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**FORMATION OF THE VISUAL IMAGE OF THE CITY (KHARKIV)
UNDER WARTIME CONDITIONS****M. Ya. Averbakh,**Mykhailo.Averbakh@kname.edu.ua , ORCID: 0000-0001-6085-4145**O. B. Demydiuk,**Oksana.Demydiuk@kname.edu.ua , ORCID: 0000-0001-5787-5156*O.M. Beketov National University of Urban Economy in Kharkiv, Ukraine*

Annotation. The study addresses the issue of a comprehensive and systematic approach to the formation and restoration of the visual image of post-war cities in Ukraine. It emphasizes that this process extends far beyond architectural and construction tasks, functioning instead as a strategic, multi-layered project of socio-psychological rehabilitation, cultural identification, and informational resilience. The visual environment of a post-war city is interpreted as an active communicative medium that influences collective memory, emotional well-being, and social cohesion, particularly in societies affected by prolonged military conflict.

Special attention is paid to participatory practices as a key foundation for legitimacy, inclusivity, and trust in post-war urban transformation. The research examines contemporary methods of active public engagement, including co-design processes, community-based decision-making, and the application of innovative digital tools such as virtual reality (VR). VR technologies are analyzed as instruments for project visualization, inclusivity testing, risk mitigation, and the achievement of social consensus prior to implementation, thereby democratizing the design process and reducing conflict between stakeholders.

The paper proposes a comprehensive, multi-phase program that integrates long-term strategic planning instruments, such as the development of urban master plans, municipal design codes, and visual regulation frameworks, with tactical and operational solutions. These include localized design interventions in specific urban areas (streets, squares, small public spaces, courtyards), rapid urban improvement measures, and the creation of exemplary “postcard” views and selfie zones. Such interventions are considered not merely as aesthetic enhancements, but as tools for shaping a positive visual narrative, strengthening urban branding, and supporting psychological recovery during and after the conflict.

Using Kharkiv as a case study, the research analyzes practical strategies for maintaining and preserving a positive visual image of the city under conditions of active hostilities. These strategies include the organization of safe festive, cultural, and memorial events, as well as temporary and adaptive spatial interventions, which function as mechanisms for sustaining community morale, reinforcing collective identity, and counteracting narratives of destruction.

The study concludes that post-war recovery presents a unique opportunity not only to rebuild damaged infrastructure, but to achieve a qualitative transformation of the urban environment. This transformation aims to produce cities that are more humane, resilient, visually coherent, and socially inclusive, grounded in European values, cultural continuity, and active civic participation. The findings contribute to the interdisciplinary discourse on post-conflict urbanism and may serve as a methodological framework for policymakers, urban planners, architects, and local communities involved in the reconstruction of war-affected cities.

Keywords: visual image of the city, architectural environment, participatory practices, memorialization, social cohesion, psychological well-being, post-war recovery.

Relevance of the research. The relevance of the topic is determined by the unprecedented scale of visual and structural transformation of Ukrainian cities, particularly Kharkiv, which has become an “eastern fortress” and a symbol of national resilience. Damage to significant architectural landmarks requires a rethinking of the city’s visual image not merely as an aesthetic category, but as a key instrument of community resistance and psychological resilience.

Statement of the problem. The central problem of the study lies in the acute contradiction between the need to preserve the historical authenticity of the urban environment and the urgent demands of contemporary urban development under wartime conditions. There is a risk of a disconnect between expert-driven visions and the real needs of residents, who require the “healing” of damaged buildings in order to return home. In addition, there is a growing need to develop effective mechanisms for public engagement (participation) in shaping the post-war image of the city amid mass population displacement and persistent psychological stress. The formation of the visual image is further complicated by the necessity to balance the narrative of a “city under fire” with the creation of a positive brand of an innovative hub capable of attracting investment and talent after the cessation of hostilities. Therefore, the development of a methodological model that integrates VR-based tools for future visualization with principles of inclusivity is critically important for overcoming the “demographic gap” and stimulating the return of citizens.

Analysis of recent research and publications. An analysis of recent studies and publications indicates the formation of a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Kharkiv’s visual image. Researchers examine the city not merely as an architectural object but as a dynamic symbol of national resistance and a laboratory for post-war modernization. A number of studies focus on the transformation of perceptions of key architectural landmarks. A central object of analysis has been Derzhprom, which in 2024–2025 publications, including architectural guides and articles in *The Guardian*, is presented as the “crown of the city” and a primary visual testament to Kharkiv’s resilience. The narrative of “Kharkiv – reinforced concrete” is interpreted as a visual brand that combines structural strength with the psychological endurance of its residents.

A significant portion of the literature is devoted to the development of the “Kharkiv Master Plan” as a blueprint for rebuilding the country. Researchers, particularly within the UN4UkrainianCities initiative, analyze five pilot projects: heritage, the scientific quarter, housing, industry, and the continuous ecosystem of rivers and parks. Contemporary studies examine urban resilience through the lens of both physical infrastructure and social practices [1].

The project “Those Who Remained: Testimonies of Kharkiv Region Residents” examines interviews with local residents, highlighting their attachment to the city as a key source of resilience [2]. Underground urbanism is also explored: metro schools and underground hospitals “Kovcheh” (“Ark”) are studied as new visual and functional standards for safe urban environments [3, 4, 5].

Recent publications also examine the process of toponymic cleansing and the decolonization of Kharkiv’s visual space (renaming over 120 objects including metro stations) as a means of reinforcing Ukrainian identity in the frontline region [6, 7].

The tasks of forming a harmonious and integral visual image of the city were addressed in our earlier work, specifically in the paper “The complex program of forming the visual image of a city (Kharkiv)” [8]. That study examined the problem of visual pollution of urban space, its saturation with advertising and informational messages. The relevance of the issue was driven by the conflict between architecture and advertising.

At the beginning of the war in 2022, the priorities concerning the image of the city shifted radically. The features of the formation and perception of the city’s visual image were subsequently examined in the context of the changes that occurred as a result of Russian aggression [9]. We have also analyzed how the image of the frontline city of Kharkiv is shaped under conditions of

unprovoked aggression through creative and artistic practices that communicate its suffering, resilience, and struggle for freedom to international audiences [10].

Purpose. The purpose of the paper is to theoretically substantiate and develop a comprehensive methodological model for the formation and maintenance of a positive, inclusive, and resilient visual image of post-war cities in Ukraine, integrating the principles of participatory design, psychological rehabilitation, and urban branding.

Research objectives. The research aims to conceptualize the role of visual identity as a strategic resource for strengthening social cohesion and enhancing the psychological resilience of communities in the context of post-war recovery. It also seeks to develop a typology and methodology for the implementation of participatory practices that ensure the legitimacy, transparency, and functional adequacy of public space reconstruction projects. In addition, the study focuses on formulating key principles and operational algorithms for the creation of a comprehensive visual recovery program.

The research methodology involves systems analysis and synthesis (decomposing the problem of visual identity into components – architecture, urban amenities, marketing, psychology – and integrating these components into a holistic comprehensive program); the case study method (examining a pilot city to analyze implemented local projects); visual analysis and monitoring of changes in the urban landscape; as well as project-based modeling (development of proposals, testing the use of virtual reality tools, and conducting simulated participatory workshops).

Presentation of the main material.

1. Transformations of the city's visual image in the first days of the aggression.

The outbreak of war instantly erased the familiar image of a once-flourishing and vibrant city. Visual evidence of the threat appeared in windows covered with protective tape, which later, after missile strikes, turned into empty voids or were hastily boarded up with plywood. The struggle to preserve cultural identity manifested itself in the “armor” of sandbags with which communities protected their key architectural symbols. In particular, the monument to Taras Shevchenko in Kharkiv was concealed under special structures made of protective netting. This imagery – barricaded monuments in Kyiv, Odesa, Dnipro, and Zaporizhzhia – became a central artistic motif in patriotic design and poster art, transforming into a recognizable brand of national resilience.

Outdoor advertising in Ukraine radically changed its format, shifting from a commercial tool to an instrument of information warfare and psychological pressure on the enemy. Outdoor advertising operators, such as “RTM-Ukraine”, and creative agencies (notably Banda Agency) widely displayed patriotic visuals and direct messages addressed to Russian soldiers [11]. “Advisor to the Ukraine’s Minister of Internal Affairs, made an appeal to owners of outdoor advertising objects (billboards, light boxes, advertising structures on walls of buildings) to place the appropriate inscriptions on their own, without any approval, without embarrassment in expressions. The most common were signs with the direction where to go to the Russian troops. The most popular destination is the meme expression “Russian warship, go f–k yourself” from the defenders of Snake Island. On other billboards, Ukrainians offer the occupiers to leave their lands, rather than follow the criminal orders of Russian president Vladimir Putin: “Russian soldier, stop! How will you be able to look your kids in the eyes? Go away! Stay human”, “Ivan, has your mother already known that you are killing Ukrainians?”, “Putin lost. The whole world stands with Ukraine. Most messages to Russian soldiers in Ukraine were urging them to leave “without blood on the hands” etc.” (Fig. 1) [9, p.14].

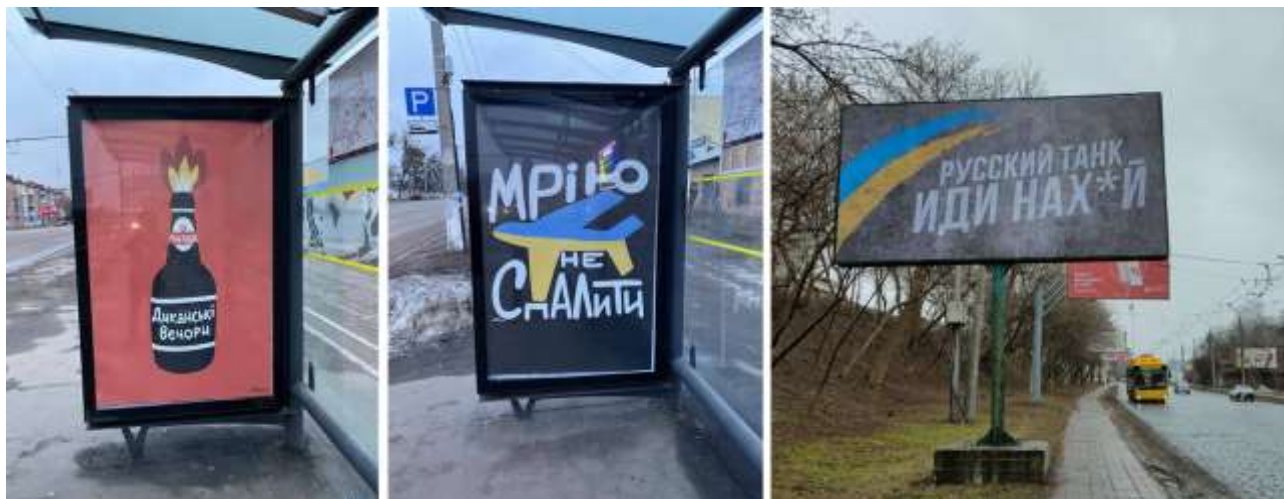


Fig. 1. Billboards and posters with appeals to Russian soldiers (Source: <https://poltava.to/news/64982/>)

The media representation of Kharkiv during the first years of the war evolved from the image of a besieged city to the status of an unbreakable “eastern fortress,” based on a combination of military resilience and active cultural diplomacy. The main symbol of this resistance became the narrative “Kharkiv is reinforced concrete,” which equates the strength of its residents with the endurance of iconic reinforced-concrete structures such as the Derzhprom building, which remains an embodiment of power even after enemy strikes [12]. This concept of resilience has been actively promoted by the media through literature, particularly collections of interviews with the heroes of the city’s defense, as well as through musical projects that reinforce the perception of the city as an unshakable shield of the country.

The visual language of journalism emphasized the continuity of life through sharp contrasts: the everyday life of residents set against the backdrop of the consequences of shelling, the development of a network of safe underground schools, and the bright illumination of frontline streets. Owing to the work of “Kharkiv Media Hub”, the city became a key center for foreign media, while the presentation of cultural heritage at prestigious international forums, together with visionary rebuilding plans, enabled Kharkiv to effectively counter enemy disinformation and the propaganda of fear.

The ruins of destroyed buildings, shell craters, plywood-covered window openings, and walls with damaged surfaces became a visual backdrop for the professional work of street artists and bold experiments by active residents. Back in June 2022, 16-year-old graduate of Kharkiv Secondary School No. 134, Valeriia, was photographed in a red evening dress against the background of her destroyed school on the day when the graduation party was supposed to take place. The photograph captures what remained of the canceled graduation ceremony – the red dress and the ruins of her former school (Fig. 2.1) [13].

Valeriia’s idea was picked up by her schoolmates. Nine graduates danced a waltz amidst the ruins of their school. The final school dance was performed to the song “Mriya” (meaning: “Dream”) by Jerry Heil which was called in honor of the legendary Ukrainian Aircraft – Antonov An-225 “Mriya” (the heaviest aircraft ever built with the largest wingspan) destroyed by the invaders. Volunteers Anastasia Grachova and Anton Sokolov held a wedding photo shoot in central Kharkiv, set against buildings destroyed as a result of Russian shelling. The photograph was ranked among the 20 best images of 2022 by the British newspaper *The Guardian* (Fig. 2.2).



Fig. 2. Photoshoots among the ruins of Kharkiv: 1) the graduate near her destroyed school (Source: <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/06/ucraina-storia-valerie-ragazza-vestita-di-rosso-ballo-tra-le-macerie-di-kharkiv-122096d5-1df6-49aa-b556-9900937845f9.html>); 2) newlyweds (Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/dec/28/the-best-photographs-of-2022-and-the-stories-behind-them>)

In response to Russian aggression on the cultural front, street artists create their works on the walls of damaged buildings. On the surviving wall of a destroyed high-rise in North Saltivka neighborhood of Kharkiv, a volunteer from China, 25-year-old Richard Chung, drew a picture of a soldier bringing a bright future. Richard came to Kharkiv to help displaced people from the front-line areas of the region. Within a few weeks, he has created seven art objects in the city [14]. Bandit, the street artist from San Clemente, has also added art to bullet-riddled, bombed buildings of North Saltivka. He has created postcard murals as a sign of gratitude to the defenders of Ukraine. Patched holes in the concrete wall above them serve as a reminder of the shelling of 2022 [15].

On the damaged facade of the Kharkiv Academic Theater of Musical Comedy, a mural dedicated to the Armed Forces of Ukraine was created. The facade of the theater was damaged by fragments of a Russian missile on August 23, 2022 – Kharkiv City Day. The explosion caused all the windows in the building to blow out, so the theater management covered them with plywood panels, which were painted by the chief artist. In the portraits, he depicted theater actresses wearing blue and yellow clothes. They are looking hopefully at the sky. In addition, the mural features a trident, a black curtain – the gates of the theater of military operations, a tank, the Derzhprom building, and a glove of a Ukrainian Armed Forces fighter. Besides supporting the patriotic spirit, the murals greatly enliven the “gray” urban space, and even the windows boarded up with plywood don’t look so depressing. Due to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the musical comedy theater has stopped performances. Since March 2022, the artists have been performing in shelters, sanatoriums with displaced people, and for the military. Only in the metro they performed more than 20 concerts in the spring of 2022 [16].

On the eve of the 300th anniversary of the Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda, artists from the “Culture Walls” movement visited Kharkiv. They painted graffiti “Skovoroda’s Letters” on the boarded-up windows of the hotel “Kharkiv” on Maidan Svobody (Freedom Square) [17]. The “Culture Walls” movement was created by the initiators of the “Cultural Forces”, a unit that provides cultural and psychological support to the Ukrainian militaries. The leader of the “Cultural Forces”, poet, musician, TV presenter Mikolai Sierga, called on Ukrainian artists to join the

“Culture Walls” movement to create murals in de-occupied cities. The project already involves artists from Odesa, Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Rivne.

Many Kharkiv street art artists are currently working outside the city. Anastasiia Khudiakova, the author of many murals, including “The Whale” (a triptych on the end walls of three connected sixteen-story buildings, recognized in the Ukrainian Book of Records as the largest street art piece – 1375.74 sq. m), is creating patriotic murals in Vynohradiv, Zakarpattia. Kharkiv artist Sonya Moroziuk is working in Kyiv. Her mural “What’s cooler than a family of 44 million?” is dedicated to the unity of Ukrainian people. It is about Ukrainians on the front lines and in the rear, about mutual support and joint efforts for our victory. The “Kailas-V” art group has implemented a number of projects in Kyiv, Chernivtsi, Cherkasy, Bakhmut, Izium, Avdiivka, Enerhodar, and several other Ukrainian cities. In Kyiv, “Kailas-V” is known, in particular, for murals the “Saint Javelina”, “Mykhailo Hrushevskyy”, and “Pavlo Skoropadskyy”.

The works of the well-known Kharkiv artist Hamlet Zinkivskyy are especially popular in the city. His street art is distinguished by its graphic style and original texts. Hamlet began painting on the streets of Kharkiv in 2007. Over time, his monochrome graphic works with philosophical inscriptions have become an integral part of the urban landscape. Most of all Hamlet values in his work the dialogue with the viewer and calls himself a street artist: despite personal popularity, participation in art projects, and demand for his works, he continues to paint on the streets of his city [18].

With the beginning of the full-scale war, Hamlet’s works have taken on a new significance. After the de-occupation of the Kharkiv region, the artist’s graphic works first appeared in Izium, and then in Kupiansk. The artist often chooses free surfaces for his works – fragments of urban development, as well as shop windows or windows shattered by explosions and boarded up with oriented strand boards (OSB panels), mainly in the central part of Kharkiv, which was heavily damaged by cluster scattering projectile and missile attacks (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Works by Hamlet Zinkivskyy:

- 1) “Hellish hospitality” on the damaged facade of the Kharkiv City Council;
- 2) “Keys miss their doors”; 3) “The conclusion of the commission: Fit for life”

(Source: Photos by Mykhaylo Averbakh)

Hamlet believes that street art adds additional attractions to the city and creates new meanings. He is convinced that art should have an impact. And life is not about how many years you can live, but about what you can bring to the world during those years. It is necessary to constantly think about how to make the world a better place [19].

2. Kharkiv in the fourth year of the war.

When the war has been going on for four years, and its end remains unpredictable, it is important to document the main, so to speak, perspectives or viewpoints of phenomena, symbols and events occurring at this stage in Kharkiv and creating its composite (visual, mental and behavioral) image. The second, no less important goal of this paper is to reveal and convey the events of the terrible war taking place in the 21st century in the center of Europe. And at the center of these historical narratives are people who, despite all challenges, pressures, losses and suffering, live, resist, fight, create and hope for a victory of peace, justice and freedom, a victory for the entire civilized and democratic world.

Three years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the United Nations, in cooperation with the Government of Ukraine, the World Bank Group, and the European Commission, has released an updated joint Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA4) for Ukraine. As of December 31, 2024, the total cost of reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine over the next decade is estimated at USD 524 billion, which is approximately 2.8 times Ukraine's nominal GDP for 2024. According to current estimates, 13 percent of Ukraine's total housing stock has been damaged or destroyed. Across all sectors, the greatest destruction has occurred in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Kyiv regions, which together account for about 72% of total damage [20].

Particular concern is raised by the condition of infrastructure facilities. The Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) has published data from its latest study indicating that, as of November 2024, direct damage inflicted on Ukraine's infrastructure had increased to nearly USD 170 billion. The largest share of total direct losses was suffered by residential buildings (USD 60.0 billion) and transport infrastructure (USD 38.5 billion). A total of 209,000 private houses, 27,000 apartment buildings, and 600 dormitory buildings were damaged or destroyed. During the same period, more than 26,000 km of roads were damaged or destroyed, with estimated losses of USD 28.3 billion. Losses in railway transport amount to USD 4.3 billion, port infrastructure to USD 0.85 billion, and the aviation sector to USD 2 billion. Direct losses of private passenger vehicles are estimated at USD 2.2 billion (260,000 vehicles destroyed or damaged).

Ukraine's energy sector has lost USD 14.6 billion. Industry, construction, and the service sector have suffered losses totaling USD 14.4 billion. Nearly 500 large and medium-sized private and state-owned enterprises have been destroyed or severely damaged. The agro-industrial complex has also sustained significant damage: more than 130,000 units of agricultural machinery have been lost, 4 million tons of grain storage capacity destroyed or damaged, and 16,000 hectares of perennial crops affected. The forestry sector has suffered major losses as well, with 298,000 hectares of forest damaged due to hostilities and fires. Losses to educational infrastructure are estimated at USD 7.3 billion. During the period of the full-scale invasion, more than 4,000 educational institutions have been damaged or destroyed, including 229 schools, 110 kindergartens, and 97 universities. The healthcare sector has lost USD 4.3 billion. In total, 1,554 medical facilities have been damaged, including 515 hospitals and 465 outpatient clinics [21].

According to the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, as of July 2025, 1,528 cultural heritage sites in Ukraine have been destroyed or damaged as a result of Russian aggression. Among them are 147 sites of national significance, 1,267 of local significance, and 114 newly identified sites. Overall, damage has been recorded in 18 regions. The most severe destruction has affected heritage sites in

Kharkiv, Kherson, Odesa, Donetsk, and Kyiv regions. At the same time, shelling and hostilities have damaged 2,359 cultural infrastructure facilities, of which 471 were completely destroyed. In total, the affected facilities include: cultural clubs (1,147), libraries (830), art education institutions (180), museums and galleries (129), theaters, cinemas, and philharmonic halls (49), nature reserves (9), parks and zoos (10), and four circuses [22].

Focusing specifically on Kharkiv: over three years of the full-scale invasion, the Russian army has inflicted devastating strikes on the city, turning parts of it into ruins. According to Kharkiv Mayor Ihor Terekhov, total damage caused to the city by Russian attacks may amount to approximately EUR 10 billion. More than 12,000 civilian objects have been destroyed or damaged [23]. These include 8,239 residential buildings, 132 schools, 114 kindergartens, 129 higher education institutions, 89 medical facilities, 15 cultural sites, 223 administrative buildings, and over 2,300 critical infrastructure and commercial real estate facilities [24].

In his Telegram channel (https://t.me/ihor_terekhov/3190), Ihor Terekhov regularly posts operational information about the situation in Kharkiv. In October 2025 alone, Russia hit the city with 80 strikes, more than half of them using various types of UAVs. In addition, the enemy employed guided aerial bombs and tested new tactics involving FPV drone attacks. A total of 109 people were injured, including three children. Explosions were reported in nearly all districts of the city: Industrialnyi, Kholodnohirskiy, Kyivskiy, Shevchenkivskiy, Slobidskiy, Novobavarskiy, and Saltivskiy. Energy facilities, a private kindergarten, the 2nd City Hospital, the Barabashovo Market, and other business facilities, as well as dozens of residential buildings, suffered severe damage.

Separately, it is important to note statistics on the destruction of educational institutions. The website of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine continuously updates information on Ukraine as a whole and by region regarding the number of educational facilities damaged as a result of Russia's attack on Ukraine. At the time of preparing this study (late October 2025), the figures were as follows: 4,358 educational institutions had been affected by bombings and shelling, 400 of them completely destroyed. In Kharkiv city and Kharkiv region alone, 742 educational institutions were damaged, 101 were completely destroyed, including 30 kindergartens and 60 schools (Fig. 4) [25].



Fig. 4. Kharkiv schools destroyed as a result of bombing and shelling:

1) Kharkiv Gymnasium No. 46; 2) Kharkiv Gymnasium No. 47

(Source: Photos by Mykhaylo Averbakh)

In the first days and months of the war, residents sought shelter in the metro: both those who had lost their homes and those fleeing constant shelling. Even now, some people continue to spend the night there. Although access to the platforms officially closes at 10:00 p.m. and reopens at 5:30 a.m., entry remains possible overnight. During curfew hours, residents are allowed to stay in the

station lobbies near the entrances. When the number of people increases and overcrowding occurs, authorities allow them onto the platforms.

All city celebrations that residents once enjoyed now take place in the metro. The most vivid of these are Christmas and New Year. Decorating the stations of the Kharkiv Metro for the winter holidays has become a new wartime tradition, intended to give residents, and especially children, a sense of celebration in the safety of the underground space. For the third consecutive year, the city's main Christmas tree, standing approximately five to six meters tall, has been installed at "Universytet" (University) metro station. Its lights are traditionally switched on St. Nicholas Day (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Children's activity space at the "23 Serpnia" (23 August) station and New Year's decorations at "Universytet" station (Source: Photos by Mykhaylo Averbakh)

To decorate the stations, employees of the Central Park and the metro use decorative structures and illumination that once adorned city avenues before the war. They also actively incorporate natural materials, particularly pine branches left over from tree pruning in city parks, to create Christmas wreaths. As mass events on the surface remain prohibited due to constant shelling, special installations are set up directly on station platforms, such as St. Nicholas's House at the "Istorychnyi Muzei" (Historical Museum) station, and festive concerts, theatrical performances, and children's events are held underground. At the same time, metro stations continue to fulfill their primary transport function while also serving as safe spaces for educational facilities and underground schools.

The Kharkiv Metro School has become a unique global precedent for organizing a sustainable educational process under conditions of constant shelling, transforming transport infrastructure into a secure educational hub. As of 2025, fully equipped classrooms have been established at six metro stations, allowing thousands of children to attend offline classes in safe conditions. These facilities are equipped with modern air recovery systems, high-quality sound insulation, comfortable desks, and all necessary equipment, enabling schoolchildren to focus on learning despite external threats. In addition to general education subjects, art schools also began operating offline in underground spaces in early 2025, ensuring the cultural and creative development of young people even in frontline conditions.

Overall, thanks to the creation of safe locations within the metro system, more than 7,000 students, approximately 1,700 of whom are first graders, are receiving education in a blended

format. Children are transported to metro stations by school buses accompanied by teachers and police officers. To facilitate student transportation, the city has introduced 12 routes serviced by 20 buses [26]. This level of coordination and centralization of educational resources underground demonstrates the high organizational effectiveness of municipal authorities in responding to the challenges of war.

The establishment of underground schools and continued investment in the construction of new, standalone protected educational spaces (including those outside the metro system) sets an important precedent highlighting the strategic necessity of investing in secure social infrastructure. This approach is critical for preserving human capital and ensuring the city's demographic resilience amid ongoing or potential military aggression. Even after the active phase of the war ends, the experience gained in the Kharkiv Metro can be used to enhance the city's overall resilience. Underground spaces already adapted for education could form the basis for multifunctional underground centers. Future projects may include permanent protected cultural venues, conference halls, or medical hubs integrated into the transport system, allowing the city to retain a strategic defensive resource while increasing the functionality and resilience of its urban infrastructure in any future crisis.

Previously, we considered the visual image of Kharkiv metro stations through the prism of excessive placement of advertising elements. The most aggressive and cynical form of subway advertising, the so-called branding, was analyzed. This technique involves advertising images, which function as the sole visual subject and reflect the visual identity of a specific brand, completely covering the forms and structures of the station's distribution vestibule. It was noted that the station branding leads to the destruction of the original architectural concept, violates the authors' copyright, and ultimately distorts the architectural image. Fundamental principles of architectural composition, such as tectonics, proportions, scale, and plasticity, are compromised. Instead of the laconicism, rigor, simplicity, and solemnity intended by the architects, carnival-like effects emerged: imagery disproportionate to human scale and architectural space, colors discordant with the environment, polygraphic paints in the interior, and an overall impression resembling a decorated construction fence concealing repair works [27].

During the war, the nature of advertising presence has changed significantly. Station branding has disappeared. At the "Istorychnyi Muzei" station, the columns of the central nave, once covered with advertisements for household appliances, are now adorned with enlarged posters of patriotic children's drawings (Fig. 6.1, 6.2).

Along the platform walls, billboards bearing messages such as "Looking for a home, looking for a job, looking for support," "Crying, laughing, talking, being silent," "Bullets hit not only the body," and "Traces of war remain not only on the streets of cities" have appeared (Fig. 6.3).



Fig. 6. Visual and informational means inside the subway:

- 1) advertising design (branding) of the “Історичний Музей” station in pre-war times;
- 2) patriotic posters: stylization of children’s drawings; 3) social advertising from the Helping Survivors Platform (Source: Photos by Mykhaylo Averbakh)

These displays form part of a social advertising campaign by the Helping Survivors organization – an online platform that compiles contacts for key support services for victims of various forms of violence during wartime. It is indicated that anyone can receive social and psychological assistance, legal consultations, informational support, and the opportunity to contact specialists for those who are in Ukraine or temporarily outside its borders. All services offered through the Platform are free of charge and confidential. The Helping Survivors initiative was established by the Office of the Vice Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, with the involvement of the Government Commissioner for Gender Policy and the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Ukraine [28].

3. Post-war recovery strategy. Participatory practices.

In the context of urban recovery and development, this area of activity is of particular relevance and possesses significant theoretical and applied potential. Participatory practices (or co-creation practices) in the development of public spaces represent a methodology that involves the active and inclusive engagement of all key stakeholders (citizens, local communities, businesses, experts, and local governments) in the processes of design, implementation, and management of public spaces.

In post-war Ukraine, the application of this approach takes on special significance, as it primarily contributes to overcoming trauma and rebuilding trust. Collaborative work on recovery projects can become a powerful instrument of social cohesion and the restoration of psychological well-being. Participation also provides legitimacy and sustainability to certain ideas and solutions. Decisions made with community involvement enjoy a higher level of social support and ensure more effective long-term use of public spaces. Moreover, collective civic engagement facilitates the identification of real needs. Participatory processes make it possible to uncover the authentic needs of residents, thereby ensuring the functional adequacy and inclusiveness of the spaces created.

Within the post-war recovery of Ukrainian cities, several forms of participatory action can be identified. First is co-design. Workshops, architectural “cafés”, design thinking sessions, and similar formats become critically important for the rebuilding of damaged facilities. These practices focus

on the direct development of concepts, plans, and spatial functions together with future users [29]. Equally important are public discussions and hearings. To gather a wide range of perspectives, assess proposed projects, and ensure process transparency, tools such as surveys, focus groups, and public presentations should be employed. Practical and impactful measures may include tactical urbanism and spatial testing. Rapid, low-cost, temporary transformations of parts of a territory allow new spatial functions (for example, benches, children's areas, temporary installations) to be tested prior to capital construction, thereby minimizing investment risks. Volunteer community work (toloka) and "construction weekends" can also be effective. Direct citizen involvement in the physical implementation of parts of a project (such as painting, landscaping, or assembling furniture) enhances a sense of shared ownership and responsibility [30].

At the same time, certain challenges accompany these processes. One of them is time and resource constraints. The need for rapid reconstruction may conflict with the lengthy procedures required for participatory engagement. The dispersion of communities, due to a significant share of internally displaced persons and mobilized citizens, complicates the representativeness of participation. The inclusion of vulnerable groups also presents difficulties. Engaging veterans, persons with disabilities, and elderly people requires the use of specialized mechanisms.

An innovative and powerful tool for deepening and democratizing participatory practices, especially in the context of complex and large-scale post-war recovery projects, is virtual reality (VR). The application of VR elevates public engagement to a qualitatively new level, addressing key shortcomings of traditional methods. Citizens often struggle to interpret two-dimensional drawings, plans, or maps. VR immerses participants in a realistic, 3D model of the future space (architectural visualization), making the project tangible and comprehensible. VR tools can also be used for the remote engagement of internally displaced persons, veterans, and citizens who are physically unable to attend workshops, thus ensuring a more representative sample. In addition, participants can interact with the project in real time (e.g., changing the placement of objects, materials, or lighting), providing precise spatial feedback rather than general comments [31].

It should be noted that the implementation of VR technologies in contemporary Ukrainian conditions faces several challenges that need to be addressed. These include, first and foremost, technological inequality – not all communities have access to VR headsets. This barrier can be overcome through hybrid approaches, such as establishing specialized VR hubs in libraries or administrative centers, as well as using mobile (smartphone-based) VR applications [32]. Furthermore, the creation of detailed VR models is relatively costly. This issue can be mitigated through the standardization of processes and the use of game engines (such as Unity or Unreal Engine) to reduce development costs and enable rapid scalability across multiple projects.

The use of virtual reality in the architecture of public spaces can become an effective methodological tool in post-war recovery projects, where functionality, safety, and psychological comfort are of critical importance. VR enables a deep, academically grounded analysis of a project's functional adequacy before construction begins. While immersed in a VR model, architects and community members can experience the real scale of a space, building heights, the size of small architectural forms, and their impact on overall perception. These factors are crucial for creating a humane and comfortable environment, modeling different space usage scenarios.

In the context of post-war reconstruction, where significant attention is devoted to the needs of veterans and people with disabilities, VR serves as an indispensable tool for inclusive design. Architects can simulate movement through a virtual space from the perspective of a wheelchair user (checking ramp slopes, passage widths, and the placement of tactile paving). The placement and height of elements such as benches, information boards, and call buttons can be evaluated for different user groups, including children, the elderly, and people with limited mobility. VR also allows for the modeling of a space's acoustic properties (e.g., noise levels from nearby roads) and

lighting effectiveness (avoiding shadowed areas and assessing entrance illumination), which directly affect user safety and psychological comfort.

4. Shaping the post-war visual image of the city (the case of Kharkiv).

The formation, maintenance, and preservation of a positive visual image of a city during active hostilities and shelling (as in the case of Kharkiv) is an extremely complex yet critically important strategic project within the framework of municipal resilience. This process extends far beyond aesthetics and becomes an element of information, psychological, and social defense. In Kharkiv, where destruction is ongoing, a positive visual image performs three key functions. The first is countering propaganda. Visual evidence that the city is alive, functioning, and resisting refutes narratives portraying it as “captured” or “dead”. The second function is sustaining morale. Local visual improvements create a sense of control, stability, and hope among residents who face daily trauma. The third, equally important function is the visualization of resilience. Emphasizing the rapid restoration of critical infrastructure and historical landmarks demonstrates the steadfastness of both municipal authorities and the community. An effective tool for shaping and maintaining the city’s visual image is the implementation of rapid-response projects. Unlike post-war reconstruction, during the active phase of war priority is given to fast, safe, and modular interventions.

An important aspect is the preservation and support of this image. A necessary step is the creation of a visual archive, i.e. a systematic documentation of destruction and emergency restoration work through photography, video, and 3D scanning. This serves not only historical purposes but also provides justification for recovery needs. Equally important is the regular publication of photo reports and stories highlighting how municipal services and volunteers restore facilities, thereby shaping a positive image of the “working city.” Certain measures, such as the institutionalization of visual control, should ensure the protection of the city’s visual image. These include the introduction of simplified but mandatory regulations for temporary signage, window repairs, and the sealing of blast damage. Such measures are necessary to prevent visual chaos, which can intensify feelings of disorder and neglect. The use of virtual reality to present future projects in safe locations can also be an effective tool.

The creation of a post-war visual image of cities in general, and Kharkiv in particular, is a complex, multi-vector process that goes far beyond purely architectural reconstruction. It requires deep reflection on cultural memory, identity, and the socio-psychological impact of destruction. The post-war visual image of a city should be based on the principles of identity preservation, memorialization and trauma awareness, sustainability and resilience, and inclusive renewal. This process must operate on several interconnected levels: architectural and urban-planning, memorial, and regulatory.

Special attention should be given to memorialization as a factor in shaping the visual image of post-war cities, particularly Kharkiv. Against the backdrop of Russia’s full-scale aggression, the creation of memorials dedicated to fallen defenders and civilian victims in Ukraine has gained particular relevance. Contemporary memorial architecture seeks to move away from Soviet-era and pompous traditions, instead offering spaces for remembrance, reflection, and integration into the urban environment [33]. Today, the architectural and memorial landscape of Ukrainian cities represents a complex and dynamic palimpsest reflecting multilayered history, multiple traumas, and the ongoing process of national identity formation. Urban space is architecturally shaped by several historical layers of memorialization. The pre-Soviet heritage is represented by historical necropolises (such as Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv), where graves function as works of art and historical monuments, reflecting local, religious, and cultural traditions. Soviet monumentalism, until recently, dominated public space through monumental architecture (Lenin statues, monuments to liberating soldiers, and World War II memorials). These memorials were characterized by pomp,

ideological saturation, and authoritarian aesthetics. The processes of decommunization and deimperialization have significantly transformed this layer through the dismantling or recontextualization of such objects. Post-Soviet memorials associated with the Holodomor, political repression, and the Revolution of Dignity (for example, the memorial to the Heavenly Hundred in Lviv) have already demonstrated a shift away from Soviet aesthetics toward more minimalist, symbolic, and modernist forms (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Memorial to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred in Lviv
(Source: <https://find-way.com.ua/oblast/lvivska/lviv/memorial-heroiv-nebesnoi-sotni-lviv>)

The main architectural and spatial marker of the past decade has been the creation of large memorial zones dedicated to fallen defenders and victims of aggression. One of the most noticeable phenomena is the transformation of cemetery architecture. According to methodological guidelines, local authorities allocate military burial sectors (alleys of glory) in central or the most frequently visited areas of existing urban cemeteries. Unlike traditional Ukrainian burials, new military sections often strive for a unified style of gravestones and overall design. This trend follows global practices of military cemeteries, where individual fences, tables, and large photographs are replaced by standardized, restrained markers (often taking religious specifics into account), emphasizing collective memory and equality in sacrifice [34].

5. A Comprehensive program for shaping the visual image of post-war cities in Ukraine.

The creation of a comprehensive program for shaping the visual image of post-war cities is a strategic, long-term project that must integrate architectural, social, psychological, economic, and memorial aspects. The starting point should be data collection, damage assessment, and the development of a methodological framework. An assessment of cultural heritage is required, including precise documentation of damage to historic buildings, architectural landmarks, and panoramic views. A socio-psychological audit should be conducted through surveys and focus groups to identify collective visual trauma and community expectations regarding the city's new image, determining which elements should be preserved as memory and which should be radically renewed. Based on this, a methodological platform is developed. Fundamental rules of a city design code are established, i.e. initial mandatory regulations regarding building heights, development lines, material usage, and signage placement for restored objects. The integration of VR tools is implemented through the development of software for virtual modeling and participatory engagement at subsequent stages.

The next phase is conceptualization (design), aimed at defining a long-term vision and key architectural projects. The strategy can be considered along two main directions. The first is the creation of a “Visual Recovery Master Plan,” which defines zones for implementing the necessary measures. The second direction focuses on memorialization and public art, including a strategy for integrating ruins – determining which structures should be preserved as memorials and which should be fully dismantled.

At the third stage of the program (the implementation phase) visual standards are introduced and enforced. The design code is coordinated through the use of VR to present detailed rules for façades, signage, color palettes, and public-space improvements during public discussions, enabling the collective adoption of these visual norms. Pilot projects for public spaces are developed. Control and governance systems include the creation of an online registry of construction projects and their compliance with the design code, ensuring transparency and minimizing corruption risks.

An important element in forming a marketing strategy and a positive visual image of a post-war city is the creation of exemplary, so-called “postcard” views and selfie zones. This direction of work extends beyond architecture into the realm of urban branding and communication. The effective creation of such points requires both analytical and design-based approaches. First, locations must be identified, prioritizing strategic recovery sites, i.e. places that have undergone significant reconstruction or host memorials of resilience. Such points should offer a harmonious backdrop that combines preserved historical heritage with contemporary architectural achievements of recovery. They must also be easily accessible, provide space for gathering, and be integrated into pedestrian routes. Second, thematic content must be defined. Local design projects for specific areas (streets, small public squares, pocket parks, courtyards) are among the most tangible and rapid tools for shaping a positive visual image of the city in the post-war period. They generate a psychological effect of “small victories” and immediately improve residents’ quality of life.

The methodological foundations of this strategy may include participation at the neighborhood level (engaging residents of a specific street or building in the joint design of their courtyard or square); temporary and iterative design approaches (using mobile, easily replaceable elements such as container-based greenery, modular benches, or street art on plywood panels, allowing for rapid design changes); and a focus on safety and comfort (prioritizing high-quality lighting, restoration of pavement surfaces, and the creation of short-term rest areas).

The typology of selfie zones may vary depending on the project’s goals and location. For example, “Memorial Resilience” may involve installations that reinterpret debris (e.g. a sculpture made from scrap metal, polished and illuminated) expressing memory of the past transformed into strength. Another theme is “New Identity,” using contemporary, high-quality design elements, such as a stylized city name with innovative typography and colors, embodying the idea of a European, forward-looking future. A different narrative is “Eco-Renewal,” where vertical greenery, biophilic design, or an installation integrated into a renovated park symbolizes life overcoming destruction and sustainability. Another theme is “Panorama of Recovery,” featuring a specially equipped observation platform offering views of large-scale restored development, demonstrating the scope and speed of reconstruction efforts.

The success of creating these “postcard” views depends on their integration into the city’s overall design code. They should not function as isolated objects, but rather as a logical visual extension of the new architectural policy.

Conclusions. The visual image of a post-war city is not a passive reflection of reconstructed objects. It is an active tool of communication and psychological recovery. During periods of active hostilities (as in Kharkiv), urban improvement initiatives and local projects (the design of parks, small public squares, and façades) perform the function of a psychological shield. They create

“islands of normality”, visually counteract narratives of destruction, and sustain the community’s morale. A new visual image requires the integration of memory about the war. The creation of exemplary “postcard” views and selfie zones should be aimed at visualizing resilience and the future, transforming sites of destruction into memorial spaces or symbols of rebirth. The success of recovery directly depends on the active and inclusive involvement of all stakeholders, especially the local community. Participatory practices should become instruments of social cohesion. Virtual reality must become a strategic technology that democratizes the design process. It allows communities to experience and evaluate complex architectural projects before construction begins, ensuring visual consensus.

To achieve sustainable results, the implementation of a comprehensive, multi-phase program with a clear regulatory framework is necessary. The introduction of a municipal design code is a mandatory condition for preventing visual chaos during reconstruction. This code must be jointly agreed upon through participatory tools (including VR modeling). The program should combine strategic master planning (long-term zoning and the identification of visual dominants) with local projects. Post-war urban recovery is an opportunity not merely to rebuild what has been destroyed, but to shape a qualitatively new, humane, and inclusive visual image grounded in European values, cultural heritage, and active civic participation. This is the only path toward creating a truly sustainable and resilient urban environment.

Prospects for further research. Further research may focus on the empirical evaluation of how visual design interventions influence psychological recovery and social cohesion in post-war cities. Comparative studies between different Ukrainian cities and international post-conflict cases could identify transferable models and context-specific limitations. Particular attention should be given to the long-term effectiveness of participatory design practices, including the role of VR and other immersive technologies in shaping public consensus and decision-making quality. Future studies may also explore the governance mechanisms of municipal design codes, assessing their impact on visual consistency, transparency, and resilience over time. Additionally, interdisciplinary research combining architecture, urban studies, psychology, and digital technologies would deepen understanding of how visual environments can support collective memory, identity reconstruction, and sustainable urban development in post-war contexts.

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ФОРМУВАННЯ ВІЗУАЛЬНОГО ОБРАЗУ МІСТА (ХАРКОВА) В УМОВАХ ВІЙНИ

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Анотація. У дослідженні розкриваються питання комплексного підходу до формування та відновлення візуального образу повоєнних міст України. Наголошується, що цей процес є не лише архітектурно-будівельним, а й стратегічним проектом соціально-психологічної реабілітації, культурної ідентифікації та інформаційної стійкості. Особлива увага приділяється партисипативним практикам як основі легітимності та соціальної згуртованості. Розглядаються методи активного залучення громадськості, зокрема використання інноваційних інструментів, таких як віртуальна реальність, для візуалізації проєктів, тестування інклюзивності та досягнення суспільного консенсусу. Пропонується комплексна програма, що поєднує довгострокове стратегічне планування (розробка майстер-планів та дизайн-кодів) із тактичними оперативними рішеннями. До останніх віднесено локальні проєкти оформлення окремих зон (вулиць, скверів), швидкий благоустрій та створення зразкових «карткових» ракурсів і селфі-зон для формування нового, позитивного візуального наративу. На прикладі Харкова аналізуються методи підтримки та збереження позитивного візуального образу міста під час активних бойових дій, включаючи проведення безпечних святкових та меморіальних заходів як інструменту підтримки морального духу громади. Робиться висновок, що повоєнне відновлення надає унікальну можливість не просто відбудувати зруйноване, а якісно трансформувати міське середовище, зробивши його більш гуманним, стійким та візуально гармонійним.

Ключові слова: візуальний образ, архітектурне середовище, партисипація, меморіалізація, соціальна згуртованість, психологічне благополуччя, повоєнне відновлення.

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