

***Photographic Mnemotopes:
Phototextual Reports as a Research Tool for the Communication of the Memory of Places***

Clorinda Sissi Galasso, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

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Abstract

The proposed study refers to Communication Design for the Territory, a discipline that has taken up the territorial theme as its own specific dimension, in conjunction with memory studies, an academic field that investigates memory as an integrated interdisciplinary system that combines the physiological dimension with the socio-cultural one. The focus is the concept of *mnemotope*. The term combines two Greek words, *mnéme*, memory and *tópos*, place, becoming a plural object of territorial interpretation of various forms and scales, that can be categorized in mnemotopes with trauma (e.g., war mnemotopes) and mnemotopes without trauma (e.g., birthplaces of illustrious people, literary mnemotopes). The communication and representation of mnemotopes is essential to manifest their territorial network and to make their cultural value emerge. Photography, given its historical link with the memory of places and its visualization, is one of the most suitable systems for mnemotopic communication, especially in its relationship with the textual narratives. For this reason, it has been developed a specific design tool, the *mnemotopic phototextual report*, which can enhance the recognition of mnemotopes, express their different typologies, and evoke their immaterial qualities. The report not only merges textual apparatus and visual apparatus in a unique environment but cross the traditional models used in the academic context for case study research with diaristic narratives and literary travelogues. The paper will show in detail the features of the *mnemotopic phototextual report* as valuable tool for the description of territories, places, and their memories, on the edge between photography and design.

Keywords: Mnemotope, Communication Design, Memory of Places, Phototextual Report, Photography

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Introduction

There is a strong connection between memory and places. Their relationship proves to be a central theme of interdisciplinary research and Communication Design can offer an original perspective on this topic by favoring the reactivation of the territorial past.

In particular, Communication Design for the Territory, a recent discipline that has taken up the territory as its own specific dimension considering places as stratified entities, gathers and analyzes contents (archival documents, testimonies, historical photographs, etc.) and reconnects them to places using specific tools and devices. It can provide new answers to the search for a theoretical solution between the ideas of "places of memory" and "memory of places" by focusing on the concept of the *mnemotope*. The term is composed of the two Greek words *mnéme*, memory, and *tópos*, place, condensing in a singular term the bond between these two fundamental aspects of humanity. The origin of this *portmanteau* is intrinsic to the studies regarding the spatialization of memory. This topic is historically multidisciplinary and has led to a variety of considerations and debates in fields of knowledge such as cultural anthropology, history, photography, and sociology. Until the XVIII century, the link between places and memory was recognized only as "a way to remember", a mnemotechnic (Yates, 1993) configured in the classical *loci memoriae*, ancient associations of concepts, images, and places generated in the mind to reactivate large amounts of information that could thereby be transmitted. At the beginning of the XX century, this broad and interdisciplinary discussion includes the innovative work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who in *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) states that memory can only exist if it is contextualized by the social group to which the individual belongs. His thesis clearly breaks away from the physiological and technical view of memory and starts from the radical assumption that no one can remember alone, and that memory is created since childhood by being integrated in a specific and recognizable social framework. He is also considered the father of the idea of the collective memory. For the sociologist, memory is never a purely individual matter, and communities need shared mnestic support to recognize themselves as such and to survive events. Even the most intimate and personal memories exist «in relationship with a whole ensemble of notions which many others possess» (Connerton, 1989, p. 36). Collective memory does not only refer to the past but also inhabits the contemporaneity and «unfolds within a spatial framework [...] we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. 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» (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 139-140).

Forty years later, Pierre Nora, inspired by the theories of Halbwachs, publishes a monumental work, divided in seven volumes, entitled *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984). The author considers the *lieu de mémoire*, the place of memory, as mental or physical, abstract or concrete, territorial or objective entity «where memory crystallizes and conceals itself» (Nora, 1989, p. 7). He does not only focus on the physical and territorial dimension of mnestic sites, but he also dwells on other external and mediated marks as objects (e.g., vocabulary, encyclopedia, calendar), famous characters in the history of a country (e.g., Jeanne d'Arc) and traditional celebrations.

The success of Nora's study is so vast that produces a turn in the mnestic context materialized in a historical period of unexpected and excessive interest in memory, not only in academia, but also in other cultural fields such as art, psychology, neuroscience,

cinematography, and literature: the *memory boom* (Winter, 2007). During this time, the concept of the *lieu de mémoire* goes through considerable issues. Under a theoretical perspective, it loses the interpretative nuances highlighted by Nora, becoming a concept associated only to the celebratory side of the past. The aspiration to give voice to places where history and memory are integrated on an immaterial level, places where symbolic value stands for the permanence of time, is equated with the theme of commemoration, eliminating the mnestic variations.

The idea of *lieu de mémoire* also raises translation problems: after Nora, many countries try to find their own version of the concept. In Germany, the term *Erinnerungsorte* (François & Schulze, 2001) is the most commonly used, where the word *erinnern*, “to internalize”, has come to refer to memory and also has a didactic connotation, meaning “to learn”, “to teach” (Erl & Nuenning, 2010, p. 22). In Italy particularly relevant are Mario Isnenghi (1996) reflections: in his work, echoing Nora’s title, *I luoghi della memoria*, the author focuses on the symbols, characters, and structures of Italy from 1861 to the second post-war period. In the US there are the studies of Jay Winter that in the essay *Sites of memory* (2010) stay in the field of commemoration, affirming that the sites «have an initial, creative phase, when they are constructed or adapted to particular commemorative purposes. Then follows a period of institutionalization and routinization of their use» (p. 312).

In this specific historical and conceptual framework, the *mnemotope* finally appears. At the beginning it is only a synonym, another terminological alternative replacing the *lieu de mémoire*. In 1992, Jan Assmann, a German anthropologist, decided to use the compound word indicating a territorial object of territorial interpretation, a topographical text of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011). Today the mnemotope can be considered as a complex entity where are condensed the physical and the symbolic sides of memory, connected to a specific place. A reality that can be identified and recognized on the territory, geolocalized even if inaccessible. The term has been sporadically used in fields of knowledge like anthropology or sociology and is currently part of the *Memory Studies*, an international and interdisciplinary network of researchers that consider memory as an integrated system combining the physiological dimension with the socio-cultural one, particularly interested in all those apparatuses in which memory is stratified and which may favor its transmission (e.g., places). Prominent scholars in this field include the aforementioned Jan Assmann, Paul Connerton, and Jay Winter.

Mnemotopic Phototextual Report

To investigate the concept mnemotope under a communicative perspective, the present study was divided into different stages: mnemotopic categorization; mnemotopic exploration; mnemotopic analysis.

1. Mnemotopic categorization

At the beginning of the research, I preferred not to focus on a standard, formal definition of mnemotope, that would have affected its intrinsic complexity. Instead, I moved toward organizing a mnemotopic taxonomy that would allow me to highlight the variety of these territorial realities. Mnemotopes can be very different from each other, in terms of scale, type, and accessibility. They can be man-made structures or natural landmarks, minuscule dots on the map or entire regions, and even empty spaces (Van Rookhuijzen, 2020). We can therefore rely on a preliminary categorization that divides mnemotopes into individual and

collectives. Individual mnemotopes are places related to personal, private memories, a bridge between autobiography and topography. They are rich in sensory elements and emotional shades, but they are also very fragile and overexposed to the passage of time; if they are not communicated and shared, they can last as short as a generation. On the other hand, collective mnemotopes are public places, more stable and recognizable than the individuals as they have already passed through processes of institutionalization.

We can also distinguish between two other mnemotopic macro categories: mnemotopes *with trauma* and mnemotopes *without trauma* (Fig. 1). The first are realities connected to the traditional idea of places of memory, commemorative sites that provide public mnestic recognition. Their surface is characterized by forms of externalization of memory such as monuments, memorials, and memorial museums. Without trauma mnemotopes offer a very different perspective. They are mnestic entities that are not imbued with contested memories but are equally marked by strong emotional experiences, multilayered microcosms, cultural intersections where territory, past and curiosity coexist, often linked to the creative side of the past. We can identify for example: cinematographic locations; literary mnemotopes, birthplaces of illustrious people such as artists, writers or poets; historical cafes; industrial mnemotopes. In the area between mnemotopes with trauma and without trauma, we can then classify liminal realities such as: ruins; mnemotopes, marked only by commemorative plaques; naked places, places that have no traces of the event whose memories they preserve (Pirazzoli, 2010); cemeteries as places of collective burial that can collect famous graves.

These two macro categories are not to be understood as exclusive but are in dialogue with each other. In fact, mnemotopes are dynamic and active realities that inhabit the territory and for this reason are constantly taxonomically evolving.

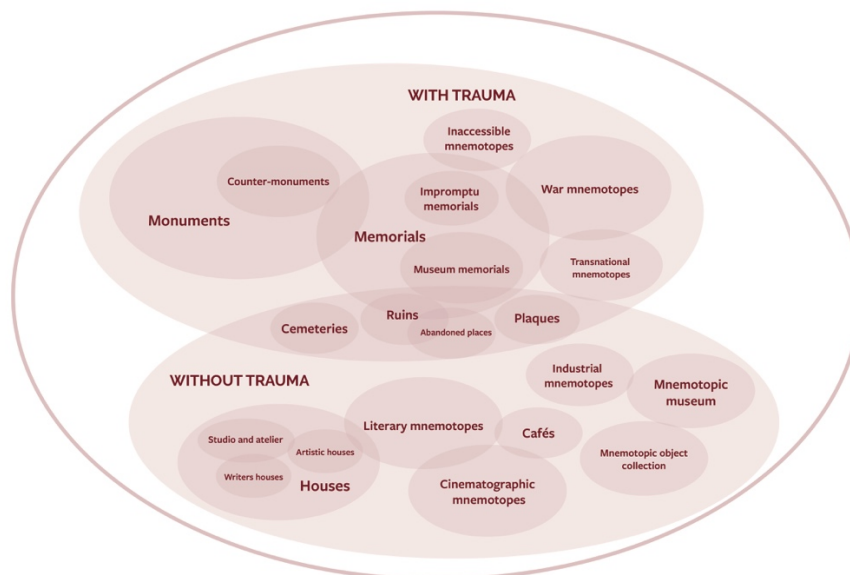


Figure 1: Mnemotopic categorization, 2021.

2. Mnemotopic exploration

In order to understand the mnemotopic features I decided to physically explore these territorial realities to directly experience the memories that they still contain and preserve. From January 2018 till May 2022, I explored 92 international mnemotopes. Wherever

possible, I gathered communication devices (e.g., brochures, pamphlets, maps), used audio guides, participated in guided tours, and contacted those responsible for the sites to get a complete picture of the mnemotopes' history and current presence. Throughout the exploration phase, I took travel notes, and each mnemotope was documented by a series of photographs to detail the site and the surrounding landscape. These images were accompanied by original photographic production to evocatively represent the connection between place and memory. Parallel to the spatial exploration, I also conducted research in relation to languages: I investigated many possible communicative apparatuses to translate the mnemotope and I decided to use the phototext, which focuses on the fusion of the narrative and visual planes into a *unicum*. In the phototextual environment (e.g., the page), the verbal and the eidetic levels are assembled and combined to generate a *third object* in the mind of the viewer/reader, «that develops and lives only in the constant 'ping-pong' of the eyes when they move horizontally back and forth from image to text» (Chiocchetti, 2018, p. 742).

3. Mnemotopic analysis

After setting the mnemotopic taxonomy and opting for the phototext as the elective language of the research, I moved on toward the analytical phase. Therefore, I decided to create a specific design tool for mnemotopic communication so that I could examine their characteristics in detail, and I could emphasize their presence in the territory. From a methodological point of view, the elaboration of the tool refers to the blend of different apparatuses.

First, the *case study report*, configured as mode of inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon – the case – in depth and within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). To this research framework I added the phototextual model, and more specifically the auto-photobiotope: based on the idea of photography as a place of preservation of the past, the autobiographical phototextual apparatus offers the union of the photograph as a subjective vision of oneself and the surrounding reality (Ferraro & Sperti, 2021) with the personal textual account of one's experience in the world, often taking the form of diary notes, introspective and extemporaneous reflections, correspondence, and poetic excerpts. Then, I included the *travelogue*, a narrative genre that is part of the broader field of travel literature, which became popular at the beginning of the seventeenth century, collecting narrations describing journeys and explorations.

Combining these three devices, I generated the *mnemotopic phototextual report* (Fig. 2): an analytical interpretative report, core of the entire research, describing the main mnemotopic sub-typologies, facing the mnemotopic complexity and variety, able to valorize and recognize the fundamental presence of these territorial entities. Echoing the studies of one of the most important scholars in phototextual practices, Michele Cometa (2016), each report is divided in three complementary parts: *inscriptio*, *subscriptio*, *pictura*.

The *inscriptio* is the informative apparatus of the report including: the title, in this case the name of the place; the location; the coordinates, as each mnemotope can be identified on a map; the mnemotopic category; the mnemotopic typology; the state of preservation; the website, when present. The *subscriptio* is the commentary part of the report, consisting of two complementary sections: Description, analytical report of the mnemotope, with basic information about the place; Mnemotopic relevance, autobiographic mnemotopic storytelling, acting as a travelogue. I decided to leave this part in Italian, my native language, because it

constitutes the most subjective and emotional part of the whole phototext. It is the personal account of my mnemotopic experience on each place.

The *pictura* is the visual level of the phototext consisting of two pictures for each mnemotope taken from the photographic reportage, with occasionally the insertion of not-self-produced materials (e.g., links to music tracks to expand the phototext experience at the synesthetic level). The visual apparatus mixes descriptive and informative photographs with detailed pictures that do not refer directly to the appearance of the place but to the memories it contains and preserves; on each page, images constantly dialogue with the text. Verbal and visual parts continuously interface and mutually export their meanings.



Figure 2: Example of mnemotopic phototextual report, 2022.

Mnemo Photo project

During my research I decided also to involve the mnemotopic phototextual report in other design projects to test its functions, objectives, and results. *Mnemo Photo*, for example, is a photographic project focused on individual mnemotopes. After having explored so many public and collective mnestic realities, I decided to concentrate on personal memories and places.

I asked to the participants of the project to compile an online form indicating one of their personal mnemotopes with: name and age; title related to the place or the memory; coordinates or precise address of the place; physical description of the place as accurate as possible to be identified; relevance, or the importance of the memory associated to that place. After having collected the data, I proceeded to map the locations (Fig. 3) indicated by the participants and to establish the routes for the photographs.

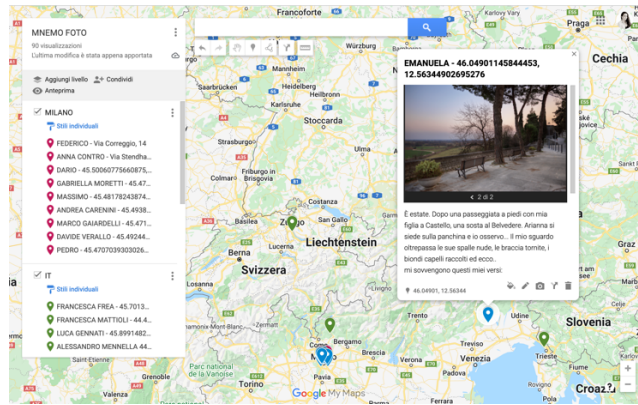


Figure 3: Mnemo Photo, map of the geolocalized photo places, 2022.

For the pictures, I tried to choose the time of day with the least human presence, if possible, and to reflect the moods and color suggestions given by the participants. I printed the photographs on a 30x45 cm rigid support and returned them to the mnemotopic owners. Then I made a staged portrait (Fig. 4) with the persons holding the printed photo in their hands; they had the possibility to choose in which part of the house to take the picture and with whom. I decided to take the portraits in their homes rather than in front of a neutral background to create a meta-photo in the encounter between the inner individual mnemotope – the place of residence – and the outer individual mnemotope – the place of memory that is externalized and spatialized. Even though the photograph of the place can appear mixed with the place, the domestic environment represents an essential part of the research: the house is one of the most meaningful mnemotopes, guardian of personal memories.



Figure 4: Mnemo Photo, example of meta portrait, 2022.

Being invited and entering private homes was a very challenging part of the project, but it was also the most sensitive part of the whole research, because it allowed me to share with the participants different mnemotopes, the memories associated with them and the unique moment of recording reminiscences in an intimate and safe environment.

In addition, the project wants to investigate people's reaction when they look at their own place, their mnemotope, photographed by external eyes, to see if they can still recognize it despite the passage of time. Mnemo Photo also intends to study whether there are recurring

aspects that can unify and characterize the representation of individual mnemotopes, adding new typologies and patterns (e.g., square, bench, door, street, bar, park) to those already highlighted in the research, during the categorization phase. The project is still in progress¹ and will take a serial form, almost as if it were a mnemonic topographical mosaic. The individual mnemotopes, communicated through the three-part report (Fig. 5), photographed and returned to the owner, enter, thanks to the final portrait, a new path of public fruition and shared recognition that brings them closer to the collective mnemonic realities.



Figure 5: Mnemo Photo, example of phototextual report, 2022.

Conclusion

The research was conducted from a design perspective to highlight the role of communication design in connecting memory and places through phototextual mnemonic practices and tools (i.e., mnemonic phototextual report). Based on this process, the main research contributions should be considered from three different perspectives: theoretical, methodological and disciplinary. The main theoretical achievement relates to the definition and categorization of mnemotopes. By combining the main references to the mnemotope, highlighting points of contact, overlaps and conceptual distances, I was able to provide a possible definition of the concept mnemotope that emerged in the design context. In this context, it was also of great importance to propose a mnemonic taxonomy based on the main macro-categories (individual mnemotopes; collective mnemotopes; mnemotopes with trauma; mnemotopes without trauma) and then divided into clusters analyzed through the phototextual practices.

From a methodological point of view, the most important contribution consists in the typological analysis tool identified in the encounter between case study report, autobiotext and travelogue: the mnemonic phototextual report. In particular, the phototextual practices normally treated in the literature and in the photographic field were repurposed for project use, taking the operation beyond the realm of method and giving it a project dimension. Reports conceived as formats are an act of communication design whose contribution can be understood not only at the methodological level as useful tools for case study research, but also at the project level as effective hybrid apparatuses for mnemonic

¹ For further information on the project and to participate visit the link: <https://forms.gle/2nB2doznphVCEqiY8>

recognition, remediation, and communication. Staying within the discipline context, I believe that the mnemotopic phototextual can be used in other design projects, such as in the case of Mnemo Photo, but also in other disciplinary contexts as an analytical tool suitable for increasing knowledge of hybrid topics like mnemotope, and for expanding categorization processes and studies through case studies with an approach that mixes the visual and the verbal generating new formations of meaning.

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Contact email: clorindasissi.galasso@polimi.it