

Mnemotopic Perspectives: Communication Design as Stabilizer for the Memory of Places

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Abstract—The ancestral relationship between humans and geographical environment has long been at the center of an interdisciplinary dialogue, which sees one of its main research nodes in the relationship between memory and places. Given its deep complexity, this symbiotic connection continues to look for a proper definition that appears increasingly negotiated by different disciplines. Numerous fields of knowledge are involved, from anthropology to semiotics of space, from photography to architecture, up to subjects traditionally far from these reasonings. This is the case of Design of Communication, a young discipline, now confident in itself and its objectives, aimed at finding and investigating original forms of visualization and representation, between sedimented knowledge and new technologies. In particular, Design of Communication for the Territory offers an alternative perspective to the debate, encouraging the reactivation and reconstruction of the memory of places. Recognizing *mnemotopes* as a cultural object of vertical interpretation of the memory-place relationship, design can become a real mediator of the territorial fixation of memories, making them increasingly accessible and perceptible, contributing to build a topography of memory. According to a mnemotopic vision, Communication Design can support the passage from a memory in which the observer participates only as an individual to a collective form of memory. A mnemotopic form of Communication Design can, through geolocation and content map-based systems, make chronology a topography rooted in the territory and practicable; it can be useful to understand how the perception of the memory of places changes over time, considering how to insert them in the contemporary world. *Mnemotopes* can be materialized in different format of translation, editing and narration and then involved in complex systems of communication. The memory of places, therefore, if stabilized by the tools offered by Communication Design, can make visible ruins and territorial stratifications, illuminating them with new communicative interests that can be shared and participated.

Keywords—Memory of places, design of communication, territory, mnemotope, topography of memory.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE relationship between place and memory is part of deep cultural history. Since ancient Greece poets, oratories, and politicians have relied on *mnemotechnics*, principles used to organize memory, founded on places recollection, which made it possible to keep in mind vast stores of knowledge.

It is not surprising that the importance of places for a virtuous memory has a founding myth. Simonides of Ceos, a famous poet, was hired to give a panegyric during a banquet organized by an influential man, Scopas, in Thessaly. While Simonides had left the hall for a moment, a terrible accident occurred, the entire roof of the house collapsed, and the poet was the only

survivor. Thanks to his mnemonic abilities, he could identify the position of every person who had been seated at the table just before the tragic event. His great memory was not only a genius expression: precise mnemonic patterns enhanced it. This legend, even if it may appear fable-like, introduces three interconnecting concepts that will define some of the most important issues of the topography of memory. First of all, the hegemony of the sight. Training visual and the imaginative faculty is essential to represent objects, places, and events in mind. The second aspect is the presence of a building, real or fictitious, in which to insert the newly created images in exact order. Finally, the importance of suggestion and engagement: the mental environments have to involve the creator to facilitate their memorization.

The story had a huge success, crossed national borders, was translated in Latin, and quoted in many rhetoric treatises over the following centuries, becoming the milestone for the culture of eloquence, for the long-standing tradition that raised memorization to the level of an *ars memoriae* [29].

In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a work long attributed to Cicero, the anonymous author gave a more detailed description of ancient mnemotechnics, stating that there are two different types of memory coexisting in the human mind: the natural memory, embedded in our minds, born simultaneously with thought, and the artificial memory (*artificiosa*), the one that can be learned and improved by training. The artificial memory includes backgrounds (*loci*), scenes naturally or artificially set off on a small scale, for example, palaces, gardens, vestibules, useful for precisely organizing memories, and images (*imagines*), figures, marks, or symbols of the object to remember [11]. Images and backgrounds interact creating *imagines agentes*, mnemonic devices which, due to their great emotional and suggestive impact, can recall large amounts of data.

In 1966 Frances Yates, published *The Art of Memory* [34] and was one of the first scholars to highlight the importance of the mnemonics tradition by reviving its decisive role, from Classicism to the Renaissance. Through her pioneering work, she disclosed the topic as a historical foundation of the connection between place and memory. After her studies, the art of memory was no longer just a way to fix and organize memories in mind but became a source of identity and culture [19].

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II. PLACES OF MEMORY

Until the eighteenth century, the link between places and memory has been recognized in classical *loci memoriae*. However, starting from Romanticism, it has acquired a deeper philosophical and conceptual articulation, which has freed it from being just a technical ability [18]. The place was moving away from being the setting only of our present, an artificial context for memories, the place was becoming the protagonist of studies that would help the *loci* evolve into actual *places of memory*. In this interdisciplinary discussion, the innovative works by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs were particularly significant. In *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* [20] he refused the Freudian thesis that memories are preserved only in the unconscious, affirming that they can last only if “contextualized by the social group to which the individual belongs, be it a family, a social class, or a religious community” [10]. He was already introducing the idea that memory is never truly private, not a purely individual affair, but exists as collective memory, a topic that gives the name to his most famous book, *La mémoire collective* (1950). “Every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework. [...] It is to space - the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination - that we must turn our attention” [21]. For Halbwachs the place became one of the foundations of intersubjectivity, vital in creating connections between individuals and social groups [16].

Another author who contributed significantly to what can be defined as the hermeneutics of the places of memory is certainly Pierre Nora. Influenced by Halbwachs, he wrote a monumental work in seven volumes, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984-1992), a comprehensive scholarly study about the places of memory. Places where memory crystallizes and secretes [24], mental and physical spaces where a group, a community, or an entire society can recognize itself through a connection with the collective memory [6]. Places of memory are significant units, of material or ideal order, which the will of men or the passage of time have made a symbolic element for communities and societies [24]. Nora distinguishes *lieux de mémoire* from *milieux de mémoire*, tradition-grounded memory, the way the past is “naturally” in the present [15]: “There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” [25]. The focus is that the spontaneous and traditional forms of memory, which are irremediably destined to be lost and disappear, have been substituted by the places of memory, artificial and reconstituted objects, moved by commemorative intentions.

Pierre Nora divides *Lieux de mémoire* into three categories: material, symbolical and functional. The first are monuments, museums, archives, memorials, places where the relationship with history prevails; the second ones, like anniversaries or pilgrimages, are related to the mental geography of remembrance and are intended to evoke episodes that are fundamental to the identity of a country [18]. The third typology combines the collective diaries and autobiographies with movies and exhibitions to keep the memory alive. Proceeding his reflections, Nora introduces a significant peculiarity of places of memory, their relation with the symbol. He affirms

that even a place that appears merely material, such as an archive depository, is not a place of memory if the imagination does not invest it with a *symbolic aura* [24]. In this statement, we can glimpse the seed of the storytelling of places of memory, that idea of mnemonic interpretation and translation that will become a fundamental part of their communication.

Nora's work was fundamental, and starting from his theories, the idea of a place of memory has begun to be understood as a specific place, where the commemorative side prevails and allows us to better understand past events and transmit them to future generations. However, Nora's works also presented a sort of translation issue. *Lieux de mémoire* have been variously transformed into realms of memory, places of memory, or even backgrounds of memory, connecting them with the original idea of *loci*. In Germany the term *erinnerungsorte* is the most used, where the word *erinnern*, to internalize, has passed to mean memory, and also has a didactical connotation, stating for to learn, to teach [1]. What is clear is that *lieux de mémoire* is not a transnational word, not only terminologically but also conceptually. No wonder that after Nora's publications, many countries have worked to seek their own idea of places of memory. Particularly relevant are Mario Isnenghi [23] reflections in Italy and the studies of the American historian Jay Winter, who in the essay *Sites of memory* [35] define the term more narrowly to mean physical sites where commemorative acts occur, real *topoi* with a life history.

Despite the attempt to move away from Nora, these reflections continue to manifest one of his most compelling methodologies, the investigation of memory sites as “plural texts” in the Barthesian sense of the term [18]: “The text is plural. This does not mean only that it has several meanings, but that it fulfills the very plurality of meaning: an irreducible (and not just acceptable) plurality. The text is coexistence of meaning, but passage, traversal” [5]. An intrinsic plurality that undoubtedly defines places of memory complexity.

III. THE MNEMOTOPES

In the literature, to indicate the interaction between places and memory, we can also use another particular term: *mnemotope*, or in a more classical way, *mnemotopos*. This conceptual *portmanteau* is more than a practical synonym of place of memory, used for stylistic reasons when you want to avoid repetition, more than the combination of the ideas of memory and place. The term effectively renders the concepts of place and remembrance as interdependent, entangling their manifestations and significations in one epistemological whole [13]. Mnemotope is a cultural object of territorial interpretation, a plural text, on the border between individual and collective, between private and institutionalized [7]. Inside this term, we can also find the liminal value, highlighted by Nora, between material and symbol, that characterizes the topography of memory.

Mnemotope is not an entirely new word. It has been sporadically used in various fields of knowledge. One of the first authors who mentioned it not as a synonym was Jan Assmann's in his most famous work, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (1992). Referring to Maurice Halbwachs' *La*

topographie legendaire des evangiles en Terre Sainte [22], he affirms that: “The art of memory works with imaginary settings, and memory culture with signs based on Nature. Even, or indeed especially, entire landscapes may serve as a medium for cultural memory. [...] Rome created a sacred landscape during Antiquity, consisting of topographical texts of cultural memory, that is, ‘mnemotopes’” [2]. In Assmann’s vision, mnemotopes start to be physical and memorable places of a certain amplitude, privileged mediums of cultural memory.

If memory is inevitably concerned with time, we can also discuss whether mnemotope can have a connection with a more successful concept, the *chronotope* theorized by Bakhtin as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” [4]. The fusion of temporal and spatial dimensions is an essential part of the literary chronotope, which certainly tends to distance it from the mnemotope, where time plays a constitutive, but not determining role. Moreover, the chronotope remains in the literary territory, and there are many doubts about the possibility of its insertion in other cultural texts. A mnemotope is instead a place of multiple interacting cultural products to produce mnemonic knowledge and awareness. Therefore, the issue is still very open: today is missing an unambiguous definition of the term that disconnects it entirely from being a terminological alternative for places of memory. We can find an attempt in *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung. Ein interdisziplinäres Lexicon*, the “Dictionary of Memory and Remembrance” [26], which gathers most of the terms that make up the macrocosm of memory. While echoing Assmann’s reflection, the authors emphasize even more that mnemotopes can mark very complex formations of sense, useful to the collective remembrance if identified on the territory and culturally recognized. They can last a long time, and their permanence can strengthen community identity.

Jan Van Rookhuijzen, one of the few scholars to have declared and motivated his mnemotopic choice, claims that mnemotopes are different from objects, monuments, or landscapes, although these categories are closely associated with them [32]. Objects are transportable, not embedded in a surrounding landscape, and less permanent than a mnemotope. Monuments are planned, they are apparatuses that never pretend to be unintentional, while mnemotopes can be the result of a totally spontaneous stratification.

Stefan Bednarek [9] adds that perhaps, in an attempt of definition, it would be useful to distinguish mnemotopes as much as possible from their historical referents *lieux de mémoire*, to give them terminological independence and to remove them from the context of *commemorative bulimia*, to which Nora somberly referred [6]. Definitions by negation certainly help to narrow the mnemotopic multifaceted field but do not entirely solve the puzzle.

Mnemotopes may take any form, they can be man-made structures and natural landmarks, and even empty spaces [32]. We can also identify some specific mnemotopic categories. We can talk about mnemotopes “with trauma”, more related to the traditional idea of places of memory, where commemoration and the *memento* play a fundamental role, and mnemotopes

“without trauma”, linked to positive aspects of reality, with strong creative energy [7], for example literary mnemotopes, birthplaces of famous people, cinematographic locations. Going more into detail, we can also indicate some features common to the entire mnemotopic sphere.

We can start from the word itself mnemotope, focusing on the second segment, *-topoi*. The term *topos* came from Greek τόπος, place, but over time its lexical vocation has evolved to mean a common or recurring topic, something that is repeated and whose connotation is recognized and shared, until it becomes a content itself. Expanding this idea, we can look for specific *mnemo-topoi*, recurring patterns, motifs, building blocks of collective memory, potentially defining a mnemotopic rhetoric, not absolute but constantly updatable and integrable. Basic unifying criteria that can make mnemotopes more intelligible and decipherable.

First, in dealing with mnemotopes, the place, the physical place, is essential. Mnemotopes are not transportable markers of collective identity [14], they have precise location and roots. In this context, we cannot fail to mention the sense of authenticity. When we approach a mnemotope we often expect to have unique access to the past, building a relationship of trust. Feeling the mnemotope as real, as genuine memory bearer, is one of the access keys to its true identity.

Mnemotopes are located. They have topographies (hills, trees, rivers), geographies (cities, towns, capitals), and different scales (region, zone, areas, districts) [14]. Mnemotopes contain narratives. Whether visible or latent, the layers of stories are a fundamental part of the mnemotope and its subsequent dissemination. Mnemotopes have their own communicative value that may be hidden but remains intrinsic as they go from individual to collective horizons.

Mnemotopes are places where vital complexity emerges from a layered stratification. The physical presence of the place fixes memory, situates mnemotopes in a perspective of permanence, able to alleviate disorientation and separation caused by the passage of time [12]. Permanence is not affected by the elimination of monuments or memorials that come up on mnemotopes, and the stability of places finds its faithful ally in representation. The resilience of mnemotopes also depends on their ability to create relationships. These kinds of places can connect territory and people because they can be lived and felt.

The place is one of the main experiences that one can make of memory, and sensoriality is a foundational part of mnemotopic involvement. There is a kind of embodied memory in coming into contact with a mnemotope. Casey [12] suggests that we can talk about an *aura*, an embracing atmosphere, that exists in the place and can surround us. Paradoxically, we can perceive the atmosphere even of inaccessible mnemotopes. This happens not directly but through various translation processes that can increase the already mentioned trust in the mnemotope. Not to be underestimated is the suggestion that a mnemotope can generate up to natural enchantment.

Mnemotopes can also be activators of territorial movements and traveling activities. A visitor that recognizes a place as a mnemotope can experience the curiosity to go in that place, to see, and perceive its memory. Finally, the mnemotopic

identification can stabilize a place without institutionalization, making it emerge on the territory, ready to communicate.

IV. COMMUNICATION DESIGN AS MNEMOTOPIC STABILIZER

The mnemotopic recognition, especially for those non-institutionalized places that have a strong communicative urgency, is not a direct and straightforward operation. We need specific methods and tools to make a place emerge on the territory as the bearer of significant memories.

Today Communication Design, and more specifically, Communication Design for the Territory, can stabilize mnemotopic realities, making them more evident and understandable. This discipline merges traditional know-how with technological innovation [8]; it masters different instruments to translate and represent the place-memory axis, and is able to look to other fields of knowledge, successfully interfacing with them. This happens precisely in the case of mnemotopes, whose study belongs mainly to fields of knowledge that are very distant from design, such as anthropology, sociology, and memory studies. Nevertheless, Communication Design can deal with the description and visualization of mnemotopes, and their translation, transforming them into articulated communicative systems that introduce individual memories into a wider and collective narrative.

The privileged tool of this discipline is cartography, essential when discussing mnesic-spatial representation. For centuries maps, interfaces to describe and act upon the complexity of the territory [27], have helped to reconstruct the past and geolocate historical events. As an interpretation of reality, they are not only conventional visualizations of a geographical area, but they are able to convey the complexity of the elements that compose them. They are the final communicative artifact of a translation process in which different actors are involved: data, information, images, and texts are anchored to the territory revealing their communicative nature. Maps become visual mediums of remembrance, which cannot be thought of as "the

passive reproduction of reality but a production of meaning and spaces" [28].

For the design of mnemotopic communication, maps are fundamental. They help geolocalize the memory of places and identify new connections up to the creation of real mnemotopic itineraries. However, maps are not only static devices to identify points and to guide territorial exploration. They can also be useful to reconstruct and visualize narratives, encouraging knowledge and imagination. In this context, one of the most important solutions of topographic mnesic storytelling [30] is the *story maps*, and even more the *digital story maps*. They are spatial structures of stories in relationship with places that can add to the bi-dimensional structure of maps the temporal side and the dynamism; story maps are not created to "define exact locations, determine coordinates or measure distances, but seek to tell and stimulate stories from different places and times" [30]. They can expose the stratified mnemotopes, making contents of different nature interact on a cartographic structure. To clarify the importance of the story maps, we can introduce here a project called *Distretto Testori*, "Testori District", designed for Milano City of Literature UNESCO. It has been realized by DCxT, the research group of Communication Design for the Territory from the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano. It is a map-based web portal, focused on the places quoted by Giovanni Testori [31], a famous Italian writer of the post-war period, specifically choose because he describes Milan as a city that constantly needs localization in order to be able to stand up to the greatness of the events it collects. His works are full of places depicted in detail, up to the specific addresses and districts.

The website is divided into three main sections. The first one, the most important, is a complex story map, based on the quotes from the novel together with pre-selected archival photos describing the precisely geolocalized places. This content is divided into six chapters that remind those of a book. The user can move within the narrative, following the suggested itinerary, or can decide to freely explore the sections and the suggested places.



Fig. 1 *Distretto Testori*. Inside the chapter "I Casermoni". The historical images are geolocalized on the map and combined with Testori's quotes

The second part is related to the principal places of Testori's life, fixed on the map, enriched with historical pictures, and reference dates.

The third section is called "Mnemotopes" and is a map of Testori's places, divided into four different sub-categories: literary mnemotopes, cinematographic mnemotopes, biographical mnemotopes, contemporary mnemotopes (places

where Testori's memory is nowadays preserved, like Testori's Archive). In this way, the user can have a general view of the district related to the author and the places that characterize it. At first glance, it seems clear that most of them are not official places, but common places linked to everyday life, which would risk being forgotten if not stabilized by the communicative translation operated by design.

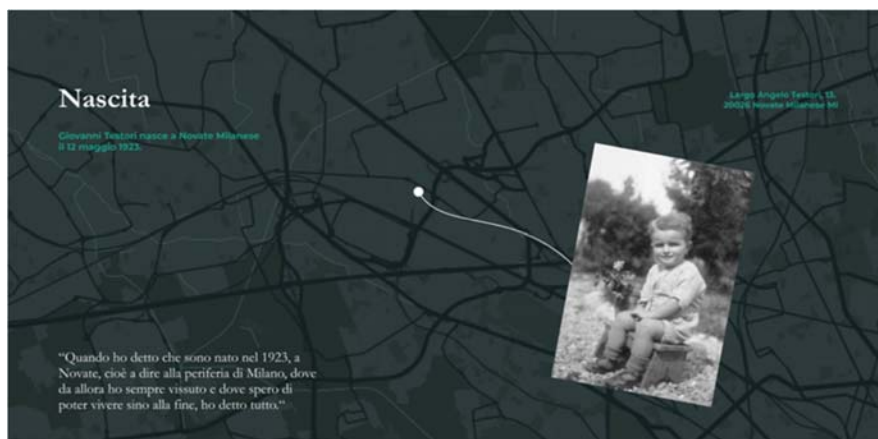


Fig. 2 *Distretto Testori*. Inside the section dedicated to the places of Testori's life

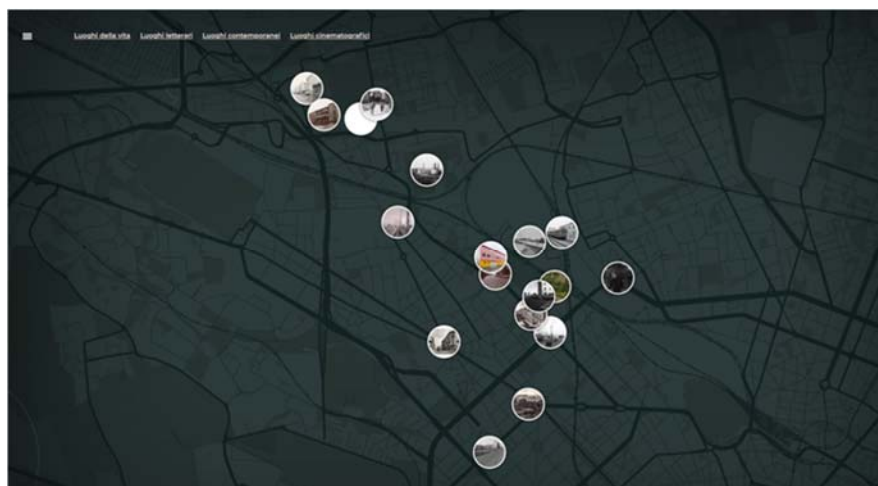


Fig. 3 *Distretto Testori*. Inside the section "Mnemotopes", mapping all the places related to Testori's memory

In this experimental project, Communication Design recognized the places narrated by the author as mnemotopes, highlighting not only points on a map but a dense Testori district in Milan. Literary mnemotopes have been translated and represented through a hybrid system in which coexist maps, archival photos, quotes creating together a new narration. In fact, the website does not report the stories and the characters of Testori on a cartographic medium, but the places narrated by the author, in a specific virtual environment, generate a new geolocalized original story.

Considering mnemotopic communication, what appears to be more important is not the level of individual artifacts, which should also be carefully evaluated and selected, but how they work together within a complex communication system and what apparatuses can generate. It is right through the

hybridization of languages, in fact, that the intrinsic complexity of mnemotopes is able to emerge.

The role of Communication Design as a stabilizer of the memory of places can also be experimented within the educational field, especially through teaching activities. This aspect can be demonstrated by analyzing the project "Educazione e Memoria. Un racconto di periferia" [37], with the over-mentioned DCxT group as scientific coordinator. The project intended to involve high school students from the Rosa Luxemburg Technical Institute in Milan, to realize a movie documentary about the Marchiondi Spagliardi Institute. Built between 1954-1958 in a peripheral area of the city by the architect Vittoriano Viganò, the institute was intended to host children in difficulty. The huge complex of buildings was a clear example of the Brutalist current, but today is miserably

abandoned and inaccessible. For this reason, the core of the work was the rediscovery of a past unknown but under everyone's eyes, to understand, validate, and communicate it.



Fig. 4 Marchiondi Spagliardi Institute by Vittoriano Viganò, abandoned and hidden by thick vegetation. Milan, 2021

We proposed a narrative methodology, starting from Communication Design to investigate abandoned architectures that are silent and disregarded. Four seminars have been organized for the students, by setting up a path of recognition of the building as a mnemotope, focused on the pedagogical vocation of the ruins [3]. Fundamental was exploring the original functions of the remaining structures at the historical, mnemonic, and architectural level, promoting territorial awareness; atmospheres of memory and places have been another critical theme through which to explore Marchiondi Institute. The didactic translation of the mnemotope has also passed through participatory activities: realization of word-cloud posters and original postcards to put at the center of the reflection on the future of the suburbs, an element of primary importance, memory of place.



Fig. 5 A postcard realized by the students of the project "Educazione e Memoria. Un racconto di periferia", 2021

For the final meeting, we also organized a walking tour around the perimeter of Marchiondi, to test if an abandoned mnemotope can still stimulate curiosity and touristic

involvement. Students were given a map to orient themselves around the buildings and recognize their function despite the dense vegetation.



Fig. 6 Students walking around the perimeter of Marchiondi Institute, Milan, 2021

The mnemotopic recognition achieved with the communication design tools made the experience much more engaging. It allowed the students to perceive the building no longer as a ruin to be demolished but as a cultural resource of the neighborhood. These experimentations and the related prototypes feed the idea that the mnemotopes needing most to be inserted in complex communicative systems, are the ones that have not experienced processes of *museification* or institutionalization, whether they are punctual places (Marchiondi) or memory-scapes (Testori District). Communication design can offer them external communication devices, which must necessarily be elaborated, that act as re-activators of dormant memories.

V. MNEMOTOPES AS ACTIVATORS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCOURSES

The German art historian Aby Warburg was an energetic ambassador of the interdisciplinary study of culture, pointing out, since the beginning of the 20th century, that researchers should stop policing disciplinary boundaries to gain insight into processes of cultural memory [17].

Mnemotopic communication design is not only limited to referring to other fields of knowledge, but it also manages to generate new interdisciplinary discourses. This is the case of *Mnemosphere project* [36], promoted by the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano, involving PhD students and research fellows. *Mnemosphere* aims to investigate the different ways in which the memory of places can be designed and communicated through atmospheric spaces capable of stimulating emotions.

The project bases its approach on a synergistic collaboration between different disciplinary fields. The driving force of the research is the dialogue between the design of communication for the territory and the design of installations in the atmospheric dimension; the interdisciplinary nature of the research is enriched with the study of emotions, color perception, and the design of temporary spaces and services.

The project does not aim to give a single definition to the

concept of “mnemosphere”, but intends to investigate its plural substance to communicate its intangibility. We started the investigation from the construction of a shared vocabulary regarding the concepts of “mnemotopes”, “atmospheres of spaces” and “atlas of emotions”. Then, we visually expanded the shared lexicon through an Open Call for images that invited artists, designers, photographers, and creative professionals to share their own visual interpretations of the theme. The main

idea was to use a tool, the open call, typically addressed to the art world, in a specific design context, to see and evaluate its effects. The Call was articulated through the filling of a form with images and text, that stimulated the participants to reflect on the relationship between the memories, places, atmospheres, and colors. Surprisingly, more than 400 images were received among photographs, illustrations, artworks, and videos.

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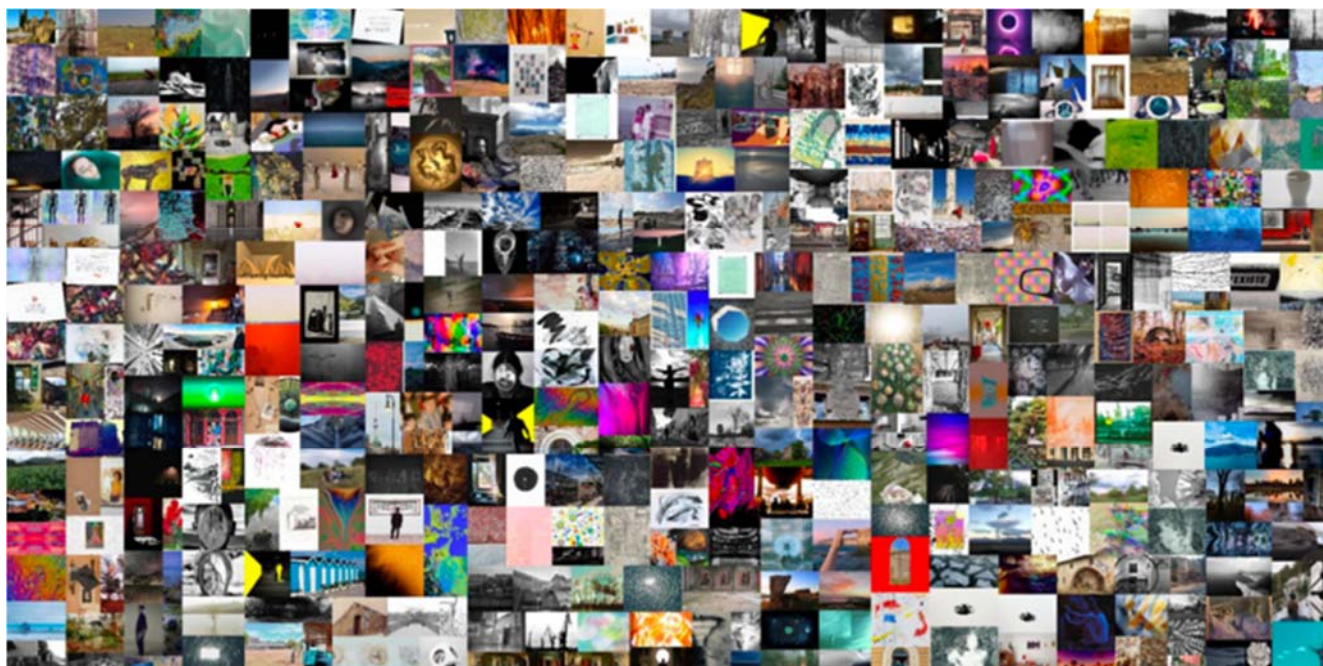


Fig. 7 Mnemosphere Project. Open call results, 2021



Fig. 8 Mnemosphere Project. Board on collective memory, 2021

The project is still ongoing, and we are now organizing a series of workshops to analyze the collected materials. One of

them has been specifically dedicated to mnemotopes; we divided the images from the open call into different categories

related to the mnemotopic sphere: individual memory, collective memory, physical environment, and abstract dimensions. We elaborated four boards from this preliminary distinction, inspired by Warburg *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* [33], making mnemotopes activators of interdisciplinary discourses.

Once all images are analyzed and integrated into the lexicon, the final goal will be to set up a collective and participated visual archive, a *Mnemosphere Atlas*, where the power of the relationship between images and words will emerge, contributing to narrate the atmospheres of memory in the present time.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

From a *mnemotopic perspective*, Communication Design for the Territory can be a valuable resource. It can interact with the other disciplines involved in study of mnemotopes in a supportive way. It is not only a process of enhancement and communicative translation; Communication Design is involved in the very recognition of these complex mnemonic realities. It can stabilize the memory of places and make it accessible through mnemotopes representation; it acts in particular on those lesser-known places that time has made almost invisible and manages to make them much more perceptible. Moreover, this field of knowledge, through the use of maps, can create mnemotopic paths and fill them with stories and visual narratives that can be experienced by users even online.

One of the theoretical challenges will be to understand the cultural specificity of mnemotopic research and design, increasingly distinguishing it from other academic discourses, while keeping the concept flourishing in an interdisciplinary environment.

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