

## **Notes from Slavutych: the last nuclear monotown**

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When the city of Slavutych was built, it was for a very specific purpose: to house the workers of those who would continue to work at the post-disaster Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and their families. It was the pinnacle of Soviet planned cities, the culmination of decades of lessons learned from similar projects. Like Pripyat, the abandoned city Slavutych was replacing, a young city for young professionals. For all



the excitement the new city elicited however, within just a few short years international consensus and national law had established a hard expiration date for the city's purpose. As a result, city leaders and residents were faced with the realization that unless the city underwent fundamental changes, Slavutych was going to die.

### **A purpose-built city**

'Slavutych' written beneath a glass art piece installed in the city museum. The city was purpose built to house post-Chernobyl workers. Photograph by Nathaniel Ray Pickett. Following the 1986 Chernobyl NPP accident, Soviet officials found themselves in a difficult position. Among the contributing factors of this difficult position was that the

other three completed reactors at Chernobyl were not only still operational, but had become necessary to provide power to Kyiv and the surrounding area—shutting them down was simply not an immediate option. Pripyat, the city built in 1970 for Chernobyl workers and their families, and the other evacuated cities, towns, and villages in the immediate vicinity of the plant were unsuitable for long-term residence; it was similarly unreasonable to continue bussing in plant workers and liquidators. On the 2nd of October 1986 the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the USSR [decided](#) to construct a new city just outside of the Zone of Alienation that would be connected to the plant by rail to house plant workers and liquidators.

Though conceived by committee in Moscow, the planning and construction of Slavutych was an inclusive affair. The Kyiv-based architect F. I. Borovik conceived of the city as split into distinct districts built in the styles of various Soviet republics surrounding a central plaza and park. The construction of Slavutych was truly an all-Union affair as architects and builders from the eight republics after which the districts of the city are named descended on a small clearing in the forest west of Chernihiv. Replete with green spaces, official injunctions to only fell the trees absolutely necessary for construction, schools and fitness centers, Slavutych was the zenith of Soviet urban planning—fittingly so, since it was the last city built in the Soviet Union and remains the youngest city in Ukraine.

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## **Closing the reactor**

If there is a “before” and an “after” in Slavutych’s history, it is the date of the shutting down of the last functional reactor at the Chernobyl NPP. This event has had a transformative effect on the city, more so than any other single event, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukrainian independence. Closing the plant however did not come as a surprise—after the disaster, it was only a matter of time before the three other reactors were spun down for the last time.

It is not easy to just “turn off” a nuclear reactor; in fact, the decommissioning process takes decades to complete. In the case of the Chernobyl plant, radioactive contamination as a result of the disaster only complicates the process and extends the timeline—plant administrators estimate that the final step of dismantling the reactors [will take place by 2064](#) (though the question of storing spent nuclear fuel will remain

relevant for centuries beyond that date). The first step in the decommissioning process however, ceasing normal operations, was completed in 2000 as part of a multinational, multiagency agreement that had a transformative effect on Slavutych.

In the early 1990s, Ukraine met with the G7 nations to discuss a number of nuclear questions, some regarding disarmament, others regarding what to do with Chornobyl. The Soviet Union's collapse had obliterated Ukraine's economy, which was simply unprepared to function without the central planning apparatus of the USSR. Ukraine simply did not have the means to afford the high cost of the continual cleanup efforts required, and the G7 meetings led to numerous memoranda of understanding and other agreements whereby Ukraine could secure international funding for Chornobyl if it met a number of conditions, including restructuring the country's energy sector and committing to an early decommissioning of the plant by the end of 2000. The early decommissioning project had actually begun slightly before the G7 meetings when a fire broke out in the plant's reactor 2 in 1991, but Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma held out until the last minute—December 15, 2000—to shut down the final reactor.

The shutdown of the final reactor hit Slavutych hard, despite the city's efforts to brace for impact. Unemployment spiked above 6% as almost 6000 plant personnel lost their jobs in the following months. Though these numbers have rebounded in the intervening years, walking through the city and listening to many of the residents talk, the spectre of the closing of the reactor looms large. Very little new construction has taken place in the center of town—though there is some on the outskirts—and the newly-remodelled hotel right in the center square borders on eyesore in contrast to the aging buildings around it. One pair of old men on the bus out of town wished that they'd see each other again soon, but then again only if Slavutych is still around next year. Yet despite all of this, there has been a consistent counter-narrative of hope and rebirth.

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### **Attempts at rejuvenation**

Slavutych's first, and until 2015, only, mayor, Volodymyr Udovychenko, for over two decades dedicated himself to finding ways to save his city. By and large, this meant diversifying the economy away from its monotown identity and design. Those initial G7 meetings led Udovychenko and other city leaders to develop an Action Plan, published in 1997, with support from USAID and [TACIS](#). The Action Plan reads like a

grant proposal, with specific recommendations for diversifying Slavutyich, including transferring the Plant's assets to the city's coffers, numerous strategies for encouraging local small-business startups, establishing a training center for soon-to-be-former Plant employees to gain skills in other fields, and building a business park. This scattergun approach to encouraging economic diversification also led to establishing a Special Economic Zone in the city through 2020, an attempt at enticing business by drastically reducing a number of tax burdens.

By and large, most of the proposals for economic development laid out in the 1997 Action Plan have yielded limited results. The Slavutyich Special Economic Zone has also underdelivered on its job-creating projections, though [a new Action Plan](#) prepared by the City Council in 2013 show an upwards trend in overall job creation.

But rejuvenation is not just an economic question, a fact understood quite well by Udovychenko and the city leadership. Slavutyich was not only the youngest city in Ukraine, but while birth rates fell across the entire former Soviet Union, Slavutyich's continued to grow. Even today, the former mayor beams with pride at the full preschools and the vibrancy of the youth, including the creation of the Youth Council that meets twice yearly. Their major accomplishment: convincing the mayor to get funds from the Kyiv oblast to build a skate park.

Even though there is little economic incentive for the youth to stay in Slavutyich—job prospects are slim, there are no opportunities for higher education in town, and nightlife is virtually nonexistent—by no means have they been idle in the efforts to save their city. The few twentysomethings I did meet in Slavutyich were working hard to come up with ways to revitalize their city, even if their university and work obligations mean they are only in the city for long weekends and holidays. Youth-lead initiatives have had a tangible effect on the city as well, like concerted efforts to utilize alternative energy sources, [Facebook campaigns to rebrand the city](#), electing a proactive mayor, writing grants for international and NGO support, and establishing the [86 Film and Urbanism Festival](#), which will be in its third year this May. Perhaps in this regard, Slavutyich is fulfilling its purpose after all, as a young city for young professionals.

The end result is that far from dying, Slavutyich is on the road to being a thriving community.

*[Nathaniel Ray Pickett](#) is currently on a Fulbright grant in Ukraine collecting data for his doctoral dissertation, entitled "Social Fallout: Assembling Political Geographies in the Shadow of Chernobyl". An example of his published academic work can be found [here](#).*

Cover photograph by Nathaniel Ray Pickett