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Places for community and community resilience: case of Verhalenhuis Belvédère

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ABSTRACT

This study explores whether and in what ways the socio-spatial dynamics of Verhalenhuis Belvédère contribute to community resilience and social connections in Katendrecht. Located in Rotterdam, the neighbourhood's layered social history and evolving diversity make it a distinctive context for studying community places. Drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews, the research identifies key socio-spatial qualities that position the place as an important form of community infrastructure, enabling network-building and reinforcing people – place ties. The findings highlight three ways the place supports community resilience: (1) fostering spatial agency through participatory co-creation of the physical environment; (2) promoting networked solidarity across diverse social groups in the neighbourhood; and (3) enabling identity grounding through cultural recognition and memory work connected to Katendrecht's heritage. The study demonstrates how such community-driven places can help counteract the disruptive effects of urban renewal while maintaining neighbourhood identity. These insights underscore the importance of public space design that prioritises cultural recognition, grassroots participation, and flexible programming to support communities undergoing transformation. Operationalising socio-spatial frameworks through resident-collective management, participatory governance, and targeted design interventions can enable integrated design – planning – policy approaches, helping planners and policymakers foster more connected and resilient communities.

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Socio-spatial dynamics; communities; community resilience; Verhalenhuis Belvédère

Introduction

Urban regeneration processes often present a complex set of social challenges. While redevelopment can revitalise physical infrastructure, it may also generate pressures related to social fragmentation, displacement, and the erosion of community bonds (Musterd and Ostendorf 2008). Understanding how community resilience can be supported within changing urban environments is therefore increasingly important. In this context, community-oriented spaces may play a significant role by providing places for gathering, dialogue, and shared cultural practices. Rotterdam's Katendrecht offers a relevant setting for exploring these dynamics.

Originally a quiet 19th-century village, Katendrecht was annexed by Rotterdam in 1895 and became central to the city's industrial expansion. The excavation of Maashaven and Rijnhaven harbours transformed the area into a bustling maritime district (Gemeente Rotterdam 2024; see Figure 1). This development attracted a diverse population of harbour workers and migrants, shaping a distinctive social fabric (Verhalenhuis Rotterdam 2012). Over time, Katendrecht evolved into a lively cultural hub, known for its nightlife, jazz scene, and red-light district. During World War II, Katendrecht also served as a refuge for people escaping persecution (De Bund n.d.).

In the post-war decades, urban renewal policies, aimed to improve housing conditions and the quality of the built environment (Snel *et al.* 2011). However, these policies also triggered gentrification, drawing more affluent residents and reshaping the social fabric of the district (Lees *et al.* 2008). More recently, redevelopment initiatives and investments in infrastructure and public space have contributed to Katendrecht's transformation into an increasingly attractive residential neighbourhood (Baptist 2017). These changes have improved physical conditions and attracted new residents but have also reshaped the neighbourhood's demographic composition and raised questions about social cohesion and belonging among long-standing communities (Poelen 2016, Baptist 2017). This dynamic presents both opportunities and challenges for community cohesion, as the interactions between diverse groups – shaped by varying cultural backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and life experiences – can either strengthen or strain social ties.

Today, Katendrecht is home to a diverse mix of people, including long-standing residents connected

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Figure 1. Left: aerial image of katendrecht, 1922 (municipality of Rotterdam, city archives). Right (two above): 1900 – café restaurant belvédère (municipality of Rotterdam, city archives). Right (two below): 1981 – the belvédère, Katendrechtse Bewonersorganisatie (KBO).

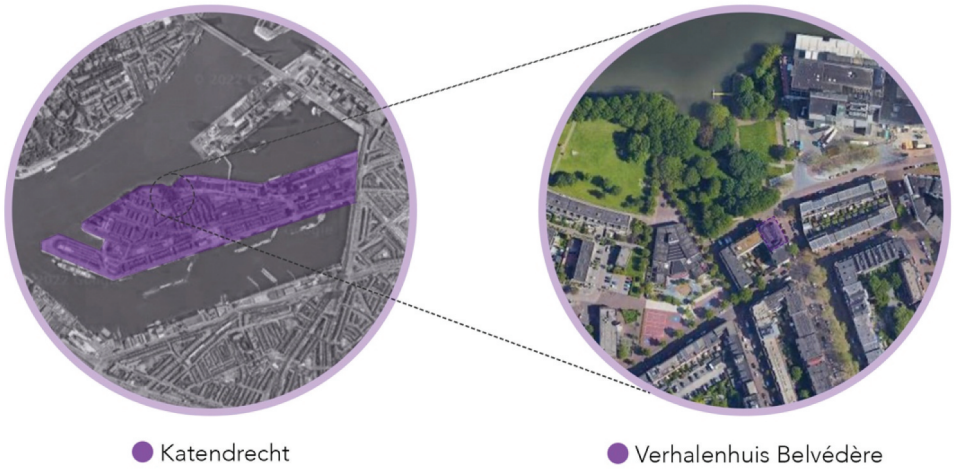


Figure 2. Location of Verhalenhuis Belvédère in Katendrecht.

to the former harbour district and newer residents attracted by recent redevelopment (Gemeente Rotterdam 2024). Between 2013 (4,506 residents) and 2023 (6,681 residents), the population climbed by approximately 48%, while the number of households also increased significantly from 2,114 to 3,385, and dwellings from 2,105 to 3,276 (AlleCijfers.nl 2024, Wijkprofiel Rotterdam 2024). In 2024, approximately 40% of residents reported a non-Western background and 12% a Western background, underscoring significant cultural diversification (OverUwBuurt n.d.). While these demographic shifts provide important context, the present study does not aim to analyse urban regeneration itself. Instead, it examines how a community-based cultural initiative operates within this evolving socio-spatial environment.

In this context, the study poses the following research question: Whether and in what ways the socio-spatial dynamics of Verhalenhuis Belvédère contribute to community resilience and social connections in the context of Katendrecht?

Verhalenhuis Belvédère (Stories House Belvédère) provides a compelling case for analysing how social, cultural and artistic initiatives foster interaction and inclusivity within a dynamic neighbourhood and beyond. Located in Katendrecht (see Figure 2), the initiative functions as a community kitchen, exhibition venue, and gathering place where residents, artists, volunteers, and visitors engage through storytelling events, exhibitions, performances, and shared meals.

Verhalenhuis Belvédère is housed in a historic building constructed between 1884 and 1894, which has long served social and cultural functions within the neighbourhood (Cultureelerfgoed.nl n.d.; see Figure 1). Originally opened in 1894 as 'Bellevue,' it began as a café-restaurant, the building later hosted local jazz performances in the 1930's. Over the years, it has hosted a variety of events, including dancing, cinema, magic shows, wrestling, storytelling, and exhibitions contributing to Katendrecht's cultural life over time (Verhalenhuis Rotterdam, n.d.-c). his layered history provides an important

backdrop for its contemporary role as a community-oriented space.

Since 2009, Verhalenhuis Belvédère has operated as an independent cultural initiative rooted in community participation. The building was acquired through a collective effort by its founders, supported by crowdfunding and external funding, enabling the organisation to maintain a degree of autonomy in its programming and activities (Malherbe 2022). It continues to serve as a significant cultural and social hub, engaging diverse groups through a broad range of activities and programmes. Today the space attracts approximately 20,000 visitors annually and hosts a range of cultural and social activities that bring together diverse participants.

Participants include residents, artists, volunteers, community groups, and visitors who engage with the space through cultural programmes, storytelling events, exhibitions, and shared meals organised at the community kitchen. These activities create opportunities for interaction between different groups within the neighbourhood, making the initiative a relevant site for examining how social connections and shared narratives emerge through everyday spatial practices.

Rather than functioning solely as a cultural venue, Verhalenhuis Belvédère operates as a community-oriented platform where local actors contribute to the organisation of events and activities. Residents participate in programming, assist with the space's upkeep, and collaborate om projects that reflect the local histories and experiences. This participatory model reflects broader shifts in urban governance toward more community-driven forms of cultural production and public space management (Francis *et al.* 2012, Sennett 2018, Müller 2022).

Theoretical background: building community resilience through public spaces and community interaction

Community resilience is a multifaceted concept, essential for understanding how communities adapt to and recover from disruptions, both sudden and gradual. Public spaces, as integral components of the built environment, play a critical role in fostering resilience by serving not only as physical locations but as dynamic arenas where social relations unfold and socio-spatial transformations take place (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991, Madanipour 2003). 'The production of space' underscores this duality, framing public spaces as both products of and catalysts for social interaction, where power, memory, and identity are continually negotiated (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991).

At the heart of urban resilience lies the ability of communities to not only withstand adversity but to adapt and thrive – a dual capacity often termed 'bouncing back' and 'bouncing forward' (Richardson 1980, Lamson 1982). This aligns with David Harvey's (2012) call for a 'right to the city,' where resilience is tied to collective agency in reshaping urban environments. Such agency is particularly evident in processes like urban regeneration, where Sherry Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation' highlights how inclusive decision-making in public space design can strengthen long-term community adaptability.

Within the field of strategic planning and design, the focus on enhancing community resilience emphasises the importance of social processes, particularly the formation of collaborative networks and 'third places' (Oldenburg 1989) – informal hubs that foster trust and local identity and help communities preserve and protect the elements they value most. These networks, as Klinenberg (2018) argues, constitute 'social infrastructure,' form the foundation of resilience, empowering communities to respond to both sudden shocks and longer-term transformations (Lerch 2017).

Resilience is thus shaped not only by individual actions but by the relationships that people maintain with one another and with their environments. The spatial context of these relationships plays a key role in the emergence of community resilience, highlighting the interconnectedness between people and place (Saja *et al.* 2018). Public spaces, as sites of interaction, become arenas for 'everyday urbanism' (Jacobs 1961, Whyte 1980), where collective resilience is cultivated through shared practices. By providing venues for meaningful social engagement and the exchange of ideas, these spaces strengthen a sense of community and shared resilience.

In this sense, public spaces are often conceptualised as intersections where social relations unfold within physical settings, especially as communities engage with and shape their environments. These spaces serve as crucial sites for structuring urban social life, acting as visible arenas for socio-spatial change (Lofland 2017, Kent 2019). Research on the public realm – including studies of street life and plaza design – demonstrates how spatial configuration shapes spontaneous social interaction, while analyses of embodied memory reveal how these spaces simultaneously preserve collective identity during periods of disruption (Jacobs 1961, Whyte 1980, Connerton 1989). Everyday practices, such as gathering in informal eateries or local bars, further emphasise how the built environment influences lived experiences and the diversity of social interactions. Rather than viewing space as static, architectural objects, public spaces are seen as fluid, evolving domains of ongoing interaction and meaning making (Attiwill, 2011).

Thus, community resilience must be framed as both reactive and proactive. While the ability to manage immediate crises remains essential, equal focus should

be placed on building the long-term capacity to navigate more predictable shifts. Within this framework, public spaces serve as essential components of social and community infrastructure. These environments do more than provide physical gathering points; they actively support the formation of social networks and place attachment – key ingredients in fostering a resilient, cohesive community over time (Klinenberg 2018, Manzo and Devine-Wright 2021, Asadollahi Asl Zarkhah *et al.* 2025).

Asadollahi Asl Zarkhah *et al.* (2025) further emphasise that public spaces are not merely physical backdrops, but active elements in shaping community resilience. The framework developed in their study underscores the interdependence of community networks, people-place connections, and community infrastructure, suggesting that these dimensions must be addressed in an integrated manner to strengthen long-term adaptability. When public spaces facilitate everyday interactions and nurture local identity, they become platforms where adaptive capacities can take root – enabling communities not only to withstand disruptions but also to evolve through shared engagement and spatial belonging.

Methodology

To explore socio-spatial dynamics, this study adopts a qualitative ethnographic case study approach aimed at developing an in-depth understanding of socio-spatial interactions and lived experiences within the specific context of Verhalenhuis Belvédère. A combination of observations and interviews was chosen as the primary data collection method. This approach enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings by capturing both qualitative insights and subjective experiences through interpretative phenomenological analysis (Lyons and Coyle 2007, Smith *et al.* 2009).

In addition, this research includes an analysis of the physical attributes, incorporating micro-spatial analysis, and mapping techniques to further investigate the interrelation between spatial and social dimensions. Attention was given to architectural configuration and interior spatial qualities, including visibility, permeability, seating arrangements, and the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces. These spatial characteristics were examined to understand how architectural design and interior organisation influence patterns of interaction, accessibility, and the formation of social connections within the space.

Rather than producing generalisable quantitative measures, the research focuses on interpretative insights derived from observations, interviews, and spatial analysis to explore how social practices and spatial configurations interact in the everyday use of the place. This multi-method approach facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the study location.

In accordance with the study's ethical approval and data management plan, detailed demographic characteristics of participants, such as age, gender, or ability, were not systematically recorded. The analysis therefore focuses on the social interactions and community practices observed within this setting rather than on the demographic profiling of participants.

Observations

Observations provide a valuable means to document how social processes, behaviours, and structures both shape and are shaped by the physical spaces users engage with (Zeisel 2006, Yin 2009). In this study, the method was grounded in principles of environmental psychology and anthropological fieldwork, particularly participant observation, wherein the researcher develops familiarity with the context through repeated presence in the setting over time (Guest *et al.* 2013). Through the systematic observation of behaviours and interactions within the site, the study gained insights into the social dynamics and the influence of spatial factors.

A total of 12 observational sessions were conducted over a period of three years. Each session lasted between two and three hours, depending on the level of activity and the nature of the programming at Verhalenhuis Belvédère. To account for temporal and situational variations, observations were carried out at different times of the year and across multiple seasons. These included sessions on both weekdays and weekends, at various times of day – noon, afternoon, and evening – as well as during a range of events such as storytelling sessions, music nights, and community dinners. This approach enabled the identification of recurring activities and behavioural patterns and ensured exposure to a broad spectrum of temporal and social conditions, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of spatial dynamics.

In addition to the 12 structured observational sessions that formed the core of the documented data collection, the researcher's engagement with the site extended through repeated informal visits over the course of the study period. These included attending events and spending time in the space during everyday activities, such as community meals. These visits supported familiarity with the setting and moving towards an emic perspective of everyday interactions, practices, and spatial use.

As the space primarily hosts cultural programmes, community meals, and storytelling events, most participants engaging with the space during observations were adults involved as organisers, volunteers, or visitors.

The observations focused on capturing the main characteristics of the space and understanding how people interacted with and behaved within it. Particular attention was given to communities and their micro-stories, aiming to explore how they used, appropriated, and experienced the environment. Emphasis was placed on how the built environment supported, shaped, or constrained specific uses and social exchanges.

Observation data were recorded through field notes, photographic documentation, and spatial mapping of behavioural sequences. Observations followed a framework that considered the actor, the act, significant others, relationships, context, and setting (Zeisel 2006). The guiding questions for observation included: Who is present, and who might be absent? What activities are participants engaging in, and what activities are not taking place? How do the activities and movements of different communities relate spatially? How do spatial configurations influence behaviour? In what ways does the environment encourage or inhibit certain uses? Using this method, data were collected on activities, relationships, behavioural opportunities, environmental constraints, and the spatial dimensions of human communication (Hall and Hall 1966).

This method is inherently interactive and exploratory in nature (Whyte 1993, Yin 2009, Guest *et al.* 2013). Applied across multiple settings and timeframes, it enabled the observation of both episodic occurrences and recurring behavioural patterns, revealing how the socio-spatial dynamics of Verhalenhuis Belvédère contribute to broader processes of community interaction and the formation of social connections.

Interviews

Relying solely on observations to understand how spatial configuration influences behaviour, inclusion, exclusion, and lived experiences presents significant challenges and potential biases. To address this, interviews were employed as a key method for diverse perspectives. Two complementary approaches were adopted: (I) formal, audio-recorded interviews with key stakeholders, including the founder and manager, assistant, the event coordinator, and two volunteers; and (II) informal conversations with 20 users of the place and individuals in the surrounding neighbourhood, for which detailed notes were taken. In the presentation of quotations, participants are identified according to three categories – key stakeholders, volunteers, and visitors – to provide contextual perspective while preserving anonymity.

The interview and conversation questions were open-ended, encouraging participants to reflect and articulate their thoughts more fully (Elmendorf and Luloff 2006). The formal interviews followed a semi-structured format guided by thematic prompts rather than fixed questions (see Table 1). These prompts served as starting points for conversation and allowed participants to elaborate freely on their experiences and perspectives. Informal conversations, recognised as a valuable qualitative method, provide nuanced insights that structured interviews might overlook (Swain and King 2022). Combining formal interviews with informal conversations enriched the depth and validity of data collection, integrating structured, reflective insights from key stakeholders with spontaneous, everyday perspectives of users and community members (Roulston 2010, Brinkmann 2014).

All interviews were conducted with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis. The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, which focuses on exploring and interpreting participants lived experiences (Smith *et al.* 2009).

Findings: socio-spatial dynamics and community resilience

Understanding the interplay between social dynamics and the built environment is critical to framing the results of this study. The built environment not only provides the physical setting for social interaction but also actively shapes and reinforces key social processes,

Table 1. Example of the interview guide used in the study.

Interview Stage	Guiding Prompts
Introduction	Introduction of the researcher and explanation of the study. Participants were invited to briefly describe their connection to Verhalenhuis Belvédère and how they first became aware of or involved with the place.
Personal involvement	Conversation about participants' roles in the space (e.g. organiser, volunteer, or user) and how they typically interact with or participate in activities taking place there.
Experiences of the space	Open discussion about participants' experiences of the space and the types of activities or events that take place there.
Social interactions and neighbourhood context	Reflections on how people meet, interact, or spend time in the space and how the place relates to the broader neighbourhood. Participants were also invited to reflect on who tends to use the space and whether certain groups appear present.
Perspectives on the place	Participants were invited to share their views on how the place is used and perceived within the neighbourhood, including any changes they have observed over time.
Closing reflections	Opportunity for participants to add further comments or raise issues that had not been discussed during the conversation.

such as social networks and trust. In this section, the data has been arranged according to recurring themes abstracted from the empirical findings. By interweaving data with reflections, the analysis examines how specific socio-spatial dynamics within the case study contribute to fostering community resilience.

Key findings include the creation of a welcoming, living room-like spatial arrangement that promotes inclusivity and comfort, and the presence of a liminal zone that extends the space beyond its physical boundaries, encouraging spontaneous encounters and informal engagement. The dynamic scalability of Verhalenhuis, along with its programmatic flexibility and adaptive use, allows the space to respond to evolving community needs, support the inclusion of diverse initiatives and operate effectively across different scales. Community-driven governance fosters agency, shared responsibility, and active participation. Building networks through collaborative initiatives and ongoing dialogue strengthens social cohesion.

Cultural recognition and acknowledgment play a critical role in deepening sense of belonging and trust and reinforcing social ties. Storytelling further strengthens these connections by creating opportunities to share lived experiences, contribute to collective memory, shape shared identities, and nurture a deeper sense of belonging. Ultimately, these interwoven elements, which shape the shared sensory experiences, support the development of a deeper sense of belonging to place. Together, they demonstrate how spatial configurations, and social practices interact to enhance the community's ability to navigate challenges and sustain collective well-being.

Welcoming atmosphere and living room-like spatial arrangement

A defining characteristic of this space is its welcoming atmosphere and living room-like spatial arrangement. As one interviewee noted, 'The feeling you get here is very welcoming; it feels like you are at home' (Visitor, informal conversation, May 2023). While all floors are freely accessible to the public, the ground floor plays a particularly significant role in fostering this sense of warmth and familiarity. With its cozy ambiance, it evokes the comfort of a living room, creating an inviting and familiar environment (see Figures 3–5).

A key feature contributing to this atmosphere is the presence of large windows, which enhance transparency and visual accessibility. From an architectural perspective, these openings act as spatial interfaces that visually connect the interior to the surrounding streetscape, lowering the threshold for entry and encouraging spontaneous engagement from passers-by (see Figure 4). This permeability strengthens the relationship between the interior environment and public life outside. Additionally, the entrance, strategically positioned at the intersection of two streets, increases visibility and accessibility, naturally inviting passers-by to enter and engage with the space (see Figure 3). As interviewees noted:



Figure 3. Verhalenhuis Belvédère (authors archive, 2021).



Figure 4. Left: ground floor (authors archive, 2022); right: (Verhalenhuis Rotterdam, n.d.-a).



Figure 5. First floor_ exhibition hall, (top left: signed 'Enrica Masi', Verhalenhuis Rotterdam; other images: Verhalenhuis Rotterdam and authors' archive, 2021-2022).

> Windows and door open, a lot of light I like it, I love the building, I love old characteristic, it has a story. (Volunteer, interview, May 2023)

> You can see inside and walk in, and the door is always open. (Visitor, informal conversation, May 2023)

> Downstairs is an open and inviting public space, open, I think that is important. After the war, people started making it more closed, throwing away doors and using small windows. But it's important that we put the doors back as they were 100 years ago. (Key stakeholder, interview, June 2023)

The seating areas are arranged to encourage informal gatherings. Soft lighting and warm colours, and elements like curtains, furniture, pictures, old wooden pieces, and cups – each with its own story – frequently mentioned in interviews, further enhance the relaxed and inviting atmosphere.

Throughout interviews and informal conversation, users consistently expressed their appreciation for the welcoming atmosphere. They emphasised feeling at ease and highlighted how the spatial arrangement naturally encouraged spontaneous conversations and social engagement. As interviewees noted:

> You feel welcome, with a mix of different cultures, and everyone is treated equally. The concept, like the kitchen, feels like your living room, but bigger. The idea behind it is that the food is for everyone, and the price is affordable. You can meet new people in a nice space—not just at your table—but with the chance to connect with people from different cultures. They offer opportunities to do that. Volunteers help in the

> kitchen, and even those who are struggling in life can come and feel the warmth. That's what I feel. You can also engage in activities with others, and it all brings people together, helping each other. It isn't a commercial thing, it isn't a business; it's about love for culture, music, and people. When you see that, you want to be part of it and be here. (Volunteer, interview, May 2023)

> The atmosphere is inviting and safe—it's like a big, large living room where people who don't know each other meet, and food helps. (Visitor, informal conversation, June 2023)

> Some people don't mind setting at a table with people who don't know but some prefer to sit with people they know. People who come for the first time more tend to sit with those they are familiar with. I don't know, if I come with four and there isn't a table for four, I like to split and sit with others or invite people to come and join our table. Some people say, 'o no', and some would join. (Visitor, informal conversation, May 2023)

> The whole setting invites you to sit with others, someone may join your table so if you look for a place to have your table and stuff maybe not the right place. (Volunteer, interview, May 2023)

The spatial arrangement and welcoming culture of this space play a crucial role in fostering social connections and a sense of belonging. Deliberate design elements – such as transparency, accessibility, and inviting seating configurations – not only create an inclusive environment but also encourage spontaneous interactions and meaningful connections.

As highlighted in the interviews, the welcoming nature of the space fosters a sense of inclusion, where cultural differences are acknowledged and celebrated, and everyone feels valued. These features encourage community members to engage, support one another, and build social networks. A resilient community is characterised by strong social ties and a shared sense of place, enabling individuals to navigate challenges collectively and adapt to changing circumstances. Therefore, the design and atmosphere of this place not only enhance user experience but also play a vital role in strengthening community resilience.

Liminal zone

In this case study, the liminal zone is distinctly expressed through the arrangement of chairs and tables on the sidewalk, effectively extending the space beyond the building's boundaries. Additionally, the use of the green area across the street further blurs the boundaries between private and public spaces, creating an expanded zone for interaction. This spatial configuration encourages informal gatherings and enables the temporal appropriation of public space.

These practices align with literature on liminal spaces, which emphasize their role in fostering social engagement and community resilience. By providing flexible spaces for interaction, the liminal zone facilitates informal social exchanges that contribute to community cohesion and belonging (Melis *et al.* 2020). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2021, sidewalks were adapted with tables serving sweets and drinks, creating spaces for safe social interactions (Figure 6). The ability to reconfigure public spaces in response to evolving community needs enhances inclusivity and fosters a dynamic environment for collective action.

In this context, the spatial arrangement not only strengthens social ties but also strengthens the community's capacity to navigate challenges through informal, community-driven practices.

Dynamic scalability, programmatic flexibility, and adaptive use

Another significant outcome of our study highlights the dynamic scalability of Verhalenhuis, emphasising the interplay between social and spatial factors. The space seamlessly adapts to diverse events and activities, embodying programmatic openness and spatial flexibility (see Figure 7). Beyond serving as a daily gathering place for the local community in Katendrecht, it attracts visitors from across Rotterdam and neighbouring cities, fostering a broad cultural exchange. As one of the Key stakeholders noted, 'It has a local function, people come for coffee, but it also has a function for people from elsewhere.' This dual role reinforces its significance as a meeting point for diverse groups.

Verhalenhuis accommodates a variety of uses – some visit exhibitions, while others use the rooms for private meetings. This fluid programming allows it to cater to both structured and spontaneous interactions, reinforcing its role as a dynamic and inclusive hub, aligning with the participatory and inclusive approach to heritage spaces (Malherbe 2022).

Moreover, the space serves as a meeting point for residents with different connections to Katendrecht, including long-term residents and more recent arrivals to the neighbourhood, while maintaining a strong focus on Rotterdam. As a key stakeholder explains:

> We wanted to create a place for connection between these two groups, but our main focus was Rotterdam. Also, because of its geographical location, I think it was the place for migrant stories. That was our goal when we started. We said, 'We have more than 200 nationalities, and now that we are doing the People's Kitchen, we have new food, new stories, new culture, sharing the richness of the city.'

Through art exhibitions, cultural events, and storytelling via photography and performances, the space connects individuals and communities, strengthening



Figure 6. Spatial configuration at the intersection of Rechtshuislaan and Katendrechtselaan, illustrating the liminal zone created using sidewalks and adjacent green space, two below: (Verhalenhuis Rotterdam, n.d.-b).

social ties and enhancing resilience. As a platform for cultural celebrations, artistic showcases, and academic gatherings, it facilitates meaningful interactions, cultivates social networks, and reinforces community bonds. By providing an open environment for expression, idea exchange, and collaborative initiatives, Verhalenhuis plays a pivotal role in fostering a dynamic and interconnected community.

Community-driven governance

Another key insight from our study relates to the governance of the place. The story of the Verhalenhuis illustrates how community-driven governance can foster community resilience in urban spaces. As an initiative carried out by the community, the space is rooted in a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. This governance model strengthens the space's ability to function effectively for the community's benefit, as involvement in decision-making processes enhances empowerment, accountability, and agency. Collaborative governance models have been shown to strengthen community capacity, while participatory governance fosters empowerment and accountability within community settings. Together, these elements contribute to the enhancement of community cohesion and resilience (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Fung 2006). In practice, the organisational model combines community participation, volunteer contributions, project-based cultural funding, and occasional space rental for events and activities, which together support the long-term functioning of the initiative.

> We felt the need for the Verhalenhuis, especially in a diverse city, but after a year and a half, the municipality of Rotterdam decided to restore the building and turn it into apartments. The next month, we were told to leave, and the only option left was to buy the place. For a year and a half, we were working out of Flinx, a small space where we started with food and presentations. Gradually, we gained support, with 30 people agreeing to help. Rabobank provided a loan, and Vaillantfonds, a major fund in the Netherlands, offered to support us for two years. In 2012, we purchased the building and began the slow process

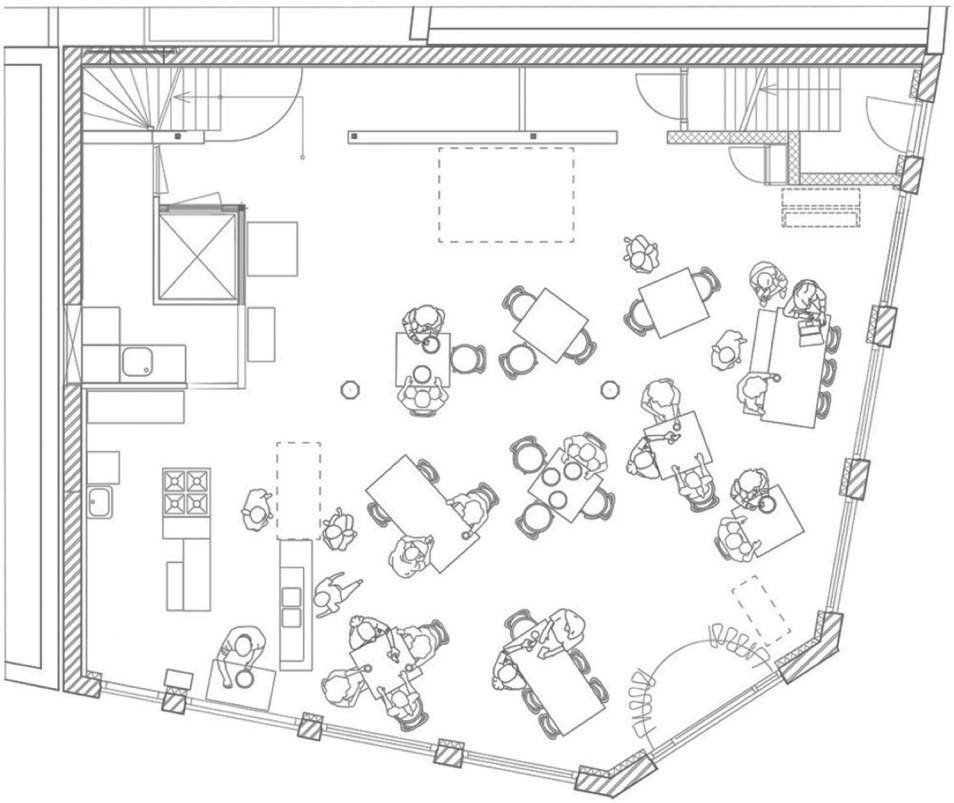


Figure 7. Ground floor plan illustrating the spatial arrangement and the ways in which people engage in diverse activities, reflecting patterns of adaptive use (based on authors' field observations, 2023).

> of rebuilding. With little money, what mattered most was the growing sense of community—people helped in various ways, from donations to offering furniture. The space officially opened in 2013, with the community playing a crucial role in its development. (Key stakeholder, interview, June 2023)

Quotes from interviews reflect important elements of community-driven governance, which emphasises trust, collaboration, and local autonomy over formal structures. Below are some examples, along with an analysis of their relation to these principles.

> Sometimes people come in after the event has started, and maybe they don't even pay for their entrance. But no one really checks—everything here is based on trust. (Volunteer, interview, May 2023)

In a community-driven governance model, trust is a foundational principle, allowing people to participate freely without rigid checks or enforcement. It suggests a system where individuals are trusted to contribute, participate, and engage in a way that fosters collaboration.

> In different cultures, municipalities have different roles. Not everyone feels safe with the municipality. In some cultures, it's like, 'Oh, that is a governmental organization', and they don't share because they think it can jeopardize them. So, it also depends on where you are from. (Key stakeholder, interview, May 2023)

This quote highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in governance and community-driven initiatives. It suggests that community members might have different levels of trust in formal institutions (such as municipalities), and thus, governance structures need to be adaptable and responsive to those cultural differences to foster inclusion and participation.

> There, it's like, 'This is what we will do for you, and this is the plan'. But here, there is the freedom to be creative—they provide what you need but let you fill in with what you want. (Visitor, informal conversation)

This quote reflects the flexibility and autonomy that community-driven governance encourages. Rather than imposing a rigid plan from above, it emphasizes empowering individuals and community members to take ownership and contribute creatively, aligning with the principles of decentralisation and self-governance.

> Many volunteers are here, doing things out of pleasure. (Key stakeholder, interview, May 2023)

> You do it from your heart, you do it because you want to. (Volunteer, interview, May 2023)

Both quotes highlight the concept of volunteerism driven by personal motivation and passion, which is central to community-driven governance. Volunteers

contribute because they genuinely care and feel connected to the cause, not because they are required to or compensated. This intrinsic motivation fosters a sense of ownership and shared purpose, encouraging individuals to participate freely and make a positive impact, driven by their desire to contribute rather than external rewards or mandates.

Building networks

Verhalenhuis Belvédère plays a pivotal role in building networks within its neighbourhood by creating connections between individuals, groups, and various institutions. Its strategic collaborations with local organisations, such as Theatre Walhalla, Kopi Soesoe, and other community partners, facilitate a broad, interconnected network that extends beyond its immediate space. This approach helps ensure that different communities have access to a wide range of activities and opportunities for engagement.

As one interviewee noted, 'It's not just by people who pass by or me telling you, but also the organisations that work with us here' (Key stakeholder, interview, June 2023). The network is actively nurtured through partnerships and collective efforts. The organisation's outreach initiatives serve as a bridge to connect various community groups.

The importance of these connections becomes particularly evident in the role Verhalenhuis plays in bridging together residents with different relationships to the neighbourhood. As one Key stakeholder highlighted, it was crucial to 'make a place for connection between those two groups' – long-time residents and more recent arrivals – especially given the social and economic differences shaped by ongoing urban change. Verhalenhuis's efforts to create an inclusive space facilitate understanding and interaction across these distinct communities.

Reaching out to isolated or underrepresented groups is central to its strategy. As one Key stakeholder emphasised, 'It is important to reach out to people, so we are not waiting for people to come in, when we want to make a connection between people, we go to them and invite them to come.' This proactive approach is particularly evident in their outreach to senior apartment complexes and other areas where individuals might be more isolated. As a volunteer explained, 'I think it is more important to go to Bellefleurhof senior apartment complex, people sitting behind the door all alone, we ring the bell and ask them to come over.' Through these efforts, Verhalenhuis ensures that even the most disengaged individuals are actively included in community activities, reinforcing the network and fostering a more inclusive environment.

The success of these outreach efforts is exemplified in events such as the Bulgarian family's celebration of their child's first birthday at Verhalenhuis. Although initially hesitant, the family embraced the invitation to host the event, which became a remarkable gathering, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds – elderly residents, students from China, and others. As a key stakeholder reflected, 'We invited totally different people, elder people, Chinese students . . . it was the main attraction of the party. It is so nice to get to know each other.'

These actions underscore the importance of active engagement in building resilient and sustainable community networks. By establishing relationships with local organizations and reaching out to individuals across various parts of the neighbourhood, Verhalenhuis Belvédère strengthens the social fabric of the community and enhances collective resilience.

Cultural recognition and acknowledgment

By celebrating cultural diversity through events that honour different traditions such as food, music, storytelling, and dance, Verhalenhuis Belvédère not only fosters cultural expression but also affirms the value of each distinct group. This recognition contributes to participants' sense of self-respect and belonging, while cultivating a shared atmosphere of pride in diversity. In doing so, the space reinforces social bonds within the Katendrecht neighbourhood and beyond.

Examples include Yalda Night, where Iranian poetry, music, storytelling, and food celebrate the winter solstice, and Chinese New Year festivities with dances and traditional meals. Greek Music Nights, Cape Verdean Music Nights, and Moroccan Music Nights feature live music, dance, and cuisine, promoting cultural pride and mutual respect. Additionally, Surinamese, Bulgarian, and Colombian folk cuisine nights showcase culinary traditions while fostering cross-cultural connections.

As interviewees noted:

> In Cape Verde, dance and music and sharing food are part of the culture. . . . here we can dance, enjoy music, and share traditional meals. (Visitor, informal conversation, June 2023)

> Here we say the story of our country, we talk our language, the place we eat our food, listen to our music. (Visitor, informal conversation, May 2023)

Such initiatives are instrumental in enhancing community resilience, as engaging with and valuing cultural heritage not only preserves traditions but also strengthens social cohesion (Fabbricatti *et al.* 2020). Research indicates that culture and cultural heritage are pivotal in citizen engagement and can drive social, environmental, economic, and governance innovation (Fabbricatti *et al.* 2020).

Moreover, the communal dining and storytelling experiences at Verhalenhuis Belvédère align with the

concept of food sovereignty, emphasising the right to culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods. This practice fosters community building, social cohesion, and the transmission of knowledge, contributing to social-ecological resilience (Doran 2024).

By valuing diverse cultural narratives, Verhalenhuis Belvédère strengthens social cohesion, deepens place attachment, and enhances community resilience through cultural acknowledgment and shared experiences.

Storytelling as a bridge: memory, identity, and belonging

The power of stories within Verhalenhuis Belvédère is significant, serving to connect people, preserve histories, and create a shared sense of understanding. By offering a space where citizens can exchange personal narratives, storytelling supports reflection, strengthens social ties within and between communities, and contributes to forming stronger communities (Slingerland *et al.* 2021). The spatial characteristics of the building further enrich this social exchange. With its layered history visibly etched into the structure, the space evokes a sense of continuity and authenticity. Its openness and transparency invite engagement and foster connections. Together, the spatial configuration and storytelling initiatives strengthen participation, deepen social bonds, and nurture a shared sense of belonging.

A key example of this is the People's Kitchen, which started as an initiative to bring people together over food and stories. 'We started with people's kitchen, with sharing food and story, every month someone to cook and share life story and after three months more people ask, and it was full' (Key stakeholder, interview, June 2023). This illustrates how an act of sharing a meal can evolve into a meaningful exchange of narratives, strengthening communal bonds and fostering deeper connections among participants.

Oral history is another significant component of Verhalenhuis Belvédère's work. This place not only provides a space for storytelling but also actively preserves these narratives. As a key stakeholder describes, 'It is important that people know we are also doing with oral history that is why we have the listening room, and the headphones, not that people are using that but to show that we are working with oral history. So, you can also ask us to record your story, it is how it works now for 5 years or so.' The ability to record and archive stories ensures that voices from different communities are not lost over time but are instead documented for future generations (see Figure 8).

The impact of storytelling extends to various community-driven archival projects. A key stakeholder highlights how a request from an elder community member led to the documentation of black history through objects and personal stories. Similar efforts have been made to capture the Chinese, Cape Verdean, and Jewish histories within the city. 'She came to me 2 years ago saying that we



Figure 8. Second floor_ story studio (top left: signed 'Enrica Masi', Verhalenhuis Rotterdam; bottom right: authors' archive, 2021; other images: Verhalenhuis Rotterdam, n.d.-c).

have an archive, recording the story of black community through objects and everything else, she asked me to make a Chinese version of it in Verhalenhuis to collect Chinese history and heritage, but it was big and we didn't have enough space.' These initiatives reveal how storytelling is not only a means of individual expression but also a method of preserving cultural heritage and identity. By housing these archives, the building becomes a vessel for preserving cultural heritage, illustrating how spatial configuration supports the long-term preservation of collective memory and identity. This example highlights the tangible link between storytelling and the built environment, emphasising that archiving cultural narratives inherently depends on the availability of dedicated physical space.

Furthermore, Verhalenhuis Belvédère's collaborations with artists and historical figures illustrate how storytelling interweaves with the artistic and cultural fabric of the community. 'We also have a good connection with Wederopbouw two visual artists from Katendrecht, Wally Elenbaas and Dolf Henkes he left everything all his paint to the state, at cultural heritage agency to Netherlands we work a lot with their art and story we also work with a lot of artist from the same generation in Rotterdam who had a strong connection with the rebuilding of the city after WW' (Key stakeholder, interview, June 2023). These stories contribute to a collective memory, reinforcing the connection between past and present generations.

The building itself embodies a rich history of multicultural presence, further amplifying the power of stories. Interviewee notes, 'I always tell people it comes through the traces of the different communities you feel in the house since 1894 people use this building in different ways, the Suriname jazz club, Greece night club, Turkish wrestling arena, the Jewish hideaway. So, this is what you feel in the atmosphere of the house' (Visitor, informal conversation, June 2023). The very structure of Verhalenhuis Belvédère serves as a living testament to the narratives of those who have passed through it, creating a sense of continuity and shared history.

Ultimately, storytelling within Verhalenhuis Belvédère is more than just an exchange of words; it is a practice that builds relationships, preserves histories, and strengthens communities. By providing a platform where diverse voices can be heard and both individual and collective narratives are documented, it actively contributes to the resilience and cohesion of the society it serves.

Sense of belonging

Verhalenhuis Belvédère is more than just a cultural space; it is a place where people from diverse backgrounds find a sense of belonging through shared sensory experiences. By engaging multiple senses – olfactory, auditory, gustatory, and visual – the space fosters an environment that feels familiar, welcoming, and inclusive. As one of the stakeholders (June 2023) describes, 'I thought the city needed a place that you can come back to – a place where you can be, leave for some time, and then return. Some people participate every week, some once a year. It's a place that gives a homely feeling and the surprise of getting to know others you don't know.' This statement encapsulates the role of Verhalenhuis Belvédère as a space where community members experience both continuity and discovery, reinforcing a deep-rooted sense of connection.

The olfactory elements play a significant role in evoking memories and cultural ties, particularly through the scents associated with the sea and the port. As one visitor noted, '[The city] has a lot with the sea and the port, and our people are connected to the sea.' This connection to place and history further strengthens the feeling of familiarity, making the space resonate with visitors who share these associations.

Moreover, the communal experience of food is central to fostering belonging. One visitor highlighted the contrast between typical Dutch eating habits and the warmth of shared meals at Verhalenhuis Belvédère: 'I think the food is very important. In the Netherlands, we don't have time to eat; most people eat sandwiches. Here we sit and eat together, [a] warm meal – it already feels very warming.' This emphasis on communal dining creates a familiar atmosphere, where the act of eating together becomes a medium for cultural exchange and social bonding.

Beyond sensory experiences, the space cultivates a strong social fabric where individuals care for and support one another. As expressed in interviews, '[We] always give attention to people; people really care for each other,' and 'Everyone helps each other. If something happens to someone, they will take care [of] her/him too, [it] feels like family' (Volunteer, interview, May 2023). These testimonials highlight the ethos of mutual aid and solidarity that defines Verhalenhuis Belvédère. By fostering an environment where people feel seen, heard, and supported, the space transcends its physical dimensions and becomes a true home for its community.

In blending sensory engagement with social connection, Verhalenhuis Belvédère exemplifies how spaces can actively cultivate a sense of belonging. Through its intentional design and inclusive ethos, it transforms storytelling into a lived, multisensory experience that welcomes and unites individuals across cultures and backgrounds.

Discussion

The connections and collaborations nurtured at Verhalenhuis Belvédère illustrate how socio-spatial

dynamics emerging through the interaction of spatial design, programming, and community participation can foster community resilience and meaningful social connections within contexts of urban regeneration. The welcoming, living room-like atmosphere of the space exemplifies what Oldenburg (1989) described as a 'third place' - an informal public setting that facilitates regular, voluntary interactions essential for community building. This is further supported by the design of liminal zones – transitional spaces between public and private realms – that allow visitors to ease into the social environment, much like successful urban plazas observed by Whyte (1980).

Beyond its social programming, the architectural and interior design of the building also contributes to this function. The spatial layout, visual openness, and flexible interior arrangements, including shared tables and adaptable seating, create conditions that encourage informal encounters and shared activities. These architectural characteristics demonstrate how spatial design can support the emergence of social infrastructure by shaping patterns of visibility, proximity, and comfort within communal environments.

Verhalenhuis Belvédère also demonstrates a degree of programmatic flexibility reflecting Lefebvre's (2014) notion of the 'production of space,' where spatial environments are shaped through everyday communal practices. It's community-driven governance model reflects Arnstein's (1969) principles of citizen participation, transforming what might otherwise be a passive cultural venue into an active platform for co-creation. Rather than simply occupying the space, residents are empowered to co-produce it, fostering robust social networks that echo Castells (1983) understanding of the foundations of urban social movements. This becomes especially critical in Katendrecht, a neighbourhood undergoing rapid redevelopment, where the risk of displacing long-standing communities is high. While Verhalenhuis Belvédère provides a platform for community participation, it is also important to acknowledge that such initiatives operate within broader urban regeneration processes that they cannot fully control. Cultural and social spaces may help mitigate some effects, yet they cannot entirely prevent structural pressures such as rising housing costs or demographic shifts associated with gentrification.

The Verhalenhuis's commitment to cultural recognition and acknowledgment brings Massey's (2005) notion of space as a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far' into practice, ensuring that Katendrecht's diverse histories and identities remain integral to its redevelopment narrative. Storytelling initiatives function as bridges between memory, identity and belonging, creating what Connerton (1989) terms 'incorporated practices' – bodily, habitual performances that sustain community memory. Together, these elements cultivate a deeply rooted sense of place that is both locally grounded and aligned with as Harvey's (2012) call for communities to claim their 'right to the city.'

The socio-spatial dynamics of Verhalenhuis Belvédère contribute to community resilience and social connectedness through an integrated approach that combines spatial agency, networked solidarity, and identity grounding (see Figure 9). It is important to emphasise that the findings do not suggest that physical space alone produces community interaction or resilience. Rather, the case of Verhalenhuis Belvédère illustrates how spatial characteristics and social practices operate in a mutually reinforcing manner. Activities such as shared meals, storytelling events, and cultural programming activate the spatial setting, while the architectural configuration of the building supports these interactions by enabling visibility, accessibility, and flexible use. In this sense, community dynamics emerge through the interplay between spatial environment and social practices rather than through spatial design alone. These findings are also relevant to urban health, as social connectedness, sense of belonging, and community resilience are well established as key determinants of health and well-being in urban environments (Barton and Grant 2006, World Health Organization 2008). Taken together, the socio-spatial dynamics observed in Verhalenhuis Belvédère contribute to conditions that support health and well-being through everyday social interaction and inclusion.

First, by enabling residents to actively co-create the space – through participatory governance structures, collaborative programming, and storytelling practices – Verhalenhuis Belvédère transforms physical infrastructure into social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2018). This transformation challenges the alienating effects of top-down urban regeneration, instead realizing Lefebvre's and Nicholson-Smith (1991) vision of resilience through the collective production of space. Here, spatial agency becomes a key vehicle through which communities assert ownership and shape their environments in ways that reflect their needs and identities.

Second, the space functions as a site of networked solidarity, intentionally bridging diverse social groups including long-standing residents, recent migrants, and artists. These encounters generate what Jacobs (1961) described as the 'social capital' of neighbourhoods – informal ties that build trust, reciprocity, and a sense of mutual responsibility. The resulting social networks form a web of support that, as Castells (1983) argued, can be mobilized to resist displacement and exclusion. In the context of Katendrecht's rapid transformation, this solidarity strengthens the capacity of local communities to withstand socio-spatial disruption. Nevertheless, participation in such spaces may not be evenly distributed across all social groups. As with many community initiatives, certain residents may



Figure 9. Diagram illustrating the socio-spatial dynamics of Verhalenhuis Belvédère and their contribution to community resilience, adapted from the framework of communicative resilience enabled by public spaces.

remain underrepresented due to language barriers, time constraints, or differing levels of social capital, which can influence who benefits most from these forms of social infrastructure. In addition, some residents may feel less connected to or interested in the initiative due to differing preferences, priorities, or perceptions of the space, highlighting the challenges of engaging all segments of a diverse neighbourhood. In some cases, residents may also choose not to engage due to differing views about the initiative's cultural orientation or inclusive ethos, illustrating how participation in community spaces can be shaped not only by practical barriers but also by personal and ideological preferences.

Third, Verhalenhuis Belvédère nurtures people – place connections through a sustained emphasis on cultural recognition and memory work. By embedding storytelling and historical acknowledgment into its everyday practices, the space affirms multiple identities and narratives, aligning with Massey's (2005) concept of space as a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far.' These practices generate deep attachments to place, fostering the kind of rootedness that Manzo and Devine-Wright (2021) identify as essential for place-based resilience. Memory becomes not only a form of cultural preservation but also a strategy for navigating change without erasure. At the same time, the process of representing community narratives raises questions about whose stories are prioritized and how collective memory is curated. Ensuring that storytelling initiatives remain inclusive and reflective of the neighbourhood's full diversity requires continuous attention and reflexivity from organisers.

Conclusion

Through this integrated socio-spatial approach, Verhalenhuis Belvédère demonstrates how public spaces can function as important sites of community life, echoing Jacobs' (1961) observations on the social role of neighbourhood spaces Verhalenhuis Belvédère exemplifies a framework for community resilience enabled by public spaces – where community infrastructure (spatial agency), community networks (solidarity), and people-place connections (cultural grounding) mutually reinforce one another in an ongoing cycle of spatial and social reproduction (Asadollahi Asl Zarkhah *et al.* 2025).

While this study provides insight into how socio-spatial dynamics operate in Verhalenhuis Belvédère, the findings are based on a single case and should therefore

be interpreted as context-specific rather than universally generalizable. Future research could expand the scope to comparative cases, particularly those collectively managed by residents, to clarify how participatory governance models operate across different public spaces and urban contexts. Such studies could also explore how community spaces designed for different age groups and abilities shape socio-spatial interactions and forms of community resilience. In addition, examining how design interventions – such as liminal zones and adaptive spatial layouts – interact with local policies may further illuminate how spatial and governance strategies foster social connectivity. This would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how socio-spatial frameworks, such as Asadollahi Asl Zarkhah et al'.s (2025) triad, function in public spaces and inform integrated design – planning – policy approaches for resilient communities.

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