



The Space That Creates Community: A Study on the Functioning of Community-building Centers

Research report



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[Community reBuilding](#) is a joint project by Cedos and UMAEF which provides financial and expert support for creating or updating community-building centers, which are accessible physical spaces where people from various social groups can come together for leisure, community development, cooperation, and comprehensive realization of their human potential.

Cedos is an independent think tank, an urban bureau, and a community that has been working on social and spatial development issues since 2010. We believe that every person is entitled to a dignified standard of living. Therefore, Cedos's goal is to identify the systemic causes of social

problems and develop strategies to solve them. Our approach is research-based. We study social processes and public policies, spread critical knowledge, promote and implement progressive changes, and educate and empower a community of supporters for these changes. In our work, we are guided by the values of dignity, equality, solidarity, participation, quality, and empathy.

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● Foreword

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only destroyed the infrastructure of many hromadas but also undermined the social ties that form the foundation of communities. The Community reBuilding project emerged as an attempt to support the processes of uniting people in small hromadas, where a single space often serves the functions of several institutions in a large city.

The project was born as a response to the wave of solidarity that arose from the very first days of the full-scale war around volunteering and mutual aid—as a way to preserve the “infrastructure of unity,” a new form of civic interaction where meanings matter more than walls, and where the goal is not the renovation of buildings but the “renovation of meanings.”

Community-building Centers are not merely venues for events or meetings, but hubs of a new culture of coexistence, where generations, experiences, and social groups come together. Each of these spaces reflects the local depth and needs of its hromada, uniting people around an old pharmacy, a clay-walled house, a library, or a museum.

For some teams, it was the first time they had undertaken such transformations—from complex technical renovation work to developing the programming of the center. Mentorship support became an important source of confidence, implementation quality, and strengthening of local teams, while co-funding (mostly from local budgets) proved to be one of the key lessons in seeking sustainability.

The concept of each Community-building Center is unique and creative. We wanted these Centers to become models for other hromadas, catalysts for broader social dialogue, for a stronger sense of belonging and integration, for interaction and responsibility. And we can see that this goal has been achieved, as the implemented projects already serve as examples for others.

Across two rounds of the project competition, more than 700 applications were submitted, demonstrating a large-scale demand for such initiatives. Therefore, this study serves as a valuable guide for other hromadas, based on the experience of four implemented projects—showing how and why to build an “infrastructure of unity” that grows from the bottom up, from the initiatives of people who stay, act, and continue to find and build new meanings within their communities.

Community-building Centers can become an effective tool in post-war recovery and a model of a new local democracy, in which the hromada does not merely consume services but shapes decisions. Even now, they are becoming platforms for cooperation between local authorities, citizens, cultural institutions, and international partners.

Of course, there is a risk that enemy missiles may destroy these centers, but the experience and skills gained by the community cannot be taken away. This is illustrated, in particular, by the example of the Velyka Pysarivka Hromada, which, after being forced to evacuate due to Russian attacks, established its center in a new location, in Okhtyrka.

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● Methodology

The aim of this study was to analyze the particularities of functioning and the role in the hromada's life of community-building centers established as part of the first wave of the Community reBuilding project.

Key goals of the study:

1. To describe the general principles of the functioning of community-building centers and the work of their teams.
2. To examine how community-building centers affect the engagement of different social groups in the hromada community and to discover how exactly hromada residents participate in the activities of community-building centers.
3. To clarify how the establishment of a community-building center has affected the hromada.

To meet these goals, 4 community-building centers were selected in 4 hromadas in order to show through their example how these spaces function a year after the implementation of the project. Data collection involved conducting in-person semi-structured in-depth interviews, as well as observing the work of each of the 4 community-building centers during research visits to these spaces. In addition, to record factual information from all 10 community-building centers, we sent a structured anonymous questionnaire to the managers of the centers.

The field stage of the study took place in **April–May 2025**.

In total, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted as part of the study. Of these, 8 interviews were with the managers of the community-building centers, and 9 with the users of these spaces.

To ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, the collected data was available only to the research team. The quotes used in the report have been anonymized and do not contain information that could identify a person or make it clear which of the centers is being referred to.

The study has a number of limitations:

- **The research findings are not representative of all community-building centers** created during the implementation of the first wave of the Community reBuilding project. We only studied the activities of 4 community-

building centers in 4 hromadas in detail; when selecting them, we tried to maintain diversity in the areas of activity on which these spaces focus, as well as to select spaces from hromadas in different regions of Ukraine. At the same time, we understand that the specifics of functioning of other community-building centers, particularly those located near the border with Russia or the line of contact, may differ significantly from the spaces we visited.

- **Limited representation of the experience of residents of hromadas** where community-building centers were created during the implementation of the first wave of the Community reBuilding project. We spoke with those hromada residents who are active users of the community-building centers, namely those who initiate and organize activities and events in these spaces. In addition, we obtained the contacts of these users through the managers of the community-building centers. Therefore, we realize that the experience of other users may be somewhat different. Also, this study does not take into account the experience of people who only visited the community-building centers without initiating any events.
- **The experience of people who did not visit the community-building centers** of the first wave of the Community reBuilding project **is not represented**. In this study, we did not speak with residents of the hromadas who, for one reason or another, did not visit the community-building centers.

The interviewers represent the Cedos Think Tank, which helped implement the Community reBuilding project. We assume that the informants' perception of the interviewers as representatives of an organization that directly contributed to the implementation of the project may have influenced their responses during the in-depth interviews. At the same time, we made an effort to mitigate this influence with detailed instructions regarding the purpose of the conversation, by explaining the importance of knowing both the positive and the negative experiences of the centers' functioning for the further development of similar spaces in other hromadas. In addition, we included different types of questions in the guides and supplemented the results of the in-depth interviews with responses to the anonymous questionnaire for the managers of the community-building centers.

Part 1 ● Community- building Centers: Their Idea and Role for Hromadas

In 2024, the Cedos Think Tank, in partnership with the Ukraine-Moldova American Enterprise Fund (UMAEF), implemented the first wave of the [Community reBuilding project](#). The project provided support to 10 civil society organizations from 10 hromadas in developing community-building centers, which are accessible physical spaces where people from different social groups can meet and come together for leisure, community development, cooperation, and comprehensive realization of their human potential. Each of the organizations received a financial grant and mentoring support to equip such a space.

Community-building centers were conceived as spaces that **could simultaneously perform several functions important for the development of hromadas**.¹ The centers are public spaces where people can gather for joint activities, which in turn should contribute to the **creation and strengthening of social ties** among residents. Community-building centers are also part of the **infrastructure for the development of civil society**. After all, they can be spaces where local initiatives emerge and develop, which later become the foundation for the creation and activity of civil society organizations.

Community-building centers should promote **more regular communication among people with different experiences and life situations**, making the hromada a more cohesive community. Such spaces are not commercial and should be accessible for use by all residents of the hromada. This allows people with different life experiences, identities, and views to get to know each other, communicate informally, or discuss urgent issues from the hromada's life.

During the project implementation, we also saw community-building centers as **places where various practices would unfold**. These practices include educational events for different age and social groups, sports, cultural, charitable activities, and more. In particular, we expected that the project would allow people to gain access to informal education in community-building centers, which would provide them with new knowledge and skills and facilitate the process of professional retraining. Such activities are especially relevant during the full-scale war, which has forced many people to leave their homes and undergo adaptation in new communities, establishing their lives in new localities or

¹ In this section, the idea of the creation and functioning of community-building centers is described on the basis of an interview with Ivan Verbytskyi, the Director of Cedos in 2019–2024.

regions. This is also important in the context of the return of veterans to civilian life: community-building centers can be the spaces where these people can turn for a consultation or a service (educational and beyond).

For the Cedos team, it was also important as part of this project to help create community-building centers that would contribute to meeting the **cultural needs** of hromada residents. Various types of musical, theatrical, and artistic events can be held in these spaces. The need for such venues is especially urgent in small hromadas, particularly rural ones, where usually there is only one facility that can serve this function (a village club or a house of culture). However, these facilities often lack the material and technical equipment necessary for events and are not accessible for people with limited mobility. Therefore, a community-building center can be a space that gives the hromada the opportunity to organize leisure activities that bring together people of different ages and experiences.

The important tasks of community-building centers, in our view, also include the creation of spaces where hromada residents can receive **social services**. Such services may include, in particular, those related to social integration/reintegration and counseling. Those who need psychological help and support can also turn to the community-building center.

During the project implementation, we reflected on the role of people in the existence of such spaces. After all, it is precisely thanks to people, both administrative teams and visitors, that community-building centers have continued to function actively even after the project ended. In this context, we saw community-building centers as spaces that hromada residents would perceive as accessible to them, as “their own” spaces which they could freely use when needed. At the same time, to avoid problems and ensure smooth functioning of the spaces, rules for their use are important. Therefore, it is crucial how the teams of these spaces view the manager of the space and how they strive to achieve the sense that the community-building center, despite the existence of shared rules of use, belongs to the residents of the hromada.

Another characteristic that we considered necessary is **the hromada’s sense of symbolic belonging to the space**, perceiving it as safe and comfortable for everyone. We saw this aspect in particular as one of the challenges in implementing

the project, since, as public space researchers note, “even in inclusive spaces, invisible forms of exclusion may exist.”² Therefore, to prevent various forms of exclusion of certain social groups, it is necessary to maintain a balance between horizontal approaches to organizing the work of the spaces and the curatorial work of the community-building center team. Thus, the role of curators will be to create an atmosphere of trust and understanding with active residents of the hromada who initiate activities and events in the space, and to invite all people from the hromada to attend events.

As a result of the first wave of the project, the following community-building centers have been created:

Apteka Resource and Recovery Center

Rural Town of Blyzniuky, Blyzniuky Hromada, Kharkiv Oblast

The community-building center opened in a former pharmacy. The idea of a resource and recovery hub arose to help those affected by the war and to support the military.

In Apteka, there is a room for mental health services, a space for art therapy, literary cafes, informal education, the Perekotypole Mobile Cinema, exhibitions of works by local artisans, and charity auctions. Classes on mine safety and first aid increase the hromada’s capacity to address risks related to the war.

² Ihor Tyshchenko. Returning to Public Space (Ігор Тищенко. Повернення до публічного простору). https://ua.boell.org/sites/default/files/urban_studies_3_edit.pdf.

Library Garage

City of Chortkiv, Chortkiv Hromada, Ternopil Oblast

The community-building center opened in a modular pavilion in a library courtyard. The demand for a barrier-free space emerged during an open design session, since the library is located in a three-story inaccessible building that cannot be significantly altered due to its status as an architectural monument.

The Library Garage became a place for literary gatherings, lectures and trainings, art and photo exhibitions, traditional crafts workshops, educational events, and classes of the Silver Age University. Meetings of the Film Club on Zelena Street and the Book Start for Kids club, as well as music jams, are just a few examples of regular gatherings organized by the visitors of the space.

The Unbreakable Veteran Space

City of Nizhyn, Nizhyn Hromada, Chernihiv Oblast

The Unbreakable is the first community-building center for veterans and their families in the Chernihiv Region. Volunteers from the community contributed to the renovation works.

The center provides psychological and legal consultations, has a children's room, a coworking space with a cafe, a gym, and a space for group activities and discussions. Veterans not only take part in trainings and events but also organize and conduct them themselves. Regular feedback helps keep the program of the veterans' space filled with relevant events.

DobroHub: Happy People's Space

Village of Kremydivka, Dobroslav Hromada, Odesa Oblast

The community-building center opened in a starosta district of a "hromada without outskirts." Here, they are convinced of the need to develop all territories evenly, rather than focusing only on the administrative center. The space is located on the second floor of an outpatient clinic building, so to ensure its physical accessibility, an elevator has been installed.

The key characteristic of the space is its adaptability to the needs of visitors. There are 4 rooms for events: a larger transformable space for discussions and yoga classes, a bookstore cafe, a computer room, a children's space, and a workshop.

Snihuri Hub

Village of Yevhenivka, Snihurivka Hromada, Mykolayiv Oblast

The community-building center opened on the basis of the Yevhenivka House of Culture. Its goal is to give people the opportunity to rest, support each other, and develop their creative potential. The hub's work takes into account security risks due to its proximity to the frontline.

The key feature of the Snihuri Hub is its physical and social accessibility. People from different social groups and of different ages, regardless of their physical condition, are able to freely visit and use this space.

Creative KOLOHUB

City of Ovruch, Ovruch Hromada, Zhytomyr Oblast

The community-building center in Ovruch opened in a library. Its goal is to engage different social groups in the life of the border hromada that has been affected by Russian shelling. The renovation also strengthened the capacity of the library's youth department.

The space has already hosted the Charms of Ukrainian Women, a nationwide exhibition of motanka dolls; meetings of the Poetry Without Shelter poetry club, psychological trainings, financial literacy classes, and other activities. Creative KOLOHUB brings together different people who are equally interested in active participation, learning, and joint activities: youth, elderly people, internally displaced persons, and unemployed people who are currently actively searching for employment opportunities.

Na Belebni Clay Space

Village of Cherneshchyna, Krasnokutsk Hromada

The community-building center opened in a 100-year-old clay-walled house. The project's idea is based on exploring the potential of the community's traditional knowledge and skills and engaging this potential in building social cohesion in the hromada, promoting living heritage, and developing initiatives important for post-war recovery processes. Residents of the hromada took part in restoring the space, including in a toloka and in plastering of the house.

CollabZONE

City of Kovel, Kovel Hromada, Volyn Region

The inclusive community-building center opened on the basis of an international youth house. The design and programming of the space were based on the findings of a study of the needs of young people in the hromada. To ensure the center's sustainability, consultations were held with human rights and youth NGOs.

In the space, its users can:

- hold their own educational/cultural event;
- attend an event organized by the CollabZONE team;
- work/study in a comfortable coworking space;
- grow in a community of grown-up and conscientious people united by shared interests.

No Limits Space

City of Horodok, Horodok Hromada, Lviv Oblast

The community-building center opened in the city's public library. The renovations carried out within the project were the first step in implementing the concept of the space's development. Thanks to mentoring support, the library eliminated physical barriers both outside and inside the building.

The library is accessible, so people from different social groups can visit it and take part in discussing issues important to the hromada.

Rollerdrome Space for Free Communication and Leisure Velyka Pysarivka Hromada, Sumy Oblast

The community-building center in the Velyka Pysarivka Hromada is a roller rink in the village club building. During field meetings before the start of the project, people from nearby villages spoke about the need for a place for children and their families to relax. One of the advantages of the club is the presence of an equipped bomb shelter.

The implementation of the project in the Velyka Pysarivka hromada has been suspended due to the intense shelling of the Sumy Oblast, which escalated in February 2024, and the evacuation of people from the hromada. However, in June 2024, the community-building center reopened in evacuation in the city of Okhtyrka, Sumy Oblast.

Part 2 ● Management and Functioning of Community-building Centers

We asked the managers of the spaces about how the activities of community-building centers are funded. After all, this factor influences the sustainability and long-term development of the spaces.

During the study, we recorded that about half of the managers of community-building centers consider **insufficient funding to be the most widespread problem**. Only 4 out of the 10 community-building centers of the first wave of the project have a stable source of financial income. Depending on their capacities and experience, the teams have applied different strategies for attracting resources. Among the sources of funding for the spaces that were discussed with us, the following can be highlighted:

- partial or full coverage of utility fees from the budget of the territorial hromada;
- allocation of funding from the hromada budget for the salaries of the managers under the condition that the space is municipally owned;
- engaging grant funding;
- assistance from local entrepreneurs;
- holding events on a commercial basis.

Some of the spaces were municipally owned, so the managers **appealed to local government bodies with requests to help** complete the renovations or provide funding for the new project.

“Because [the name of a local government body] really liked our project. And they said, OK, do you need heating? We’ll arrange heating. Do you need a roof? We do... The roof will be installed. Do you need new windows? There will be new windows. Everything to make sure that the center works to the fullest extent.”

Manager of a community-building center

However, **there have been changes in the prioritization of expenditures** due to the war, and in some hromadas tax revenues to local budgets have generally decreased. Therefore, it may be more difficult for the managers of community-building centers to obtain funds from local governments. At the same time, in 6 out of the 10 community-building centers of the first wave, the main source of funding is actually allocations from the local budget.

"After all, we do function within the structure of local self-government, and we can also apply for some of these deeper or more specific municipal services. [...] But right now, we have different... The city as the source of our income just has different priorities. Because of the drones, because of the aid, and so on."

Manager of a community-building center

Some spaces also rely on receiving **grant funding**. Writing grant applications and searching for opportunities is carried out both by the team on their own and with the involvement of partner organizations or more experienced specialists. At the same time, this activity requires investing resources in preparing the application, finding partnerships, or learning fundraising, while **the teams' resources are often quite limited**. In addition, some managers mentioned that many of their applications were unsuccessful, and they had to wait for quite a long time for the results of competitions. In our study, all 10 teams of community-building centers stated that they had written applications, but 4 of them had never won in grant competitions.

"So it's been over a year since we opened. March 23 [2025] marked a year. So it turns out that only this July is when we start this grant from [name of the donor]. Only then will we finally purchase everything that we wanted from the beginning."

Manager of a community-building center

There were also cases when a team managed to win a grant for the required amount of funds, but the funding was reduced for reasons unrelated to the activities of the community-building center.

"Right now [name of the donor] has shortened it for us, because initially we applied for 9 months. And now they said there would only be four, because they [the donor] must shut down by October."

Manager of a community-building center

In one of the hromadas, commercial establishments also operate in the building where the space is located, and they pay rent for the premises. **The hromada redirects the funds received from the rent to cover part of the expenses of the community-building center**, in particular the utility fees.

"Since we've given part of the premises to businesses, basically we cover these expenses. Because we rent premises out on a commercial basis, they took them from an auction. Plus, thanks to the rent, we compensate for the utility fees."

Manager of a community-building center

In all interviews, the managers emphasized the importance of the people who work in community-building centers. That is why we asked about who makes up the space's team and how it is managed. The informants explained that approaches to management and team formation depend on available funding, administrative needs, the size of the space, and whether it is in municipal ownership. In most cases, **the team included people in a managerial, an administrative, and a communication position.**

For instance, one of the community-building centers had no separate person responsible for managing it. Since the center was on the balance of a municipal institution, it was the employees of this institution who handled the administration of the space.

"We've decided that [the name of the community-building center] will not, at least not for now [...], have a separate employee with, like, separate financial provision."

Manager of a community-building center

In this case, **a person from the municipal institution** was responsible for planning and coordinating various events, managing the process of attracting necessary resources, and arranging cooperation with other organizations. This approach can limit the capacity for the space's development, since **the person in charge of it may also have other duties in the municipal institution.** It should also be noted that the level of trust in local government bodies in the hromada may affect the perception of the community-building center.

On the other hand, spaces that are on the balance of municipal institutions are able to involve other employees of the institution, for example, to provide services for organizing repair work or holding events with the involvement of people from the local department of culture.

"The whole cultural service center. It's another 50 people, essentially. So in addition to the employees in the villages, there are also 10 more people here, plus they have different specializations. [...] So when the administrators see they cannot do something on their own... For example, they don't know how, then they call a specially trained person who comes and helps them to make sure that everything is ready for the event."

Manager of a community-building center

The managers of most spaces said that they try to actively involve residents of the hromada in initiating and carrying out activities in the community-building center. After all, in their opinion, the **communities that form around** it are important for the existence of the space. From the experience of the informants, such communities over time become increasingly active and take on part of the responsibility for the functioning of the space. In doing so, they ease the work of the team and make the management of the space more horizontal.

"[...] There is this, I'd probably call it autonomy. [...] If someone is from a more permanent community, and in whom there is, let's say, trust, then it [takes place] without [the manager's name] involvement, or anyone from the library, maybe... You can, I don't know, take the keys. [...] So essentially they take on the roles, and, like, it all works on this self-sufficiency, self-responsibility [...]."

Manager of a community-building center

This was mostly mentioned by the users themselves as well, who noted that they felt their own influence on the development of the space. This happened, in particular, because these people had positive experiences of organizing their own events and improving the space through joint work.

"Well, I don't know, maybe I, like, overestimate myself, but I've contributed enough to this space, both materially and, let's say, spiritually, and some other things. So, basically, yes. I believe I have an impact on its development."

User of a community-building center, organizes events for the youth

Other managers spoke about having at least one person who is engaged exclusively in managing this particular space. They mentioned that when looking for such an employee, personal interest and **concern for the development of the community-building center** are important.

“We’ve hired a space administrator for a position in the municipal institution, department of culture, she’s a librarian in a village library here. She also... I mean, there’s a bookstore cafe here, and she handles the administration of the space [...].”

Manager of a community-building center

In one of the community-building centers, the entire **team**, including the manager, **consists of 5 people**. The need for this number of people is related to the fact that different events can take place simultaneously in the space due to the larger number of separate rooms and the availability of sufficient furniture and equipment. This number of people in the team also **allows the space to remain open for more hours**.

“Four [people] work here. [...] We employ a youth worker who manages the youth space, they’re also here. We also employ [a person’s name], she holds cultural events, educational events here. She holds so many events with veterans.”

Manager of a community-building center

In addition, larger teams of the spaces spoke about their **focus on less hierarchy in working relationships** and the aspiration for an even distribution of responsibilities. In particular, this referred to the interchangeability of people in different positions and the desire to avoid unilateral decision-making in the management of the space.

“It’s not like someone is the director, and someone is a subordinate here. [...] It’s a team, as I say. And we decide everything together. When someone calls me a ‘direkhtor,’ jokingly, I say, ‘We’re all direkhtors here, because this is teamwork.’”

Manager of a community-building center

In several cases, the managers who were involved in creating the spaces at the stage of implementing the Community reBuilding project are now working in a different role. For example, one of the managers currently participates as a user and initiates events.

“And now my role is more like, er... As a user and as an initiator of individual events, now more, like, ad-hoc ones. I mean, the space is fully administered by [the name of another manager].”

Manager of a community-building center

The lack of salaries for employees of community-building centers makes it necessary for them to have another, paid job. Under these conditions, the team of the space may become **overworked**, or, due to different life circumstances, people may **lose the ability to work in the space**. This will cause changes in the team, which may negatively affect the sustainability of the space's work.

"Most often, people who work here, they're volunteers, because projects are for a month or three, but otherwise the space works constantly. And to provide for their own family somehow, everyone has a job."

User of a community-building center, conducts art therapy classes

At the same time, people who worked in the space under these conditions said that they were willing to do it and understood that these conditions are justified by the difficulty of finding stable funding. The informants explained that if the community-building center operated only during periods when there was funding for staff salaries, it would not have become a place for community building and communication among the residents of the hromada.

"It's all absolutely voluntary, for example, nobody forces me. [...] Well, the girls, like, say, we don't, like, have funding for you. I say, well, OK then, no problem. [...] Well, I can be useful to someone. [...] This is also very important to me."

Manager of a community-building center

Meanwhile, other people join the work only when there is funding to pay a salary.

"And this team, it's 8 people who work here constantly. [...] But there are also those who just come part-time. We engage them, there's funding, and they're here. No [funding], no [people]."

Manager of a community-building center

The issue of barrier-free access to the spaces was one of the key aspects addressed by the participants of the Community ReBuilding project, since the spaces must be **accessible to all residents of the hromada**. At the same time, specific challenges and their solutions were determined by the

characteristics of the buildings where the community-building centers are located.

In conversations with different people, we often learned that the accessibility of the community-building center is one of the characteristics that positively distinguish it from most other spaces in the hromada.

"In the very center, say, he can't even enter every store or pharmacy [using a wheelchair], but here, the entrance is great, there's everything. If needed, as I said, even this bathroom initially just astonished me, that everything is accessible."

User of a community-building center, teaches fitness classes

In conversations, the informants noted that the accessibility of the space is important for different groups of people, including parents with strollers, children, elderly people, people with disabilities.

"We're happy that, after all, we've managed access-free entrances both to the yard and to the space. And thanks to this, wheelchair users, in particular, as well as people with strollers [...]. Our space looks open to various categories. Young kids who aren't tall enough yet, they can reach the sink, manage in the bathroom on their own."

Manager of a community-building center

People also pointed out specific **elements in the layout of the space that make it accessible**. First of all, these were the presence of a ramp, sufficiently wide doorways, thresholds removed between different parts of the space. This was mentioned both in the context of comfort for those who have already visited the space and in the context of how it helps attract new people to the community-building center.

An important component of accessibility is the **convenience of the space for parents with children**. Community-building centers became more accessible for parents with children, for example, due to the presence of a changing table in the bathroom and a children's room where one can leave their child for some time. In this way, parents who do not have support in childcare can also visit and spend time in community-building centers.

"Sometimes also a mother has nowhere to leave her kids. She leaves the kids in the children's room and participates in peace. There are cases when the mother is alone [...], and the child is young. Even going to the market to buy something, some food or anything, it's very inconvenient with a young child. They come, leave them, and come back in an hour."

Manager of a community-building center

At the same time, the managers found different solutions to ensure the accessibility of the spaces under conditions of limited resources and architectural features of the building. These included a lift platform next to the stairs in one of the community-building centers and an elevator inside the building where the space was not located on the first floor. At the same time, according to the informants, such adaptations may create inconveniences for those who need to use them. For example, in one of the spaces, a manager shared plans to rebuild the stairs into a gradually sloped entrance that everyone would be able to use.

"Our stairs. I also dream of remaking them, so that they're just like a ramp. Because those who arrive with wheelchairs, they use the lift platform to go upstairs. [...] Those who don't have one leg, they are ashamed to use it."

Manager of a community-building center

At the same time, both users and managers noted that difficulties with being able to get to the community-building center arise due to the **inaccessibility of the space around it**. This referred to the lack of a proper sidewalk with lowered curbs at pedestrian crossings, poor road surface, the absence of public transit routes passing near the space. For example, a participant mentioned in one of the conversations that in their hromada, they are working to make the entire area of the town where the community-building center is located more accessible for all residents.

"Now here in [name of locality], there's a real adaptation of the city for people with disabilities. I mean, they're already making ramps [...], cutting down these sidewalks on the side to make them lower."

User of a community-building center, organizes events

Another factor that affects the accessibility of a community-building center for the hromada residents is its location. In this

context, the informants spoke about the importance of **the community-building center being located close to other places that people often visit**, such as schools, kindergartens, administrative service centers, parks, or the central part of town. At the same time, people who live in areas of the town located far from the center may not know about the existence of the space or may find it **more difficult and time-consuming to get there**. The managers mentioned their intentions to work on informing and involving these residents in events.

“It’s just that the people who are right in the center, who have a habit of going to the library or hanging out in one way or another, they know. But those further away, say, in [name of a neighborhood], some other neighborhoods, of course, it’s harder for them to find out somehow.”

User of a community-building center, organizes events

The manager of one of the spaces shared that they provided the opportunity of **free transportation to the community-building center**. In this way, residents of other localities take part in certain events in the space. At the same time, this leads to a situation where people can visit the space only when such an option is available, and not whenever they wish.

“Well, once again, each starostat has their own group chat, for example. We make a call that there’s going to be, say, an information session. [...] If someone needs a lift, like, put a plus. They do, let’s say, five people from [name of locality]. And a bus goes there, collects the people, comes here, the event takes place, we take photos and [bring] them back.”

Manager of a community-building center

During their operation after the completion of the Community ReBuilding project, **some spaces continued to change**. This concerned the events held in them, ongoing renovations, the appearance of different furniture or arrangements in the area around the community-building center. In some spaces, there were also redesigns after the project ended. The managers told us that they changed the purpose of rooms, removed doors in them, turned several small rooms into one large room. These changes were driven by the desire to adapt the space to the needs of the users.

Often, new things appear in these spaces thanks to the initiative of visitors. They bring new furniture, help with

repairs, or purchase necessary items at their own expense. Users told us that because of this they felt greater responsibility for the space and strove to continue improving it.

“The cyber academy, it’s from the youth space. I mean, if we take something small like that, say, the cupboard with the board games, it’s also all ours. Before that, it was an empty cupboard. [...] I mean, there are a lot of small ideas like these. For example, we relocated things, it was also our initiative.”

User of a community-building center, organizes events for the youth

One of the unmet needs mentioned by several managers in our survey was **the absence of a proper shelter near** the community-building center. One manager said that because of this a decision was made to build a shelter inside the community-building center.

At the same time, not all spaces have undergone significant changes since the completion of the project. According to one manager, this was because at the planning stage of the community-building center, they had managed to anticipate almost all the needs of potential users.

“We developed this furniture, these various tables, they can be arranged in different ways. We did the design, planning. [...] Basically, when I come in, it seems like nothing has changed.”

Manager of a community-building center

The informants said that they would like to continue developing the spaces of community-building centers and the areas around them. During the interviews, they shared their **ideas for further work with the spaces**. For example, they mentioned adding **new furniture to the space, expanding it with new rooms** so that more people could be invited to events. They also spoke about specific furniture or zones, such as shelves, larger storage areas, sinks, small kitchens for organizing coffee breaks. They would also like to have **equipment for adaptive sports**, since, in the opinion of the research participants, this would help involve the veteran community in the space.

Another way of developing community-building centers that the informants envisioned was arranging space **for outdoor events**. They mentioned the need for greenery, seating, and

equipment for showing films. In their responses, they also pointed out the need to **set up mobile bomb shelters** near the community-building centers so that in the event of a threat of shelling it would be possible to quickly move event participants to a safer place.

The informants also reflected on how activities for parents and children were conducted at the time. In their opinion, it is important to organize not only family events but also separate events for parents in these spaces. Therefore, the research participants considered it necessary to **arrange zones where children could spend time** with a specialist while their parents are engaged in another activity.

In the context of developing the spaces of community-building centers, the research participants also spoke about **increasing the level of inclusivity**. They said they would like to have tools that would allow the involvement of people with visual or hearing impairments in events. They also mentioned creating opportunities for people to reach the community-building centers without barriers. To achieve this, they considered it necessary to carry out **systematic work on arranging the hromada's space and developing a social taxi service**.

"We would maybe like to have some specific tools for this, maybe some assistive technology for the visually impaired, if people have poor hearing, for example. Or when people have vision impairments."

Manager of a community-building center

Part 3 ● People and Activities in Community-building Centers

Community-building centers are spaces for communication among residents of hromadas, receiving consultations from specific professionals, learning, as well as cultural events, entertainment, sports, and other activities.

During conversations with the informants, we asked them what activities and events take place in the spaces of community-building centers, as well as which people interact with the space and in what ways.

People's main roles at community-building centers

In this study, we have identified the following main roles in which people interact with community-building centers:

- managers of community-building centers;
- users of community-building centers;
- visitors of community-building centers.

The managers of community-building centers are people who head the administrative team of the space or those who were responsible for implementing the Community ReBuilding project in the hromada at the stage of creating the community-building center. The managers formulate the main **goals for the development of the space and oversee the implementation of these goals**. In addition, they are also engaged in seeking additional funding, interacting with local government bodies, and overseeing the programming of events in the spaces.

The users of community-building centers are people who **initiate, organize, and/or conduct activities** in the community-building centers. The users of community-building centers may be part of the space's administrative team (as volunteers or as staff members with regular remuneration for their labor), or they may be active residents of the hromada who have experience in organizing events.

The visitors of community-building centers are the people who **spend time in the space of community-building centers** both at events/activities and outside of them. Unlike the users, the visitors do not take part in organizing or initiating activities in the spaces of community-building centers.

It is important to note that **these roles are flexible and can be combined and changed** according to the requests and needs of people connected with community-building centers. In particular, visitors of the spaces can also become users, and vice versa. In this subsection, we describe in more detail how exactly these roles can be combined and changed.

We asked the study participants which groups of people and how often visit the community-building centers. Some community-building centers, at the time of their creation, were positioned as spaces oriented toward certain groups of people (for example, youth, veterans, active military, etc.). However, conversations with the informants from these spaces showed that **community-building centers attract members of all social groups** regardless of the space's initial focus on one of them.

"I can see anyone here. I can see little kids like these, I can see 90-year-old ladies, or just adults, or, say people in difficult life circumstances, I can see our local businesses discussing something. Basically, I see all kinds of people here, different people. I think our space, this space, doesn't have a specific target audience."

User of a community-building center, organizes events for the youth

Community-building center spaces are quite actively visited and/or used by **young people**. According to the study findings, 6 out of 10 surveyed managers of the first-wave community-building centers named youth aged 18–24 among the groups that most often attend the space. In addition, the majority (8 out of 10) of informants noted that teenagers often visit community-building centers and are present at almost all events. One informant said that young people are more willing to visit modern facilities adapted to the needs of the audience.

"[...] A large material base: a TV, a laptop, speakers, just a large room, beanbags, well, in general everything is great. And yes, this really helps, first of all, to invite experts so that they can conduct training, and second, to hold some interesting activities ourselves. [...] I noticed a trend that young people are much more inclined to visit a nice facility with good renovations than somewhere behind the House of Culture without renovations, where the garage is falling apart, and just sit at some folding tables."

Manager of a community-building center

We also asked the study participants which groups are more likely to take part in events at community-building centers.

The informants noted that among adults, **women participate in the activities of community-building centers more actively than men**. At the same time, among young people (particularly teenagers), girls and boys use the space equally. In addition, there are activities in community-building centers that attract an audience typically consisting of either only men or only women. For example, the participants gave the example of antique collectors' meetings in one of the spaces, where most of the audience are men. On the other hand, some sports activities (yoga, dance, etc.), charity events, activities with children, and educational trainings for parents mainly attract women.

"Among young people, it's equal, both girls and boys attend. Well, what do I mean by youth? Let's say, of school age, up to the age of 20, they're equal. As for more grown-up people, like families, couples, I think it's more women [than men]."

Manager of a community-building center

At the same time, the spaces of community-building centers are **convenient for people with children**. In particular, comfortable conditions have been created for visiting with a child—for example, in one of the spaces there is a children's room where parents can leave their child under the supervision of a specialist and take part in an activity in the community-building center while their child is there. In addition, quite often community-building centers hold events and activities for children of different ages.

In their approach to interacting with users and visitors, community-building centers focus on **creating an atmosphere of trust and safety, both physical and psychological**.

"People who host us in this space make people feel as welcome as possible. So I feel maximum safety in this space. Both physical and psychological. I know nobody's going to hurt me here, nor... We express opinions here and so on. It's especially noticeable in teenagers when you conduct an event. [...] here, they're not afraid to express, to say something, whether it's right or wrong."

User of a community-building center, organizes events

The people who organize events and activities in community-building centers said that they try to **take into account the requests and needs of the audiences in their planning**. This particularly applies to events dedicated to sensitive topics. One

of the informants gave an example that during the organization of group meetings for psychological support, people were grouped according to their experiences.

“We had two support groups for women, and at the time we had both the wives of the fallen and their mothers. [...] We don't group veterans with mothers either, because it's different. Everyone has their own experience and response to that experience. [...] We don't divide anyone in this way, but we bring them together specifically based on interests, on needs, on requests.”

User of a community-building center, conducts art therapy classes

Visitors have the opportunity to initiate and organize an activity or event. Community-building centers usually had no **formal mechanism for organizing or approving events** proposed by residents of the hromada. Instead, people approach the manager of the community-building center personally and coordinate the details of holding the event or activity. The users of the spaces whom we spoke with described such interaction as easy and comfortable for them. However, such communication may be unclear for other residents interested in organizing activities. Therefore, it is important that all people are informed about this informal way of arranging the organization of an activity or event in the space.

In addition to organizing or attending events, people also **take part in the process of developing and arranging the space** of community-building centers and new spaces around them. Such processes of organizing the center can at the same time play the role of an entertainment or artistic activity.

“[...] And [they] created a set of outdoor furniture that can be moved, for [them]selves, for [their] own future events, where they're going to do outdoor literary gatherings, music concerts. And we can't wait, to be honest, for warm weather to arrive this season, because we really want to also do something outdoors, yeah.”

Manager of a community-building center

One of the informants also gave an example that people who helped create the community-building center on a volunteer basis later became active users of this space. In particular, they began to participate more regularly in activities and events (and organize them), and to visit the space during its working hours.

“No doubt, there are people who receive some services, attend trainings at [name of a community-building center] on a regular basis. Some come to help create this. At the very beginning, [...] a lot of work was just done on a volunteer basis. And people who did it, they also then started to attend. So from this moment of creation to, essentially, receiving some benefits from the functioning of this space.”

Manager of a community-building center

Community-building centers are **open for visiting even when no events or activities are being held there**. The informants said that during this time visitors can come to have informal conversations with each other, with the center’s team, and generally spend time in a format that is comfortable for them.

“Kids come here to me before school, “Oh, can we sit with you here?” Well, make yourself a coffee, they sit there. Kids come, take books to read at home, too. It’s not like we only open it when there’s some... some event.”

Manager of a community-building center

The research participants also said that community-building centers, through events and activities, become a platform where **people with different life experiences, who would not interact with each other outside the space, can communicate**. Such events can be educational, charitable, cultural, or entertainment-related.

“So we did a cat bingo. Whoever had seen this, this, this, this, and they stayed there to talk for probably 2 hours, because everyone just wanted to talk about their own kitty. Even in this way, people who’d never met each other, they were like, ‘Let me write down your [phone] number.’ Because they found something in common, and that’s really great.”

Manager of a community-building center

The result of such interaction among the residents of the hromada in the space is the **formation of new communities**. One example is the creation of the hromada’s youth council, which is now engaged, in particular, in fundraising and developing projects in partnership with local authorities. Communities of people with similar experiences also form around the community-building center thanks to the work of support groups, participation in educational programs, and activities for exchanging experiences (including among

parents).

"[...] Regarding communities, [...] it happens that there are meetings of a certain population group which are divided, like, not by the characteristic of age but, like, as mothers of veterans or volunteers, there was a meeting [for them]."

User of a community-building center, organizes events for the youth

The informants also said that there are groups of people who are currently not active visitors of community-building centers. They emphasized that they would like to see these people more often in the spaces of community-building centers, so they try to come up with additional methods to engage them. According to the research results, **among the people who visit community-building centers the least often are elderly people, particularly men**. At the same time, some representatives of community-building centers noted that certain events are popular among elderly people. In particular, these events include charitable and educational ones, such as the University of the Third Age, which offers a range of educational programs for elderly people. As an example of charitable events, they mentioned making gifts for the military, which are regularly attended by elderly women.

"They [elderly women] are such active participants here. And we constantly make angels, on a regular basis, send parcels, that kind of homely warmth. Some knit socks, others do something else. They are regulars with us. Sometimes they even visit the hospital."

User of a community-building center, conducts art therapy classes

Our research showed that the creation of community-building centers has had a positive impact on the activity of elderly people in the hromada. Thus, **despite the fact that elderly people visit these spaces less often, they have gained the opportunity to occasionally gather for joint activities** and interact with each other and with other groups of residents of their hromada. In this way, communities of elderly people are not excluded from the active life of the hromada.

"Ladies of the golden age. And gentlemen of the golden age [gather at community-building centers for joint activities]. What we mean by this is age 60 and above. [...] They have rehearsals here, singing."

Manager of a community-building center

Some informants said that the veteran community currently uses the community-building center somewhat less often. Only in 3 out of the 10 centers, veterans were mentioned as those who most frequently visit the community-building center.

The teams of community-building centers use various **strategies to engage less active residents of the hromada**. One of the main strategies is creating comfortable conditions for potential participants to take part in events or activities. For example, a center may organize transportation to the space to involve people with limited mobility in some events. This particularly applies to residents of other towns and villages in the hromada. One informant said that some events involved more people when the center provided transport for participants. In this context, it is important that the physical accessibility of the community-building center for people with limited mobility be constant and not limited only to certain events or activities. Members of the center teams can also invite potential participants by phone and involve local government bodies and municipal institutions (for example, the hromada's Social Services Center or Administrative Service Center) in the process of inviting people.

The informants also spoke about their experience of interacting with and involving veterans and active military personnel in activities. In particular, their experience shows that **the first step for these people to engage with the community-building center is often family activities**. Therefore, the teams of the centers try to first invite them to attend events together with their families. And during the event, they also introduce them to the space, explain what activities are available there, and what services veterans or military personnel can use.

"[...] a veteran can be [attracted] to such a space through their family, their kid, their wife, through some activities and so on. The culture of seeking mental health assistance is still very poor in our country. We don't have a developed culture in this regard like they do, for example, in the West. And because of this, we emphasized having some kind of family things through which veterans could start coming."

Manager of a community-building center

The teams of community-building centers use different communication channels to inform people about their work, particularly about holding events and activities. They **actively**

use social media for this, such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and others. At the same time, due to the security situation, community-building centers try **not to publish all information about their activities**. In particular, some activities (for children or for veterans and military personnel) are announced offline through the distribution of printed materials or in person. Some community-building centers also apply cybersecurity measures—for example, they try not to create Telegram groups if the events and activities of the space focus on the target audience of veterans. Some community-building centers also **do not publicly share their address**; the available information is a phone number or email.

The teams of community-building centers **collect feedback from visitors** in different ways. Some informants noted that they use online tools (online forms) or conduct offline surveys for this purpose. However, the vast majority of managers of community-building centers **collect feedback and impressions of the space personally through informal communication** with visitors.

“We did surveys [...] and I had a questionnaire, I sent it to people. [...] But] mostly it was offline [in conversations], parents came and we talked to them about what they would like. [...] Questionnaires are good, but it seems to me that if it’s in-person communication, you see people’s reaction, you hear them.”

Manager of a community-building center

The teams of community-building centers also use online tools (mainly Google Forms) for people’s pre-registration for events, in order to be able to plan the number of visitors and, if necessary and possible, organize transportation to the space. Such tools are mainly used by the teams of spaces that work with young people (including teenagers). At the same time, it is important that the managers of community-building centers take into account that online tools may not be accessible to everyone and offer alternative ways of communication and engagement.

The informants also reflected on **what activities they would like to introduce in community-building centers in the future**. Most often they mentioned **sessions with psychologists**, particularly group ones. They shared that they saw the population’s need for psychological support and understood that this need is currently not being addressed. At the same time, they noticed that people were still not inclined

to seek mental health care. Therefore, it seemed to them that it would be a good idea to have such support included among the activities of community-building centers. After all, the openness and trust toward the events that take place in the space could encourage people to seek mental health support.

On the other hand, the research participants said **that not everything planned can be implemented**. This is primarily related to the need to involve external experts who refuse to come to the hromada. According to the informants, such refusals are most often related to the small size of the target audience for which the event would be intended. However, the organizing team often has no way to increase the size of the target audience due to the generally small number of residents in rural hromadas.

“I would maybe like to hold more educational events for the youth or something. But we need to look at the demand from the youth. Basically, our population is small, and if you just subtract and leave the youth, and then the youth who are interested in something, there just really won't be a lot. So it's hard. We try, call them. Plus it's just that the experts who conduct the training sessions never reach this place.”

User of a community-building center, organizes events for the youth

Part 4 ● Impact of a Community-building Center on the Hromada and the Community Beyond It

In our research, we tried to find out what impact the community-building center has on the hromada, its residents, and the physical space around the center. We also aimed to record the significance of the community-building center beyond its immediate location, particularly in its interaction with other towns and villages of the hromada, other hromadas and oblasts.

The space around the center may include a courtyard (of various sizes), some utility buildings, part of a street, and so on. The teams of community-building centers try to **adapt the space available to them** around the center to people's needs and requests and to expand the possibilities for holding activities and events.

Some community-building centers try to **make the space around the center physically more accessible and visually more open** to the residents of the hromada. Thus, the space can easily be seen from the street and people can freely enter the area around the community-building center. For example, the manager of one community-building center said that during the creation of the center the front fence was removed, making the area more open. Now, according to the informant, residents more often linger near the space and can use this area in a way that is comfortable for them. In addition, this part of the space has become more convenient for public events, since the absence of additional fences attracts a larger number of people.

"This [territory], the one adjacent to the street, [...] there used to be a fence, but when it was all being renovated and everything changed in the yard completely, then the fence was also removed, and it added [...] some physical openness. [...] So, basically, this area in front of [a community-building center], it's, like, very... very much like a display window. I mean, even a passer-by can just sit there on a bench, people who come to see the mural or just have a break, walk by with a dog or something. This is what happens on a daily basis, without events. As for the events, this front area was only used during these bigger ones, like fairs, markets, I mean, it's the area where local craftsmen stand, I mean, where you can also just sit and have a break. It's as open, as public as possible."

Manager of a community-building center

At the same time, community-building centers try to maintain **a balance between physical accessibility, the openness of the area around the space, and people's need for anonymity and privacy**. Thus, the territory around the community-building center is zoned: there is both a more public and open section

and, for example, an inner courtyard that cannot be seen from the street or neighboring plots.

"We also [want to] surround the back part of the building with a tall fence, and set up a low fence here. So that you can see everything clearly from the street, but the back area, to make it more secluded, like, for hanging out privately if needed. Because, for instance, it's not always comfortable for veterans when people are looking at them. Young people definitely don't like it very much, when people look at them a lot."

Manager of a community-building center

The territory around the centers is also **improved through participation in other projects** whose mission and audience resonate with the idea of a community-building space. A representative of a community-building center said that active residents of the hromada who use the space had taken part in developing such a project, including in writing the grant application.

"The kids who came here, and we, by the way, said it, that it would be cool if there was some gym equipment outside. So we've ended up in our project, [name of the project]. We [with the Youth Council] wrote an application, we passed, and now we're implementing it. It also came from here, from the space."

Manager of a community-building center

We also asked informants whether anything had changed in the space of their city, town or village near the community-building center after the center was created. In particular, whether the new space had affected the design of the street, the infrastructure, or the pedestrian routes in the town around the community-building center. Some study participants said that the center's team, together with local residents, **actively engage in greening the area around the center**. In particular, these activities can be initiated by people who actively visit the community-building center.

"This has had a very positive impact even on the outdoor planning of the settlement, because we try to improve the area as well, like here... We have [...] a flowerbed... Yeah... And we were planning there... [...] Either to plant a lawn, or flowers, or thujas... I mean, so that it would look nice and beautiful."

Manager of a community-building center

"All the flowerbeds, almost, were planted by the mothers of the fallen. [...] They were coming from the cemetery, cleaning. [...] And they came here, [...] they said: "Girls, let's plant some flowers here for you." [...] Some brought daffodils from home, some brought peonies, some brought something else. And they planted a flowerbed here and a flowerbed there. [...] They were the ones who initiated it."

Manager of a community-building center

Among the study participants, there were those who said they noticed **increased activity of hromada residents** on the street/streets around the community-building center. This happens, in particular, in hromadas with lower populations, where some streets, including central ones, had been inactive before the community-building center was created.

"The town center has come to life. The intersection has come to life. Because people have appeared here, people come here and see that the building is not just standing there. So this has been the impact."

Manager of a community-building center

In addition, the creation of a community-building center in some hromadas influenced **the formation of other hubs of collective activity** around the space for residents of the city, town or village. For instance, one informant gave the example that a larger number of young people began to gather in the area near the community-building center.

"The center for youth has moved here, where all the young people hang out, it shifted more towards this side of our town. And they still, even if they're going somewhere, they'll all come in here to say hello, hang out for 20 minutes, wait for someone."

User of a community-building center, organizes events for the youth

Apart from the active movement of people around the community-building center, there is also **increased commercial activity** near the space, namely the organization of guided tours. This activity near the community-building center can increase its visibility and attract more people to it. As one informant said, the community-building center became one of the stops on a tour through the hromada's town.

"As for commercial activities, I'll probably draw more attention to the tours that come here. They may stop here. There were even... There have been offers, but they were never implemented, for a tour group that walks around the place, sees something, for them to stop at the [name of a community-building center] and have a lecture, workshop or something there."

Manager of a community-building center

We also asked the study participants to talk about **other public spaces** available in their towns or villages that have functions similar to community-building centers. Among such spaces, informants mentioned houses of culture, libraries, education institutions (in particular, schools), and other municipal institutions. These spaces were mainly used for activities and events before the community-building centers were created. At the same time, some informants noted that these buildings were in poor condition and lacked sufficient technical equipment. Informants said that people **preferred community-building centers** for organizing activities or events, because these spaces are more convenient to use thanks to their material and technical equipment as well as accessibility.

"Occasionally, when this space here is already occupied, we move to the library. But in general, we try to book this space specifically, we adapt to the dates, because it's more convenient than the library."

User of a community-building center, organizes events for children

The teams of community-building centers also **interact with other localities, hromadas, and oblasts**. Informants talked about cooperation with NGOs from other cities, particularly about organizing activities for hromada residents. Managers of community-building centers also noted that residents of other hromadas visited the center to **learn from the experience of creating such a space**. This is especially true for those centers that, at the time of their establishment, were the only examples of similar spaces in the rayon or oblast.

"They came, looked, learned about every location, how it was created, what works and how. They [residents of another hromada] were like, 'Cool, we don't have this, we're gonna do it.' They've opened a hub in their town."

User of a community-building center, conducts art therapy classes

In addition to learning from experience, residents of other towns and villages in the hromada, neighboring hromadas, or oblasts also visit community-building centers to receive a service or consultation or to take part in an activity or event. Spaces focused on a specific social group particularly attract residents of other hromadas. An example of this is community-building centers that actively cooperate with the veteran community and the military or organize events for internally displaced people.

“We don’t deny [visiting the community-building center to] anyone, it’s not like only [name of locality] and that’s it. I mean, they’re all veterans.”

Manager of a community-building center

A significant share of study participants noted that **the creation of a community-building center contributed to cohesion among residents**. In the hromadas where such a space is the only one of its kind, its key role as a platform for interaction and communication between local residents has become especially evident. Informants also emphasized the multifunctionality of such a space: community-building centers are used by some of the hromada’s municipal institutions (for example, the space may host or be used for certain events by the Child Services Office, the Cultural Services Center, the Youth Space, etc.); cultural, sports, and other events are held there, as well as meetings of grassroots resident initiatives; while at the same time the centers serve as a place for informal communication among people.

“In addition to cultural events, there have been these very important events held here, such as when we voted regarding amendments to the Hromada Statute, we voted here. When the Strategy for Hromada Development was being created, we also voted here. We voted, discussed it, there were 60 or 70 people from the entire hromada. Some kind of social events for people in difficult life circumstances were here. Essentially, it has changed, I can’t even describe the extent to which [name of the community-building center] has changed the community in general. Right now it’s the key place for [name of locality] in general, not counting the Hromada House.”

Manager of a community-building center

Some informants also expressed the opinion that the creation of a community-building center **encourages resident activity** and motivates residents to participate more actively in the hromada's life.

"I mean, these small triggers kind of set off whole layers, and maybe future communities that will want to emerge in the city, and give them space. And first of all, probably, give them courage. Like, come on, do it, look, we had these, and those, and this is how we did it, let's do this. It probably gives its own impetus. Because a lot of events are happening in the city now, and that's cool."

Manager of a community-building center

In addition, a community-building center is a place for hromada residents to turn to, in particular, when the spaces of other initiatives close. One informant gave the example of a community-building center that took in the community of an organization whose previous space had been closed because their funding had ended.

Community-building centers also become platforms where, through activities, events, and the provision of certain services and consultations, the hromada gains knowledge and experience in supporting particular social groups. This especially concerns spaces with a target audience. For example, one study participant noted that the community-building center made it possible to focus on working with a specific group of people, and that through the center's work the team is learning how to work specifically with the veteran community, military service members, and their families.

"The impact of the space is that it's more focused attention specifically on this category. We are constantly learning with the girls, constantly. We constantly think about how it was done in other countries."

User of a community-building center, conducts art therapy classes

Study participants noted that **people in the hromada are becoming more knowledgeable** about human rights issues and communication with different social groups thanks to the informational and educational events held in the community-building center. Among such events, they mentioned training for parents on communicating with children.

"We've started holding more informational events. And there are still many, many things planned, because you see today's challenges, what parents need. And with parents, sometimes you discuss whether such events are interesting for you, whether you would like to keep attending them, whether they are needed. They have an impact! [...] Parents are becoming more knowledgeable, and also in communication, because they actively attend, they take part in discussions."

User of a community-building center, organizes events for children

In some hromadas, through active participation in the activities of the community-building center, users of the space **develop a sense of belonging to the community** around the center. One informant said that hromada residents unite around the space and start to associate themselves with it in a certain way. It is important to note that such a sense of belonging can create identification either with the hromada as a whole or only with the space. In the latter case, it is important for the teams of community-building centers to ensure that identification with the space eventually turns into a sense of belonging to the entire hromada. This will help to build the positioning of the community-building center as part of the hromada, a space around which residents come together.

"First of all, it united them, because it's a place where different communities meet, but they are united around their center, and, let's say, even these, as I said, the fairs that we organize. All kinds of schools, kindergartens, just moms, grandmothers, they already represent [the community-building center]. They even present themselves not as [name of locality] center, but as [name of the community-building center]. That's how we say it, '[name of the community-building center] is making the location.'"

Manager of a community-building center

It is also worth noting that community-building centers and the spaces around them can serve as examples of multifunctional non-commercial spaces accessible to all hromada residents. Their operation demonstrates how public spaces can function on human-centered principles: being open to all social groups, physically accessible, and managed according to a horizontal, democratic principle. As a result, other communities and hromadas can learn from this experience and try to create similar spaces.

“It seems to me this is, like, just an example of a slightly different use of open public space than usual, because there aren't any other such places yet, and we'd like this to become an inspiration to transform other places—of which there are actually many with potential—into something multifunctional, people-friendly, barrier-free. Well, at least now there's something to point to, not somewhere far away, but like, you can say, 'Here it was cool, this is how it can work.' And of course, there's still room to grow, and some nuances we didn't take into account in the territory, too. But that's also, like, experience we can work with further and try to do something else in the city based on that experience.”

Manager of a community-building center

● Conclusions

In this study, we outlined the main principles of managing and operating community-building centers, their role in the lives of hromada residents, and the significance of these spaces both within the territorial boundaries of the hromada and beyond.

As a result of conversations with the study participants, we identified a number of aspects that are key to the functioning of community-building centers. These include a physical space that is convenient and adapted to people's needs; sustainable funding and horizontal management that helps people feel the space is "theirs" while at the same time ensuring adherence to rules for shared use of the space; engaging people and building a community around the centers with efforts to make sure that all social groups take part in this community; using community-building centers not only as venues for events but also as spaces where people can communicate and support each other.

The findings of the study show that the functioning of community-building centers during the first year after the completion of the first wave of the Community reBuilding project was as follows.

Physical space

- **Accessibility** of community-building centers sets them apart positively from most other spaces in hromadas. Physical accessibility was one of the priorities during the implementation of the Community reBuilding project. As a result, the established centers are accessible for different groups of people, including parents with strollers, children, older people, and people with disabilities. At times, the teams of community-building centers faced challenges related to the inaccessibility of existing premises for people with limited mobility. To improve accessibility even under such constraints, they made decisions to install the necessary infrastructure. For example, an elevator was installed in buildings where the community-building center was located on the second floor.
- **Location convenience** also plays an important role in the functioning of community-building centers. Among the spaces we studied, some are located in the center of the settlement or near other places that people fre-

quently visit. Such spaces include, in particular, education institutions and social protection offices. This helps attract more attention to community-building centers.

- The spaces of community-building centers are furnished with modern **material and technical equipment**, which allows the center's team to organize various events and activities. These technical facilities, in particular, allow teenagers and young people to both study and organize various activities (for example, e-sports competitions).
- **Having several rooms in one space** allows the teams of community-building centers to simultaneously organize activities for different audiences so that groups of visitors can feel comfortable staying in the center.
- Community-building centers try to make the space around the center **physically more accessible and visually more open** for hromada residents. This allows residents to easily enter the space or use the area around it in a way that is comfortable for them.
- Community-building centers try to maintain **a balance between physical accessibility, the openness of the area around the space, and people's need for anonymity and privacy**. This is achieved by zoning the territory, where there is both a more public and open part and, for example, an inner courtyard that is not visible from the street or neighboring plots.
- The territory around community-building centers is also **improved through participation in other projects** that resonate with the idea of the space. Active residents of the hromada are engaged in such initiatives, particularly at the stage of preparing grant applications.

Management and funding

- The teams of community-building centers mostly try to organize the management of the space on the principles of **horizontal interaction**. In particular, managers of community-building centers noted that they sought to involve hromada residents in initiating and implementing activities in the space. Thus, hromada residents participated in arranging the space and later became active users, taking part in or organizing various events. Some

of these people have become part of the team and now hold regular activities in the space. Residents also sometimes initiate activities such as greening the area around the centers. Informants emphasized that the community itself is the foundation of the existence of community-building centers.

- **The role of the teams** of community-building centers is key for the managers we spoke with. The composition of the team and management approaches depend on funding, administrative needs, the size of the space, and the form of ownership. Typically, a community-building center team includes a managerial position, an administrative position, and a communication position.
- For some community-building centers, the main source of funding is **allocations from the local budget**. This can pose a challenge if the priorities of budget distribution change. Therefore, it is important for the teams of the spaces to take this into account and, if possible, diversify their funding sources.
- The lack of **remuneration** for the community-building center team can undermine the sustainability of their work: people are forced to combine their activities in the space with other jobs, which leads to excessive workload or resignation of staff members. At the same time, **motivation and an understanding of the space's value** allow its team to continue working on the center's development. This indicates that sustainable functioning of a community-building center requires not only motivated and value-driven people, but also predictable funding.
- In conditions of unstable funding, the teams of community-building centers employed various **strategies to attract resources**, in particular covering utility fees from the territorial hromada's budget, allocating funds from the hromada budget for salaries, attracting grant funding, receiving support from local entrepreneurs, and organizing events on a commercial basis.

Activities and interaction with people

- Community-building centers are places for events and activities in various formats and for different audiences. In particular, they are **prepared to engage members of all social groups** regardless of the initial focus of the space on one target group.
- Community-building centers have become platforms for interaction between various social groups of hromada residents, where people with different life experiences can communicate informally, sharing both their difficulties and enjoyable events. As noted by participants in our study, these were often people who did not interact with one another outside the center's space.
- The most active users and visitors of community-building centers are young people and women with children. Hromada residents have **the opportunity to initiate an event** by means of an informal oral request to the managers. At the same time, in the absence of a formal procedure for initiating an event, it is important that people are informed about how they can do this.
- Older people, particularly older men, as well as veterans and active military service members, visit community-building centers less frequently. In this regard, the center teams apply different **strategies to engage less active** hromada residents. These strategies include focusing on creating comfortable conditions during the planning and organization of events or activities. In particular, this involves arranging transport for older people and/or people with limited mobility, engaging veterans and military personnel through family activities, as well as personally inviting target audience members by phone calls. Despite the fact that attendance increases when transport or personal invitations are provided, these practices **require systematization and integration into the daily work** of community-building centers.
- Community-building center teams actively use social media to inform the public about the activities of their centers and to announce events and activities. At the same time, it is also important that community-building center teams consider people who do not use social media and spread information through other

communication channels as well.

- Some community-building centers use various tools to collect **feedback** from visitors, including online tools. However, managers of community-building centers prefer feedback received in informal conversations with people. In this context, it is important to achieve a sustainable, clear, and convenient mechanism for different groups of people to provide feedback on the activities of the spaces.

Reflecting on the impact of community-building centers on the community, study participants noted that the establishment of these spaces has **contributed to the cohesion of residents**. In some hromadas, the center has become the key platform for interaction and communication among people. In addition, the emergence of this space has encouraged resident activity, motivating them to take part in community life. An example of such activity is, in particular, the foundation of a youth council on the basis of a community-building center, which united local youth and provided an opportunity to create projects for the benefit of the community. It is also important that community-building centers and the spaces around them have become examples of multifunctional non-commercial public spaces that are accessible to all hromada residents and operate on people-centered principles. These spaces are open not only during events but also at other times that are convenient for people, physically accessible to everyone, and managed according to a horizontal principle through the involvement of people interested in the space's activities and the regular collection of feedback. Thus, other communities and hromadas can adopt the experience of creating such spaces.

We also compared the role of community-building centers, as observed in the findings of the study, with the initial idea the team had when creating the Community reBuilding project. We can conclude that community-building centers mostly perform the functions we hoped to achieve. Specifically, this refers to the following.

- **Strengthening social ties and fostering cohesion among hromada residents.** People with different life experiences, identities, and views interact with one another in the spaces of community-building centers. This helps people understand one another, share and discuss their experiences and perspectives, and support each other.
- **Creating infrastructure for the development of civil**

society. Community-building centers become spaces where local initiatives emerge and grow. Later, these initiatives transform into the foundation for more sustainable activity—for example, local civil society organizations.

- **Access to educational opportunities for different social groups.** In community-building centers, residents of various ages and backgrounds obtain informal education on different topics and gain opportunities for professional retraining. This is especially important for people who have been forced to leave their homes due to the war and adapt to new communities, as well as for veterans in the process of returning to civilian life.
- **Meeting the cultural needs of hromada residents.** Cultural practices are among the activities that take place in community-building centers. Hromada residents participate in various artistic, theatrical, musical, athletic, and charitable events. This is especially relevant for hromadas which lack modern public spaces for holding events of this kind.
- **Access to social services and support.** Community-building centers are places where hromada residents can receive consultations, mental health assistance, as well as services related to social integration/reintegration and counseling.

However, we've also recorded the difficulties that community-building center teams face in their work. Most of these difficulties are critical and cannot be resolved by the teams alone. Therefore, in order for the community-building centers to continue performing these functions, they **need support** in several key aspects.

1. **Achieving financial sustainability of community-building centers.** It is necessary to support the ability of community-building centers to provide payment for their team's work in order to maintain professional management of the spaces. It is also important for community-building centers to be able to cover operational costs, expenses for material and technical equipment, furnishing and maintenance of amenities, etc. After all, funding for such expenses is often difficult to include in grant projects.
2. **Development of community-building center teams.** Since the effectiveness of community-building centers depends on the management capacities of the team,

their knowledge and skills, it is also necessary to support teams in developing their capacities. In particular, this concerns training center teams in methods of communicating about the space's activities to attract a wider audience, strategies for engaging the least active community members, effective tools for mobilizing additional resources, as well as deepening skills in managing community-building center teams.

3. **Security and energy resilience during the war.** Many community-building centers do not have a bomb shelter or lack a properly equipped entrance to it, which forces some spaces to close and suspend all activities during air raid alerts. Therefore, community-building centers need support in creating or equipping civil defense shelters. It is also important to maintain the energy independence of these spaces in case of power outages caused by Russian shelling of Ukrainian infrastructure.