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# An answer to the complex representation of territory. The fertile ground of mnemotopes and design of communication.

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**Abstract** | The present article aims to be part of the multidisciplinary debate on the relationship between places and memory. It intends to investigate *mnemotopes* as cultural objects of vertical interpretation of the memory-place axis, capable of including the tension between places of memory and memory of places. After the analysis of selected mnemotopes, the article will focus on the important role of Design of Communication as a mediator of territorial past through significant examples of existing artifacts and projects. A mnemotopic communication, founded on geolocalized map-based systems, can interpret the stratification of places and succeed in translating and reactivating their memories. These practices can be useful to understand how the perception of the places of memory changes over time, reflecting on their entrance into contemporaneity. Mnemotopic communication design can be therefore a valid cultural practice and fertile ground for creative entities.

**KEYWORDS | MNEMOTOPE, COMMUNICATION DESIGN, MEMORY, CULTURE, TERRITORY**

## 1. Memory activating places: between reality and fiction

Even if memory may look like a phenomenon that mainly concerns temporality, a closer look reveals a constitutive and not accidental relationship with spatiality (Violi, 2014). Memory and spaces are strongly interconnected and every place can be read as a palimpsest of what has occurred in the past. Spatial localization is also one of the most important devices that supports our abilities to remember, and it would be very difficult to describe an event if one did not imagine the place (Halbwachs, 1997). Places not only help to remember, but they can be a mnemonic anchorage and can even activate memories.

It is therefore not surprising that, since the times of ancient Greece and Rome, poets, orators and politicians have relied on mnemonic systems, the *art of memory*, which made it possible to keep in mind vast stores of knowledge. Frances Yates (1993), emphasizes its importance on a communicative level, in historical periods in which, before the invention of printing, orality played a fundamental role. These internal remembrance processes, were founded only on mental activities and abilities, without the aid of devices, and were based on the invention of artificial places of memory, *loci*, set up in the mind and then populated by a series of objects and figures directly connected to the contents to be remembered. The “images were used for the significance of precise contents of knowledge, while the fiction places to give them order and the possibility of being recalled” (Assmann, 2002, p.331). Cicero himself stated that people wishing to train memory must choose certain places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and locate those images in the produced places (Yates, 1993). The *images agentes*, “activating images”, thus generated, ancient mental unions of concepts, images and spaces, were able to reactivate large amounts of information that could be transmitted as a result.

However, considering the ontologically technological nature of humans, which has always made up for their faults and failings, it is not surprising that, with the passage of time, the art of memory became a sort of “intellectual fossil” (Rossi, 2001, p.60), giving way to technically dependent mnemonic systems (Montani, 2017). This definition, without any negative meaning, helps to focus attention on the externalized segments of memory, which, detaching themselves from their own organic essence, enter into relation with inorganic and technological supports, useful to restore not only parts of the individual identity, but also entire collective areas. These types of mnemonic practices no longer need to rely on imaginary places, but can count on real places with which establish a relationship of productive interdependence.

The constant externalisation of memory here introduced, together with the one of orientation, still feeds a lively techno-social issue (Montanari, 2019). This vivid debate finds in devices equipped with geolocation systems a focal point. For several years now, in fact, the precise and immediate territorial localization of information and contents is not only a matter of geographical coordinates and goes beyond the cartographic reason, becoming part of a more articulated discourse, negotiated by different disciplinary approaches, which

is generating a convergence between material and immaterial, between corporeal and localized (Montanari, 2019), surface and stratification. The protagonist of this intersection is certainly space, an aggregate of significant substance (Iacoli, 2017), in which reality, perception and elements of the imaginary densely coexist (Soja, 1996). A system of places (Norberg-Schultz, 1996) far from being considered mere positions, which manifest and develop as complex cultural agglomerations, made up of multiform data. The traditional conception of space as an inert void in which objects just exist, has given way to a new vision that considers it active and full (Kern, 1988), and for this reason the most advanced technological devices with geolocation have to deal with the territorial fixation of increasingly composite details. The principles of georeferencing are therefore no longer just a tool at the service of orientation, but become a new substance of expression, capable of producing original languages, contents (Montanari, 2019) and communication modalities.

Starting from these considerations, we can see that the deep and constantly moving flow of data coming from the content/location axis is generating an unexpected itinerary of personal memories punctually linked to the territory. A real underlying archive, not directly perceptible, of passages on places and spatial frequentations that can be interpreted as a generalized tracking of individual memories that enter into a collective narrative. A concrete example is the case of Google Maps, the main outsourced digital orientation tool, which allows to store and subsequently view all the places you have passed through since 2009. This process, most of the time not perceived, creates what we could provocatively call "the map of our life" (Lana, 2019), where you can see all the small movements, but also the long journeys archived with precision day after day. Let's see then how geolocation systems, not considering here the problem of compromised privacy, can become a useful tool for stabilizing memories and movements, which by their very nature would be fluid and difficult to understand, creating a new and original mnemonic-spatial substratum of contents directly connected to the territory and fixed on it.

## 2. Mnemotope or mnemotopes?

Our preliminary discourse revealed the ancestral relationship between humans and geographical environment of which the connection between territory and memory is an integral and constitutive part. This theme, with a historically multidisciplinary vocation, has over the years seen the multiplication of reflections and debates in fields of knowledge such as cultural anthropology, geosemiotics, documentary photography and sociology. Maurice Halbwachs' (1997) considerations are involved in this last context. He strongly supports the importance of the localization of memory, affirming that places and the spatialization of memory play an important role in the stability of collective memory. The spatial substance in which memory is rooted, however, is not inert, but innervated by the thoughts and feelings of the people of the past (Truc, 2011) and the sociologist therefore distinguishes two different mnemonic frameworks. On one hand we find the familiar and local past, "made of

objects, houses and stones" (Truc, 2011, p.149), which is therefore extremely vulnerable to the incessant passage of time. On the other hand, there is a more distant and less intimate memory, but consequently more robust and shareable. If, in order to have control of their perceptions, people usually need to get closer to the object, it seems that they need to move away from it to preserve a collective memory (Halbwachs, 2008). We can therefore define the first conceptual framework as "memory of places", a form of private remembrance, precisely linked to details of specific places, preserved in each individual, very exposed to temporal corrosion and subsequent disappearance. The second instead as "places of memory", less rich in details, but certainly more stable because subject to processes of institutionalization and constant symbolization (Truc, 2011).

A response to the singular relationship between places of memory and memory of places, can be conceptually found in the Greek calque *mnemotope* (Van Rookhuijzen, 2017), used by Jan Assmann (1997) to identify a culturalized object of territorial interpretation. The term lexically incorporates the source of tension highlighted by Halbwachs, making itself a potentially privileged reference point of a complexity hovering between reality and symbol, between individual and collective, between private and institutionalized. *Mnemotopes*, however, are not only traces, but real apparatuses (Agamben, 2009), mnemonic devices that have a preferential relationship with the territories, going beyond the pure testimony and preservation of the past, to contribute to its active and complete reconstruction, as engines of renewed interpretations. These entities are susceptible to multiple formulations according to the specific sensitivities linked to different views, by culture, geographical and temporal determination (Violi, 2014) and this means that any general definition of the term *mnemotope* is, in most cases, definitely incomplete and sketchy, without recurring to a dynamic reflection on the different places and memories that may constitute a *mnemotope*.

Consider, for example, a preliminary, but significant, possible distinction. We are facing a proliferation of *mnemotopes* that we can call "with trauma", the result of a paradigm shift of the very meaning of traumatic event. If in the past trauma was what cannot be spoken of, today it is all that is spoken of (Giglioli, 2011), because the events are increasingly seeking a sense that makes them feel worthy of being transmitted and communicated. The places of traumatic memories are most often institutionalized through monuments and transformed into museums and memorial sites in which coexist, not without difficulty, the mnemonic and evocative power immanent to places and the desire to re-propose the invisible, chronologically disappeared, through dissimulation and reconstruction (Assmann, 2002). A particular case is represented by the Museo per la Memoria di Ustica in Bologna, created by the conceptual artist Christian Boltanski and inaugurated in 2007. It did not rise directly on the site of the trauma of which it wants to be testimony but was deliberately built in the city that saw the departure of the plane, then victim of the disaster. The museum is a "complex semiotic object, which interweaves different dimensions of reading: museum, place of historical memory, funeral memorial, work of art, civil and [...] political testimony" (Violi, 2014, p.307) and this peculiarity contributes to demonstrate the *mnemotopic* stratification, inhabited by intrinsic complexity, which can be manifested in different ways. The strong

dialectic between material and immaterial also emerges, typical of memory itself, which in this case is revealed through an installation that involves space and visitors. The wreckage of the plane has in fact been entirely reconstructed and is located in the center of the museum, all the other objects found have instead been taken out of sight, closed in black boxes that surround the carcass of the aircraft. This operation excludes the physicality and materiality of the objects-relics, of which only the idea remains.

A very different perspective is proposed by the mnemotopes that we can call “without trauma”. Mnestic entities linked to positive aspects of the experience which, even if not pervaded by controversial and conflictual memories, are equally characterized by strong emotional experiences and that can be very important for the construction of cultural spaces of memory (Assmann, 2002). Multifaceted microcosms, they are interdisciplinary intersections in which territory, past, curiosity and technology coexist, often united by a strong commitment to conservation. There are various mnemotopic types without trauma that are not mutually exclusive, but enrich the places with further stratifications that, if codified, allow the development of new models of territorial reading. In this way the mnemotopes without trauma can remove the risk of illegibility of the places of memory generated by the breaking of the interdependence between memory and its living translation. We can identify as first category the cultural mnemotopes, places of geoattraction and subsequent geoaggregation of varied cultural phenomena, usually concentrated in a given time period. Points of transversal creative convergence are phenomena with socio-cultural implications that have characterized entire eras. Think, for example, of the Montparnasse district of Paris, which at the beginning of the 20th century saw the migration of the artistic community from the overcrowded Montmatre. It became what for Apollinaire was the neighborhood of les extravagates, the refuge of beautiful and free gaiety, simplicity, and carelessness (Shattuck, 1971). A circumscribed area where, in few years, collective ateliers multiplied, the hub of avant-garde experimentation, but also cafés, such as La Rotonde or Le Dôme, a spontaneous meeting place for painters such as Amedeo Modigliani and Chaïm Soutine, aesthetes, poets, patrons and art dealers, places animated by an overwhelming expressive vitality.

The same creative energy accompanied the experience of Bar Jamaica, in Brera district of Milan, which after the Second World War, lived the coexistence of important artistic personalities who were regular customers. Not far from the Academy of Fine Arts and the headquarters of Corriere della Sera in via Solferino, the bar became a catalyst for ideas and design meetings between artists, journalists, critics, writers. The white tiles that still cover the walls today, were the setting and stage for significant intellectual exchanges. Piero Manzoni, Luciano Bianciardi, Lucio Fontana passed through here. The famous photographer Ugo Mulas immortalized the bar and its clients in his black and white images, further stratifying its identity with a new photographic memory of reportage, which still today documents the period with great expressive power.

Within the macro-category of cultural mnemotopes, there are *literary mnemotopes*, places where inspirations and intellectual efforts have been concentrated in order to generate remarkable works. They are physical spaces, inhabited and experienced by the protagonists of the history of literature that, if mapped, can highlight original itineraries of intersections between places and ideas that "could only be conceived where they were materially born" (Pagani, 2019, p.11). This typology also includes places narrated by writers particularly rooted in a territory. An example would be Giovanni Testori's novels, concentrated in the streets of Milan's post-war suburbs. Iconic is the case of *Ponte della Ghisolfa*, a railway overpass that the writer has made the protagonist of one of his most famous stories (Testori, 2013). His characters live this common place, relocating it from being a simple passageway and making it an agglomeration of memories in which urban and social, private and collective experiences merge. The Ponte della Ghisolfa has been further stratified over the years thanks to the cinematic and theatrical transpositions of Testori's novels, including the famous movie *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* by Luchino Visconti, emphasizing even more how the mnemotope without trauma can be linked to creative experiences. In fact, this kind of mnesic-spatial entities invites to ask ourselves how much a place and its physical conformation can actually influence the generation of artistic and design contents, moving away from being a stage, but working as an active part in generative processes.

The same question can emerge when talking about *project mnemotopes*, historical places present and rooted in the territory, such as archives, museum-houses and museum-studios, protagonists of the past of industrial design. They represent important research centres, complex collections of materials of relevant scientific interest with great potential for dissemination, often unexpressed. This type of mnemotope is today at the centre of numerous attempts at systematization, useful to make them accessible to the general public. In this context, the "Design Storico" project was launched in 2019. With the support of Fondazione Cariplo and counting on a network of places of memory already active in the territory, it will map the relevant nucleus of Lombardy design activities and promote a series of events and exhibitions that will turn the spotlight on this heritage and on the territorial memory linked to the culture of the project.

Examples such as the one just mentioned, are the demonstration of a current proliferation of attempts to map not the works, but the places where they were thought or realized, itineraries between ideas and territories. These experimental processes demonstrate how much mnemotopes are involved in concrete and funded projects driven by the emerging need for memorialization and spatialization that engages various areas of knowledge.

### **3. Communication Design: a mnemotopic point of view**

Communication design, "a mature discipline with its own identity that merges traditional know-how with technological innovation" (Baule & Quaggiotto, 2015), plays a significant role in this particular multidisciplinary context. In fact, it can deal with the description and

visualization of mnemotopes, but also with their translation, transforming them into articulated communicative systems that introduce individual memories into a wider and collective narrative. This field of knowledge is able to visualize new mnemonic itineraries and consequently laying the foundations for real maps of places of memories, but also for innovative mnemotopic archives.

Through the practices of mnemotopic communication design, in fact, we can uncover significant details and contents of the territories by showing them through communicative artifacts with great expressive potential. These products are made up of various types of linguistic formats whose characteristics vary according to the data to be transmitted.

A nodal language for the transmission of mnemotopes, given the ancient relationship between images and memory, is the photo-narrative, a system of visual editing in which a particular spatial storytelling is concentrated. Gabriele Basilico's urban photographic projects are a significant example of this process, in which the relationship between the past and places becomes the object of visual reflection, giving shape to a scenario that borders on the metaphysical and materializes in bright contrasts between light and shadow and in the precise choice of a monumental black and white that returns a city only apparently uninhabited. Roberta Valtorta (2012) writes that his works are sensitive investigations aimed at that complex object that is the city, with which he enters into dialogue as he would with a person, with a living organism, a reading of that urban experience that somehow remains entangled in its architecture. A moment of exchange between photos and geography that evokes a real commitment to memory that makes images able to look into the stratified past of a territory.

Another interesting case is the *Memofilm*<sup>1</sup> used to reconstruct the individual stories of Alzheimer's patients. Twenty minutes of audiovisual materials that help the self-construction of the patient's identity through the editing and subsequent transmission of personal memories. Although this type of artifact is mainly related to clinical and neuroscientific research, memofilms are useful, within our discourse, to identify further formal characteristics for mnemotopic communication. In particular, perceptual aspects emerge as an important channel of remembrance, materializing in audiovisual systems. The union of sounds, static images and videos can be useful in the reactivation of mnemonic contents also in the case of memory of places. An experimentation driven by the same objectives as the ones of Memofilm, has been recently designed in Gavirate, in the province of Varese, Lombardy. Before August 2020, in the square in front of the train station, there will be an old telephone booth, a bench and a mailbox, a corner of memories in which Alzheimer's patients

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<sup>1</sup> *Memofilm* is an experimental project born in 2008 in Bologna from the joint commitment of Asp (Azienda di Servizi alla persona) and directors from Cineteca. Each memofilm is a twenty-minute video made to measure for patients by drawing on their heritage of affection, loved ones and familiar objects, assembled together in an evocative way. They aim to improve the behavior disorders associated with Alzheimer and other forms of dementia, being a positive part of the therapy. For more info: <https://memofilmontheweb.wordpress.com/>.

can find fragments of the past world and feel reassured (Landoni, 2020). In this case, the mnemotopic artifact is not a media, is not digital, but is designed and built directly on and for the territory, showing the great importance that real places still have in reactivating memory.

Another practical case is “Distretto Testori”, a project of DCxT, the Design of Communication for the territory research group of Politecnico di Milano. The project started after the proclamation of Milan as UNESCO Creative City of Literature in 2017, a recognition that immediately set in motion reflections on the possible mapping of places linked to the literary memories of the city. The work is focused on the works of the aforementioned Giovanni Testori, who described the places where the narratives took place in detail, up to often mentioning the addresses. It was therefore decided to create an original map-based web platform, made up of several different microformats.



Figure 1. “Distretto Testori” web portal homepage. From this page users can choose between three different digital itineraries: geolocalized photo-storytelling based on the novels, photo documentary of Testori’s life, archive map of Testori’s literary mnemotopes.

Each of them is intended to be part of a collective archive of Testori’s literary mnemotopes that can be read at various levels. After an initial and fundamental archival research, which brought to light peculiarities of the memory of the places identified, the most useful and significant materials have been selected. The next phase saw the design of the singular artifacts, eachone as an attempt to concentrate a particular level of the story by crossing literary memories with territorial ones. Three production lines were delineated: a geolocalized photo-storytelling, based on the quotes from the novel, the places described and the imaginary created by the writer, integrated with an interactive structure. A photo-

documentary of Testori's life fixed on a map, realized using original pictures and the author's memoirs. An archive map of Testori's literary mnemotopes, intended to be a new mnemonic layer of Milan Creative City of Literature.



Figure 2. "Distretto Testori" web portal. Inside the photo-storytelling section, the user can interactively move in Testori's places, accessing different types of contents (archive photos, quotes, videos).

The project was previewed at the Annual Conference of UNESCO Creative Cities, which took place in Fabriano in June 2019, and is currently being implemented. It aims to become a model for territorial communication systems, capable of offering an innovative approach to the topic of "mnemotopes without trauma" making them more active and easily perceptible, allowing even mute places to speak again.

## 4. Conclusions

Memory is intimately and indissolubly related to places. The aim here was to outline that this connection can be read through the principle of mnemotope, understood as a culturalized object of territorial interpretation. As emerges from the cases presented in the article, mnemotopes can take many forms, from a bridge in Milan to a café in Paris, but they shared the capability to solve the tension concerning places of memory and memory of places. This duality is not a contradiction (Wüstenberg, 2019), is the way they take a position between the past and the future between individual and collectivity, between temporality and spatiality (Donohoe, 2013).

In this open context, Communication Design can supply tools and methods to design mnemotopes, metabolizing the metamorphic complexity of memory and places. As *images agentes* of the classical mnemonics techniques, could activate in mind a great quantity of memories, mnemotopes, technically dependent on communication design, are now able to interface with territorial past, interpreting its stratification. Considering the examples discussed above, what we have to study is how this discipline recalls the texture of the places (Adams et al., 2001), how it succeeds in translating and galvanizing mnemotopes, how it supports narratives for mnestic territories suffering from communicative insufficiency.

Under this perspective, mnemotopic communication design turns out to be a concrete cultural practice that, avoiding the stereotypes of nostalgic re-enactments, can open the doors to original multidisciplinary discussions on memory-places axis. In sum, designed mnemotopes are able to renew the experience of the territories, and the mnemotopic framework is a useful heuristic tool (Van Rookhuijzen, 2019) for understanding the topography of memory.

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