

Slavutych: Urban Practices, Memories and Imagination Research Report of the Studio at the Summer School “The Idea of the City: Reality Check”

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Introduction

This report was produced under unique circumstances, which have largely determined its structure and content. In 2016 we spent two weeks in Slavutych, a satellite town of the Chornobyl nuclear power plant (ChNPP), the last planned city in the Soviet Union and the youngest city in the independent Ukraine, located deep in the forests of Eastern Polesia. As one of the three research studios, we were interested in urban practices, memories, and imagination. More precisely, we wanted to find out to what extent the values that were embodied at the stage of urban planning have been put into practice, how relevant they are to the present-day city, and how the residents build their connection to the space and interact with the city. We also looked at the questions of how we can problematize and actualize the “Soviet” heritage, and what possibilities exist for developing the cultural potential of the city.

We presented the results of our field research on the last day of the program in Slavutych and put them into the form of a scientific report during the first months after the summer school. This report presents our reflections after only two weeks of field research conducted by a group of people who have never worked together and had to constantly negotiate on the common framework of the study. It is a collective work by researchers with different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, with different levels of familiarity with the anthropological approach, the history of the region, and the space of

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Slavutych. The structure of the paper reflects the variety of questions that arose in the process of our exploration.

This text contributes to existing literature on city planning, symbolic landscapes, and the urban anthropology of nuclear company towns. The research on company towns is mostly focused on the classical industrial epoch, and the relatively new company towns, founded in recent decades, has gained much less attention.¹ Among them, the special category of Soviet *atomograds* was studied most often from the point of view of social relations, spatial segregation, the role of Soviet ideology, the political decisions behind their appearance and urban management; in some cases there have also been attempts to conceptualize something called the “mentality” of their inhabitants.² The interest in power and social relations, but with an accent on urban anthropology and landscape, is present in the works by Kate Brown and Anna Veronika Wendland.³ Some of the recent works have paid more attention to the “post-history” of *atomograds*, namely, to the Soviet legacies both on the level of urban planning and the everyday functioning of the cities, as well as the social practices of inhabitants and their adaptation to the post-Soviet realities

¹ See the review of the literature on company towns in: MARCELO J. BORGES, SUSANNA B. TORRES: *Company Towns: Concepts, Historiography, and Approaches*, in: IDEM (eds.): *Company Towns: Labor, Space, and Power Relations across Time and Continents*, New York 2012, pp. 1-40.

² GREG KASER: *Motivation and Redirection: Rationale and Achievements in the Russian Closed Nuclear Cities*, in: SAMUEL APIKYAN, DAVID DIAMOND (eds.): *Countering Nuclear and Radiological Terrorism*, Dordrecht 2006, pp. 1-29; NATALYA MELNIKOVA: *Fenomen zakrytogo atomnogo goroda [The Phenomenon of the Closed Atomic City]*, Ekaterinburg 2006, including the issue of “mentality;” NADEZHDA KUTEPOVA, OLGA TSEPILOVA: *Closed City, Open Disaster*, in: MICHAEL EDELSTEIN, MARIA TYSIACHNIOUK et al. (eds.): *Cultures of Contamination: Legacies of Pollution in Russia and the US*, Bingley 2007, pp. 147-164; VIKTOR KUZNETSOV, with NATALYA MELNIKOVA, VLADIMIR NOVOSELOV: *Zakrytye goroda Urala: Istoricheskie ocherki [Closed Cities of the Ural: Historical Sketches]*, Ekaterinburg 2008; VIKTOR KUZNETSOV: *Atomnye zakrytye administrativno-territorialnye obrazovaniia Urala: istoriia i sovremennost [Nuclear Closed Administrative-Territorial Entities of the Ural: History and Present Time]*. Vol. 1: *Sovetskii period [Soviet Period]*, Ekaterinburg 2015; vol. 2: *Postsovetskii period [Post-Soviet Period]*, Ekaterinburg 2016; ANNA STORM: *Lost Utopia*, in: EADEM: *Postindustrial Landscape Scars*, New York 2014, pp. 75-99; STEFAN GUTH: *Oasis of the Future: The Nuclear City of Shevchenko/Aqtau, 1959-2019*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 66 (2018) 1, pp. 93-123. Here we don't touch the broader problem of “closed” towns and territories in the USSR; for more details, see the overview by SERGEI I. ZHUK: *Closing and Opening Soviet Society (Introduction to the Forum)*, in: *Ab Imperio* (2011), 2, pp. 123-158.

³ KATE BROWN: *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*, Oxford 2013; ANNA VERONIKA WENDLAND: *Inventing the Atomograd: Nuclear Urbanism as a Way of Life in Eastern Europe, 1970-2011*, in: THOMAS BOHN, THOMAS FELDHOFF et al. (eds.): *The Impact of Disaster: Social and Cultural Approaches to Fukushima and Chernobyl*, Berlin 2015, pp. 261-287.

and the closure of the plants.⁴ Among these works, the case of Prypiat' is most interesting for us because of its relations with Slavutych. However, Prypiat' is mostly seen through the prism of the post-catastrophic landscape, and only a few works are dedicated to its initial planning, the perceptions of its inhabitants and the symbolic landscape of the city.⁵

In our paper, we are dealing with the problems of Slavutych's symbolic landscape, how the city was perceived in the imaginations of the planners, inhabitants and others, everyday uses of its public spaces, and how memories of Chernobyl manifest through the unique prism of this nuclear city, which was founded relatively late, after the major blow to the nuclear utopia and socialist planned economy had taken place, a kind of emergency architecture in the wake of the breakdown of the USSR. The only existing research on the planning and architecture of Slavutych, with some notes on its symbolic landscape, is the work by Ievheniia Gubkina.⁶ Our research report develops some of Gubkina's ideas and tries to visualize how the built environment of Slavutych was appropriated, and has been used and lived in, and how the initial city planning ideas survived and were transformed 25 years after the city was founded.

Taking into account the growing interest in Chernobyl after the extremely successful HBO mini-series, we do believe that locally produced knowledge about Slavutych could provide a non-stigmatized and a non-exoticized perspective and give a voice to people for whom the ChNPP is much more than the image from the media.

Research Agenda

Slavutych, built in 1986-1989 to resettle the inhabitants of Prypiat' after the nuclear explosion, is now the satellite town of the ChNPP. This town is a unique example of Soviet city planning and architecture because it was created to prove the catastrophe had been successfully overcome. Slavutych was planned and built in the forested Chernihiv region of Polesia within an extremely short time. From beginning to end, this project was overseen by a single professional team, working within the planned economy with a special

⁴ KRISTINA SLIAVAITE: *From Pioneers to Target Group: Social Change, Ethnicity and Memory in a Lithuanian Nuclear Power Plant Community*, PhD Dissertation, Lund University 2005; RASA BALOČKAITĖ: *Coping with the Unwanted Past in Planned Socialist Towns: Visaginas, Tychy, and Nowa Huta*, in: *Slovo: Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Affairs* 24 (2012) 1, pp. 41-57; INGA FREIMANE: *Dwelling in Visaginas: The Phenomenology of the Post-Socialist Town*, MA Thesis, Glasgow—Tartu 2014; STORM (as in footnote 2).

⁵ TETIANA PERGA: *Influence of Nuclear Energy on Cultural Landscape of Ukrainian Polissia: Case Study of Prypiat'*, in: *Istoryko-politychni studii Kyivskoho natsionalnoho universytetu ekonomiky* 10 (2018), 2, pp. 75-82.

⁶ IEVGENIIA GUBKINA: *Slavutych: Architectural Guide*, Berlin 2016.

supply of resources and materials.⁷ Today this city lives on and its architecture, infrastructure, and public places continue to be rethought and invested with new symbolic meanings. A considerable percentage of the population is still involved in the projects related to the consequences of the Chornobyl disaster.

Early printed newspaper articles about Slavutych testify that the planned approach was present in literally all spheres of life: how the city would be administered, used and perceived by both its new inhabitants and onlookers in the USSR and abroad. “The city of comfort,” “city of nature,” “city of children,” “city of the friendship of the nations” are some of the descriptions that were transmitted through Soviet media. These images are still present today. But, over time, new ideas of how the city should and could be used have continued to emerge. From the beginning, it was a new home (as one of our interviewees put it, “a bedroom”) for the workers of the ChNPP. In 1991, Slavutych witnessed the breakdown of the Soviet Union and, in 2001, had to come to terms with the closure of the plant. Now the people here are looking for a new defining idea, a new identity for their city.

Slavutych is an extreme example of emergency architecture and a planned approach to urban design. By studying the city, we can discover to what extent the initial ideas proposed and implemented by the architects and planners worked out in practice, and examine how a planned company city born in the socialist, centralized, state-owned economy was transformed under the conditions of post-Soviet privatization, democratization, and deindustrialization. Built in the forests of Polesia, this town could tell us a lot of stories: a story of human interventions in the natural landscape, a story of nuclear energy, a story of overcoming catastrophe, a story of dreams and hopes, and how they are changing. The main focus of our research is on people who keep (re)creating, experiencing, imagining and remembering Slavutych. We are interested in discovering how citizens of the youngest Ukrainian city have established their links with its spaces, whether these be a building, a neighborhood, the city in general, or wider links to the region defined by ChNPP impact, and, finally, links to bigger national and transnational entities. We intend to learn about their life paths, their interactions with the city, and the meanings they associate with the places around them.

The 2016 summer school had a participatory design—students and tutors worked together on the development of a collaborative project, which would combine the individual interests of each person with a general frame of the school, the transformation of the “idea of the city.” As an international group of participants with diverse professional and cultural backgrounds, we had to agree on our common ground and formulated two basic research questions: “How were dwelling places distributed, appropriated, perceived and made culturally meaningful (and what does that tell us about Slavutych’s people)?”

⁷ Ibidem, p. 7.

and “What are the changing layers of the symbolic cityscape?” Thus, our main focus was on how the initial planning ideas related both to practical issues of housing and infrastructure, as well as to the symbolic landscape, city image, and how the founding myth changed over time.

With regard to sources and methods, we used both verbal (texts, oral conversations) and visual (images, drawings), existing (books, articles in mass media) and newly created (interviews, mental maps, observations) materials, and applied visual⁸ and discourse⁹ analysis in order to work with collected data. We focused primarily on people currently living in Slavutych. In-depth interview¹⁰ was a key method of data collection. Each interview starts as a story of the person’s life and is then built around three blocks of questions on (1) the city’s image and symbolic landscape¹¹, (2) city structure¹², and (3) housing¹³. By doing so, we can focus on three different levels: the level of the city (1), the level of the district (2), and the level of the interviewee’s own apartment or house (3). After the conversations, we asked our storytellers to draw Slavutych as they imagined it. We collected 16 interviews, both with Slavutych residents and experts working in the areas of city administration, construction and development, medicine, nuclear energy, and mass media.¹⁴

⁸ STEPHEN SPENCER: *Visual Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Awakening Visions*, London 2011; THEO VAN LEEUWEN, CAREY JEWITT (eds.): *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, London 2003; GREGORY STANCAZAK (ed.): *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation*, Los Angeles 2007.

⁹ MARIANNE JØRGENSEN, LOUISE PHILLIPS: *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London—New Delhi 2002.

¹⁰ STEINAR KVALE: *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Thousand Oaks 1996.

¹¹ “What are the most important places in Slavutych? Where do people like to take photos? What are your favorite places? How and where do you spend your free time? What do you think about the idea to include Slavutych into the list of architectural monuments and heritage objects? What kind of tourist potential does the city have, if any? What is your ideal Slavutych?”

¹² “Have you been to other apartments (in other quarters) in Slavutych? What do you think about them? Do you think some residential houses have any special architectural value or not? If yes, which? What district is considered the best/worst?”

¹³ “What was your first impression of the town? How did it change? How did you get an apartment? Were you satisfied with it? Where did you get your furniture when you moved in? What is left from the originally planned apartment? Did you change anything in the layout of your apartment? What would you like to change about/in your apartment? Do you know your neighbors? Are there any common areas near your building? If yes, how do people use them? Do you have anything taken from Prypiat in your flat? Do you have anything in your apartment that reminds you about the Chornobyl nuclear catastrophe? Anything related to the Chornobyl nuclear power plant?”

¹⁴ All the interviews, mental maps and photographs taken during the days of the summer school are accessible in the Center for Urban History Media Archive, collection of the Studio “Urban Practices, Memories and Imagination.”

Founding Myth and City Image

We have analyzed our observations on the symbolic landscape and considered the following questions: How was the city planned? What is it like now? What are its possible developments in the future? What could be a “new idea of the city?” A symbolic landscape can be conceptualized in two ways: as the physical, which is visible to us, and as the ideal, imagined aspect of the space with incorporated cultural and social meanings, “a projection from an actual landscape and society.”¹⁵ Slavutych was not only constructed as a city but it was also created in line with certain verbal and visual representations that could be nowadays called “city branding.” The rhetorical representation of the city developed through time. When under construction (1987-1989), it was a mix of Soviet ideological clichés with rhetoric typical for the new planned cities and company towns of that time: “The City of Friendship of Nations,” “The City that is not on a Map yet,” “Slavutych in the Beginning of Geography,” “The City Born by Friendship,” “The City of Energy Workers,” and “The Satellite City of Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.”¹⁶ The typical Soviet rhetoric of the “friendship of the nations” was enhanced by the fact that the quarters of the city were built by different Soviet republics with their particular national styles of décor, landscape design, and planning.



Fig. 1: “Slavutych—the city of the friendship of nations.” Photo by Yevhen Alimov. The Center for Urban History, Urban Media Archive, Yevhen Alimov Collection

The founding of the city was also marked by changes in Soviet ideology during Gorbachev’s perestroika. The ideas of openness, modernization, and non-state-controlled public space were among the initial “ideas of Slavutych.” For example, one of the early books about the city-to-be depicts an outdoor lesson with a teacher showing a picture of Mickey Mouse—a clearly “western” symbol. The image also includes a father (not a mother) taking care of children, reflecting changes in the Soviet gender ideology of the time, which

¹⁵ DONALD W. MEINIG: Symbolic Landscapes: Some Idealizations of American Communities, in: *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, New York 1979, pp. 164-192, here p. 165.

¹⁶ These and later such mottos are either the names of articles in local newspapers or key words from the lead. We are thankful to Slavutych library for digitizing press material and making their collection available to us before and during the summer school.

included the notion of more partnership in family relations. This was a dream about the city with a modern approach to learning and living.¹⁷



Fig. 2:
Future of the City. Picture from:
Slavutych—town of Energy Workers,
Kyiv 1987

In the following period, under the strong paternalist mayor Volodymyr Udovychenko (1989-2015), other mottos appeared: “The City of Resurrection,” “The City of Salvation,” “The Modern City,” “Young City,” “City of Children,” “The Green City,” “The City of Dreams and Hope,” “The City of Dreams,” “Eternal City,” or “The City Where the White Angel¹⁸ Lives and Sees the World Happy.” The mayor consciously constructed an image of a successful city in a “western” fashion—accenting public self-representation. One purpose of this was to attract more international financial support for ChNPP projects and other enterprises in the city. The presence of international specialists (such as those at the Novarka project who were working on a new safe confinement unit for the fourth reactor) attracted cultural activists from abroad as well. The monument to the fallen liquidators of the ChNPP catastrophe was supplemented by a temporary mural made by one such foreign painter who included a reference to the American song “Solidarity Forever:” “From the ashes of the old we will build a new world.” This phrase alluded to the city’s founding myth of successfully overcoming a tragedy, and simultaneously to the new city project. Shifts in the political situation, when Ukraine proclaimed its orientation towards European integration in 2004, were also reflected in later claims about Slavutych as a “European” city or “a piece of Europe.” Some of these descriptions were voiced in our interviews

¹⁷ Also, it is important to emphasize here the centrality of the child in the local Slavutych myth, which reflects not only the socialist ideological cliché “all the best should be given to the children,” but also how “adult’s fears for [children’s] future stood as a central concern of post-Chernobyl society,” as KATE BROWN: *Manual for Survival: Chernobyl’s Guide to the Future*, New York 2019, p. 39, notes in relation to the affluent *kindergartens* in Slavutych.

¹⁸ An Angel is part of Slavutych’s official coat of arms.

with the locals, as well as some new (and more critical) phrases, such as “Sanatorium City” or “Soviet Utopia.”



Fig. 3: “From the ashes of the old”—a reference to “Solidarity forever” on a temporary 2009 mural, which was added to the old memorial to Chernobyl liquidators. Photos from the Studio Collection, Archive of the Center for Urban History

Today, both the authorities and the population as a whole are searching for a new idea for the city. In 2015, the city administration initiated a survey on what could be the Slavutych “brand.” Interestingly, the symbols of nuclear energy did not attract many votes. This was a clear indication that the city is looking for a new identity. Our research and the summer school in general became one of the voices in this search.

The Cultural Identity of Slavutych and Locating It on Symbolic Maps

Initially, Slavutych was intended to serve as a model of the unity of the Soviet Republics. Today, the city is more often presented as “European.” Thus, references to “Eurofences,” “Euroglazing” and the various other “Euro-objects” are omnipresent. In the interviews with the local residents, the rhetoric of “Europe” is often related to the issues of living standards and consumerism:

“[The flat] has two balconies, two bathrooms, this is a European plan.”¹⁹

“Baltic quarters are of good quality and prestige, because the Baltic republics in the USSR lived better, that is, in accordance with European standards. They had one foot in Europe even back then.”²⁰

“Eurofences” and “Eurowindows” are not always produced in the European Union—they could be made locally or in China. These references to “Europe” rather reflect the qualitative difference from the material environment in which Slavutych citizens used to live before 1991. In their comments, interviewees also applied the imagined “Europeanness” to a particular hous-

¹⁹ Interview with Oleksandr Demydov, local TV channel director.

²⁰ Ibidem.

ing type—a cottage. From the very beginning of Slavutych, the combination of cottages and tenement houses was planned and built as an expression of care for the future citizens and a wish to provide them with new, higher living standards, different from most Soviet planned cities. Cottages were spoken of as places of closer connection to nature, which in the case of Polesia meant pine forests, of a better and comfortable life, and an embodiment of individualism, as contrasted to Soviet collectivism. Fences that appeared around cottages, separating them both from the city and from each other, become symbols of social inequalities, and an imagined “Europeanness.”

Moving to the next level of analysis, the “national” districts of Slavutych, built by eight Soviet Union republics—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and Ukraine—we see that interviewees divide the city in accordance with the notion of “European” identity. For example, some people believe that Slavutych as a whole is an enclave of Europe in Ukraine. This becomes evident on the mental map drawn by one of our respondents during the interview.

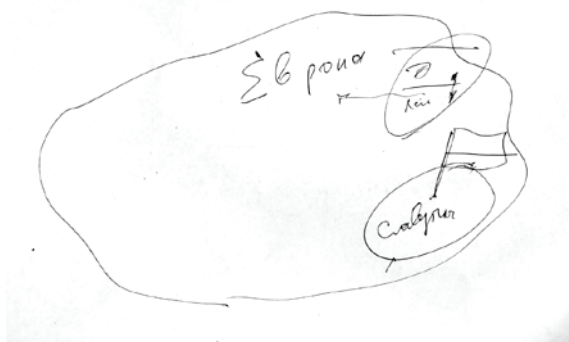


Fig. 4:
Mental map of Slavutych as part of Europe.²¹ Picture from Studio Collection, Archive of the Center for Urban History

Others draw the line between an imagined West and East straight through the main thoroughfare of the city. It is particularly interesting that, according to this logic, Ukraine is on the West side, whereas Russia stays on the East side of the border, along with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

“The town is divided into West and East. Ukraine, Vilnius, and Riga are part of the European side. Russia, Dobryninski [quarter] and Azerbaijan are part of the Asian side.”²²

Some divide the city into four parts: Baltic states, Caucasus, Russia and Ukraine, a division emphasizing the difference between technologically

²¹ The author’s comments in the process of creating this image: “This is Europe. Slavutych. And the flag of Ukraine. We are in Europe. I am ready to become a European citizen or a member of the UN.”

²² Interview with the Krolivovski artistic duo.

advanced and comfortable areas of the “Baltic” area and atmospheric, but not such high-quality architecture of the three regions of the Caucasus.

“Baltic districts are clear, laconic and restrained. Caucasian districts are calm and warm.”²³

Analyzing the perception of one of the most popular areas of Slavutych, the Yerevan quarter, we noted that, contrary to the above logic, even though it is filled with references to the national architectural traditions of Armenia embodied in small architectural details, sculpture and specific materials such as the pink tuff used on building facades, Yerevan is also perceived by one of the respondents as the area of the “European bourgeois.”

“The best area is the Yerevan [quarter], definitely. I don’t live there, but it is most beautiful [...] I’ve been to Yerevan, this city is pink like our quarter [...] it is a very beautiful city. For me, even back then this was another country, Europe. It looked European back then.”²⁴

Thus, in Slavutych we observe a curious symbolic game between “Europe” as a place of culture and as a place of consumption and utility at the same time.



Fig. 5: Yerevan quarter with the kindergarten “Krunk,” late 1980s. Photo by Yevhen Alimov, the Center for Urban History, Urban Media Archive, Yevhen Alimov Collection

²³ Interview with Volodymyr Stepanovych, a builder.

²⁴ Interview with Larysa Dmytrivna, principal of a kindergarten.

Image of the City on the Mental Maps

After the interviews, our storytellers were asked to draw Slavutych as they imagined it. In the analysis of these mental maps, we have to separate “psychological” elements (the types of lines used, intensity of pressure etc.) and “social” elements (e.g. composition, structure, elements of the image). We focus on the social part: outlining the framework (the scale of the picture—an object, a house, a street, a quarter, the whole city, a city as a part of the world, etc.); the type of picture: map (view from above / no central object) or image (side view / central object); the structure of the image (central object / if any, components of the drawing), and finally, interpretation of the symbolic structure of the picture.

Pictures 2, 3, 6 and 7 can undoubtedly be treated as “images,” as well as picture 5, which has a network of activities as a central object. Pictures 1, 4 and 8 are examples of “maps.” The basic differences between “images” and “maps” are vivid: they have different scales and structure. Images usually are constructed either as side-views of a specific situation or as a set of connected elements, like the network of activities in picture 5 or the five most important spatial or symbolic details that respondents recalled about Slavutych in picture 3. Maps are more “place-based.” They show relations between buildings, which have emotional and / or functional meanings, and often rely on the street grid (sometimes scaled). For instance, one of the foreigners who worked at the “Novarka” project depicted only three elements: office, home, and central square (see picture 1), and this illustrates the highly functional relation to the space, which is perceived through everyday connections between home, work, and places for leisure on the central square.

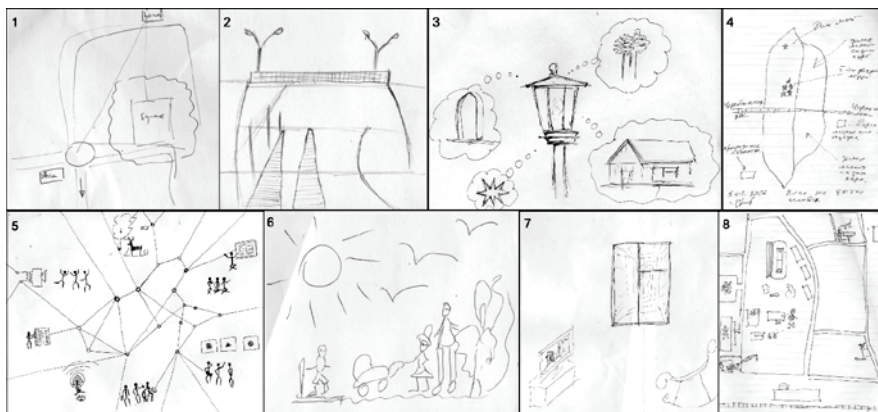


Fig. 6: Examples of mental maps. Pictures from Studio Collection, Archive of the Center for Urban History

Drawings of the space usually mirror personal everyday experiences (workplaces in pictures 1 and 4, the home of a freelancer in picture 7) and the symbolic landscape of the city (“city of greenery” and “city for children” on picture 6). They incorporate different iconographic elements, for instance, the author of picture 5 recalled that he intentionally used pictograms, and they depict people’s reflections on the meaning of the city. The city is clearly perceived as a transit zone in the case of picture 2. In fact, the connectivity presented as train lines on pictures 2, 4 and 8 is also a reference to ChNPP. The plant itself was present only in one picture (not included here) by a young man whose mother used to work there. Its role now has shifted: it has become more functional than commemorative.

Some mental maps include visions of an imagined future (like picture 4 showing the original plan of Slavutych with housing facilities for 80,000 people) and images of what might be (as in the example of picture 5 showing a network of new facilities and activities within the city). They illustrate some which either used to be relevant or might have become a “new idea of the city.” These drawings reflect both on the current situation and project a desirable future onto Slavutych.

Symbolic Cityscape: Monuments and Commemorations

From its inception, Slavutych was perceived as a human-scale city with the individual at its center. This idea is present in the visual language of the cityscapes, its decorative paintings, sculptures, and monuments, which are all designed to a human scale, reflecting human and nature-friendly ideas. The viewer is not suppressed but inspired to interact.

This specific feature of the visual language could be interpreted as an attempt to overcome the trauma of the disaster and live through it. Symbols of nuclear energy are rarely used in the city, as opposed to Prypiat’ and most other nuclear power-plant cities. Thus, in a competition for city symbols, a project with no references to the atom was chosen. The visual language of Slavutych now presents the human as a part of the natural (ecological) city.

In our interviews, the locals interpreted public sculptures as people-friendly and interaction-inspiring. Three sculptures representing nude people (“Family,” “Young Man Planting an Oak,” “A Dream”) are interpreted, on the one hand, as an allusion to Slavutych as a city of rehabilitation after the catastrophe, and, on the other hand, as an expression of the openness of the city and its inhabitants. There are no hidden corners or blind alleys, everyone knows everyone else, and no one has anything to hide.



Fig. 7: Three “nude” monuments

a: “A Dream,” Aleksandra. A, CC BY-SA 4.0

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=62420926> (2019-07-10)

b: “Young Man Planting an Oak,” Meowcrew1717, CC BY-SA 4.0

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=62678670> (2019-07-10)

c: “A Family,” Demmarcos, CC BY-SA 4.0

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=51846687> (2019-07-10)

“I like the monument in the park very much—‘The Family.’ Everyone likes it. They take pictures, they sit there [...] When Stesha [granddaughter] was small, we would go there all the time. Children always touch it, or sit on it. It is polished and even glitters! Between Leningrad and Belgorod, there are children lying in the sun [“A Dream”]. I feel sorry for them in wintertime, they are in the snow, undressed. I console myself by thinking, it is just a monument [laughs], but still ... Nude. I don’t know why it is so. Maybe, because people are open, and the monuments are open.”²⁵



Fig. 8: Memorial to the fallen liquidators of the Chernobyl disaster, late 1980s. The portraits of those who died in the first days are situated on the left and right of the memorial stone. Photo by Yevhen Alimov, the Center for Urban History, Urban Media Archive, Yevhen Alimov Collection

²⁵ Interview with Larysa Dmytrivna, principal of a kindergarten.

The memory of the Chernobyl disaster is embodied in the memorial to the fallen liquidators on the central city square. This memorial represents the personal dimension of the tragedy through the photos and names of the fallen. That is why the whole place avoids the oppressive monumentality of the late Soviet period with its generalized heroic images. The memorial portrays particular individuals.

The citizens express positive feelings about the commemorative ritual (“The Night of Memory”) near this monument—it represents non-official memory.

Oleksandr Demydov, the director of the local TV channel, mentions this ritual in the interview:

“This is the monument. On the twenty-sixth of April at 1:20 a.m., people come with candles, lay flowers, and just stay there and reflect on their personal relation to it. No official gatherings are held or speeches delivered. I think this is a good tradition for the urban space. This is one of few traditions instilled in the city; and there are no announcements, but everyone knows that people just come, and there will be respectful music as it is an anniversary—there will be screens showing photos of the accident. People just come, the bell rings, there is a minute of silence, the fire-engines come, the siren sounds, and people place candles.”

The nuclear plant continues to be present not only in the annual commemorations, but also in everyday life in Slavutych. When talking about the most symbolically significant places in the city, inhabitants mentioned both the memorial dedicated to the fallen, as well as sculptures and places with no allusions to the disaster.

The central city square can be interpreted as a particular symbolic link between the memory of the past catastrophe (the formative event for Slavutych) and the movement to the future embodied in the figure of the White Angel. It is an attempt to reconsider the idea of the city not on the basis of its mono-industrial identity, but rather on the basis of a more sublime symbol.

Initial Ideas of the City and Their Transformation in Practice: The Level of Housing

Initially, Slavutych was planned by its architects as a model city, bringing together the best up-to-date building and planning practices, techniques, and materials. Emerging in the late Soviet period, the Slavutych project reflected the changing ideas on housing at the end of the socialist era. There was more attention to individual needs, ecological ideas, the human scale, dreams about higher consumer standards²⁶, and there was recognition of a multiplicity of different lifestyles (reflected in the combination of tenant houses and single-

²⁶ GUBKINA (as in footnote 6), pp. 16-23.

family houses).²⁷ An unusual brochure prepared by the Central Scientific Research and Planning Institute of Standard and Experimental Housing Design (*Tsentralnyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut eksperimental'nogo proektirovaniia zhilishcha*) in Moscow included such new ideas as individualized design and furniture, and flats meeting the needs of all family members. Rational and modern interiors had to match the creativity of inhabitants to make the design “expressive.” They also had to include the most up-to-date technical appliances, wallpapers and furniture.²⁸ It was also claimed that flats in Slavutych were much better planned and were more spacious than in other cities. In line with the late Soviet upsurge of local patriotism and nationalism, the flat was presented as a good space to preserve family treasures, national traditions and historical experiences, embodied in folk art or crafts.²⁹ Moreover, Slavutych was supposed to express a new aesthetic vision (sometimes contradicting practical needs): balconies were made open so they could include flowers or temporary colorful tents. In cottage districts, fences were forbidden. Unsurprisingly, this late Soviet idealized vision underwent considerable changes in the post-Soviet period, reflecting the deep transformation of the society and individuals.

Although the housing in Slavutych is only 30 years old or newer, some buildings and apartments have already undergone visible transformations—from a fresh layer of paint and improved insulation to decoration on staircases. In order to understand the changes people introduced into their living environments in the post-socialist period, the reasons for these changes and the connotations of such practices, two aspects appear central: on the one hand, changes to the facades, on the other hand, transformations of the (semi)public spaces in and around the building (such as corridors, staircases and gardens). Besides placing these changes in the broader historical and socio-cultural context of post-socialism, the specific features of Slavutych have to be taken into account.

A first glance at apartment block facades and cottages in Slavutych shows that many original window frames have been replaced, and balconies have been glazed. The original window shapes in Slavutych were highly diverse and included hexagon and segmented arch forms. The non-standard, non-rectangular forms were part of the strategy of diversification across different Slavutych housing blocks and were supposed to recall the peculiarities of architectural practices in those Soviet republics involved in building Slavutych. This plethora of variations can also be interpreted as a late Soviet response to the criticism of socialist mass housing as monotonous, alienating and gray.

²⁷ “In theory, everything was built for the people.” Interview with the Architect Volodymyr Petrov, *ibidem*, p. 43.

²⁸ *Kak meblirovat i oborudovat kvartiru. Rekomendatsii novoselam goroda Slavutycha* [How to Furnish and Equip the Flat: Recommendations to the New Tenants of Slavutych], Moskva 1988.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 35-36.

This heterogeneity in window frames was an unusual solution for prefabricated mass housing because it complicated the production process, reduced the number of elements in a series and, therefore, raised production costs.

After original window frames deteriorated due to weather and attrition, some residents decided to replace them. Customized window frames resulted in different renovation tactics. Some opted for a perfect fit (customized frames strictly following the original form), while others adjusted the window dimensions to a rectangle, a standard shape that could be easily obtained in a hardware store. The latter solution was usually realized by walling up open balconies an intervention that reduced the amount of natural lightning.



Fig. 9: Initial look of the blocks in Yerevan quarter and contemporary variations of window frames in the Yerevan quarter (wooden and “Eurowindows,” perfect-fit and rectangular forms). Photos: left—Yevhen Alimov Collection; right—Studio Collection, Archive of the Center for Urban History

Besides diversity in new window shapes, the choice of material is also indicative. While some decided to stick to wood, the original material of the frames, others chose plastic (usually white) frames. As some of our subjects confirm, wooden frames were often considered more aesthetically appealing, but also more expensive. Similar to this choice of custom-made, perfect-fit window frames instead of DIY interventions to reduce forms to a standard rectangle, the choice of material was also indicative of residents’ purchasing power and status. Furthermore, plastic window frames have a connotation of Europeanness—the term “Eurowindow” is a common signifier for this type of window, revealing a desire to associate with European values.

The increasing heterogeneity and variations noticeable on Slavutych facades are deeply connected with the privatization of apartments that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Similar processes of moving from the planned to the unplanned, as reflected in house facades, are to be found in post-socialist contexts with a high level of privatization, such as the former

Yugoslavia³⁰ and Czechoslovakia. In other contexts, such as the former GDR, apartment buildings are still rented—usually from a state-related company—and are significantly less variable. Actions such as the renovation of facades are not undertaken by individual tenants (as elsewhere in Ukraine), but carried out for the whole building. However, this initiative often faces problems if flats are not occupied.³¹

An atomization of ownership leads to differing practices among residents, which reflects not only their class status, but also their taste, needs and desires. Although in the 1988 “Recommendations”, residents were encouraged to customize their apartments, the book also limited the interventions by law, and the designing process was not participatory: the state still played a paternalizing role. Hence, the post-Soviet variations reflected a turn towards post-modernist individualism. In the example of window interventions, it is possible to find both the need for customization and individualization of one’s living space, embodied in the “window right” formulated by Austrian architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, and a more pragmatic motivation—the wish to save money in the case of poorer residents, which makes the growing inequality in the society more visible.

Similar heterogenization is noticeable in the use of (semi)public space in and around buildings. Privatization and personalization of space include, but are not limited to, improvised benches or even sofas for smoking in corridors in front of apartments, decoration of the staircases with reproductions of paintings, plants, figurines and/or wall paintings, gardens in front of buildings, and the use of empty elevator shafts as extra rooms.



Fig. 10:
Wall painting by one of the inhabitants (mother of a small child) on an apartment building landing (Nevsky quarter).
Photo: Lea Horvat

³⁰ IVAN KUCINA, MILICA TOPALOVIĆ, BRANKO BELAČEVIĆ, DUBRAVKA SEKULIĆ: From Planned to Unplanned City: New Belgrade’s Transformations, in: MAROJE MRDULJAŠ, VLADIMIR KULIĆ (eds.): *Unfinished Modernizations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism*, Zagreb 2012, pp. 156-173.

³¹ CHRISTOPH Haller: *Leerstand im Plattenbau: Ausmaß—Ursachen—Gegenstrategien*, Berlin 2002.



Fig. 11:
 Improvised bench for smoking
 installed on a hallway radiator
 (Pecherskyi quarter). Elevator
 shaft used for storage (Nevsky
 quarter). Photos: Lea Horvat

After privatization, ownership and the distribution of responsibility for the “in-between” spaces such as staircases and elevator shafts became extremely obscure. The ways in which inhabitants claim these spaces vary but they are usually respected by others. For example, in one building, tenants tacitly accepted that the sofa in the corridor was to be used only by those who put it there, in front of their apartment, although they had placed that sofa in “no one’s” space.

How privatization and compartmentalization have developed is especially visible in cottage courtyards. Fences were initially forbidden so everyone could enjoy the views. Nevertheless, they began appearing after 1991, indicating ownership and offering more seclusion and privacy. Additionally, a style of fence called “Eurofence,” which was a composite imitation of different stonework styles became, like the “Eurowindow,” popular and widespread.



Fig. 12: Initially, the fences were forbidden (Tallinn quarter); “Eurofences” in front of a cottage (Tallinn quarter). Photos: left: Yevhen Alimov Collection; right: Lea Horvat

Those (semi)public spaces are, on the one hand, an expression of the participation and active involvement of tenants in their environment and, on the other hand, they function as an arena of struggle for meaning. Accordingly, some of the interventions in these (semi)public spaces, such as artworks, were quietly removed by anonymous neighbors:

“This is an interesting experiment with the environment [...] I put a picture on the wall. I started with one, it was from a fashion magazine, just a pop-style girl and a nice dress [...] The first time it was taken away very aggressively. ‘You won’t take my space.’ But I didn’t stop. I put up another one [...] it was there for probably two months. Then I added another one—next day they both disappeared. After that, Alexandra put up just white paper and wrote: ‘girl, in a pink dress ...’ [laughs]; it was [on the wall] for two days. I should know when it’s time to provoke them [neighbors] again, because they are irritated [...] you can feel their ego, and you can play with them next time.”³²

Since there are no regular meetings for tenants, the practices of silent privatization and interventions are highly nontransparent and not talked about. Interventions also reflect differences between the quarters. Thus, vegetable gardens from the socialist period are seen as an unwanted, “ruralizing” practice often associated with the poor and contrasted with non-utilitarian flower gardens.

The customization of living environments tells us a lot, not only about the needs and desires of inhabitants, but also about what they miss in their environment, be it an extra storage space, a smoking area or an aesthetic pleasure. In their practices, the current political situation is intertwined with history and pragmatic needs.



Fig. 13:
Flower garden with imitation traditional Ukrainian fence with pots on sticks in front of an apartment building (Vilnius quarter). Photo: Natalia Otrishchenko

Symbols and Memory: Private Level

By exploring the private living space of Slavutych residents during the interviews and making observations in their flats, we were primarily seeking answers to the question of whether, and in what way, “big narratives” (global history related to the ChNPP explosion or city history and officially confirmed city brands and symbols) are present in the private space, and how this presence/absence was interpreted by the interviewees.

³² Interview with the Krolikovski artistic duo.

As the explosion at the ChNPP affected a considerable number of the families in Slavutych, and the “zone” is still an important place of work for many, the ChNPP still remains a significant point of reference, not only on the public, but also on the personal and family level.

While studying public discourses and private narratives, one can notice the difference between the glance from the outside and the insider’s perspective. Chornobyl is usually depicted by the media as a space of otherness, danger and tragedy.³³ The image of Slavutych as seen from the outside is quite bleak as well: several of our respondents mention that some people from other cities are afraid of going to Slavutych and consider it to be dangerous and polluted with radiation.³⁴ Children from Slavutych who went to a summer camp made jokes about the radioactivity of their bodies to scare other children and make fun of them.³⁵ The locals’ feelings and perceptions of Chornobyl, on the other hand, are quite different. In fact, years of experience in dealing with the consequences of the catastrophe and involvement in the work of the station have made the topic of Chornobyl a part of everyday life and personal identity.

In order to see how Slavutych as the “successor city” of Prypiat’ contains the memory of the catastrophe in private interiors and the physical objects and spaces of home, residents were asked about objects in their apartment that reminded them of Chernobyl. We found that, 30 years after the events, the symbolic meanings of Chernobyl have become somewhat domesticated and appropriated into everyday reality.



Fig. 14: “Nuclear” past and present in domestic space. Pictures from Studio Collection, Archive of the Center for Urban History

³³ One example of journalistic representation of Slavutych, with emphasis on health hazards from radiation, economic hardships, and lasting memories of the loss of relatives and friends, generally written in a depressive mood is: DARIA NINKO, ALEKSANDR LITVIN: Reportazh iz Slavuticha: bolshoe kladbishche dla malenkogo goroda [Reportage from Slavutych: A Big Cemetery for a Small Town], in: Segodnia newspaper, project “Chernobyl. 30 years,” URL: <http://www.segodnya.ua/chernobl30/reportazh-iz-slavuticha-708748.html> (2019-07-10).

³⁴ Interviews with Halyna Yakivna (pensioner, former kindergarten teacher), Oleksandr Kupnyi (photographer and filmmaker, former dosimetrist at ChNPP), and Ioann Shepida.

³⁵ Interview with Kateryna, high school graduate.

Often, particular objects, such as awards and prizes for the work at the ChNPP, show pride and a positive relationship to the plant, especially because this work is very well paid. The items related to the “Novarka” project—such as a pen or a clock—signify the financial stability of the owner and her/his professional pride. In many cases, the narrative strategy to counter the “extreme” and “fearful” image of the Chornobyl NPP is centered on professional identity³⁶:

“I was very interested. The geography [of the station] is unknown to me. I used to go to the block alone at night to study it, to remember with my feet [...] from a professional point of view it was interesting, because other stations had nothing like this [...] it is like a cabinet of curiosities [...] to see something beautiful in the scary things—that’s not bad; that’s how it is easy to get to know it, to study it. If you are afraid of it—you will not study it.”³⁷

In some cases, the objects taken from Prypiat’ can mean the rebuilding of home, or family and kinship if personal photos are the only thing that you have left, as the interview with Halyna Yakivna reveals:

“In 2006, it was 20 years since the accident. And my daughter was so willing to go! She came especially for this from the Far East. And for the twenty-sixth of April people from all over the former USSR came [...] But most interesting—in my son’s room on the wall—is the portrait of our grandfather who perished in Moldavia during the [WWII] war! Empty, empty flat, and the portrait was waiting for us for 20 years—when we came to take it. ‘Olya, I will not leave it here, we’ll take him, because he was waiting for us on the wall, just look.’ Someone took everything from our flat, we had so many books, three times more than here—everything was cleared, a bare flat. And I took the portrait [...]”³⁸

Here, the relationship to the ancestor, who was connected to the victory in the Second World War—one of the pillars of the Soviet identity—allowed the creation of a symbolic continuity of life divided by the Chornobyl tragedy.

In some other cases the ChNPP was present in the interior due to a special sense of humor, which transformed the dangerous and threatening nuclear topic into a system of signs for everyday communication. The warning notice “Contaminated!” placed on a bedroom door became a teenage joke for keeping out parents³⁹, and the board “Object Containment” was used to designate the private study of a photographer and filmmaker in his apartment.⁴⁰ Thus, the sensationalist outsider view was contradicted with feelings of familiarity and daily habit in the town built after a nuclear catastrophe.

³⁶ A characteristic example of the professional discourse: ALEKSANDR KUPNYI: *Zhyvy, poka nas pomniat: Vospominaniia likvidatorov / Memories of Lives Given: Memories of Liquidators*, Kharkiv 2011.

³⁷ Interview with Oleksandr Kupnyi.

³⁸ Interview with Halyna Yakivna.

³⁹ Thanks to Margo Abord for this observation about the board “Polluted!” in a flat in Tallinn quarter.

⁴⁰ Interview with Oleksandr Kupnyi.



Fig. 15:
“Object Containment” board. Photo:
Natalia Otrishchenko

Conclusions

During the quest for “the idea of the city” three levels have been examined: the macro-scale image of the city and its symbolic landscape, the meso-scale of city structure and the micro-scale at the level of housing. We used both visual and verbal data to understand how Slavutych is perceived and experienced and what the main reference points to the city are for its inhabitants. Through brief glimpses of the lives of local people, we tried to understand some basic ideas about city operation, (re)development, and (re)invention.

Slavutych, as a new planned city deep in the Polesian forests, has a powerful founding myth, still present in public and private discourses: the city reborn from the ashes, overcoming a tragedy; a city planned in accordance with the best and most fashionable ideas of its time; a city purposefully built for work at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, thus the city of energy workers, engineers, and scientists.

Now the city is trying to depart from this image of the mono-functional “atomograd” and to develop a new understanding of its destiny, while still preserving the memories of the Chernobyl accident as a human tragedy and self-sacrifice, both in public rituals and in personal accounts and domestic space. The Soviet dream about the “friendship of peoples” embodied in the nationally themed districts continues to be rethought and reinterpreted, now with the use of nationalized images and stereotypes, as well as in terms of civilizational divisions (East/West, Europe/Asia) now common in Ukraine.

Privatization opened up the possibility of more freedom to remake the public and semi-public space both in the city center and in and around residential blocks. Along with creativity, we can notice a lack of solidarity and communication between citizens about plausible changes and what is understood as the common good.

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