps, installing mobile earthquake alert apps, and developing personal housing strategies. Some friends and relatives of my informants moved out of Almaty (Inf. B) or began to question their living conditions—"It's really scary to live in high-rises, especially on the top floor" (Inf. B). They now consult architect acquaintances before buying or renting apartments (Inf. A), and some "consider selling [apartments in a new high-rise]" (Inf. G), believing that when it comes to Soviet-era buildings, "the state was in control [of construction], and such a building could easily withstand a 9-magnitude quake" (Inf. E).

At the same time, residents do not reject the state as *taking care of* them or as a potential *care-giver*. They demonstrate an active willingness to receive care properly—for example, by learning expected behaviors during earthquakes and the logistics of evacuation. People frequently contact KazRICA for remodeling consultations, assigning responsibility for safety to professionals affiliated with the state, while simultaneously demonstrating their own *taking care of* neighbors' safety (Inf. C). Volunteer organizations perceive a public demand to be *care-receivers* beyond the formal algorithms developed by the state, and therefore they also prepare their own resources so that when "people start acting [as care-receivers], volunteers [can] step in to ensure their safety—hand out tea, little pastries, warm things" (Inf. H).

The earthquake became a point of reassembly for care configurations by transforming the roles of the urban actors. Yet more than anything, it brought the residents' role into focus. A common sentiment—that "people still need to approach this issue more responsibly" (Inf. B)—reflects the demand for urban dwellers to take on multiple roles: as *care-receivers* who follow instructions; as citizens who *care about* their built environment by raising awareness; as individuals who *take care of* their own safety through housing choices; and as *care-givers* in civic initiatives. This last role is especially emphasized by volunteers, who regret that, unlike in other cities, "where the population itself observes and prepares," in Almaty, "people practically don't want to do anything [for preparedness]" (Inf. B).

8. Earthquake as an (Absent) Transformer

Earthquake preparedness relies on imaginations of the future that are "disciplined and conditioned by an awareness of the past" (Jasanoff, 2010). The "before" of earthquakes incorporates global experience, and every tremor in Almaty offers an opportunity to rethink preparedness for a larger, potentially destructive earthquake. Small but physically perceptible earthquakes "keep you on your toes" (Inf. A), constantly forcing configurations of care to reorganize and strengthen while raising questions about roles and responsibilities. They undoubtedly transform the organization of waiting, yet the *absence* of earthquakes also acts as a transformer of care configurations.

Informants described the post-earthquake state in terms of closure—“So how did it all end?” (Inf. A); “Everyone sighed and gasped, and the day was over” (Inf. I). This framing suggests preparedness reorganization was seen as complete. Yet precisely at this perceived moment of “ending,” a new transformation arose—one tied to *the absence* of earthquakes. Gradually, people exhaled: “We’ve survived—we’ll live a little longer” (Inf. A). Configurations of care began to gravitate back toward how they were organized “before.” Residents gradually dropped out of care configurations—“People panicked, slept it off, and went back to normal life; they’re no longer interested in this issue” (Inf. B)—leaving the central caring roles to professionals, the city administration, and the seemingly reliable Soviet housing legacy. The alerts whose absence once provoked public outrage have now become part of the city’s background noise, barely noticed. High-rise residents have returned to their apartments. City administration campaigns have faded into bureaucratic reports and disappeared from the public sphere because no one *cares about* them anymore.

Still, the temporally deferred configuration of care will never fully repeat the “before” state. During the next tangible earthquake in Almaty, on March 4, 2024, “people were more organized and reacted the way they were supposed to react” (Inf. A). State institutions also acted faster to perform *care-giving*—creating emergency headquarters, opening gathering points, and communicating with residents more efficiently. This event marked a new phase of standby mode, as it triggered a reconfiguration of care and raised questions about the capacity of certain urban actors—this time, kindergartens and schools—to act as reliable care actors.

9. Conclusion

In this article, I explored how the everyday experience of waiting for a potentially destructive earthquake is organized in Almaty and examined the phases before, during, and after the moderate but tangible earthquake of January 2024. In this way, I seek to contribute to understanding how preparedness changes over time (Deville et al., 2014). Unlike texts that treat an earthquake as an event that radically reshapes everyday realities or as a rupture in urban life (Temenos, 2025), in this article I consider it a “crisis ordinary” (Berlant, 2011) and examine the process of waiting for disaster.

Drawing on the notion of *standby* (Kemmer et al., 2021), I offered an alternative to examining preparedness solely as a practice of professionals: I paid equal attention to the preparedness practices carried out by state and emergency professionals and to the everyday practices of residents that may appear as inactivity or passivity. I also questioned the opposition between the state institution and local residents, which is often emphasized in the literature on disaster anticipation. Instead, I suggested focusing on the interdependencies among the actors involved in anticipating disaster and on how they jointly shape (in)security through relations of care.

To specify how disaster anticipation is organized and to understand the role of a small but tangible earthquake therein, I proposed the category of *configurations of care*. This concept develops the understanding of the city as a fragile assemblage (Angell, 2014) and allows us to see who and how seeks to make it more stable and adaptable to chronic uncertainty. Based on the idea of care as an assemblage (E. R. Power, 2019), the concept of care configurations reveals the (re)distribution of care among different actors before, during, and after the moderate but tangible earthquake. Thus, in this article, I argue that anticipating disaster is a dynamic process of (re)distributing care, in which the actors involved situationally

shift between care-related roles (care-giving, care-receiving, taking care of, caring about) and vary their intensity of engagement, forming different configurations and thereby transforming the mode of waiting.

Empirically, I trace the shifts in configurations of care associated with the January 23, 2024, earthquake in Almaty. Before it, responsibility for preparedness rested primarily on professionals affiliated with the state—they were expected to *take care of* potential earthquakes. City residents were assigned the role of *care-receivers*—a role they accepted reluctantly. At the same time, experts and activists were part of the configuration of care by *caring about* preparedness and sought to orient residents toward taking on such a role as well, framing the earthquake as a matter of concern, a political issue requiring a more responsible role from the state.

In the absence of noticeable earthquakes, preparedness appears as routine—a state in which there is “the risk of becoming trapped in an endless present” (Deville, 2021, p. 1). The future—in its potentially catastrophic form—bursts into the city’s everyday life as a magnitude-5 earthquake, one that does not destroy buildings or infrastructure but makes people run out into the streets. This time, residents wanted to perform the role of *care-receivers*, yet the expert understanding of preparedness, which deemed no reaction necessary, clashed with residents’ emotional experiences and their need for *care-giving*. The inability to mobilize and to transform *taking care of* into actual *care-giving* practices led to what Deville et al. (2014) describe as the “breakdown of preparedness”—the erosion of the state as a materially responsible force for survival. As a result, practices of *care-giving* for close ones came to the forefront. These were uncoordinated and potentially harmful to the collective good, since—as with hastily leaving the city and creating traffic jams—they took place within a material environment produced by the state that expected people to remain *care-receivers* and not take responsibility for their own safety.

After the earthquake, the reorganization of care configurations continues. The state attempts to restore its role as the main actor that *takes care of*, while activists and volunteers simultaneously undermine and support it—mobilizing the Presidential Administration to oversee preparedness, or substituting for emergency services where they are needed but not present as *care-givers* according to official protocols. Residents, in turn, seek to integrate into these configurations both as *care-receivers* from volunteers and the state and as autonomous actors capable of *taking care of* themselves by reorganizing their everyday routines and creating safer domestic environments.

A tangible earthquake forces configurations of care to reassemble rapidly. Yet the absence of an earthquake also acts as a transformer, albeit a less visible one: Gradually, care configurations tend to shift toward a configuration in which the main roles are assigned to emergency professionals and state institutions. Residents gradually withdraw from *taking care of*, though they still *care about* from time to time. The configurations, however, never repeat what is already reconfigured, and the standby mode continues to evolve—moving through new phases of activation and dormancy.

Both the earthquake that “keeps you on your toes” and its absence equally transform how responsibility is distributed within anticipation. A tangible earthquake requires a quick transformation of state services from *taking care of* into *care-giving*, which failed in the case discussed and introduced volunteers and residents as *care-giving* actors. The absence weakens *caring about* and makes *taking care of* less responsible. Considering these transformations through the concept of configurations of care makes it possible to see not only the

politics of responsibility and blame after disasters (Angell, 2014), but also how the constant re-adjustment and learning to exist within uncertainty is organized in a situation where its elimination is impossible.

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Communicative Solidarity: Networked Resistance to Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism in Urban Spaces

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Abstract

Today, in many parts of the world, local urban communities are forced to self-organise in response to the neoliberal restructuring of the state with its emphasis on privatisation, deregulation, and austerity that has hollowed out welfare provisions, leading to urban fragmentation. This article tells two stories of seemingly disconnected places, which, upon closer scrutiny, bear similarities regarding the ways in which neoliberalism and conflicts unfold in urban space: Favela da Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, and humanitarian activism across various regions in Russia. It discusses the communicative processes through which collectivities are formed and strengthened in situations of constant instability. The discussion systematises analytical insights and empirical findings from on-site visits and interviews. Our analysis demonstrates that these groups enact solidarity as a communicative practice strengthened by place-based relations. In these contexts, collective action that at a macro level has a political meaning gains a practical and affective significance for individuals engaged in it.

Keywords

Brazil; communicative ecologies; communicative solidarity; humanitarian activism; marginalization; Russia; shadow care infrastructure; urban activism

1. Introduction

Faced with contemporary crises, such as pandemics, wars, and natural catastrophes, local urban communities are increasingly forced to self-organise. The neoliberal restructuring of the state, with its emphasis on

privatisation, deregulation, and austerity, has hollowed out welfare provisions and the state's capacity to provide safety nets for citizens in times of need. Furthermore, the dissociation between living and work, as well as rapid commercialisation and the diminishing of public and communal spaces, has conditioned the fragmentation of urban communities. The increasing precarisation of work that reduces the security of contemporary life has led, for many, to precarious existences lacking the stability to plan their lives. In this way, urban life also becomes affected by the "cancellation of future" identified by Fisher (2020) as a state of political and creative inaction in which many resort to nostalgia, allowing reactionary politics to proliferate.

These processes happen in a context of what Santos (2021) called "space schizophrenia," a condition in which spaces are singular and global at the same time thanks to transport and information technologies. Meanwhile, citizens' rights are connected to the material space where people live—food, healthcare, sanitation, transport—but are managed by global corporations that do not have these rights as end goals, being "anti-citizen" in nature. As Stephen Graham argues, infrastructural systems such as water, sewage, electricity, and communications are often hidden underground and taken for granted in Western cities until disruption makes them visible (Graham, 2014, pp. 468–469). For Graham, such moments expose the "banal and ordinary" as contested sites of dynamism and action (Graham, 2014, p. 469). We take a reverse-engineering approach: Rather than treating disruption as an exception, we understand it as a persistent ontological condition that must be collectively mitigated. As reliance on seemingly invisible infrastructures—whether buried underground or etherealised in the myth of the digital cloud—intensifies, it becomes important to examine the sociotechnical dynamics through which disruptions are resisted and overcome.

Against this backdrop, we explore how urban communities (re)engage in future-oriented political imaginaries through communicative practices of solidarity in the present tense of complex crises. Kemmer and Simone (2021) refer to acts of "minor" future-making to define seemingly insignificant practices that enable processes of collective subversion of urban trajectories. We argue that solidarity enacted through communicative practices unveils the collective character of seemingly minor future-making individual acts.

The settings for our interrogation are Russian and Brazilian cities, places where state institutions fail to perform their fundamental role of safeguarding welfare and granting citizen rights, while corporations make access to infrastructures that would allow citizens to fulfil their basic rights difficult. These seemingly disconnected cases bear similarities regarding the ways in which neoliberal contradictions and contemporary conflicts unfold in urban spaces. In both cases, citizens are left to navigate crises and precarity on their own, often resorting to informal solidarity networks that emerge through communicative processes, creating shadow infrastructures of care that operate informally or in parallel to state infrastructures (Power et al., 2022). Dwellers in Favela da Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro and humanitarian activists in Russia engage in communicative solidarity under conditions of stable instability, thereby ensuring the future existence of communities.

Rather than treating solidarity as a moral disposition alone, we approach it as a communicative practice as enacted through the circulation of information, the coordination of care, the maintenance of trust, and the creation of mediated spaces of belonging and action. Bringing together these two cases allows us to show how communicative solidarity emerges in different but comparable urban environments marked by repression, marginalisation, and infrastructural inequality. In both cases, communication becomes central to sustaining collective action, even though the forms of visibility, risk, and territorial embeddedness differ.

In the following section, we contextualise each case, outlining the conditions that connect them as examples of contemporary communicative solidarity in urban environments. We then present the conceptual framework and methodological approach guiding our analysis, before turning to the empirical discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Case Contexts: Communicative Solidarity Under Constrained Conditions

Although Russia and Brazil differ significantly in terms of political regimes and urban governance, the two cases become comparable when approached through the question of how collective actors sustain solidarity under constrained conditions in future-oriented practices. In both urban contexts, communities operate in environments where institutional infrastructures are unreliable, hostile, or simply insufficient. Humanitarian activists in Russia navigate authoritarian repression and wartime censorship, while community communicators in Rocinha operate in a territorially marginalised urban space shaped by violence, infrastructural neglect, and contested state presence. Despite these differences, actors in both settings develop communicative practices that allow them to coordinate and maintain collective ties and sustain forms of engagement within the community. The cases, therefore, offer an opportunity to examine how communicative solidarity emerges as a future-oriented practice across different urban contexts marked by instability and uneven access to infrastructures.

2.1. Russian Case

Russia possesses a highly developed digital infrastructure, with widespread internet access and mobile communication (Levada Center, 2025). At the same time, state regulation of the digital sphere has increased significantly, especially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Several social networking platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram, have been banned or blocked during the last four years, while other communication platforms and digital services, such as transport and delivery apps, face restrictions and periodic disruptions (E. Kalinina & Ingvarsson, 2026; Marrow, 2023; “Russia plans to try,” 2023). New legislation criminalising criticism of the military and the war has led to severe punishments, creating a climate of pervasive surveillance and risk for open public communication (Freedom House, 2024; E. Kalinina & Ingvarsson, 2026).

Under these conditions, visible forms of public protest have largely disappeared from urban spaces (Ingvarsson & Kalinina, 2024; A. Kalinina & Beyes, 2024). However, civic engagement has not vanished, but instead, many initiatives have shifted toward smaller-scale and more ad-hoc forms of organisation (Vasilevskaia & Kalinina, 2024), as well as “small deeds of resistance” (A. Kalinina & Beyes, 2024). The use of digital communication technologies for civic mobilisation in Russia did not emerge with the war. Prior to 2022, social media platforms were widely used for public campaigning and mobilisation around elections, urban issues, and protest events, shaping agendas and facilitating collective action (Chernysheva & Zaporozhets, 2025; Glazunova, 2022; Lonkila et al., 2021). Research on urban and political activists in the period 2017–2022 already documented forms of cautious and security-aware digital coordination (Chernysheva & Zaporozhets, 2025). After the full-scale invasion, however, this caution evolved into a more deliberate organisational strategy: Activists increasingly rely on selective and trusted audiences, encrypted messaging platforms, and informal communication networks to coordinate assistance and circulate information (Bederson et al., 2025). This reliance on digital communication infrastructures and informal

organisational practices, together with the emergence of locally embedded initiatives and newly formed cross-border networks, became the main characteristics of anti-war mobilisation (Meyer-Olimpieva, 2023).

At the same time, the humanitarian consequences of the war, including the movement of large numbers of Ukrainian civilians through Russian territory, have generated new forms of anti-war grassroots mobilisation (Karyakina & Zinder, 2023; Meyer-Olimpieva, 2025). Many Ukrainian citizens, who reached Russian territory through humanitarian corridors from combat zones (“Russia: ‘Filtration’ of Ukrainian civilians,” 2022) and hoped to continue onward to European countries, faced significant obstacles, including limited resources, unfamiliarity with travel logistics, and insufficient institutional support. In many regions, local social infrastructures proved unable to accommodate their needs, leaving refugees dependent on volunteer networks and civil society initiatives. In response, activists and volunteers organised informal support systems to provide information, financial assistance, and logistics. The communicative ecology mobilised by these networks comprised a mix of infrastructural elements, integrating conventional communication technologies, such as mobile phones, and transportation, including roads, vehicles, and boats, with spatial nodes of coordination that function as improvised meeting points. These socio-material infrastructures not only facilitated information flows but also enabled the logistical and affective work of solidarity under constrained conditions of war and political repression.

2.2. *Brazilian Case*

Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro, represents a different but analytically comparable case study in which communicative solidarity emerges under conditions of marginalisation and infrastructural inequality. Located between two of the city’s wealthiest neighbourhoods, São Conrado and Gávea, Rocinha is home to tens of thousands of residents living in a densely built informal settlement characterised by uneven access to public services, persistent territorial stigma, and recurring conflicts between organised crime and police forces.

The social conditions in Brazilian favelas have been described as a form of “militarisation of everyday life” in which police operations and territorial disputes shape the rhythms of daily life in the favelas (Martins & Farias, 2024). Residents frequently experience restricted mobility, surveillance, and precarious access to basic infrastructures such as sanitation, housing, and transportation. At the same time, favela residents have long developed collective strategies to address these inequalities and to assert their right to the city.

An important communication channel for marginalised communities has been community media initiatives. Since the late 20th century, grassroots collectives in Brazilian favelas have used radio, audiovisual projects, photography, and citizen journalism to represent local realities and to challenge dominant narratives that portray favelas primarily as spaces of violence and poverty (Custódio, 2017; Peruzzo, 2011; Suzina, 2021). Through these communicative practices, communities seek to make their experiences visible and to participate in public debates about urban inequality and social rights.

One such initiative is Fala Roça, a community communication collective established in 2013 by young residents following a media production course organised by a local NGO. Initially launched as a local newspaper, Fala Roça has since developed into a broader communication platform combining journalistic reporting as well as audiovisual and digital production. Building on traditions of popular communication in Brazil, the collective produces content addressing issues affecting favela residents, including access to

education, housing, gender equality, and public safety. These communicative practices function both as tools for community information sharing and as mechanisms for constructing counterpublic narratives about favela life (Custódio, 2017).

A key project developed by the collective is the Cultural Map of Rocinha, launched in 2015. The map documents local cultural initiatives, community organisations, meeting places, and social services within the favela. Developed through fieldwork and collaboration with local residents, the project seeks to incorporate local knowledge into the representation of the territory. In doing so, it responds to the limited representation of favelas in official or commercial digital mapping platforms, which often fail to capture the social and cultural infrastructures that structure everyday life in these areas.

The Cultural Map operates as a crowdsourced informational resource that allows residents to register cultural activities, community initiatives, and public services. More than one hundred points of interest, including schools, community centres, cultural groups, and healthcare facilities, are documented through the platform. The project follows the principle of “nothing about us without us” (Costanza-Chock, 2020), emphasising participatory knowledge production and community involvement in the design of digital tools.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1. *Solidarity as a Future-Oriented Social Practice*

Emile Durkheim understood solidarity as a force that binds societies together, preventing social unrest and conflicts (Durkheim, 1997), distinguishing between mechanical and organic solidarity. This distinction remains useful because it claims that solidarity, being one of the building blocks of a community, arises either from a feeling of belonging or from dependence on other actors in society (Durkheim, 1997). Consequently, by undermining solidarity, the individualisation imposed by neoliberal regimes is an obstacle to community building, particularly in urban areas where individualisation and privatisation are materialised in spatial practices. Building on this tradition, we approach solidarity as a social, cultural, and political response to crisis and risk (Levy, 2018) and propose communicative solidarity as a way to attend to the communicative and mediated character of solidarity. Previous studies in urban future-making have focused on temporal imaginaries related to urban spaces (Datta, 2019). We seek instead to recast the focus to present practices that are enacted with a view to constructing common urban futures that are otherwise denied to certain communities. Communicative solidarity, therefore, describes a specific way in which collective life is sustained in hostile environments, projecting a common future away from neoliberal individualism. It captures how people use communication not simply to express solidarity, but to organise and maintain it. In the cases examined in this article, we show that communicative solidarity emerges where formal support is weak, public space is constrained, and communities must rely on hybrid communicative practices to preserve collective agency.

Much of the literature on media and solidarity has previously focused on representation and attitudes toward others in processes of media production and reception (Fenton, 2008; Nikunen, 2018). Less attention has been paid to the ways media and communication are used as practical means of enacting solidarity. Yet in highly mediatised societies, collective life is increasingly organised through communication technologies, platforms, and networks (Castells, 2013). This requires a broader understanding of solidarity, one that accounts for how

communication is embedded in everyday practices of coordination, organisation of care, as well as trust- and community building.

Here, the notion of shadow infrastructures of care is particularly useful. Power et al. (2022) use the concept to describe the informal, improvised, and often hidden arrangements through which life is sustained where welfare institutions fail or withdraw. These infrastructures include not only established services, but also ad hoc networks, local initiatives, mutual aid practices, and unofficial mechanisms of care. Such arrangements are especially visible in what DeVerteuil (2015) calls post-welfare cities, where institutional provision is incomplete, uneven, or bypassed altogether.

3.2. Communicative Ecologies and Technological Appropriation

If communicative solidarity draws attention to how communities are enacted through communication practices, it also requires that the environments in which those practices take shape be examined. Communication does not occur through isolated technologies, but through complex arrangements of infrastructures, people's communicative practices, and their everyday routines. To capture this complexity, the concept of communicative ecologies is particularly useful.

Tacchi (2015) defines communicative ecologies as community-centred systems of communication composed of multiple interacting elements, including digital platforms, analogue media, interpersonal exchanges, spatial settings, and social relationships. Rather than focusing on individual technologies, the concept foregrounds the relational and contextual character of communication. As Slater (2013) argues, communication technologies are always embedded within broader social and material arrangements that shape how they are used, interpreted, and integrated into everyday life. From this perspective, communication practices emerge from a layered ecology that includes both technological infrastructures and social relations.

This approach is particularly helpful for analysing communication practices in marginalised urban contexts, where actors navigate uneven infrastructures and contested spaces. In such environments, communication rarely depends on a single platform or medium. Instead, actors combine digital tools with face-to-face interaction, informal networks, and locally embedded practices of information exchange. Communicative ecologies, therefore, highlight the hybrid character of communication, where older and newer technologies coexist and are adapted to specific social and spatial conditions (Tacchi, 2006).

In the context of communicative ecologies, technological appropriation is a key process. It refers to the ways individuals and groups adapt technologies to their own needs, reshaping them to overcome oppression in the course of everyday use (Carroll et al., 2001). In the context of marginalised or politically constrained environments, technological appropriation often takes on an explicitly political dimension. Subaltern groups frequently adapt communication technologies in order to navigate censorship, surveillance, territorial exclusion, or infrastructural neglect. In these processes, communication tools used may be repurposed for coordination, mutual aid, knowledge sharing, or territorial representation, allowing communities to maintain collective agency despite structural constraints.

In the cases examined in this article, communicative solidarity emerges from precisely such hybrid communicative ecologies. Activists and community communicators combine digital platforms, interpersonal

networks, and locally embedded knowledge to coordinate support, represent their communities, and sustain collective action under conditions of repression, marginalisation, or infrastructural exclusion. Understanding these practices, therefore, requires attention not only to the technologies themselves but also to the communicative environments in which they are embedded.

3.3. Methodological Note

This article is based on a comparative qualitative case study of two socially engaged communities that develop networks of solidarity under constrained conditions: humanitarian activist networks in Russia and popular communication initiatives in Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro. The comparison treats these communities as analytically comparable cases because, in both contexts, actors operate in urban environments marked by instability, institutional failure, and restricted possibilities for public participation. In both cases, communication becomes a practical means of sustaining collective action, coordinating care, and preserving forms of future-oriented social and political agency.

The comparative approach allows us to identify similar dynamics of communicative solidarity and understand the implications of contextual differences. The two cases are compared across the following three dimensions: (a) the political conditions from within which the communities operate; (b) the communicative infrastructures through which collective action is organised; and (c) the forms of communicative solidarity that emerge through these practices. This design allows us to examine how communicative solidarity is enacted in distinct urban environments shaped by neoliberal regimes, repression, violence, and infrastructural inequalities.

The Russian material is part of a broader research project on urban activism in Russia after 2022, funded by the Baltic Sea Foundation. The full dataset consists of 115 semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2022 and August 2025 with activists aged 21–55 across 15 large cities (more than one million inhabitants). Interviews were collected by Ekaterina Kalinina, Elisa Marin, and Oliver Skye. Participants were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their active involvement in urban civic initiatives, including non-commercial third places, heritage preservation, urban development, community gardens, and environmental activism. Of these participants, 22 had migrated from Russia to other countries, while the rest were still active in Russia at the time of the publication. Interviews were conducted in Russian by native speakers, mostly in person and in locations chosen by participants in order to ensure safety and confidentiality.

From this broader dataset, five interviews were selected for closer analysis for this article. These interviewees were not chosen to be statistically representative, but because they offered especially rich accounts of involvement in humanitarian relief for Ukrainian refugees and, in some cases, political prisoners. Importantly, these actors had not previously worked in humanitarian organisations; rather, they came from urban activist backgrounds and redirected their skills, contacts, and communicative practices toward relief work after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This makes the material especially relevant for the article's argument: It shows how preexisting activist capacities were reconfigured into forms of humanitarian and communicative solidarity under authoritarian wartime conditions. The interview material was transcribed, closely read, and manually coded, with particular attention to themes of communication, trust, coordination, infrastructural improvisation, and risk.

The Rocinha material was gathered during a site visit to the offices of the organisation Fala Roça in November 2023 as part of a network initiation project funded by the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT). During this fieldwork, both authors participated in two group meetings involving approximately 15 popular communicators from Favela da Rocinha and Complexo da Maré (an area in Rio de Janeiro formed by 17 favelas), and conducted conversational unstructured interviews with five communicators associated with Fala Roça. In addition, we carried out a document analysis of the Cultural Map of Rocinha, including its categories, functions, representational logic, and stated goals.

In the Rocinha case, the interviews are used less as standalone evidence and more as a way to contextualise the communicative practices surrounding the creation of the Cultural Map and related work at the *Fala Roça* newspaper. Because interlocutors live under constant pressure from both organised crime and police violence, and because the article identifies places and organisations in the favela, we chose not to reproduce individual quotations or provide identifying personal details. Instead, the interviews informed our interpretation of how popular communicators understand territorial representation, risks, and issues that surround visibility. The interviews, therefore, have an interpretive role alongside the site visit and document analysis.

Ethical considerations were central in both cases: In the Russian case, the names of cities and interlocutors are withheld because humanitarian support for Ukrainians and other anti-war civic activities have resulted in criminal prosecution. In the Brazilian case, anonymity is also necessary because community communicators operate in a setting marked by surveillance and threats from police. In both cases, we prioritise contextual analysis over personal identification in order to protect participants while still foregrounding the communicative practices through which collective action is sustained.

Analytically, the material was read comparatively through a conceptual lens centred on communicative solidarity. Rather than treating solidarity as a pre-given social bond, we examine how it is produced through communication: through the circulation of information, the coordination of care, the maintenance of trust, and the creation of mediated spaces of belonging and action. The analysis, therefore, focuses not only on what these groups do, but on how communication itself becomes a condition of collective endurance in urban contexts where futures are uncertain. Table 1 outlines the comparative analytical categories that guide our discussion.

Table 1. Contextual comparison.

	Russian case	Brazilian case
Political context	Authoritarian repression and war censorship, surveillance, shrinking civic space/institutional neglect of care function	Police violence, organised crime, infrastructural neglect
Geographical context	City-based, across borders, dependent on local social networks	City-based, dependent on local social networks
Why communication matters	To coordinate relief, maintain trusted ties, circulate information discreetly, sustain anti-war civic action	To represent the territory, circulate local knowledge, strengthen community ties, make rights claims visible

Table 1. (Cont.) Contextual comparison.

	Russian case	Brazilian case
Key communicative infrastructures (digital & physical infrastructure)	Telegram and Signal chats, phone calls, private apartments, roads, informal meeting points, Wi-Fi, mobile internet	Fala Roça newspaper, Cultural Map of Rocinha, face-to-face communication, graffiti
Main condition of instability	Criminalisation of dissent and humanitarian aid, insecure communication	Police and criminal violence, uneven urban services
Predominant mode of visibility	Low visibility, selective, private, and risk-managed communication	Strategic visibility: community-facing and outward-facing, but carefully negotiated
Relation to state institutions and corporate actors	Substitutes for absent or hostile state support, resists platform-based discrimination	Compensates for state neglect and stigma by platform-based mapping systems
Basis of trust	Interpersonal ties, word of mouth, prior involvement in civic engagement	Territorial embeddedness, local recognition, long-term presence in the community
Temporal orientation	Keeps civic and humanitarian action possible when future is uncertain	Reclaims the community's present and future visibility in a city that aims to erase favelas
Form of communicative solidarity	Networked, local & translocal	Place-based, representational, community-anchored
Similarity with mechanical and organic solidarity	Organic solidarity (distribution based on skills and weak ties)	Mechanical solidarity (locally based and built on strong ties in the community)

4. Communicative Solidarity and Contested Urban Futures

4.1. Communicative Infrastructures of Solidarity: Key Features

Communication plays a central role in enabling solidarity networks to operate under constrained conditions. In both cases under analysis, collective action relied on hybrid communicative infrastructures that combine digital platforms, interpersonal networks, and locally embedded practices in shared spaces. In the Russian case, activists coordinated humanitarian assistance primarily through digital communication channels such as Telegram chats (Meyer-Olimpieva, 2023, 2025), which allowed participants to share logistical information, coordinate transportation routes, and organise financial contributions. However, what truly sustained these initiatives were the previous personal relationships between individuals and the use of local physical infrastructure. Under conditions of digital surveillance and political repression, knowledge and information were primarily shared through word of mouth, while the physical spaces and routes made this solidarity effective in terms of the humanitarian support provided. At Rocinha, physical structures play an important role in reaffirming the existence of collectives in areas where those acting towards social aims struggle between a hostile police and the control of organised crime. The headquarters of Fala Roça became a communicative space that complemented the mediating role of the newspaper that started as a paper publication and is today a multiplatform publication (www.falaroca.com).

Against this background, in this analysis, we identify and discuss the key features of these communicative structures, pointing to the shared dynamics in the two different sociopolitical and spatial contexts across three dimensions: the political conditions from within which the communities operate; the communicative infrastructures through which collective action is organised; and the forms of communicative solidarity that emerge through these practices. Each dimension is specified and discussed as follows:

1. Political conditions: visibility and risk, pre-existing infrastructures;
2. Communicative infrastructures: digital infrastructures of solidarity, spatial infrastructures of solidarity, fragile infrastructures of care and personal trust, affective community infrastructures;
3. Communicative solidarity: geographies of communicative solidarity.

In the following sections, we discuss each of these comparative dimensions.

4.2. Political Conditions

4.2.1. Visibility and Risk

In both cases, people operated in highly constrained and repressive environments, which further shaped how much visibility their initiatives could afford. While in both cases, communication involved risk, the predominant mode of visibility differed. In Russia, any support to Ukrainians can be viewed by the state as an act of treason, while even mentioning the political dimensions of such support may lead to prosecution as an anti-state protest. Under these conditions, communicative solidarity in Russia depended on low visibility: carefully managed humanitarian support that reduced exposure to surveillance by state authorities.

In Rocinha, communicative solidarity was also shaped by threats, though of a different kind. Popular communicators constantly had to navigate the risks posed by both police violence and organised crime when gathering and circulating community information. Here, visibility could not simply be avoided, since projects such as the newspaper *Fala Roça* and the Cultural Map of Rocinha depended on making the territory, its cultural life, and its infrastructures visible both within and beyond the favela. At the same time, this visibility had to be strategically negotiated. Focusing on cultural activities became a way to strengthen the community and assert its presence without directly provoking controversy.

In the two cases, solidarity was not always communicated in order to be fully visible. In Russia, invisibility was often a precondition for action, as volunteers limited publicity in order to continue providing care and logistical support. In Rocinha, by contrast, visibility was necessary but calibrated: Communicators sought to contest stigma and erasure while remaining attentive to the local risks of overexposure. The two cases, therefore, differed not in whether communication was political but in how political action had to be framed and staged in order to remain possible: Russian volunteers forfeit political capital to do groundwork, while favela communicators help dwellers despite the risk of being targeted by organised crime.

In both cases, actions were often framed as pragmatic solidarity and community-building rather than as overt political confrontation. In Russia, humanitarian help could be described in practical and moral rather than explicitly anti-war terms, even if it carried a broader political significance. In Rocinha, the emphasis on culture and community infrastructure allowed communicators to support local communities and territorial recognition without always stating these efforts in openly confrontational language.

4.2.2. Pre-Existing Infrastructures

Collective action is often portrayed as spontaneous and timeless, detached from the historical and material conditions that shape it. However, technology is always appropriated within specific social and historical contexts, and its use unfolds within particular temporal dimensions. This becomes clear in both the Russian and favela cases, where seemingly immediate and improvised forms of collective action were in fact built on earlier histories of activism.

With the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, placement centres for Ukrainian refugees opened up in many large cities, where the refugees were migrating. Many of these centres emerged spontaneously, mobilising both people who were new to volunteering and those who had previous experience of social mobilisation and activism. Our respondents, who had prior experience of civic engagement, pointed out that these humanitarian actions attracted many people of different backgrounds, including refugees: “In the chat, for example, there are 1,000 people. Even more....Well, among them are refugees, too” (AN, 2024). Many of these initiatives were informal and community-led, often functioning as a patchwork infrastructure of care emerging in the absence of a more institutionalised system.

Yet despite their seemingly spontaneous and atemporal online presence, these communicative solidarity practices were not entirely ad hoc. They were deeply rooted in earlier protest and activist cultures, especially those developed in response to repression around rallies and detentions in previous years, as well as in longer-standing forms of social mobilisation in urban space. In this sense, the digital tools used to coordinate humanitarian support were not adopted in the moment, but appropriated through already existing civic networks, repertoires, and organisational experience. As one activist put it: “Civil society had already formed in Russia. You couldn’t just make it disappear. How do you get a million people to leave the country and stop doing what they do?” (PL, 2024).

A similar dynamic can be seen in Rocinha. In the favelas, there is a long history of resistance and collective organisation that can be traced back to Brazil’s re-democratisation in the mid-1980s, after a 20-year civil-military dictatorship. This history includes the emergence of communication and audiovisual collectives, often in collaboration with universities and NGOs (see Custódio, 2017). The Cultural Map of Rocinha was created by a communication collective formed in 2012 by youth who had attended a media production course offered by an NGO in partnership with a TV station, Tv Tagarela, active in Favela da Rocinha since 1998 (<https://www.falaroca.com/mapa>). Also, popular mobilization in 2015 in response to the city’s preparations for the 2016 Olympic Games contributed to the creation of the Map. The development of this technology was therefore not an isolated initiative but part of these longer communicative ecologies and assemblages.

4.3. Communicative Infrastructures

4.3.1. Digital Infrastructures of Solidarity

If collective action is historically grounded rather than purely spontaneous, the same is true of the communicative infrastructures through which it is sustained. In both cases under analysis, solidarity depended not only on prior traditions of mobilisation but also on the practical appropriation of digital tools

by specific actors who could turn platforms into working infrastructures of care. Digital communication and project management skills proved to be very much sought after in humanitarian and community activist networks. The appearance of a person combining both skills at an early stage, when the processes were agile, often became decisive and contributed to the longevity of an initiative. As several of our interlocutors pointed out, activist digital infrastructure often emerged from the initiative of a volunteer, rather than from a conscious organisational choice. Once these persons are identified, they can become nodes and catalysts of communication in social media channels.

Humanitarian activists used Telegram as a basis for improvised infrastructures that maintained both the flow of resources and the social capacity of the group: “We’d run out of stuff and ask him [a local activist] what to do, and he’d say, ‘Post on social media and people will bring more.’ So we’d post, people would bring things—and somehow that worked” (PL, 2024). Favela communicators used social networking sites to share information useful for managing daily life, including police visits to the favela and practical information about local events. When networked social relations are organically articulated, platforms become resilient communication channels through which acts of solidarity can materialise in the form of donations, protection of vulnerable community members, mutual help, and support for community initiatives.

At the same time, the infrastructures of urban solidarity were also marked by ephemerality and operational security under different forms of oppression: “I don’t think any of those chats have even been preserved—we deleted everything” (PT, 2025). Similarly, favela communicators admitted not always being able to trust commercial messaging applications and having to resort to tactical measures such as disappearing messages. This points to a deliberate erasure of communicative activity, illustrating how repression reshapes the material conditions of mobilisation. The act of deleting chats is not merely tactical; it reflects how infrastructure itself becomes dangerous. “We were securing Telegra” (PT, 2025) signals the normalisation of digital security protocols such as clearing logs, using encryption, and not leaving traces—strategies common in repressive environments and among activists managing high levels of risk.

Early humanitarian efforts also developed from digital spontaneity toward more systematised practices. While the first phase often operated under what one activist called the chaotic ethos of “grab more, throw further,” many groups eventually developed systems for resource tracking, verification, and accountability. An activist who migrated for a short period to Georgia in 2022 recalled how early relief operations became more organised and professional:

They’ve [the organisers] really made progress because they managed to structure their work. We started fundraising, tracking our purchases. We adjusted what we bought: cheaper food staples, more hygiene items, which are twice as expensive. They also built a system using Notion. (PL, 2024)

In the favelas, the same spontaneity in appropriating digital technologies for mutual help could be observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, when already established communicators started similar disparate initiatives facilitated by digital media to later converge in more organised efforts.

In both cases, the connective features of mediated communication facilitated the initial articulation of solidarity, which gradually evolved into more systematic forms of coordination and resource management.

4.3.2. Spatial Infrastructures of Solidarity

Urban social mobilisation has an undeniable spatial aspect and is profoundly embedded in local, face-to-face social interactions, especially in smaller or tightly knit urban settings and neighbourhoods. Both in the favela and among humanitarian activists, there was an identifiable sense of a place-based network composed of key individuals who knew each other, forming interpersonal networks of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). This speaks against assumptions that digital tools such as Telegram or WhatsApp are the primary mode of connection; rather, they are layered on top of already existing offline relationships rooted in particular urban localities. As one activist recalled:

The apartment itself was already packed to the ceiling, and people were still bringing stuff in. It wasn't just random drop-offs; everything came through some kind of connection. It was mostly closed communications, not just an open call for people to donate whatever they had. It was very much peer-to-peer. (PT, 2005)

Similarly, favela communicators stressed the importance of securing physical places that could be used as headquarters to meet and organise aid; in other words, a place where weak ties could be materialised into solidarity acts.

These spaces, private apartments in the case of the humanitarian activists and community-operated spaces in the case of Favela communicators, became essential elements of spatial infrastructure because they functioned as sites of coordination, storage, and spontaneous meeting points. As one activist put it: "We were gathering humanitarian aid in someone's apartment. I can't remember the exact addresses now. Maybe they still exist, but no one uses them anymore" (PT, an activist, big city). He recalled: "We were meeting at her place....Olya comes in, and of course we know each other! And we're sitting there!" (PT, 2025). These scenes provide examples of spaces functioning as a node of civic organisation.

In the Russian case, spatial infrastructures also extended beyond the city itself, connecting solidarity hubs to trans-border routes. Humanitarian activism depended not only on local spaces of coordination but also on the material infrastructures that enabled people to move across wartime and post-pandemic geographies. As one activist explained, St Petersburg functioned as a transit node for people travelling onward to Finland, Sweden, and Estonia, at a time when border restrictions introduced during Covid-19 had not yet been fully lifted: "Part of them went through Petersburg, just as a transit point, because some of the folks there were migrating....At that time, people were still being allowed through the borders....We were somehow managing to get stuff through anyway" (PT, 2025). Along the way, activists involved in humanitarian relief also developed situated knowledge of how these transnational humanitarian infrastructures operated in practice. Rather than reading this only as individual resourcefulness, we suggest understanding this example as illustrative of an ability to navigate the different spatial and institutional arrangements of specific border crossings. This also shows that communicative solidarity thus depends on infrastructures that are not always stable, but need to be interpreted and navigated across multiple jurisdictions.

4.3.3. Fragile Infrastructures of Care and Interpersonal Trust

A key characteristic of the shadow infrastructures of care is their fragility, because they rely on precarious relations. What often makes these networks fragile is that they cannot be articulated through technologically mediated interactions that occur in instant messaging applications and social networking sites, but rather through co-present personal relationships and trust. This trust is deeply tied to how the community is formed, whether it is based on shared geography (territorial) or shared identity (e.g., ethnicity, values, political beliefs). In both the Russian and the Brazilian cases, trust emerges as a condition of collective action under constrained circumstances, yet it rests on different social foundations.

Because trust relies on personal and social bonds rather than institutional or technical structures, the solidarity networks are vulnerable to collapse if those relationships are disrupted. In less institutionalised collectives that lack bureaucratic accountability, resource circulation depends almost entirely on interpersonal credibility. Once suspicion arises, the network fractures, as one activist confirms:

There was this guy, Pasha [name altered by the authors to secure anonymity], very well known in Georgia. Donations went to his bank card because he had a Georgian account. Eventually, we realised he wasn't giving us any money. But a slow conflict began, and eventually we kind of left him behind. We redirected donations to another card. (PL, 2024)

This example illustrates the fragility of informal care infrastructures in which logistical and financial coordination rests on trusted individuals rather than formal systems of accountability. Such precarious horizontality is common in grassroots initiatives (cf. Juris, 2008), where rejection of hierarchy and institutionalised bureaucratic systems often results in the absence of accountability structures and suffers from communicative breakages or even disengagement of volunteers (Bronnikova et al., 2025).

The case of Favela da Rocinha further illustrates how trust and social capital underpin solidarity initiatives, though in a different way. Popular communicators pointed out that the fact that they are known and trusted among the community makes people more likely to contribute information to the Cultural Map of Rocinha. This shows that the effectiveness of initiatives such as the Cultural Map depends on the local presence of the popular communicators and the shared histories they have with the dwellers of the favela.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and Telegram supported this trust-based coordination, but they did not replace it. In the case of Russia, Instagram was used as a peer-to-peer fundraising tool, reflecting a functional but fragile infrastructure of solidarity: "People just sent me money via Instagram, no reporting, and it was fine" (LN, 2024). Here again, the infrastructure worked because the platform was embedded in personal networks and informal communication. Yet this also meant that the initiative depended on continued goodwill, volunteer energy, and public attention, all of which could quickly diminish. When these conditions changed, both material and financial donations stopped, and the humanitarian initiative the activist talked about ceased to exist in 2025.

The comparison between the two cases shows that shadow infrastructures of care are fragile not simply because they are informal, but because they are anchored in different forms of socially produced trust. In the Russian case, trust circulated through interpersonal networks that enabled rapid coordination under repressive

conditions, but that could also collapse when credibility was lost. In Rocinha, trust was less mobile and more territorially grounded, relying on long-standing recognition within the community. In both cases, however, trust functioned as a substitute for formal guarantees, making communicative solidarity possible while also exposing it to instability.

4.3.4. Affective Community Infrastructures

Spaces are not only functional and instrumental, but also symbolic anchors for the community that can offer safety and support to local grassroots initiatives in urban areas characterised by commercial exploitation. Because social mobilisation is broader than its digital interface, material and emotional infrastructures are key to communicative solidarity.

In repressive conditions, we witness a relational mode of organising in which trust and social mobilisation are not based on open calls but built through interpersonal networks of strong and weak ties, where solidarity is enacted as practice (Paiva, 2007). This speaks against assumptions that technologies such as social media platforms or instant messaging applications are the primary mode of connection; rather, they are enmeshed in already existing territorial relationships. In the case of the Cultural Map of Rocinha, the digital interface is combined with interpersonal relations and contact. Even though there is a simple form for including new cultural initiatives, anyone can also contact the team responsible for the map to add new entries.

In Russian humanitarian solidarity networks, social media platforms are essential tools for connection and coordination. All interlocutors emphasised the critical role of Telegram bots and channels in organising their work. However, what sustained these initiatives were personal relationships between individuals. Under conditions of digital surveillance and political repression, knowledge and information were primarily shared through word of mouth. Friends and acquaintances already involved in care networks passed on details in private conversations rather than using public social media to advertise their efforts. Our own observations confirm that high-profile social media influencers contributed little to the visibility or promotion of these initiatives, either inside Russia or abroad. Instead, it was the quiet, persistent work of ordinary people, driven by interpersonal trust and informal connections, that kept these solidarity networks alive.

For both Russian and Rocinha activists, ordinary local places have affective and social importance, as they provide a safety for the exercise of activities. In the case of favelas, collective assembly and participation in cultural life are denied to favela dwellers because they exist at the urban margins. The Cultural Map of Rocinha provides a digital interface that renders these affective spaces visible as part of Rocinha's cultural infrastructure. The map includes places categorised as community centre, social centre, meeting point, and religious site that construct an image of the favela to the outside society as a socially supportive place beyond the stigma of violence and organised crime. Moreover, the digital interface allows the local communities to navigate the varied material infrastructures of culture and social care that contribute to strengthening the connective tissue of life and resistance at the favela.

In the Russian case, the emotional toll of war and organised crime is managed, in part, through smaller task- and project-based actions, which allow individuals to channel their anxiety into purposeful action. Practical tasks and projects such as distributing food for refugees or registering local cultural activities in a digital tool gave activists in Russia and Brazil a sense of purpose in their work. Here, affect is central. In such cases, activism

and community mobilisation practices evoke affective attitudes in combination with their more long-term and abstract political role.

The scale of logistical, affective, and communicative labour involved in sustaining these networks that survive on a fragile combination of personal engagement and practical knowledge cannot be ignored: “There were just so many ongoing communications, always something happening. I still have all of it in the chat—it was a ton of work” (PT, 2025). Similarly, popular communicators at Rocinha speak about constantly having to negotiate the conditions of their work with both the police and organised crime, whilst dealing with a host of personal issues.

4.4. Communicative Solidarity

4.4.1. Geographies of Communicative Solidarity

Marginalised communities often experience space schizophrenia in practice (Santos, 2021), particularly in conditions of intense but unequal digitalisation of urban life. In these situations, communicative solidarity is exercised in a communicative ecology that needs to attend to local and translocal/global aspects of their activities. In the case of Russian-speaking activists, they needed to learn how to navigate borders and create new connections with both activists and those in need of help. Popular communicators at Rocinha, in turn, needed to reclaim the representation of their territories to respond to the erasure operated by transnational technology corporations in the United States.

The humanitarian networks supporting the passage of Ukrainians through Russia to third countries were transnational and global on one hand, and hyper-local on the other. For this reason, the activists had to navigate complex transits across both post-Covid and wartime geographies. The activists working with humanitarian relief usually know the transnational corridors used for humanitarian supply chains very well, and they also demonstrate practical knowledge of how different national border systems work. In general, we observed that activist geographies, though localised and dependent on the right people being in the right localities, also spilled over borders and resulted in exile activism, i.e., civic mobilisation of people who themselves had to migrate to other countries against their will. Many Russian civic actors, journalists, and various professionals forced to leave their country continued or engaged in activism abroad: “Tbilisi saw a real explosion of these kinds of initiatives. Tons of people who knew and loved civil society work moved there and started doing a lot. Ours was one of three humanitarian aid points” (PL, 2024).

In this sense, Bronnikova et al. (2025) wrote that after 2022 Russian exile activists built a digital solidarity network with social media channels and donations made by members of Russian diaspora communities not only from Georgia, but all over the world. Even though the connections with local activists in the host country (in this case, Georgia) and with international organisations were made, they did not play a decisive role in the development of such humanitarian exile initiatives, which cannot be said about the diasporic connections, which ensured financial support. At the same time, these efforts unfolded in an environment of growing technological constraint. Western sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine led many platforms, including payment systems (Master Card, PayPal), communication apps (Zoom), and fundraising apps (Parteon), to restrict access for users in Russia. This severely hindered activists’ ability to transfer money, manage online infrastructure, and communicate securely. Many found themselves excluded from the very digital tools designed to support transnational civil society. As a result, activists were often forced to

revert to basic, analogue forms of coordination, such as cash transactions and phone calls from “dumb” phones rather than smartphones.

In a similar way, popular communicators in Rocinha created a digital map based on local knowledge of the territory, as opposed to a fully digitalised, automated process operated by Google. The United States-based tech corporation retains control over the geolocation data of Rocinha, including satellite images, telecommunication data, and official maps, which are used to comply with Google’s profit-making interests. To respond to the control of this corporate action, communities have to act collectively and engage in mutual help, through acts of communicative solidarity (helping with entering data in the map), supporting local cultural activities.

In both cases, the experience of space schizophrenia prompts a response from the communities that have to engage in conscious technological appropriation, engaging with local and territorial communicative ecologies and assemblages. When doing so, these communities also exercise communicative solidarity by constructing a sense of collective through mutual help articulated in communication.

5. Concluding Remarks: Present Tense and Imperfect Futures

The capacity to imagine and project futures depends on conditions in the present. When these conditions, including spatial, social, and political infrastructures, become unstable and unfavourable, future-making becomes difficult. In contexts marked by infrastructural inequality and political repression, such as the two cases we have presented, the future becomes unevenly accessible. Future-making requires infrastructures that stabilise expectations and enable coordinated action. When welfare systems, public services, and civic institutions are weakened or hostile, individuals and communities lose the institutional foundations that normally sustain long-term planning. In such contexts, communication becomes a collective infrastructure of future-making, rendering otherwise invisible infrastructures highly visible (Graham, 2014). Through communicative practices, communities with divergent trajectories maintain networks of care, share knowledge, and coordinate action, sustaining social continuity where institutional futures are uncertain or foreclosed. Collective knowledge and coordinated action around urban infrastructures thus function as a social buffer against the harmful social and environmental effects of infrastructural disruption. In such contexts, communication becomes a collective infrastructure of future-making. These communicative practices are specifically oriented toward solidarity acts, in the form of communicative solidarity. Communicative solidarity operates not only as a response to present crises but also as a practice of future-making. By sustaining networks of trust, information, and cooperation, communicative practices help communities maintain the conditions necessary for continuity while also minimising inequalities.

Even where institutional futures appear blocked, these communicative infrastructures allow actors to preserve the possibility of acting together. In both case studies, communicative solidarity is mobilised not only to survive present tensions but also to preserve the possibility of collective futures. In one case, futures are constrained by authoritarian repression; in the other, by urban marginalisation, violence, and inequality. Communicative solidarity, therefore, becomes part of future-making: It helps communities sustain agency where official institutions foreclose viable futures.

Our analysis of two different communities facing related conflicts intensified in neoliberal urban environments shows that these groups enact solidarity as a communicative practice strengthened by place-based relations. In these contexts, collective action that has political meaning at the macro level also gains practical and affective significance for the individuals engaged in it. The spatial dimension in both cases reveals the varied collective entanglements that can emerge beneath the surface of neoliberal, individualised, and commercialised urban spaces. In both cases, communities engender particular communicative practices (Slater, 2013) in which the places where they live play an important role. Although they make extensive use of digital communication technologies, these do not determine their actions. Our interlocutors are conscious of the limitations of digital communication technologies, particularly in terms of vulnerability to surveillance and accessibility challenges specific to vulnerable communities.

We use the term communicative solidarity to describe forms of collective cohesion produced and sustained through communication practices: the sharing of information, coordination with the help of media technologies, and trust-building among actors who share common urban spaces. Unlike mechanical solidarity, which rests on shared beliefs and similarity in small, traditional communities, or organic solidarity, which rests on the interdependence of specialised and diverse roles in industrial societies, communicative solidarity operates differently. It foregrounds the practical and relational work through which collectivities are enacted under conditions of institutional breakdown or repression in highly mediatised and atomised urban societies. Communicative solidarity does not replace classical forms of solidarity, but draws attention to a different analytical dimension: the ways collectivities are enacted through the circulation of information, mediated coordination, and the practical maintenance of social ties under conditions of uncertainty concretely related to spatial aspects of urban life, such as safety, transportation, citizen participation, and cultural and leisure activities. In this sense, solidarity is not only a moral disposition or a social structure; it is also a form of communicative action oriented toward the construction of collective futures.

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Data Availability

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