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1_Short Papers

RECONSTRUCTING BELONGING THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING: MOBILIZING SPATIAL MEMORY IN UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION FOR UKRAINE’S URBAN RECOVERY

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Abstract

This paper examines how service learning can contribute to post-war urban recovery through university–community collaboration, foregrounding spatial memory as a critical yet underexplored resource in reconstruction processes. Focusing on war-affected urban neighborhoods in Ukraine, the paper presents a design-based educational project in which architecture master students collaborate with members of the Ukrainian diaspora in Flanders. Through this collaboration, pre-war spatial memories–embedded in everyday practices, routinized movements, and social encounters–are mobilized as a form of situated knowledge that informs recovery-oriented design thinking.

Challenging dominant post-war reconstruction paradigms that prioritize either radical modernization or faithful material reconstruction, the paper argues that both approaches risk marginalizing the lived social realities embedded in the pre-conflict urban fabric. Drawing on sociological theories of place, memory, and belonging, the research proposes a memory-informed alternative that situates reconstruction within processes

of social resilience, collective meaning-making, and civic reattachment. Central to this approach is the use of architectural artefacts—such as sketches, annotated maps, and physical models—not as representational end products, but as epistemic and dialogical tools. These artefacts function as mediators that enable participants to articulate lived experience, negotiate shared understandings, and imagine socially resilient futures of reconstruction.

Methodologically, the research is structured as a design research framework grounded in service learning and organized around a three-step space-making process applied through participatory workshops with members of the Ukrainian diaspora. By integrating architectural education, community engagement, and recovery practices, the project repositions the university as a civic intermediary rather than an external expert authority. The paper contributes to debates on service learning, recovery-oriented higher education, and socially sustainable post-war urban reconstruction by demonstrating how co-designed, practice-based approaches can foster citizenship, ethical awareness, and community resilience in contexts of displacement and wartime disruption.

Introduction: War, Urban Rupture, and the Question of Recovery

Armed conflict disrupts cities not only through the destruction of buildings and infrastructure, but through the rupture of everyday spatial relations that sustain social life and belonging. Familiar routes, meeting places, thresholds, and routines vanish or become inaccessible, fracturing the mnemonic continuity through which urban environments are lived and understood. Cities affected by war are therefore not merely damaged physical systems, but destabilized socio-spatial assemblages in which material loss, memory, and meaning are deeply entangled.

Post-war reconstruction is often approached as a technical task of rebuilding or as a symbolic project of renewal. Such framings tend to privilege expert-driven planning, visual coherence, and quantifiable outcomes, while sidelining the restoration of everyday spatial practices and social relations. Yet reconstruction is also a narrative and educational process through which collective understandings of the past and imaginaries of the future are

renegotiated. Decisions about what to rebuild, transform, or erase are inseparable from questions of citizenship, responsibility, and belonging.

This paper argues that post-war urban reconstruction should be understood as a process of translation rather than representation. Drawing on theories of place, spatial memory, and belonging, it conceptualizes spatial memory as situated and relational knowledge embedded in everyday urban practices. Mobilizing such memory allows recovery to be grounded in lived experience rather than imposed abstract visions, thereby supporting social resilience alongside material renewal.

The argument is developed through a service-learning-based university–community collaboration focused on Ukraine’s ongoing war and long-term recovery. Through a design-based educational project involving architecture master students and members of the Ukrainian diaspora in Flanders, the university is positioned as a civic intermediary facilitating knowledge co-production across distance, displacement, and disciplinary boundaries. Architectural artefacts function as epistemic and dialogical tools through which spatial memory is articulated, negotiated, and translated into recovery-oriented imaginaries.

By integrating service learning (SL), design research, and participatory engagement, the paper contributes to debates on recovery-oriented higher education and university–community collaboration in wartime contexts, asking how architectural education can engage spatial memory, displacement, and ethical responsibility when direct access to post-war sites is limited.

Post-War Reconstruction and the Limits of Expert-Centric Narratives

Historical debates on post-war reconstruction reveal a recurring oscillation between two dominant paradigms. On one end, destruction is framed as an opportunity for radical modernization, clearing the ground for rationalized spatial orders, infrastructural efficiency, and economic renewal. On the opposite end, reconstruction is approached as an act of continuity through faithful material replication, often transforming damaged urban centers into heritage artefacts oriented toward representation, tourism, and symbolic identity (Shanken, 2022; Gantois, 2025). While

ideologically opposed, both paradigms produce singular narratives of renewal framed through visual coherence and expert authority.

Reconstruction becomes a project of representation—of modernity, heritage, or national resilience—rather than a process of translation between past experience and future inhabitation, marginalizing everyday practices, informal uses, and spatial routines that constituted pre-war urban life.

Empirical research in post-conflict contexts confirms this bias. Reconstruction initiatives frequently prioritize housing provision, infrastructure repair, and iconic buildings, while the social dimensions of recovery remain underdeveloped (Legnér, 2018). Participatory practices, when present, are often limited to consultation on predefined plans rather than genuine co-production of knowledge (Jackson, 2002; Lambert & Rockwell, 2012). Communities are invited to respond to expert proposals rather than to shape the epistemic foundations of reconstruction.

For displaced populations, this limitation is particularly consequential. Return to the city is not only a physical movement but a process of reattachment that depends on the recognition of familiar spatial anchors and everyday practices. When these dimensions are overlooked, reconstruction may result in technically functional environments that nevertheless fail to support social recovery and belonging.

Spatial Memory, Place, and Social Resilience

Sociological and spatial scholarship has long argued that places are not neutral containers of social life, but active participants in its production. Gieryn (2000) conceptualizes place as a stabilizing anchor for individual and collective biographies, providing material reference points through which social life is organized and rendered meaningful. Through repeated interaction, places accumulate layers of meaning that sustain feelings of belonging and attachment (Hawke, 2010; Hester, 2014).

Within this relational understanding, spatial memory emerges from everyday interaction between people and their environments. Memories of place are embedded in routines, paths, sequences of movement, and social encounters rather than in abstract representations alone. These memories are embodied and

relational forms of experiential spatial knowledge grounded in everyday interaction.

When spatial anchors are destroyed or radically transformed, mnemonic continuity is disrupted. Truc (2011) demonstrates how insensitive urban transformations can erase memory-laden qualities of place, producing disorientation and loss of belonging even in contexts of physical improvement. In post-conflict settings, reconstruction therefore holds a dual potential: it may restore social continuity by reconnecting spatial memory, or deepen alienation by disregarding it.

Engaging spatial memory in reconstruction is thus neither nostalgic nor merely commemorative. Rather, it enables reconstruction to operate as a forward-looking process in which past experiences inform future-oriented imaginaries. This requires methodological tools capable of translating experiential knowledge into spatial propositions without reducing it to anecdote or symbolism.

Ukraine, Displacement, and the Civic Role of the University

The ongoing war in Ukraine provides an urgent context in which the social and mnemonic dimensions of reconstruction acquire immediate relevance. Since the full-scale invasion of 2022, extensive damage has been inflicted on civilian neighborhoods, infrastructure, and culturally significant urban areas. Hereby, the targeting of urban environments functions not only as physical destruction but as an assault on collective memory and social cohesion (Bevan, 2006; Hoteit, 2015).

Alongside destruction, the war has generated large-scale displacement and a substantial Ukrainian diaspora across Europe, including Belgium, whose members often retain strong attachments to pre-war urban environments through embodied memories of everyday life. These memories constitute a rich repository of situated spatial knowledge.

Universities are uniquely positioned to engage this form of knowledge through SL, integrating education, research, and civic engagement as mediators between displaced communities and recovery-oriented design practices. In doing so, universities move beyond their traditional role as producers of abstract expertise and assume responsibility as civic actors engaged in social repair.

In the project discussed here, members of the Ukrainian diaspora are not approached as passive beneficiaries or consultees, but as active knowledge holders and co-designers. Their spatial memories form the epistemic foundation for collaborative inquiry into recovery-oriented urban futures.

Architectural Artefacts as Epistemic and Dialogical Tools

Architectural education traditionally relies on visual artefacts—drawings, sketches, maps, models—not only as representational devices but as tools for thinking. Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice highlights how design knowledge emerges through iterative interaction with artefacts. In post-war reconstruction contexts, however, architectural representations are often mobilized as final communication tools that reinforce expert authority and limit dialogue.

This research adopts an alternative understanding of architectural artefacts as: epistemic objects that generate knowledge through interaction rather than merely conveying solutions (Whyte, 2007; Ballestrem & Gasperoni, 2022). Such artefacts are incomplete and open-ended, inviting interpretation, negotiation and reinterpretation. As objects of speech, they enable the articulation of tacit and embodied knowledge that may be difficult to express verbally alone (Gantois, 2022). Through sketching, mapping, and model-making, spatial memory becomes externalized and discussable. Artefacts function as boundary objects that facilitate dialogue across differences in disciplinary language, cultural background, and spatial distance, offering indirect modes of expression particularly suitable in contexts of trauma and displacement.

Diaspora Communities as Situated Epistemic Actors

Members of the Ukrainian diaspora in Flanders occupy a central role within this research, though one that is carefully situated. Members of the Ukrainian diaspora are positioned neither as substitutes for local participation nor as neutral transmitters of information. Instead, they are approached as epistemic actors whose spatial memories reflect a specific positionality at the intersection of attachment, absence, and future-oriented concern.

Diasporic spatial memory is shaped by distance, temporal disjunction, and uncertainty about return. Memories are not continuously recalibrated through everyday presence but remain anchored in pre-war routines and relations. At the same time, the research explicitly avoids privileging diaspora perspectives over those of current residents in Ukraine. Diasporic engagement is understood as one situated contribution within a longer reconstruction trajectory. Architectural artefacts mediate this positioning by materializing memory in provisional forms.

The engagement of diaspora communities expands conventional understandings of participation by showing how meaningful involvement in recovery can occur across distance through memory, artefacts, and dialogue. This expanded view of participation does not replace localized, on-site collaboration, but complements it by foregrounding the temporal and relational dimensions of belonging that persist beyond displacement.

A Service-Learning Space-Making Methodology

Building on the understanding of spatial memory outlined earlier as situated, relational, and practice-based knowledge embedded in everyday urban life, this section explains how this framework is operationalized through a service-learning-based space-making methodology. Rather than reiterating conceptual foundations, the focus lies on the translation of spatial memory and belonging into concrete pedagogical and collaborative design practices.

The methodological approach is positioned at the intersection of design-based research, SL, and participatory inquiry. Post-war reconstruction is not treated as a linear problem requiring expert resolution, but as a process of collective inquiry in which meanings, memories, and future imaginaries are continuously negotiated. Service-learning functions here not only as a pedagogical format, but as an epistemic stance linking disciplinary learning to civic responsibility, ethical engagement, and social recovery.

The project is embedded within architectural education and positions students as co-learners and facilitators rather than autonomous designers or external experts. Ukrainian participants are invited to articulate memories of pre-war urban life through accounts of everyday spatial practices—such as routes, thresholds, informal meeting places, rhythms of movement, and habitual

encounters—rather than through comprehensive narratives of loss. This approach foregrounds ordinary and often overlooked dimensions of urban life typically absent from conventional planning documentation.

Architectural artefacts play a central mediating role throughout the process. Sketches, annotated maps, and physical models are introduced iteratively and continuously reworked in response to participants' contributions. Early artefacts emphasize spatial sequences, routes, and relations, while later iterations allow comparative engagement with historical maps, archival photographs, architectural plans, and contemporary satellite imagery. Rather than stabilizing meaning or prefiguring design outcomes, the artefacts structure dialogue over time and support the translation of experiential knowledge into shared spatial propositions.

A deliberate balance between precision and openness guides the development of these artefacts. Their intentional incompleteness invites engagement as provisional propositions rather than authoritative representations of “the city as it was.”

Following established accounts of research through design, knowledge is understood as emerging *in action*. Through acts of pointing, annotating, narrating, and repositioning, participants actively reshape the artefacts, enabling knowledge to emerge through iterative cycles of making, reflection, dialogue and re-making rather than through the verification of predefined hypotheses (Schön, 1983; Lawson, 1997). Analytical attention shifts from individual buildings or landmarks toward the urban fabric understood as a relational system of everyday practices and spatial connections.

Within the service-learning context, the space-making process produces reciprocal learning outcomes. Students develop architectural competencies alongside civic awareness, ethical sensitivity, and an understanding of the social implications of reconstruction. They learn to work with uncertainty, engage non-expert knowledge, and reflect on their own positionality when collaborating with conflict-affected communities. Community participants, in turn, gain access to architectural tools and languages that allow them to articulate spatial memory in forms relevant to recovery-oriented discourse, even when physical return remains uncertain.

Importantly, the methodology does not aim at producing design proposals as a primary outcome. Instead, it prioritizes shared understanding and the articulation of socially grounded imaginaries of recovery. Hereby, past spatial practices inform future-oriented conversations without prescribing definitive spatial solutions.

Taken together, this service-learning space-making methodology repositions architectural education and research as civic practices embedded in processes of social recovery. By integrating design, dialogue, and memory work, it demonstrates how universities can facilitate careful, reflexive, and socially grounded knowledge co-production in post-war contexts.

Methodological Rigor, Ethical Care, and Educational Responsibility

Methodological rigor in this research is grounded in criteria appropriate to design-based and participatory inquiry rather than in conventional standards of reproducibility or empirical generalization. The value of the research therefore lies not in the representational accuracy of its outcomes, but in the epistemic productivity of the processes it establishes.

Validity is ensured through prolonged engagement with participants, iterative workshops, and the triangulation of multiple forms of material: narrative accounts of spatial memory, architectural artefacts, historical documentation, and contemporary spatial data. These heterogeneous sources do not converge toward a single authoritative account of the pre-war city; instead, they support a relational understanding of how urban configurations sustained particular forms of everyday life and belonging. Insight emerges through the negotiation of partial perspectives rather than through their aggregation into a unified representation.

Reflexivity is an integral component of methodological rigor. Students and researchers are positioned as facilitators and co-learners, and reflexive practices are embedded throughout the process through annotated sketchbooks, collective debriefings, and iterative reinterpretation of models and drawings. These practices enable participants to critically reflect on their assumptions, positionalities, and ethical responsibilities when engaging with conflict-affected communities. Architectural artefacts themselves function as reflexive devices: they expose uncertainty and prevent premature closure around fixed design solutions.

Ethical considerations are central to the research design rather than treated as procedural requirements. Engagement with members of the Ukrainian diaspora involves working with communities potentially affected by displacement, loss, and trauma. Ethical practice is therefore approached as an ongoing, relational commitment unfolding throughout the research process. Participation is voluntary and based on informed consent, while collaboration with local gatekeepers and partner organizations ensures sensitivity to contextual and personal boundaries.

Architectural artefacts play a crucial ethical role as mediators. Indirect, spatial modes of expression allow participants to articulate memories of everyday urban life without requiring verbal recounting of traumatic experiences. By focusing on routines, places, and practices rather than on events of violence, the methodology avoids extractive forms of testimony while still acknowledging the impact of war on lived environments. Artefacts thus function not only as epistemic tools, but also as instruments of care that support respectful and non-intrusive engagement.

From an educational perspective, the project demonstrates the potential of SL to reposition architectural education as a civic and ethical practice. Learning outcomes are defined less in terms of formal design proficiency than in students' capacity to engage uncertainty, negotiate difference, and reflect on the social implications of architectural intervention. Through sustained interaction with community participants, students develop an understanding of architecture's role in processes of social recovery and resilience. Education becomes an encounter with responsibility rather than an exercise in autonomous problem-solving.

The reciprocity inherent in SL is central to this educational impact. Community participants are not positioned as clients or informants but as co-producers of knowledge whose spatial memories actively shape the direction of inquiry. Learning thus emerges as a shared process in which academic knowledge and lived experience mutually transform one another.

Taken together, methodological rigor, ethical care, and educational impact are not separate dimensions of the research but mutually reinforcing aspects of a coherent design-based, service-learning approach. The research demonstrates how universities can

contribute meaningfully to post-war recovery by creating conditions for careful, reflexive, and socially grounded knowledge production.

Conclusion

Building on the conceptual framework developed throughout this paper, the research has argued that post-war urban reconstruction cannot be reduced to a purely material or symbolic endeavor, but must be understood as a socially embedded process through which belonging is actively reconstituted. By foregrounding spatial memory as an operative form of situated knowledge, the paper challenges expert-driven reconstruction paradigms that marginalize everyday spatial practice and lived experience.

Through a service-learning-based design research framework, architectural artefacts were mobilized as epistemic tools mediating between memory, dialogue, and future-oriented imagination. Rather than stabilizing a single narrative of recovery, these artefacts enabled the negotiation of multiple perspectives and the translation of embodied experience into shared spatial propositions. Reconstruction was thus approached as a process of collective inquiry rather than representational closure.

The Ukrainian context underscores both the urgency and the complexity of such approaches. Conducted under conditions of ongoing war and displacement, the research relied primarily on remote engagement through collaboration with members of the Ukrainian diaspora, complemented by archival and digital materials and sustained contact with partners familiar with local conditions. This configuration inevitably shapes the scope and limits of participation, yet it demonstrates how spatial memory can inform recovery-oriented thinking even in the absence of immediate physical access to damaged sites.

Recognizing these limitations, a subsequent phase of the research seeks to extend the service-learning framework through direct collaboration with architecture students, academic institutions, and community participants in Ukraine itself, as conditions allow. Building on the memory-based groundwork developed through diasporic engagement, this phase aims to integrate locally situated participation within post-war environments, strengthening the university's role as a civic intermediary in longer-term recovery processes.

More broadly, the paper contributes to debates on SL, university–community collaboration, and recovery-oriented higher education by demonstrating how design-based, memory-sensitive approaches can foster citizenship, ethical awareness, and community resilience. While grounded in the Ukrainian case, the methodological principles developed here offer transferable insights for socially sustainable reconstruction in other conflict-affected and displacement contexts.

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