

A DESIRABLE PLACE TO LIVE: THE MEANING OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL ACCIDENT FOR CITY-MAKING IN CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIA

Original scientific paper
Submitted: 5. 1. 2023.
Accepted: 28. 3. 2023.
DOI: 10.15176/vol60no103
UDK 504.1(474.5)
71(474.5)

AUŠRA TELEIŠĖ

The Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius

This paper focuses on an unexpected, nonroutine and destabilising event – a fire at a tyre recycling factory, which occurred in the Lithuanian city of Alytus on 16 October 2019. It discusses how an environmental accident, which affected all residents of the city and their relationship with the environment, brought new meanings to the city. It analyses the lived experiences of the city residents as well as images, the transformation of values, social initiatives and movements that occurred in Alytus during the accident. This includes citizens' involvement in the affairs of the city afterwards as well. The article concludes that the environmental accident mobilized the community and encouraged it to re-evaluate the meaning of the factory, and the aspects that make the city a desirable place to live.

Keywords: environmental accident, place-making, the city, Lithuania

INTRODUCTION

Just like other Lithuanian cities whose growth and development during the Soviet era was closely linked to industrialization, Alytus faced sudden and radical post-Soviet deindustrialization after the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990. The city went through a reduction in the volumes of industrial enterprises, their fragmentation into smaller economic units, and bankruptcies, which caused long-term social and economic decline in urban life (Teleišė 2023: 45–93). Factories, being a significant factor for a desirable place to live during the Soviet era, collapsed and the city that had previously attracted new residents collapsed along with them as well. The residents of Alytus, reflecting on the demographic decline of the city, say that it is a place where “there is nothing to do” for young people (Teleišė 2023: 158–167).

Today, making the urban environment a desirable place to live presents a challenge for Alytus and other industrial cities in Lithuania. A fire at a tyre recycling factory, which occurred in Alytus in 2019, was an unexpected, nonroutine and destabilizing event that disrupted the everyday life of the city. It became an impulse that inspired rethinking of what a desirable place to live is.

Anthropologists emphasize that a disaster is not a static and isolated event, but rather a phenomenon that continues and unfolds in time and space (Fortun 2001: 7; Button 2010: 17; Faas 2016: 14). A disaster is perceived as part of a larger set of interwoven events (Button 2010: 17). It is a systemic and destabilizing process (Faas 2016: 14; Oliver-Smith 2020: 96), the effects of which, according to A. J. Faas, continue long after the initial incident subsides (Faas 2016: 14). A disaster is a productive event (Bond 2013: 707), capable of influencing cultural configurations (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002: 20; Barrios 2017: 161) and creating conditions for reshaping the changing world order that it draws into visibility (Fortun 2001: 10). The situation of a disaster occurring in the city exposes spatial politics and community understanding of urban life (Caverly 2018; Oliver-Smith and Goldman 1988), the interaction between survivors' practices of recovery and government plans (Oliver-Smith 2005; Doughty 2020), and raises the need for institutional and political action (Bond 2013; Dyer 2020). By challenging urban life, hazardous events encourage its rethinking, and give new meanings to the material environment and everyday practices.

Disasters affect the thoughts and actions of individuals, communities, governments, and institutions as well as their relationship with the material environment in various ways. To understand a disaster and its impact, Anthony Oliver-Smith suggests focusing on the interaction between society and the environment (Oliver-Smith 2020: 37). This interaction can be understood as place-making, which includes the "social production" and "social construction" of space. These are social, economic, and technological factors in actions of professionals that produce the material structures of place. But space is also constructed through people's social connections, memories, feelings, imagination, behaviour, and daily use of the material environment (Low 2005, 2017). These two perspectives may be seen as heuristic lines. The border between them is not always clear (Gulin Zrnić 2017: 217). "Contested space" – which occurs not only in the context of crises but also in other active acts of self-making, community building, government initiatives with civic engagement (Casagrande 2021; Gulin Zrnić and Rubić 2018), artistic practices and public events (Gulin Zrnić 2017) – is considered one of the most effective ways of revealing place-making processes (Low 2017: 75). By being a processual phenomenon and affecting different social actors and their relationship with the environment, a disaster becomes a factor and context through which city-making is exposed.

This article aims to show how an environmental accident affected urban life and assisted in changing the meanings of the city. It discusses images, the transformation of values, and lived experiences of residents of the city during an environmental accident, as well as social initiatives, the emergence of community solidarity, and movements that occurred

in the city afterwards. The approach towards the factory as the fundamental aspect of an industrial city is discussed in the context of the environmental accident.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My field research in Alytus in 2019–2021 was related to conducting my doctoral research on cultural and social processes of post-Soviet deindustrialisation (Teleišė 2023). However, during my fieldwork, an unexpected fire broke out in a tyre recycling factory on 16 October 2019. I learned about the fire on the same day via the morning news. Although I was not in the city at the time, the fire was extensively and continuously covered by the media and the social network Facebook, allowing both participation and engagement in the incident. The social network Facebook was not only a means of receiving information, but also a way of being with residents of Alytus, who did their best to monitor the situation around the fire, to share personal experiences, to offer help, to form support groups, and to initiate actions. I visited the city of Alytus three days after the fire, while the fire had not yet been extinguished. I drove and walked around the city in order to familiarize myself with all the events, people's behaviour, and their stories, and to observe the place and the environment. Walking around was a way of participating and observing the place.

Half a year later, when I visited Alytus for a second time after the Covid-19 lockdown, I conducted semi-structured interviews with firefighters who extinguished the fire, former workers of industrial companies and ordinary citizens. The interviewees suggested to me that I should meet with the firefighters and the other people who, in their view, would tell me more about what I was interested in. During my field research, I also carried out free-form interviews with people whom I accidentally met in the city. The interviews, walking around the city and seeing the place, and analyses of Facebook materials provided different, but complementary approaches to understanding the meaning of the environmental accident.

It should be added that the topic of the fire at the tyre recycling factory constantly appeared while talking to people about their experiences of post-Soviet deindustrialization, and their everyday life in the city today. Although the environmental accident is only part of my research, it has emerged as an important aspect revealing the dynamics of approaches towards the city.

THE CITY: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE PRESENT DAY

Alytus is the sixth-largest city in southern Lithuania, situated on both sides of the largest river in Lithuania – Nemunas, near the Polish border. The population of Alytus was 49,205 at the beginning of 2021 (Lithuanian Department of Statistics 2021). In the 1930s, during

the interwar period, Alytus became the centre of the county and was developed as a resort town. At the time, it was a “cosy, small town surrounded by pine trees” (Malaškevičiūtė 2018: 45). But even then, industrial companies such as the agricultural machinery factory “Ūkmaš”, the oil factory of “Kreingel brothers”, as well as a vegetable and fruit canning factory were already operating there.

Rapid industrialization of the city started during the Soviet era, when it was decided in 1964 that Alytus, along with four other Lithuanian cities, should become regional-industrial centres of Lithuania. Large industrial companies – the Alytus Cotton Mill, the Machinery Plant, the Refrigerator Plant “Snaigė”, the Alytus Experimental House Building Factory, the Alytus Meat factory, the Combined mix factory, milk and bread factories, and others – were built there. These factories formed the industrial district of the city, which was considered the largest industrial urban structure in Lithuania during the Soviet era (Balčiūnas 1976: 7). Industrialisation expanded the territory of Alytus significantly, and increased its population from 12,300 in 1959 (Visasąjunginio gyventojų surašymo 1962: 21) to 76,500 at the beginning of 1991 (Lietuvos socialinė raida 1991: 11).

After the restoration of Lithuania’s independence in 1990 and the fall of the Soviet Union, the city of Alytus experienced abrupt changes with regards to the shift to market economy, privatization, and restructuring of industrial companies. These structural changes resulted in increased unemployment, extensive emigration, population decline. “Ruined” Soviet industry, and the collapse of factories was a crisis not only for the city, but also in the personal lives of factory employees. Former factory workers used to say that, when factories were closed, they were “left without any options”, simply “existing”, and “collapsing together with the factory”.

Even today the residents of Alytus associate the idea of the city with the factory. They say that “some kind of factories are needed”, and that “there should be more industry here”. For them the factory still signifies economic security and the well-being of the city and in their personal life. Although the latest strategic plan in Alytus focuses on the idea of green and sustainable development, the city government still represents Alytus as an industrial city with a developed industrial infrastructure and skilled workforce. In the industrial part of the city an area with developed infrastructure was established, and tax incentives are applied to new industrial companies. On the website of the Alytus City Municipality¹ and on the Facebook profile of the Mayor,² an exceptional amount of infor-

¹ Available at: <https://alytus.lt/lt/naujienos/alytaus-meras-nerijus-cesiulis-pasirase-sutarti-del-nauju-investiciju-pramones-parke>; <https://alytus.lt/lt/naujienos/alytaus-miesto-taryba-prite-primu-investuotojo-atejimui-ir-esancio-pletrai>; <https://alytus.lt/lt/naujienos/pasirasyta-sutartis-su-bendrove-dvaro-valda>; <https://alytus.lt/lt/naujienos/pasirasyta-investiciju-sutartis-su-bendrove-glass-lt>; <https://alytus.lt/lt/naujienos/alytuje-iskils-nauja-mediniu-ir-metaliniu-konstrukciju-gamykla>; <https://alytus.lt/lt/naujienos/alytaus-pramones-parko-sklypai-ruosiami-investuotojams>; <https://alytus.lt/lt/naujienos/milijonu-vertes-sutartis-nauji-statiniai-ir-naujos-darbo-vietos> (accessed 1 April 2023).

² Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/photos/a.528606687645967/630335924139709>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/posts/683868775453090>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/photos/a.528606687645967/731701814003119>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/photos/a.528606687645967/731701814003119>

mation about opening factories is provided, and plans for each new factory are presented. The city government considers the establishment of new industrial companies to be a significant factor contributing to the well-being and a “better future” of urban life in Alytus. However, all this was interrupted.

THE “NIGHTMARE”: A FIRE AT THE TYRE RECYCLING FACTORY

On the night of 16 October 2019, according to the indictment, due to the violation of safety rules (Lithuanian courts 2021), a large-scale fire unexpectedly broke out in one of the biggest tyre recycling factories in the Baltic countries (Ministry of Environment 2019). This factory is located in one of the buildings of the former Alytus Cotton Factory. The fire spread over a territory of thousands of square meters and burned for ten days. It took more than five months to clean the area of burnt tyres, ashes, and various burnt objects. The fire at the tyre recycling factory was recognized as the 5th highest level disaster in Lithuania.

The fire was extinguished by firefighters from eight Lithuanian cities, by Fire Fighter Training School students and volunteers. A border guard working in Ignalina (in north-eastern Lithuania), who was on duty in the Alytus Fire and Rescue Service at the time of the environmental accident, said that the Alytus fire “was the business of all of us” (Liudvikas, around 40 years old). Extinguishing was complicated due to the structure of the building, difficult access to the fire site, and the roof collapsing. There was also a shortage of water and a lack of heavy machinery – concrete cutting shears, excavators, additional lighting poles, and respirators. Arvydas, who has been working as a firefighter at the Alytus Fire and Rescue Service for about 8 years, came to the fire site on his day off. He was later taken to the hospital due to exhaustion. He pointed out that the fire at the tyre recycling factory was a complicated event of particular significance:

It was the biggest thing that I have ever seen. I talked to my colleagues too, they told me the same, they told me that it was the most awful thing they had ever seen. Those who worked there for over 25 years said that they had never seen an accident like this. They said and we all agreed that we would never want to see anything like this again. [...] And you know, the smell... the smell of burning rubber, it's awful... I mean, all the hard work, the fire here, the heavy metals which were later found inside of human bodies, all kinds of dioxins, all such and other crap. [...] I also heard that there were areas where the roof caved in, in the sense that you work somewhere nearby, and hear a loud “boom”, you understand, and even feel the ground shaking. (Arvydas, born in 1990)

45967/862915877548378/ 731701814003119; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/photos/a.528606687645967/1026996187807012/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/photos/a.528606687645967/1102214890285141/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/photos/a.528606687645967/1137404280099535/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/posts/1142891076217522/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/posts/1215302592309703/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/posts/1238077670032195/> (accessed 1 April 2023).

A state of emergency at the municipal level was declared in the city of Alytus on the first day of the fire at the tyre recycling factory. Two days later, it was also declared in the Alytus district. It was recommended to keep the windows closed, to cover wells, to stay inside well-insulated and closed rooms, as well as to use protective equipment if necessary. It was also recommended that companies in the industrial area in Alytus should close, and later they were ordered to close. During the fire, three mobile laboratories, two of which were borrowed from Poland, constantly checked air pollution indicators in Alytus. When the fire was put out, new recommendations were issued, indicating that it was prohibited to eat vegetables, fruits, berries, meat, dairy products, and eggs which were left outside in areas where smog and burnt smell was felt. It was advised not to fish in water bodies in the polluted area. Contaminated food products were also destroyed – milk was poured out (Pinkevičienė 2019: 5). The interviewees said that, when the fire broke out, they rushed to pick their vegetables growing outside, and they were afraid to eat those that were in the garden at the time of the fire:

I had some leeks growing behind the greenhouse. We didn't eat any of them since we were afraid. We felt an extraordinarily strong [smell] everywhere here, as the wind was blowing towards us. Those who kept their livestock in the fields were greatly affected. It was awful to see milk being poured out. (Irutė, born in 1958)

Michelle Murphy notes that chemical contamination does not have clearly defined boundaries. She claims that what happens to water also happens to everything connected to it, including humans (Murphy 2017: 497). Air pollution also affects everyone who encounters it. The news media reported on the harmfulness of the fire smoke not only to human beings, but also to plants, animals, water and soil. The residents of Alytus said this as well. It was not the fire itself, but the resulting visual and olfactory pollution, that caused fear and concern for human health.

I came to Alytus on the weekend, when the city was still in a state of emergency, and light, white smoke was coming from the fire site. It was a warm, sunny autumn day. On my way to Alytus, I chose a route going through the industrial area. But the entries to the industrial area were blocked and there were two police officers wearing respirators who controlled the road. While driving further towards the city centre, I noticed that there were almost no people in the streets, on bicycle and pedestrian paths, or in the squares. A few months later, when I visited Alytus for the second time, the interviewees said that during the fire at the tyre recycling factory they walked around less, “sat” at home or “left” and “ran away from” Alytus. Elvina, who worked in an industrial company and watched the smoke approaching the windows of her workplace, said that she left for the countryside with her family: “my parents had already left, so we took [my grandmother]. Of course, she did not want [to go], since she was already over ninety years old, but we took her with us anyway”. The route to the village taken by Elvina was also carefully chosen. Efforts were made to avoid any contact with the smoke. Elvina recalled: “we drove in circles just to avoid driving through the smoke. Instead of 120 kilometres, we drove 200” (Elvina, born in 1991).

The residents of Alytus emphasized that those days were “scary” and that the fire was “horrible”. They described the environmental accident as a “nightmare”, “horror”, “hell” and “devil’s pit”. When describing the “horror” and danger of the fire, the residents of the city primarily emphasized bodily sensations, especially the smell. They felt a “stench”, “heavy smog”, “a terrible smell”, it was “difficult to breathe”, “the throat hurt” and “black soot was visible” on the sidewalks. Nicholas Shapiro notes that the body is one of the main sensors that indicate the presence of pollution, and a displeasing scent is the primary indicator thereof (Shapiro 2015: 374–375). This is how Morta, who lives near the industrial district, described her journey home during the fire and the “horror” of the event:

There was this moment where I walked from the bus station, from the store, and I did not have anything else, so I had to use my scarf to cover my face. The smell was nauseating. [...] Such a horrible, terrible smell it was. I do not know how long it lasted, because I did not walk, but ran. I ran towards my home. So, you know, I felt so nauseous. This is how it was. The feeling was truly awful. And it seemed, this feeling was as if there was a war, it was that feeling. (Morta, born in 1958)

The environmental accident in Alytus transgressed the site of the fire and the boundaries of the industrial area. The industrial company, having assumed the form of an environmental accident, invaded the residential and recreational areas in the city of Alytus. Daily practices such as going to work, shopping, or spending leisure time in the green areas of the city became dangerous during the fire. The environmental accident was a challenge to everyday urban life affecting everyone in Alytus.

DEALING WITH THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACCIDENT AND MOBILISING THE COMMUNITY

Anthropologists emphasise that vulnerable communities living in areas where natural disasters are a cyclical phenomenon develop ways of adapting to their environment. Gained knowledge can be used to reduce the damage caused by disasters, while the disaster itself, the risk that it poses, and the response to it are integrated into the life of the community (Oliver-Smith 2020; Dove and Carpenter 2008). However, unnatural, or technological disasters arise from the cultural realm and “always stand outside of cyclical time schemes” (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002: 20). A technological disaster is an unprecedented and unexpected phenomenon that cannot be predicted. Communities affected by such disasters always encounter challenges and have no experience or developed ways to cope with it. Since technological disasters are not caused by nature but by human failure or negligence, they require explanations and can lead to radical worldview changes (Button 2020: 123). Such disasters create a need for behavioural change rather than adaptation.

During the fire at the tyre recycling factory, the residents of Alytus did not reconcile with the “horrible” situation. They actively participated in the process of dealing with the

environmental accident. Multiple initiatives appeared, and various forms of help were offered during the fire in Alytus. Dealing with the environmental accident was understood as the responsibility of all residents of Alytus. For instance, firefighters who were already retired or who had finished their work volunteered to help put out the fire:

My younger brother [Name Surname] is voluntarily helping extinguish the fire outside his shift hours. And my father [Name Surname] is also helping as a volunteer, even though he was awarded for his many years of service and dedication to firefighting work and was later forced to resign after the reform. (Woman, Facebook 19 October 2019)³

The residents and companies of the city volunteered to help extinguish the fire in various ways. Individuals offered to come to the fire site and physically help extinguish the fire. There were comments from men under the Mayor's Facebook posts: "Do you still need help? At least 2 people want to come and help you.", "I have the weekend off, do you need some help?". A single person's offer to help on Facebook led to multiple similar offers from others who wanted to be informed when they were needed: "if anything, let me know. We will try to join you", "we will cooperate, I will be waiting for your message". City residents and companies also offered to bring the necessary machinery and equipment: "their own cars, ladders, respirators, forklifts, excavators and many other things". Heads of companies informed the Mayor about the possibility of providing free services:

My company [name] performs high-altitude work, if you need help and such work, please contact us and we will provide assistance. Maybe you need someone to climb poles or the roof of a building to hook up light fixtures? Contact us and we will help as much as we can for free! (Man, Facebook, 21 October 2019)

During the firefighting process, people and companies brought various foods and drinks to those working at the fire site. People brought "what they had at home": bacon, bread, sausages, pies, cakes, honey, fish, etc. Companies providing catering services brought various snacks: cookies, chocolate bars, coffee, and sparkling water. Although the Alytus City Municipality took care of providing meals to the firefighters, voluntary provision of food was a massive phenomenon during the accident. The municipality even spread a message: "the firefighters who have been working at the fire site for eight days currently have so much delicious food that they are unable to eat all of it, therefore we ask you not to bring any more food".⁴ Food was not only nourishment, but also an expression of solidarity and gratitude. The environmental accident created circumstances where cooperation and selfless acts occurred. The residents of Alytus actively and altruistically took a role in dealing with the challenge. Their behaviour that was directed to a common goal established community solidarity.

³ The owners of private accounts gave me permission to use their posts anonymously, so I am reposting them here without a link. In order to ensure the privacy of commentators on the Mayor's posts, their comments are presented anonymously and without a link.

⁴ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/alytus.lt/posts/1473147076171175> (accessed 30 March 2023).

The Fire and Rescue Service of Alytus together with their associates from the other Lithuanian cities coordinated the actions of firefighters. However, the Mayor spearheaded the initiative to organize the necessary measures, all the while helping the effort as an ordinary worker. He actively provided information about the firefighting process on his Facebook account, but also participated in directly dealing with various institutions and controlling the disaster on site. Wearing a firefighter's uniform, he came to the fire site and controlled the situation, working at the headquarters established near the scene of the fire. The Mayor and his team searched for the necessary firefighting equipment and tools: protective equipment, fuel, excavators, drones, building blueprints, mobile lights and pollution measuring stations to speed up and facilitate dealing with the disaster. He wrote "I'm picking up the phone again and calling everyone I know, asking them to wake their bulldozer or tractors, lend their machinery, and to help".⁵ He went to industrial companies, which continued to operate despite the recommendations, to stop all work: "the directors of some companies in the Industrial Park are still forcing people to work. I am going directly to these companies to demand full suspension of work".⁶ Active actions of the Mayor during the time of the accident created a feeling of confidence for the residents that the fire was under control. The people who commented on Facebook said that the Mayor's "participation everywhere by himself instead of simply coordinating things from his office" was "actual work", which is the opposite of a politician's job, associated with sitting comfortably in an office. The Mayor, a politician, became one of the residents who voluntarily took an active part in the process of extinguishing the fire.

The gratitude to the people who directly participated in the fire extinguishing process was expressed in various ways. The owners of private companies such as restaurants, hotels, recreational centres or sport clubs, as well as the Alytus City Theatre and Alytus Sports and Recreation Centre, offered firefighters and volunteers discounts or free services. Numerous invitations to various social events were given out as a form of gratitude. One interviewee whose friend is the wife of a firefighter jokingly said: "my god, we had to make time to go to the theatre free of charge. The firefighters kept receiving and bringing back these free invitations, so we keep on going and going and going" (Violeta, born in 1962).

A fund of financial support for the firefighters was formed. The owner of a company located in the industrial area of Alytus who wished to donate some money suggested opening a bank account that would be used to collect funds to additionally reward the firefighters:

While breathing in the air of Alytus polluted by burning tyres, and watching the heroic work of our firefighters, an idea came to me. Let's try to actually contribute to the elimi-

⁵ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/posts/pfbid0X7wbSKvGK63c1TC1xSWifv6BLjW-15UPhVNsxMpzRYu6qgx4KPncTeZeA8yHKVZS7l> (accessed 30 March 2023).

⁶ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Cesiulis/posts/pfbid02CxxwXjys9YNo3L6oJuegX2pSAdYd-kjvAIFTXgGcMspTvqcQtX7NfXLYTRUEYPTkK1l> (accessed 30 March 2023).

nation of consequences of this extraordinary catastrophe, instead of simply making nice comments publicly. Let's open a reward fund for the firefighters working at the fire site, to which everyone would transfer funds to support them, which would be distributed among the firefighters in the form of bonuses. (Man, Facebook, 20 October 2019)

It was one among many enquiries about the possibility to donate. The Alytus City Municipality opened a bank account in response to the initiative of the residents of the city and companies. Both individuals and various Lithuanian business structures – shopping centres, industrial and insurance companies – donated various amounts of money to reward the firefighters and “eliminators of the accident”, and to contribute to covering the costs of the hazardous situation. 214,496 euros were donated, out of which 174,570 euros were awarded to the firefighters, and 39,926 euros to “eliminators of the accident” (Mosteikaitė 2019: 4).

The environmental accident as a destabilizing event affected all the residents of Alytus. Dealing with the disaster brought everyone together: firefighters, the Mayor, as well as the residents. Anthropologists note that such disasters can result in new political, economic or social formations (Button 2010: 11), the emergence of new ideas and approaches (Fortun 2001), or may become a platform around which scientific, political and ethical projects are created (Bond 2013). However, a disaster is primarily a new impulse for behavioural change. New patterns of behaviour such as various acts of help, cooperation and solidarity emerge from the way people react and deal with a nonroutine, destabilizing event. Dealing with the fire at the tyre recycling factory was a collective effort aimed at restoring everyday life of Alytus. Mobilizing people is one of the aspects of disaster productivity.

“ALYTUS MUST REMAIN GREEN”

By emphasizing the effects of a disaster in the long-term perspective, anthropologists argue that it is a process that takes place in various trajectories. David Loher noted that disasters and accidents disrupt the fixed and stable temporal order. According to him, every new incident creates new connections between the past and the present. In other words, “the past haunts the present, and with the enduring uncertainty and fear, it stretches the disaster even further into the future” (Loher 2020: 32). Loher stresses that a disaster is not something that occurs in a distant past, but an incident that still weaves its way into the contemporary everyday life of a city through lived experiences (Loher 2020). According to Kim Fortun, the relationship between the past, the present and the future appears not only when experiencing the disaster physically, but when the incident operates as a particular understanding of the past, which is remembered and becomes knowledge that shapes and constructs a direction of the future (Fortun 2001: 7, 16). Lived experiences and memories of the disaster have an impact on how new events and phenomena occurring in the city are evaluated and interpreted.

The environmental accident was a horrible experience for the residents of Alytus, which made an impact on the city dwellers' participation in the affairs of the city. Less than a year after the fire at the tyre recycling factory, a new event happened – the establishment of a new industrial company. It was the Experimental Fossil Mineral Rocks Processing factory that was planned to be built in Alytus. There were plans to locate it in another part of the same building where the fire took place. However, following the publication of the environmental impact assessment report of the new factory, discussions emerged in the local city newspaper among the politicians of Alytus, and the founder of the factory. The question of safety of the new industrial company came up: the suitability of the building to the needs of the factory, the impact on the city and on human health, as well as economic benefits for the city were the main issues. The ambassadors of Denmark and Great Britain also discussed the construction of the new industrial company with the representatives of Alytus City Municipality, as the companies from these countries operate near the planned new factory. Without a doubt, the construction of a new chemical factory in the territory of Alytus became a significant event that involved different social groups: politicians, investors, business owners, and residents.

In response to the intention to build a chemical factory, the residents of Alytus, in the words of an interviewee, “rebelled” against its construction. They expressed their objections to the establishment of a new factory in various ways. First, as Jeronimas noticed, “discussions took place on Facebook” (Jeronimas, born in 1945). Second, information about the danger of the new factory to human health was distributed in various parts of the city. An excerpt from the article *Uolienų perdirbimas Alytuje: kliūtys inovacijai ar rūgščių lietu grėsmė* (“Rock Processing in Alytus: Obstacles to Innovation or a Danger of Acid Rain”) published in a business newspaper, was posted on the information boards of various apartment buildings. It contained fact-based information about the volume and process of the planned production activities and emphasized their danger to human health. To prevent the establishment of the new factory, both politicians and, as a local newspapers wrote, “active citizens”, initiated two petitions addressed to different state institutions. The signatures for the petitions were collected electronically via www.peticijos.lt, and in various public areas of the city where citizens were able to sign the paper versions of these petitions. One petition collected 2,560 (electronic and written) and the other 568 (electronic) signatures of the residents. Both petitions said that the people of Alytus disagree with the construction of the Experimental Fossil Mineral Rocks Processing factory in the city:

Close to the planned factory there are several companies with almost 1,000 employees and the Alytus Cultural Centre, restaurants and residential houses near the planned factory (up to 200 m away), and there is even a protected area – Gulbynė Ornithological Reserve – a few hundred meters away. [...] We believe that the development of this factory would pose a real danger to both the residents of Alytus and nature, not only in the case of a possible accident, but also due to pollutants released into the environment during the production process, and due to the noise caused by heavy-duty vehicle traffic. (Dėl iškastinių n.d.)

Emphasizing harmfulness and danger of the new factory to the city and human health, the petition aimed to show that the location selected for the factory was unsuitable. According to the residents, the danger lies in the industrial objects approaching living areas and people, kindergartens, schools, and workplaces. Morta expressed her worries precisely about the location of the new factory, which was going to be built “right here”:

We hear that some kind of a chemical factory is going to be built there again. And we don't really want that in the city. Such factories should be built somewhere outside the city. It is really the wrong thing to do it in the city. They say it's safe, but they said the same things before as well. (Morta, born in 1958)

The residents do not want to let the factory enter the territory of Alytus, not only as an idea, but also as a particular structure in a particular place. According to their concept of the city, the factory must be thrown out to the borders of the city. By taking measures to prevent the establishment of the new factory, which they see as a place that “poisons” people and the city, they are participating in the city-making process.

These actions are attempts to prevent potential danger. There are fears that an environmental accident, which happened once, might happen again, and the city would become a contaminated place. People are saying that: “this is much worse than tyres”, “Alytus does not need a second chemical bomb”, “we got enough poison back in October after the big tyre fire”, “we already had a painful experience with the tyre recycling factory”. Intentions to build a new industrial object revive the experiences of the environmental accident. The residents revised and reinterpreted the role and place of industry in the city. The interviewees said that the fire at the tyre recycling factory had an impact on how they treat industry today:

I would prefer for the city to be cultural and green, or something, but with less industry. Perhaps it is because of the fire, I don't know now. And now they want to build this new factory that people are currently talking about. They say that it supposedly won't pollute the environment more than the “Akmenės Cementas” company. So, I think, okay, it won't be polluting as much, but it will still produce some kind of toxic waste, so I am not sure about it. Though it will create jobs. But jobs won't matter if people will suffer pollution... (Renata, born in 1958)

In the woman's words there appears a contradiction between the factory as a workplace and the factory as a dangerous place. A distinction is drawn between work and human health. The factory is perceived not only as a source of livelihood, but also as a place that endangers human health.

The residents of the city argue against the establishment of a new factory by underlying the conflict between nature, which they call “greenery”, and industry. Nature and industry are perceived as antipodes – urban elements with opposite characteristics that cannot be reconciled. Nature is associated with cleanliness and human health, while industry is associated with pollution. Commentators of virtual petitions write that they are: “for a clean Alytus”, “for a green city”, “Alytus must be green”, “Alytus must remain a green, clean city”

(Dėl iškastinių n.d.; Dėl iškastinių mineralinių n.d.). “Greenery” encompasses the ecological perception of the city. The opposition between the city as a “green” place and industry is also expressed topographically by displacing industry outside the city. For the residents, outside the borders of the city is not a specific location but an abstraction that refers to a place away from living areas and people. This is how they marginalize industry. According to Mary Douglas, pollution is a source of danger for social structure appearing when the line which should not have been crossed is transgressed. To maintain order, the polluting element has to be put outside the ordinary social structure (Douglas 2001: 95–114). When the factory became a polluting object, it endangered the social structure of the city. Its displacement is an effort to have clean and unpolluted surroundings as well as to maintain order in the city. Residents of Alytus see the city without industry as a more suitable place to live.

CONCLUSIONS

The fire at the tyre recycling factory in Alytus was experienced by all citizens as a “horrible” event that unexpectedly disrupted daily urban life. However, like any other destructive event, this environmental accident created conditions for new behaviour practices and approaches to emerge. During the accident numerous collective selfless acts and cooperation between different social actors occurred in order to restore everyday urban life. The circumstances of the environmental accident mobilized the community, and established solidarity.

Active involvement of residents of the city during the fire at the tyre recycling factory did not stop after the environmental accident subsided. The dangerous event encouraged the citizens of Alytus to further engage and participate in Alytus city-making. They socially construct the city by taking pre-emptive action aiming to prevent the establishment of a new factory. In this way, the residents of Alytus express their attitude towards the factory being in the city. Measures taken by them to impede the establishment of the new factory are a way to prevent future dangerous accidents.

The disaster that challenged urban life exposed the factory as place which is dangerous. Factories as a polluting element appear in opposition to the city as a “green” place. They endanger the social structure of the city. However, the opposition between industry and the city is not unambiguous. Physically, factories remain part of the city, but the attitude towards factories being in the city is changing. The environmental accident revealed that the city still operates under an industrial order, but this order is conceptually moving outside the borders of the city. A value-loaded approach towards the factory is changing, which, in turn, changes the attitude toward the city. In addition to industry and its development, now “greenery” – as the antipode of industry, related to the issue of ecology – is seen as a significant factor in creating a desirable place to live.

REFERENCES AND SOURCES

- Balčiūnas, Vytautas. 1976. "Alytus privalo tapti mūsų laikmečio miestu". *Statyba ir Architektūra* 1/200: 7–10.
- Barrios, Roberto E. 2017. "What Does Catastrophe Reveal for Whom? The Anthropology of Crises and Disasters at the Onset of the Anthropocene". *The Annual Review of Anthropology* 46: 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102116-041635>
- Bond, David. 2013. "Governing Disaster: The Political Life of the Environment during the BP Oil Spill". *Cultural Anthropology* 28/4: 694–715. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cuan.12033>
- Button, Gregory V. 2010. *Disaster Culture. Knowledge and Uncertainty in the Wake of Human and Environmental Catastrophe*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Button, Gregory V. 2020. "The Negation of a Disaster: The Media Response to Oils Spills I Great Britain". In *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, eds. London, New York: Routledge, 121–135.
- Casagrande, Olivia. 2021. "Towards a *Tuwün Wariache*? Place-Making and Creative Acts of Traversing in the Mapuche City". *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27/4: 949–975. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13647>
- Caverly, Nicholas L. 2018. "Remaking Place after 'Disaster'". *City & Society* 30/3. Available at: <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ciso.12189> (accessed 31 March 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12189>
- Dėl iškastinių mineralinių uolienu perdirbimo gamyklos Alytuje*. Available at: <https://www.peticijos.lt/visos/76972/del-iskastiniu-mineraliniu-uolienu-perdirbimo-gamyklos-alytuje/> (accessed 30 September 2022).
- Dėl iškastinių mineralinių uolienu perdirbimo veiklos Pramonės g. 1, Alytuje*. Available at: <https://www.peticijos.lt/visos/76834/del-iskastiniu-mineraliniu-uolienu-perdirbimo-veiklos-pramones-g-1-alytuje/> (accessed 30 September 2022).
- Doughty, L. Paul. 2020. "Plan and Pattern in Reaction to Earthquake. Peru, 1978–1998". In *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, eds. London, New York: Routledge, 265–287. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315298917-32>
- Douglas, Mary. 2001. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Dove, Michael R. and Carlo Carpenter. 2008. "Introduction. Major Historical Currents in Environmental Anthropology". In *Environmental Anthropology. A Historical Reader*. Michael R. Dove and Carlo Carpenter, eds. Malden etc.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1–85.
- Dyer, L. Christopher. 2020. "The Phoenix Effect in Post-Disaster Recovery. An Analysis of the Economic Development Administration's Culture of Response after Hurricane Andrew". In *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, eds. London, New York: Routledge, 308–329.
- Faas, A. J. 2016. "Disaster Vulnerability in Anthropological Perspective". *Annals of Anthropology Practice* 40/1: 14–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12084>
- Fortun, Kim. 2001. *Advocacy after Bhopal. Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gulin Zrnić, Valentina. 2017. "Ethnological and Cultural Anthropological Approaches to the City. Framework of the Zagreb City-Making Project". *Slovak Ethnology* 65/2: 203–221.
- Gulin Zrnić, Valentina and Tihana Rubić. 2018. "City-Making Through Urban Gardening. Public Space and Civic Engagement In Zagreb". *Narodna umjetnost* 55/1: 159–179. <https://doi.org/10.15176/vol55no109>

- Lietuvos socialinė raida 1990 metais*. 1991. Vilnius: Informacinis-leidybinis centras.
- Lithuanian courts. 2021. *Alytaus apylinkės teismas atvertė "Alytaus gaisro" bylą*. Available at: <https://alytaus.teismai.lt/naujienos/alytaus-apylinkes-teismas-atverte-alytaus-gaisro-byla/278> (accessed 13 March 2023).
- Lithuanian Department of Statistics. 2021. *Lietuvos gyventojai (2021 m. leidimas)*. Available at: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/lietuvos-gyventojai-2021/salies-gyventojai/gyventoju-skaicius-ir-sudetis> (accessed 26 September 2022).
- Loher, David. 2020. "Everyday Suffering and the Abstract Time-Reckoning of Law. Reflections on the Allocation of Responsibility for an Asbestos Disaster in Italy". *Journal of Legal Anthropology* 4/2: 17–38. <https://doi.org/10.3167/jla.2020.040202>
- Low, Setha M. 2005. "Spatializing Culture. The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space in Costa Rica". In *Theorizing the City. The New Urban Anthropology Reader*. Setha M. Low, ed. New Brunswick etc.: Rutgers University Press, 111–137.
- Low, Setha M. 2017. *Spatializing Culture. The Ethnography of Space and Place*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Malaškevičiūtė, Birutė. 2018. *Kasdieniai nutikimai tarpukario Alytuje*. Alytus: UAB "Petro ofsetas".
- Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania. 2019. *Dėl didžiulio gaisro padangų perdirbimo įmonėje aplinkosaugininkai dirba pavojaus režimu*. Available at: <https://am.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/del-didziulio-gaisro-padangu-perdirbimo-imoneje-aplinkosaugininkai-dirba-pavojaus-rezimu> (accessed 30 September 2022).
- Mosteikaitė, Alma. 2019. "Ugniagesiams premijos jau pervestos". *Alytaus naujienos* 135/13365: 4.
- Murphy, Michelle. 2017. "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations". *Cultural Anthropology* 32/4: 494–503. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.02>
- Oliver-Smith, Anthony. 2005. "Communities after Catastrophe. Reconstructing the Material, Reconstructing the Social". In *Community Building in the Twenty-First Century*. Stanley E. Hyland, ed. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 45–70.
- Oliver-Smith, Anthony. 2020. "What Is a Disaster? Anthropological Perspectives on a Persistent Question". In *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, eds. London, New York: Routledge, 29–44. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315298917-4>
- Oliver-Smith, Anthony and Robert E. Goldman. 1988. "Planning Goals and Urban Realities. Post-Disaster Reconstruction in a Third World City". *City & Society* 2/2: 105–126. <https://doi.org/10.1525/city.1988.2.2.105>
- Oliver-Smith, Anthony and Susanna M. Hoffman. 2002. "Introduction. Why Anthropologists Should Study Disasters". In *Catastrophe & Culture. The Anthropology of Disaster*. Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith, eds. Santa Fe, Oxford: School of American Research Press, James Currey, 3–22.
- Pinkeičienė, Saulė. 2019. "Džiaugsmą dėl užgesinto gaisro keičia labai neramios žinios apie pieno ir galimai vandens, dirvožemio užterštumą dioksinais". *Alytaus naujienos* 122/13352: 5.
- Shapiro, Nicholas. 2015. "Attuning to the Chemosphere. Domestic Formaldehyde, Bodily Reasoning, and the Chemical Sublime". *Cultural Anthropology* 30/3: 368–393. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.02>
- Teleišė, Aušra. 2023. "Poindustrinis miesto kūrimas. Kultūriniai ir socialiniai deindustrializacijos procesai Alytaus, Marijampolės ir Plungės miestuose". Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas [PhD Thesis].
- Visasąjunginio gyventojų surašymo duomenys 1959 metų (Lietuvos TSR miestai ir rajonai)*. 1962. Vilnius: Valstybinė statistikos leidykla, Lietuvos skyrius.

POŽELJNO MJESTO ZA ŽIVOT: ZNAČENJE EKOLOŠKE NESREĆE ZA STVARANJE GRADA U SUVREMENOJ LITVI

Ovaj se rad bavi neočekivanim, nesvakidašnjim i destabilizirajućim događajem – požarom u tvornici za reciklažu guma, koji se dogodio u litavskom gradu Alytusu 16. listopada 2019. godine. U radu se raspravlja o tome kako ekološka nesreća, koja pogađa sve stanovnike grada i utječe na njihov odnos prema okolišu, rađa nova shvaćanja grada. Analiziraju se proživljena iskustva stanovnika grada kao i slike, promjene vrijednosti, društvene inicijative i pokreti koji su se tijekom nesreće javili u Alytusu. Razmatra se i uključivanje građana u upravljanje gradom nakon nesreće. U članku se zaključuje da je ekološka nesreća mobilizirala zajednicu i potaknula preispitivanje značenja tvornice, kao i preispitivanja onoga što grad čini poželjnim mjestom za život.

Ključne riječi: ekološka nesreća, stvaranje mjesta, grad, Litva