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‘Memory Talk’ in a Museum in a Contested Land

A Platform for Mutual Understanding and a Potential Method for Built Heritage Conservation

Abstract

The article reflects on a participatory research initiative involving place attachment and heritage discourses, carried out in 2012–2014 in the multicultural and ethnically contested city of Koper/Capodistria (Slovenia). The initiative engaged local inhabitants in a set of ‘memory evenings’ dedicated to exploring personal and collective memories and place attachment to sites in the city’s old town. Although it was meant to promote participatory approaches in the conservation of built heritage and stimulate inclusive heritage discourses, it also had a strong psychological effect for local inhabitants. Initially conceived as a combination of the group interview and focus group methods, it evolved into an approach comparable to the discourse of ‘memory talk’ (Degnen 2005). The article analyses the past experience, focusing particularly on its criticalities, and points to how it is currently being developed.

Keywords: memory talk, participatory methods, place attachment, heritage conservation, Koper/Capodistria

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Introduction

Contested borderland spaces represent a particular challenge for the heritage field, particularly for built heritage conservation. Heritage in contested contexts is often defined by very strong dissonances (Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996; Smith 2006), mainly related to different power positions but also to different collective memories of the groups present in the territory. As such, heritage acts as a central instrument of power, and thus also of misrecognition and access to resources (Smith 2022). Consequently, such dissonance also affects, or should affect, the conservation practices and decision-making processes about the types of interventions in physical spaces, which derive, or should derive, from a thorough values assessment, via the so-called values-led approach (Wijesuriya, Thompson & Young 2013). Although the current international framework of conservation work has for some years now promoted an even more inclusive approach, the so-called people-centred approach (Wijesuriya, Thompson & Court 2017), which takes into account the critical view on heritage discourses (Smith 2006), the methods for acquiring better insight into the different values assessments, as well as how to translate them into practical work, have not yet been thoroughly elaborated.

One example of a contested borderland space is the region of northern Istria, in Slovenia, on the border with Italy. In the post-WWII period, after annexation by Yugoslavia, it was subject to the large-scale emigration of pre-war inhabitants and the subsequent immigration of newcomers. The restructuring of the population and the creation of the region's new identity took shape through typical identity-building processes, such as a new architectural identity, landmarks or toponymy, all of which can collectively be termed *marquage symbolique* (Veschambre 2008). At present, the region is officially bilingual, with the Slovene and Italian languages both being used, but also by a strong multiculturalism due to the many different ethnic groups of immigrants from the former Yugoslav republics; the remaining Italians now form an official minority. Over the last two decades, urban development and conservation projects have triggered questions about the different heritage discourses that are present within this diverse local population, their dissonances as well as shared elements.

These quests formed the basis for an informal initiative called 'I'm telling the story of the town' (*Pripovedujem zgodbo mesta*), established more than ten years ago, in 2012–2014, in the city of Koper, which consisted of a set of 'memory evenings'. Between 2021 and 2023, a two-year research project entitled 'Potential of ethnographic methods for the conservation of built heri-

tage in contested places, the case of Northern Istria',¹ was implemented based on the informal experience. As a result, a potential new method, with the working title 'group memory talk', was adapted from the concept of 'memory talk' proposed by Degnen (2005). In this paper, I first present the theoretical framework, then the case study area, offering critical reflections on the initial informal experience from 2012–2014 and focusing on the methodological aspect of the study and on its effect on the participants. Finally, I briefly outline how the experience has recently been upgraded and revised.

The Theoretical Framework

Scholarship in the field of critical heritage studies has emphasised the need to move beyond theories 'in' heritage and those 'of' heritage and focus more on theories 'for' heritage, on 'questions about the role played by the personal, the ordinary and the everyday, within spaces of heritage, whether they are physical, discursive or affective' (Waterton & Watson 2013, 551). The current focus in the heritage field on affective practices (Smith, Wetherell & Campbell 2018; Tolia-Kelly, Waterton & Watson 2016) highlights that paying attention to emotions and affect not only can give us opportunity to unravel how people develop attachments and commitments to the past, things, beliefs, places and so forth, but also 'can reveal the fractures and tensions that are both emotionally and discursively worked out as people reconsider and reassess their attachments to what was once common sense to them' (Wetherell, Smith, & Campbell 2018, 2). The point of focus makes affect a central topic for historically contested borderland contexts.

The theoretical framework on authorised heritage discourses (AHD) (Smith 2006), as well as more recent scholarly attention devoted to the affective dimension, resonates also in the practice-oriented field of built heritage conservation. Such a focus has helped advance the conservation field, which has started over the last ten years to abandon the narrow materialist-oriented paradigm in favour of values-based approaches and even more recently people-centred approaches (Avrami & Mason 2019; Wijesuriya et al. 2017, 13). The new paradigm shift in conservation is evident in the change in emphasis 'from the care of heritage to that of pursuing the well-being of both heritage and society as a whole' (Wijesuriya et al. 2017, 13). Yet, the shift is not only about increasing participation within a given management system; it addresses the core component of heritage management, this is, the people connected

1 This article is the result of the post-doctoral research project entitled 'Potential of Ethnographic Methods in the Conservation of Built Heritage in Contested Places, the Case of Northern Istria' (Z6–3226), conducted by Neža Čebroň Lipovec and funded by the Slovenian Research Agency – ARIS.

to heritage as an integral element of heritage-making, ensuring that 'heritage has a dynamic and mutually beneficial role in society today and far into the future' (Wijesuriya et al. 2017, 13). Recently, the topic of people-centred approaches has aided the reflections of architects and scholars (Wells & Stieffel 2019; Madgin & Lesh 2021) active in historic preservation and supportive of the critical heritage studies theory on AHD. According to this framework, 'people-centred approaches' are based on collective experiences, while the additional notion of 'human-centred approaches' departs from individual experiences and translates their role at a more collective level (Wells 2020, 1). The methodological framework most commonly employed as part of the paradigm shift is that of place attachment theory (Madgin & Lesh 2021, 5–8), which focuses on the 'symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared affective meanings to a particular space that provides the basis for the individual's and group's understanding of and relation to the environment' (Altman & Low 1992, 165). The framework thus encapsulates both tangible and intangible dimensions of place attachment, in particular the dimension of emotions and affect, and in this way bridges the fundamental dichotomy between theory and practice in heritage conservation (Madgin & Lesh 2021, 3; Avrami & Mason 2019). However, the challenge of designing methodologies for built heritage conservation that would both trigger issues related to affect and place attachments and also contested topics remains open.

In the debate on the cultural significance of heritage, conservation advocates identified already two decades ago the need to adopt a broad set of methods that address the varied typologies of values, termed 'sociocultural values' by the different stakeholders but primarily the local community (Mason 2008). At the time, many participatory conservation methods borrowed from the vast experiences of community planning (Sanoff 2000), such as the charettes, fish-bowl planning, community action planning, participatory action research (PAR), largely adopting them to suit archaeological heritage projects (Wells 2015). The methods included several techniques (e.g. awareness walks, participation games, workshops, study circles, visual appraisals), namely used for values-eliciting and decision-making purposes in heritage management (Clark 2019, 2019a). However, a central objective of the planning sector methods was consensus building, and eventually conflict resolution. Scholars have criticised this aim (Rescher 1993, as cited in Sanoff 2000, 16) because it risks becoming a means to justify the position of a majority instead of identifying common interests. This claim more closely matches critical heritage studies' view of AHD: that it tends to silence alternative voices by selectively integrating and normalising them to reproduce established social hierarchies (Smith 2022).

Other methodological frameworks currently used in heritage conservation derive from traditional and newer ethnographic methodologies adapted to conservation needs. A central example is the Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedure (REAP) (Low 2002), and its shorter version, the Toolkit for the Ethnographic Study of Space (TESS) (Low et al. 2018), which combines a set of traditional ethnographic methods, such as mappings (e.g. physical traces, behavioural mapping), interviews, focus groups and participant observation, with archival research. Different types of established methods can be combined with, for example, cultural mapping (Avrami 2019) and counter-mapping (Schoefield 2014). A highly relevant source for identifying heritage-making processes and eliciting heritage values is visual material provided by the informants/participants, making the photovoice method (Wang & Burris 1997; Dedrick 2018) potentially useful when informants record images or search for historic images and explain their content. Digital technologies provide the context that brings together interaction, social learning and the collection of visual material (Wells et al. 2021); scholars have especially recognised social media in the last years as a central context for investigating perceptions of heritage and promoting participation in heritage conservation activities (Liang et al. 2021).

Contrary to the conservation field, in museology, with the new definition of museum, the issues of participation and inclusivity have become fundamentally important. The International Council of Museums defines the goal of museums as follows: 'open to the public, accessible and inclusive that foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing' (ICOM 2022). Several museum experts have underlined the need to frame museological work with insights from the field of psychology and psychotherapy, especially when dealing with difficult and sensitive histories (e.g. Simon 2011; Pabst 2019). In fact, meaning-making is a central objective of heritage interpretation (Uzzell 1998), but also of narrative therapy, which seeks to 'weave together personal narratives to offer a collective account of a community' (Yim 2022, 972) and looks for a shared sense of identity and continuity.

This dualism in the central interdisciplinary fields of heritage, conservation and museology raises the question of whether the engaged activities of museums can contribute anything to the conservation field, either as a methodological reference point or as a complementary context. The potential of this interaction framed the first, informal initiative of 'memory evenings' in Koper/Capodistria 11 years ago.

The Case Study: Northern Istria Koper/Capodistria

Heritage dissonance marks the multicultural region in the border area of Istria, set between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. The dissonance is especially evident in the northern urban area, today part of Slovenia. Istria represents a particular and informative case study of a contested space since it highlights several issues in heritage conservation related to multicultural and multi-ethnic issues. Historically, the region had for 500 years been under the rule of the Venetian Republic, until the end of 18th century, when it was integrated with the Austrian Empire. In the 20th century, northern Istrian coastal towns underwent a strong 'ethnic metamorphose' as the area was a part of different states and state ideologies, stretching from the Austro-Hungarian empire (1814–1920), the Kingdom of Italy governed by the National Fascist Party (1920–1943), the Third Reich and Nazism (1943–1945), the buffer-zone multinational temporary state known as the Free Territory of Trieste (1947–1954), Yugoslavia and socialism (1954–1991), and lastly, Slovenia and liberal democracy (1991–today). A first cataclismic period was that of interwar Fascism and its violent politics of cultural and economic annihilation of Slovenes. The most drastic demographic change took place in the decade after World War II, when 90% of pre-war, mainly Italian-speaking, inhabitants emigrated from the area, and the emptied coastal towns were resettled by newcomers from inner Slovenia and later from other Yugoslav republics (Kalc 2019; Hrobat Virloget 2021). This process took place at the same time as another fundamental socio-political change: socialism. The metamorphoses resulting from such rapid population change might be called 'Slovenisation' at first and 'Yugoslavisation' in the end (Hrobat Virloget 2021; Čebtron Lipovec 2019), since – besides Slovenes from other regions – many newcomers came first from Croatia, then from Bosnia and Serbia, and lastly – still today – many from Albania. These newcomers settled mainly in the medieval historic centres of the three cities Koper/Capodistria, Izola/Isola and Piran/Pirano, on the northern Istrian coast, which today again form Slovenian coastal region. The population change also brought with it a fundamental switch in discourses since the former (Italian-speaking) majority in the towns became a minority and the former Slovene-speaking minority now became the majority and persons in positions of authority. Accordingly, the heritage discourses also changed based on ethnic grounds as well as ideological grounds: the pre-war Italian identity, but especially Fascist values, which oriented the discourses of the pre- and inter-war period, were replaced by a primarily socialist ideological framework, integrated with a Slovene-Yugoslav national discourse. The focus of heritage preservation moved along these lines as well: post-war approaches privileged the care of previously dismissed Slovene or Slavic heritage in the countryside, while the valorisation of monuments from the *ancien regime* in

the historic city centres was limited to their use for 'scenic effect' in tourism (Čebren Lipovec 2019, 207). At the same time, major economic developments took place with the establishment of an international port and a strong focus on industrialisation. As a result, the post-war period also entailed a major restructuring of the built environment of the historic towns, where modernist architecture thoroughly changed the image and identity of the towns, including the large-scale demolition of older buildings, mostly in the town of Koper/Capodistria. The new identity – primarily Slovene-Yugoslav but at the same time socialist – was established through major interventions in the historic core, where several historic buildings were also demolished as a gesture of *marquage symbolique* (Veschambre 2008).

The post-war architecture today has an ambivalent and contested value in northern Istria since it has gained heritage value due to its age and documentary evidence but also its architectural value. At the same time, it is negatively valued because of its negative visual impact on the historic core, often also because of its socialist origin, thus many view it as an unwanted heritage. On the other hand, the older historic buildings are also often neglected, left to decay or renovated without consideration of their heritage and societal values, or else they are even demolished despite their status as listed monuments. However, in the last two decades, influenced by the neoliberal doctrine, a new wave of development and demolishing of the historic core has taken place. The buildings in danger belong to both the pre-war period (dating back to medieval times) as well as to the quality modernist complexes of the socialist period. Contrary to what one may expect, not much public criticism was heard even ten years ago, nor did heritage officials try to prevent the destruction particularly of the modernist buildings.

Such a situation has raised several questions about the identity, place attachment, values and affective practices of the current population. Recent ethnographic research on collective memory in this part of Istria (Hrobat Virloget 2021) indicates that the difference in attitude is linked to ethnic background: inhabitants of pre-war origin have a stronger link with the historic environment due to trans-generational links and tradition, which is not necessarily the case with the newcomers, who represent the majority of population. The perspective of the Italian population has been lately more in focus: many of the 'remaining' Italians consider the Venetian heritage a prominent symbol of their presence, and the neglect of it a sign of silenced memory (Hrobat Virloget 2021, 52) and 'disregard for Italian and Venetian memories' (Milič 2012, 169), thus a symbolic negation of the Other (Veschambre 2008). Nevertheless, as the various ethnic groups of post-war newcomers have integrated and intermarried new identities have formed, and with them new affective practice and place attachments. Today, Koper/Capodistria is a port city, reputed

as the capital of the Coastal-Karstic Region of Slovenia. It is a municipality of 53,000 inhabitants, approximately 7,000 of whom live in the central historic core, with most being the descendants of post-WWII newcomers. Yet, already in the late 1990s a sort of 'crisis' has been identified among the 'newcomer' community, as neatly presented in an essay by a reputed local artist:

[G]rowing crowds in the coastal cities and satellite settlements are suffering from American West Syndrome. It reads: we came here from all winds, piled block to block, got back on our feet economically – but we don't know exactly where we are and who these people are next to us. [...] In short, it is a classic identity crisis of all immigrants. [...] The culture shock is actually twofold: modern-day coastal inhabitants have barely half a century of common history... (Šav 1996, 286; translation by author)

Istria is certainly not an idiosyncratic place, as similar sentiments of rootlessness have been identified in different areas that underwent major population changes, especially in relation to the Cold War Iron Curtain, such as in Kaliningrad (Sezneva 2003) or Wrocław (Lewicka 2008). It thus raises a fundamental question about the place attachment of the current population, one that underpins recent heritage discourses and the resulting conservation interventions, or lack thereof. The question at stake thus is as follows: How can one research and identify elements of the place attachment of a diverse population living in 'Slovene coastal towns' in relation to the historic environment, including dissonances among the different groups of inhabitants (of different ethnic origin or age)? What can be the effects of a participatory approach?

Initiative: 'I'm telling the Story of a Town'

The above questions triggered my professional interest as an architectural historian and conservation scholar as well as my personal interest as a third-generation 'postwar newcomer', born in Koper/Capodistria and raised in the city's socialist suburbs. To address the questions, an ad-hoc, participatory, heritage assessment initiative entitled 'I'm telling the story of the town' (*Pripovedujem zgodbo mesta*) (Čebon Lipovec 2015) was carried out in 2012–2014 in the historic town of Koper-Capodistria in collaboration with two local experts.² It encompassed a set of public events that took place in the Regional Museum of Koper and aimed to identify facts as well as the attitudes and perceptions of members of the local community about selected sites. The initiative comprised a total of nine events, including one introductory mapping activ-

2 The key collaborators were the museum curator Maša Saccara, PhD, an archaeologist and heritage interpretation specialist, and the photographer and collector Zdenko Bombek, both of whom I would like to thank very much for the collaboration.

ity, seven 'memory evenings' and a final exhibition. The initiative had a rather intuitive setup, as it was conceived on an ad-hoc basis; the project did not have a formal framework and started as a response to large redevelopment plans by the local authorities.

In terms of methods, the 'memory evenings' approach followed the principle of multivocality, combining an impromptu group interview technique (Low 2002) with a photo-voice method using historic images. It was namely based on the idea of different levels of participation, situated in-between contributory and co-collaborative types of participation (Van Mensch & Meijer-Van Mensch 2015, 56–59). Participants/visitors were informed about the event through various media (newspaper, radio, web news, social media, emailing). So, the initiative consisted of a set of debate or 'memory talk' events where local inhabitants were invited to share their knowledge and memories about certain local topics from the recent past, mainly local built sites. Prior to the event, a set of individual 'introductory' interviews were conducted with inhabitants identified as being strongly connected with the sites (e.g. living there for a longer period or working there). Their responses and visual material served as a starting point for the public events. All the events followed a basic model where the organisers (author of the present paper and a collaborator from the Koper Regional Museum) acted as moderators of a group discussion. The debate was usually opened by a set of historic images (collected during the introductory interviews), accompanied by a short introduction, after which the visitors were invited to start talking. Any participant could talk in the language that he/she felt most comfortable with, while the moderators strictly spoke at least in Slovenian and Italian – as the entire coastal zone is officially bilingual – and at times also using a local dialect. Usually, the interlocutors from the introductory interview started. So, in the spirit of an 'open microphone', one participant often incited another to add his/her views or memories, or to contrast them. In this sense, we also tried to address the general stand that museums should be sites of learning, including through interactions among visitors, based on the social nature of learning concept. In retrospect, we can identify the approach as a combination of impromptu group interviews and focus group and participatory observations (Low 2002) that mainly took the form of 'memory talk' (Degnen 2005). Degnen defines 'villagers' memory talk' as the 'discourse in which social memories become lodged in places (both present and erased) and people (both alive and deceased) outside intentionally commemorative and ritual contexts' (2005, 736), or as the 'social memory /.../ woven into the fabric of daily talk and gossip in all its variety, contradiction and everydayness' (2005, 737), such that it 'reveals a profoundly meaningful way of relating to the surrounding world, both physical and social' (2005, 731). Within the framework of the 'memory evenings' held



Image 1. '(In)Visible City' (*Nevidno mesto/Città invisibile*), cultural mapping. Photo: Zdenko Bombek 2012.

a decade ago, the concept of 'memory talk' is what actually happened among the members of the local population, but in a public and semi-formal setting. Below, I provide a brief overview of the topics and how locals responded to the events, followed by a more in-depth analysis of the key insights.

The first event, named '(In)Visible City' (*Nevidno mesto/Città invisibile*), took place in May 2012. It was a classic exploratory activity of cultural mapping, in which inhabitants were invited to mark with pins on a map of the town those sites in the historic centre of Koper that they considered to be representative of its history (green pins) as well as those sites that they believed of particular importance on a more personal level (red pins) (Image 1) in a notebook; they could then explain their choices. The map was installed in the central hall of the museum, right at the entrance to the building, right next to an ongoing photo exhibition entitled 'Faces of Koper' (*Obrazi Kopra/Visi di Capodistria*) by the local photographer Zdenko Bombek. His exhibition was extremely well received by the local community since the author presented diptychs of local inhabitants – in their earlier age on the one side, and at present, in the same spot, on the other side. The presence of the exhibition contributed importantly to the desire of the visitors to participate in the mapping activity. The activity helped us identify what locations could serve as a good starting point for a group discussion.



Image 2. Participatory exhibition accompanying the memory evening entitled 'Birthplace', November 2012. Photo: Zdenko Bombek 2012.

The second event, which took place in September 2012, was in fact the first 'memory talk' event described above, entitled 'Urban legends and anecdotes' (*Urbane legende in anekdote/Leggende e aneddoti urbani*). It was one of the most successful events, with more than 90 visitors, several of whom brought photographs or other material to support their recollections. This event was also the most 'confronting' since members of different groups present in the city participated and spoke with one another, and also at times disagreed quite strongly (as explained later in the text). The third event, held in October and November 2012, was entitled 'Birthplace' (*Rojstna hiša/Casa natale*) and dealt with the former medieval Servite convent, which had been the local hospital since the 19th century, but specifically a regional maternity hospital from the early post-war years until 1996, so most of the local population had been born there. With this event, we sought to investigate the inhabitants' shared values but also to promote the more remote history of the city (the convent) by linking it to the city's more recent history. In addition to the main event (November 2012), we also organised a participatory, or 'growing', exhibition about the convent/hospital site. A few panels presented short histories of the site, while also leaving empty boards where people could attach their own material (Image 2). Several visitors brought or sent pictures and written papers telling of their memories, or even photos of their newborns' bracelets.

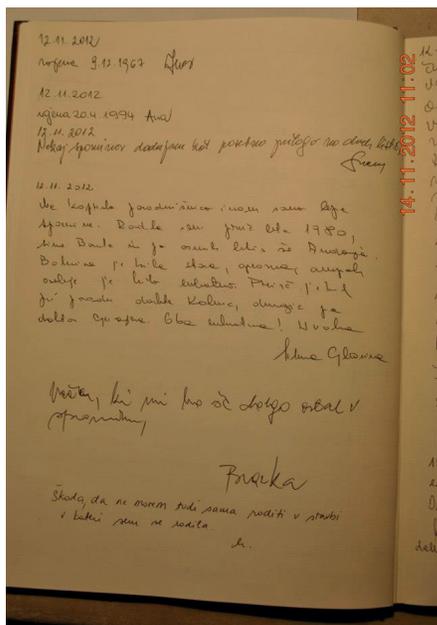


Image 3. Page from the 'memory book' of the participatory exhibition accompanying the memory evening 'Birthplace', November 2012.

However, the most effective of all the tools was the 'memory book' (Image 3): an empty notebook was left open where all visitors who were in any way connected with the site could write down their memories (hospital staff, mothers giving birth or fathers waiting outside, but also people who were born there). The book had a very powerful emotional effect since everyone could read

each other's stories and thus connect with other local residents. The 'memory evening' took place on the closing day of the exhibition and attracted approximately 70 participants. The later events were centred more on sites related to social-economic local development. The event entitled 'TOMOS in our memories' (*TOMOS v naših spominih/TOMOS nei nostri ricordi*), held in December 2012, dealt with the main factory (for making motorcycles and engines) in the region in the socialist period, which was considered the flagship site for showcasing the Yugoslav socialist self-managed economy. On a local level, the factory was important as the main employer during those years. Operating on socialist principles, it provided comprehensive care for all the employees and their families. Coincidentally, the event took place at the same time that the factory – by then privatised – was shutting down, so the event was impregnated with nostalgia and downheartedness (Image 4).

The fifth event, entitled 'Living with the port' (*Živim s pristaniščem/Vivendo con il porto*), held in April 2013, was dedicated to the Port of Koper, which is still a major part of the economy on both a local and national level. This event, too, was accompanied by a participatory exhibition; this time old photos from the port's newsletter archive, dating to the 1960s and 1970s and mainly showing the workers in action, were reprinted on simple white boards, and visitors were invited to write comments next to the images. The interaction was, however, quite limited. In contrast to the TOMOS event, the 'memory evening', participation was much more limited, with most of the participants belonging to the upper classes of employees, mainly Slovenian-speaking administra-



Image 4. Memory talk at the event titled "How we danced!", September 2013.

tors, while none of the workers, mainly Serbian/Croatian-speaking persons, participated. The last two 'memory evenings' addressed social activities in the past. One was dedicated to the dance pools in Koper (the event was entitled 'How we danced!' or *Ma smo plesali! / Come ballavamo!*) and it took place in September 2013; this event also mainly attracted participants from the older generations, but of different backgrounds. Although not as popular as some of the previous events, it did provide valuable learning opportunities, namely documentary evidence of several sites in the historic core re-discovered as social lenses into the past.

A final event, entitled 'Urban musical nodes' (*Urbana glasbena vozlišča / Nodi urbani musicali*), held in April 2014, was dedicated to local pop and rock musical productions, generally considered a principal element of current local identity. Although a topic of apparently great importance on the local level, it surprisingly did not receive as much attention as expected. The initiative addressing the broader local community had in fact concluded already earlier, with the retrospective exhibition 'We are telling the story of the town' (*Pripovedujemo zgodbo mesta/Raccontiamo la storia della città*), held in January 2014, where the choice of putting the title of the event in the plural was intentionally made ('we' instead of 'I') to underscore the identification of shared elements in the city. This concluding event again received much



Image 5. Retrospective exhibition entitled 'We are telling the story of the town' (*Pripovedujemo zgodbo mesta/Raccontiamo la storia della città*), January 2014.

attention (Image 5), and the main reaction of many of the participants was 'We want more of these events; please do not stop!'

In general, the events were welcomed with much interest and enthusiasm by the visitors/participants. Due to a lack of financial³ and institutional support, the initiative was completely based on voluntary work by the experts involved, so it had no operative funding to continue. Nevertheless, the experience called for a critical evaluation of its aims, methods and effects, should there be opportunity in the future to continue with the initiative – which in fact occurred in 2021. A SWOT analysis, carried out after the final event, showed the multiple effects of the initiative in terms of facts and attitudes, as intended by the participatory approaches (Sanoff 2000, 14). It generated a rich data collection on certain historic sites, but also officially unrecognised vernacular sites, including numerous documented and material sources, mainly pictures. At the same time, 'urban reminders', serving as 'mnemonic aids' (Lewicka 2008, 214) or even 'sticky objects' (Ahmed 2004), were identified.

3 The initiative received a small amount of material support from the Koper Regional Museum in the form of an exemption from paying the rent for the venue. In 2013, it received a very small sponsor contribution through the call for grant applications, 'Living with the port' (*Živeti s pristaniščem*), offered on a yearly basis by the Port of Koper to local cultural societies.

Sites like the maternity hospital, remembered as a collective birthplace, are examples of objects that created a point reflection and consciousness, where the weaving together of personal narratives offered a collective account of the community (Yim 2022). Yet, in-line with the already then topical issue of decolonising heritage discourses, we asked ourselves, as organisers and moderators, had we really made a significant change, when accounting for the complexity of our history, or had we only 'opened a ludic perspective on a very complex matter, /and thus/ lapsed into apologism and sanitised celebration' (Edwards & Mead 2013, 20) of the 'multiculturality' of the region or of the socialist past? The self-reflective questioning was prompted namely by moments at the events that unlocked some dormant or even silenced discourses and themes. Critical reflection and analysis were of crucial importance, both for the local community as well as for the professional and scientific issues it triggered.

Critical Insights about the Initiative

The critical insights relate mainly to the methodology and the effect of the events, namely the profile of the participants, the use of historic photographs, the museum venue and the psychological effect of the events, intertwined with the role of the researcher-moderator.

Profiles of the Participants

The first critical insight has to do with the profile of those who participated in the events. The events mainly attracted older people (50 years and up), only a few of whom were from the many ethnic groups present in the city and spoke up: the vast majority of participants were Slovenian-speaking inhabitants, some from the Italian community, a few from the former Yugoslav republics and no one from the Albanian community. The demographic profile relates directly to recent ethnological research on silenced memories in the northern Istrian region and the strong role of symbolic boundaries among the inhabitants, especially newcomers, which are structured according to the moment of arrival in the region after WWII (Katja Hrobat Virloget 2021, 188–212).

The inhabitants apparently conceive their legitimacy in claiming the right to interpret the heritage values of sites and memory discourses based on the intensity of place attachment, which supposedly derives from 'historical and ancestral ties' (Lewicka 2011), or even from the moment of arrival in the region. This attitude perpetuates the misleading assumption that deep attachments only develop through time (Garrow 2021); an assumption still present in the northern Istrian region. This observation is even more critical as it points to the fact that, contrary to our aim, we contributed to what Smith calls an 'assimilative strategy' (Smith 2022, 636), that is, the reproduction of existing

social hierarchies and the 'preforming of privilege' by a politically dominant ethnic group. On the other hand, we also identified a change in the community feeling among the participants. It mainly occurred among the older generation present at the events, who through 'memory talk' re-discovered aspects of their past that they had previously considered self-evident. In this sense, the public group events proved a driving force in mutually discovering a shared sense of identity and continuity among the members of the local community.

Use of Photographic Material and 'Historic Photovoice'

Another positive effect of the gatherings can be ascribed to the use of historic photographs. The use of historic photos for exhibitions on historic places as well as for conservation purposes is a method typically employed by researchers. However, in the case of the 'memory evenings', the historic photos had multiple roles. In the first place, several of them were used in a 'photovoice' manner. Photovoice is essentially a problem-based participatory technique that combines documentary photography, ethnographic focus groups and public exhibitions to enable people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through group discussion of the photographs, and to reach policymakers (Wang and Burris 1997; Dedrick 2018). However, photovoice is based on community members actively taking photos and commenting on them. In the case of 'memory talk', the 'voicing' or participatory part of the interaction began when preparing for the individual interviews. The members of the community provided their personal photos, selected important ones and commented on them. The interlocutor chose the images, in this way allowing him/her to select, interpret and thus elicit the essential value of particular photographs. Part of the activity then shifted from the private context of the home to the public context of the participatory, or 'growing', exhibition – in the case of the maternity hospital.

Furthermore, both in the individual and even more in the group setting, photographs became multi-sensory objects that triggered multi-sensory responses, shaping and enhancing people's emotional engagement with the visual traces of the past (Edwards 2010). The photos became emotional agents (Milič 2012, 173). As mnemonic devices, or 'sticky objects', the historic photos triggered the 'memory talk' and the weaving together of personal narratives. However, considering the dissonant perceptions of the recent past and the heritage of Istria, the historic images can also be regarded as part of an object-based form of storytelling, set within the framework of narrative therapy (Yim 2022, 971) to address issues of difficult heritage and difficult knowledge (Simon 2011).

Museum as a Venue for Participatory Research

Another critical insight stemmed from the venue site – the museum. In the Slovenian research context, with the study having been done more than ten years ago, museums were still perceived as canonical institutions, providing knowledgeable interpretation of heritage by experts, and therefore only conditionally serving as an adequate space for the participatory involvement of the community. Nevertheless, in Koper the engagement of the local curators contributed to the perception of the museum as a meeting place, which in turn contributed to the positive effect of the initiative. Due to the formal framework of the 'memory evenings' – the fact that they were held at an exact time and date and within a public institution like the museum – they did not match entirely the informal nature of the 'villagers' memory talk'. Yet, most of the events were carried out in a largely relaxed atmosphere of familiarity, in which the everyday topics discussed at the events had the effect of a 'memory talk' that might (or does) often take place in informal situations in the town's public spaces.

Psychological Effect of the Events: Confronting the Fractures and Dissonances

Another critical insight stemming from the initial experience relates to the unpreparedness of the organisers to confront in real-time the dissonance, or event conflict, which derived from the historic social and political context of the region. At some events, the conflicts that arose clearly pointed to collective traumas (Čebrov Lipovec 2015), representing a central issue in our study. Current scholarship and practice in museology is quite aware of the psychological dimensions of museum work, especially in relation to difficult heritage and traumatic pasts (Cowan et al. 2019; Pabst 2019), since the process of dealing with affect and emotions to better understand how people develop attachments to the past can reveal fractures and tensions within a community (Wetherell et al. 2018, 2). Recent research points to the manifold intersections between narrative therapy, when studied within the framework of community psychology, and museum studies: work with a group or community, storytelling as central activity, the use of objects to facilitate storytelling, collective witnessing and, most of all, meaning-making for individuals and communities (Yim 2022). Still in 2012, but also later, this level of openness and self-reflection in the expert field was not yet present.⁴

⁴ In 2017, I gave a presentation at the International symposium on 'Museums and Contested Histories, Between Memory and Oblivion', which focused on present reflections about the relationship between heritage work, particularly in museums, and psychotherapy.

The 'I'm telling the story of a town' initiative gave rise to some traumatic moments, which led the author, as organiser and moderator, to search for advice among psychotherapists.⁵ When talking, we discovered that the initiative lends itself to comparison with certain aspects of group psychotherapy. We found this endeavour somewhat far-fetched and tendential, yet the result of this mental exercise provided insightful results. For this reason, I present here the key insights. Group psychotherapy (Yalom & Leszcz 2005) is a psychotherapy approach in which a small group of clients is treated together as a group. The group context and group process function as mechanisms of transformation through the development and analysis of interpersonal relations within the group. The group enables the individual to recount a personal experience with an important other. The set of basic therapeutic factors within group therapy is broad, namely interpersonal learning, catharsis, group cohesiveness, existential factors, universality, instillation of hope, altruism, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socialising techniques, imitative behaviour and imparting information.

One of the most unexpected aspects of the 'I'm telling the story of the town' initiative was that of catharsis. In psychotherapy, it concerns the releasing of emotional distress through the free and uninhibited expression of emotion, or in simpler terms 'getting things off the chest'. When members tell their story to a supportive audience, they can obtain relief from chronic feelings of shame and guilt as well as suppressed feeling of victimhood. This aspect was most evident in the first event, dedicated to 'Urban legends and anecdotes'. The catharsis took place in the confrontation between an elderly Slovene and a younger Italian when exchanging their memories and interpretations of certain events and uses of private and public spaces in the historic centre of Koper. In recollecting the significance of a certain street in the historic centre that contained the town's first radio station, an elderly former journalist of the Slovene broadcasting channel recalled the importance of the radio station as a cultural institution during the early post-war period:

Radio Koper was the only cultural institution in the entire Primorska region at that time, and our voice even reached Trieste. It was the only cell of Slovene identity at the time, but I would say the cradle of Slovene language, because everywhere around only the local Slovene dialect was spoken, which is not bad, but that real Slovene language was only on Radio Koper. [...] Now, just one more thing, because you all spoke Italian before ... I'll tell you something now, which will sound a bit chauvinistic, but it's true. You all have an idea of where Loggia [historic café on the central square] is and where

5 I would like to thank Mrs Martina Mihič Fabčič, psychotherapist, from the company Sentoria (Koper-Ljubljana, Slovenia), for her suggestions.

that beautiful square is, with a church on one side, and on the other side that building where the hospital or the administration of the chamber used to be, and in front there were stone seats, [which are] still there now. Once, there were two fine ladies sitting in the pharmacy, which was on Čevljarska Street [side of main square] ... They always sat there in some company. On the other side, in Loggia, sat the judges of the new [Slovene] court of Koper, whom I knew all very well. So, I was walking past there /.../ and one of the fine ladies shouts after me, '*Maledetta sc'iava!*'⁶ ['damn Slav']. As soon as I heard that, I turned around and slapped her so hard that I even scared myself and started to tremble. In that moment, one of the judges came over to me. He said: 'Come, sit with us.' So, I told him what had happened. He then ordered me a drink and I don't know what else, and they applauded me for having done the right thing. I apologize to everyone who is Italian or anything, because it was not intentionally done or anything, but that's how it was. (Interview 1)

The testimony provoked, on the one hand, applause by many participants at the event, which can be interpreted as a sign of support for the expressed feeling of Slovene national pride, relating to the early postwar times and the tense atmosphere. However, the story triggered a strong emotional reaction in a younger member of the Italian community, who replied, in Italian, as follows to this narration and other earlier recollections:

I don't know if you understand me in Italian, or if you prefer, I can speak Slovenian, it's the same. I apologize, it was not my intention to intervene, but in my opinion it is necessary to offer some clarifications. In the first place, the TOMOS factory is being built on land that was stolen from my grandfather, and no one has ever returned it to him. He was neither a fascist nor a communist; he was just a peasant who worked honestly, this must be said. Indeed, some people came to Capodistria, and had luck, found work and a home, but there were also many injustices done to other people who weren't involved in ... not even in bad things. Then, in those 1950s, there was a lot of talk about the school. But it was not an idyllic system. There have been forced transfers of Italian children to Slovenian schools; there were different methods, either by intervention of the police or internal affairs, the municipal office. So, there were many children in Slovenian schools who did not know Slovenian because they had never spoken Slovenian at home. So ... it is important to say this ... that other injustices have been done to repair some damage. Then, as regards the radio station, it must be remembered that Palazzo Tarsia [in the same street as the radio station] /.../ was the seat of the Italian socialist party in the 1920s. In 1922, therefore the bad year [the

6 The dialectal term 'sc'iavo' is a strong pejorative and insult directed at Slavic people, used by Italian nationalists in Istria and the Trieste region, as it has the same root as *schivo*, a slave. In the reported account, the female version (*sc'iava*) of it was used.

Fascist *coup de état* in Italy], that we all know why, a socialist mayor /.../ was elected in Capodistria ... this must be said ... and he led the municipality until 1926 /.../ it was a total fascist regime. So, the people of Capodistria never voted for a fascist municipality. This must be remembered, because so many lies are often told about these things. /.../ Very often, just because they were Italians, everyone was called a fascist even if they were communists or of other political beliefs. [...]. (Interview 2)

The statement recounts an official narrative within the Italian community, stressing historic facts to support this generally unknown interpretation of local history and providing an alternative voice. His comments were also met with strong applause among the participants of the event. The clash between the two recollections represented an explicit public expression of two opposing viewpoints and disparate feelings, linked to two different collective memories and competing victimhood narratives – one by a member of the majority Slovenian population, supported also by the authorised heritage discourse, versus the perspective of a member of the minority Italian population. In the local context, such face-to-face moments rarely, if ever, occur in public, especially away from the political realm. The cathartic therapeutic effect was evident especially in the story told by the young Italian, who felt she could express her suppressed feeling of collective victimhood and inherited transgenerational trauma by providing a different point of view, one not part of the official Slovene discourse, in front of a Slovene audience – which at least listened to her and also gave evidence of empathy.

A key element in such exercises is the breaking of 'silence', which in this context is a 'mechanism of intergenerational transfer of trauma or stronger emotional contents' (Hrobat Virloget & Logar 2020, 262), as identified in both psychotherapeutic practice as well as ethnographic research done in the Istrian region (Hrobat Virloget & Logar 2020). However, psychotherapeutic theory stresses that catharsis alone cannot be considered the ultimate outcome. Catharsis has a therapeutic effect only if, once expressed, the traumatic experience can be accepted and consequently elaborated on in a safe environment and with empathy. In the concrete case described above, the first person to steer people's reactions in the direction of empathy was the moderator of the event, who, speaking in both Slovenian and Italian, underscored that everyone bears wounds. The moderator called attention to the universality of such wounds and the fact that, if the community wants to coexist, the wounds should be treated with equal regard, 'listened to and heard' on both sides of the aisle, leading to empathy and thus cohesiveness. In this case, the double positionality of the expert in the role of moderator/facilitator, but also that of a local, turned out to be crucial since the different groups could then identify with the words, presented in an inclusive manner and expressed in both offi-

cial languages, which underscored the idea of mutual understanding but not forced consensus. However, the experience clearly showed that such a participatory event, which seeks to tackle delicate issues of collective memory and trauma, requires more than the usual ethnographic sensitivity on the part of the moderator. After this event, no other strong conflicts arose, although strong emotional reactions did occur. Our place-oriented participatory research activity became a site of direct confrontation about the contested history.

Psychological Effect: Cohesiveness and Sense of Belonging

The second overarching effect of the events, conditionally related to key factors of group therapy, is cohesiveness, generally regarded by experts as a primary therapeutic factor, one that instils a sense of belonging and acceptance. It concerns the attraction that members have for their group and for the other members of it, the extent to which the group represents a safe environment. We place it here as the second psychological effect of the events because, in our case, it can be interpreted as having resulted from the first one: since most members of the urban population do not have deep local roots, it is the group of newcomers themselves, again irrespective of ethnic or class origin, who typically represent the local community. It is this melting pot of different people that those participating in the events recognised as comprising the community to which they belong and within which their collective memory is preserved. Several persons gave accounts of the inclusive and melting-pot character of the region, such as in the case of the dance pools in the postwar years:

Dance was what brought people together. So, there was no problem if a man from Ljubljana danced with a woman from Koper or, for example, a man from Trieste with a Slovenian woman. Sociality was created and strengthened right on the dance floor. Everyone danced in their own way. The people of Trieste knew how to dance the boogie woogie, but only the people of Trieste, because they were taught by the Americans. This social meeting helped a lot to overcome many obstacles, verbal, linguistic, and also brought new acquaintances. In Triglav [the only and new hotel in the early 1950s], the people of UDBA [Yugoslav secret service] danced with the ladies from Trieste, in fact a beautiful sociability developed precisely with the help of dance. (Interview 3)

Cohesiveness was strongly present in events that addressed topics from the region's socialist past, for example in the event dealing with the TOMOS factory. The statements that gained widespread support were those stressing collective activities, such as 'everyone had a role in the society, everyone felt useful' (Interview 4), or also

A collective, at work, that it is part of you ... and you were willing to work, you didn't cause damage, you were ready to work even a day or so for free; we went on Saturdays. ... Oh, I'll say this again ... we had to work on Saturdays ... and then there was a referendum if we want to work on Saturdays ... and I said, I want to work on Saturdays. (Interview 5)

Well, these young people here, they weren't even born then, they can listen now a bit, but one day they'll have pictures to see something. ... And I say, that's why I'm really sorry for you, because ... this [TOMOS factory] was ... our mother, this was our home, this was our bread, I feel sad for it ... and when I say this, tears are coming to my eyes. (Interview 6)

However, the TOMOS factory was also discussed in the first 'memory evening', but with the negative connotation of it being a postwar site expropriated from prewar inhabitants. This fact was considered when preparing the factory event, and the event opened with an image of the site before the factory was built in combination with a quote about the expropriation. So, the dissonance inherent to the site was an integral part of the event, as also acknowledged by some of the participants; yet, the 'progressive nostalgia' (Smith & Campbell 2017) moment prevailed.

Cohesiveness was strongly highlighted also in the case of the 'Birthplace' event, dedicated to the maternity hospital and involving not only the older generations but younger people as well (everyone born between 1946 and 1996 in the northern Istrian region). Furthermore, this topic involved the whole community in the most trans-ethnic sense, since the building had the most inclusive function *per se*, and thus its importance is recognised by many members of the community. The memory book used at the exhibition about the site and at the 'memory evening' proved a useful tool for fostering cohesiveness since each person could share with others his/her personal story, which evoked strong feelings of empathy, mutuality and thus cohesiveness.

The 'memory evenings' also triggered memory talk within the community through the use of historic images. The evenings had multiple effects in terms of helping people discover not-yet-identified sites in the city that had social value and heritage value for the community, as important elements of place attachment. At the same time, thanks to the direct interaction among the participants, clear instances of dissonance also surfaced. So, the tangible aspects of memory talk helped reveal the intangible aspects of the sites, underscoring their significance. This double effect makes the approach of memory talk a relevant method for studying built heritage conservation, as it follows the principles of a people-centred approach while also accounting for critical heritage studies' critique of the limitations of AHD and conservation's exclusive focus

on the materiality of the sites. Yet, recent scholarship has highlighted a lack of equilibrium in critical heritage studies, observing that the critical heritage studies privileges a central focus on the intangible dimension of heritage at the expense of the tangible dimension (Skrede & Holleland 2018, 82). Tangible qualities are often a 'fundamental prerequisite for an emotional attachment to the older built environment' (Wells 2016, 219), as demonstrated in studies on place attachment and theories of affect.

So, 'memory talk' in a group setting has potential as a new method for overcoming this discrepancy and responding to the current needs of the conservation field. It can contribute to community identity, offer a space for mutual recognition, raise awareness about the social and societal value of heritage sites, and finally, provide new historic data about the tangible aspects of the sites (e.g. former uses, changes). With this in mind, the former experiences of the 2012–2014 participatory research initiative were revisited and the objectives updated in a current research project on the potential of employing ethnographic methods for built heritage conservation purposes, particularly at contested sites. Based on the criticalities identified during the former initiative, some adjustments were made, such as ensuring that the venue is always the research site itself; clearly stating at the beginning of an event that it is open to everyone and will particularly address different views; and making it clear that the moderators have been in constant contact with experts in psychology to be able to interact with the participants in an adequate manner in explicit instances of conflict. To direct the events towards addressing conservation needs, the structure of the event has been complemented with some interactive techniques already in use in the heritage sector (e.g. Clark 2019).

Conclusion: Towards a New Potential Method for Built Heritage Conservation?

The above discussion stems from a theoretical framework on heritage discourses, but it also addresses the challenges that the current theory and practice of built heritage conservation are facing in the need to open themselves up to people-centred approaches, particularly in contested spaces. I analysed the 'memory evenings' held as part of the 'I'm telling the story of the town' initiative in the town of Koper/Capodistria (Slovenia) between 2012 and 2014 and dedicated to participatory research on valued places by the local community. I outlined the criticalities of this experience, but also the psychological benefits of such participative research. The experience confirmed the generally established importance of multivocal ethnographic methods and highlighted especially the advantages of 'memory talk'.

Although 'memory talk' is not considered a research method, but rather an informal process that people undertake, it can provide relevant insights. When used as a research method in a group setting, it can provide factual information (tangible dimension) as well as a multivocal understanding of the meanings of a certain place (intangible dimension), while also enhancing interactions within the community. When used in a contested context, such interactions can reveal suppressed negative feelings, such as victimhood or marginalisation, but also provide a platform for confrontation and mutual recognition since they offer the possibility to give voice to the 'infrequently heard' members of the community, to their silenced memories, telling them out loud and consequently actually being *heard* by the majority, thus serving as an 'affective interpretative strategy' (Witcomb 2013). While the museological field has already been intensively working on these types of issues for more than a decade, the heritage conservation field still needs to systematically approach such challenges, namely how to integrate the results of place attachment research, especially in contested areas, into heritage conservation practice. An attempt to move in this direction is currently taking place in Slovenia by building on the experiences of the participatory research initiative conducted a decade ago.

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SOURCES

Fieldwork material

All the fieldwork material is in the possession of the author.

Interview 1. 26 September 2012, Slovene Istria. Female, 70–80. Interviewer Neža Čebtron Lipovec.

Interview 2. 26 September 2012, Slovene Istria. Female, 30–40. Interviewer Neža Čebtron Lipovec.

- Interview 3. 18 September 2013, Slovene Istria. Male, 60–70. Interviewer Neža Čebtron Lipovec.
- Interview 4. 19 December 2013, Slovene Istria. Male, 40–50. Interviewer Neža Čebtron Lipovec.
- Interview 5. 19 December 2013, Slovene Istria. Female, 50–60. Interviewer Neža Čebtron Lipovec.
- Interview 6. 19 December 2013, Slovene Istria. Male, 60–70. Interviewer Neža Čebtron Lipovec.

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