



SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICES IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

ANÁLISIS SOCIOLÓGICO DE LAS PRÁCTICAS CONMEMORATIVAS EN LAS COMUNIDADES LOCALES

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents a sociological analysis of commemorative practices as fundamental mechanisms for the construction, preservation, and transformation of cultural memory within urban communities. The study approaches the city as a social and symbolic space where historical experiences, collective narratives, representations of the past, and local identities converge. It examines how communities produce, transmit, and reinterpret memory through institutional, emotional-cognitive, and spontaneous commemorative practices, as well as their influence on urban identity formation and social solidarity. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach combining theoretical analysis, a survey of 1,200 residents, and in-depth interviews conducted in three cities of the Russian Federation between 2024 and 2025. The findings demonstrate that commemorative practices are not limited to the preservation of historical information but represent dynamic processes through which collective meanings are created and negotiated. The study also identifies tensions arising from the reinterpretation of urban symbolic landscapes, transformations of memorial spaces, and the emergence of new digital forms of participation in memory processes. The results indicate that the effectiveness of commemorative policies depends on active community involvement, recognition of diverse memories, and the creation of dialogue spaces among institutions, social groups, and citizens. The article contributes to a broader understanding of urban memory as a dynamic sociocultural phenomenon shaped by social interaction, symbolic practices, and changing interpretations of the past.

Keywords: Urban cultural memory, Commemorative practices, Local identity, Sites of memory, Collective memory, Urban communities.

RESUMEN:

El presente artículo desarrolla un análisis sociológico de las prácticas conmemorativas como mecanismos fundamentales para la construcción, preservación y transformación de la memoria cultural en las comunidades urbanas. La investigación parte de la comprensión de la ciudad como un espacio social y simbólico donde convergen experiencias históricas, narrativas colectivas, representaciones del pasado e identidades locales. El estudio examina cómo las comunidades producen, transmiten y resignifican la memoria mediante prácticas institucionales, emocionales-cognitivas y espontáneas, así como su influencia en la configuración de la identidad urbana y la solidaridad social. La investigación adopta un enfoque metodológico mixto que integra análisis teórico, encuesta a 1200 residentes y entrevistas en profundidad realizadas en tres ciudades de la Federación de Rusia durante el periodo 2024-2025. Los resultados muestran que las prácticas conmemorativas no constituyen únicamente formas de preservación histórica, sino procesos dinámicos de construcción de significados colectivos. Asimismo, se identifican tensiones derivadas de la reinterpretación del paisaje simbólico urbano, los cambios en monumentos y espacios de memoria, y la incorporación de nuevas formas digitales de participación. Se concluye que la eficacia de las políticas conmemorativas depende de la participación activa de las comunidades locales, del reconocimiento de la diversidad de memorias y de la capacidad de generar espacios de diálogo entre instituciones, grupos sociales y ciudadanos. El estudio contribuye a una comprensión integral de la memoria urbana como un fenómeno sociocultural dinámico.

Palabras clave: Memoria cultural urbana, Prácticas conmemorativas, Identidad local, Lugares de memoria, Memoria colectiva, Comunidades urbanas.



INTRODUCTION

Cities do not merely preserve the past; they continuously select, reinterpret, materialize, and transmit it. Streets, monuments, museums, memorials, public ceremonies, family narratives, and increasingly digital spaces transform urban environments into complex territories of memory in which different interpretations of history coexist, interact, and sometimes compete. In the context of globalization, accelerated urbanization, and profound sociocultural transformation, the city can therefore no longer be understood exclusively as a physical setting for residence and economic activity. It is also a symbolic and communicative space in which historical experience is accumulated, collective identities are negotiated, and relationships between the past, present, and future are continually reconstructed. From this perspective, cultural memory functions not as a static archive but as an active social resource capable of influencing urban identity, social solidarity, and contemporary cultural and political processes (Assmann, 2004).

Commemorative practices constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which this cultural memory becomes visible and socially meaningful. They encompass a wide spectrum of institutional, collective, and everyday activities, including the construction and preservation of monuments, the naming and renaming of streets, museum exhibitions, anniversaries, public ceremonies, educational initiatives, spontaneous memorials, and other practices through which communities establish relationships with significant events, figures, and experiences of the past (Gornova, 2017). Such practices do more than preserve historical information: they establish symbolic hierarchies, define what should be remembered or forgotten, connect individual experiences with collective narratives, and contribute to the construction of a shared sense of belonging.

The theoretical foundations for understanding these processes derive from several influential traditions in memory studies. Halbwachs (1992) established the social foundations of collective memory by demonstrating that remembering is structured through social frameworks, while Nora (1989) conceptualized sites of memory as symbolic spaces in which collective remembrance crystallizes. J. Assmann (2004) and A. Assmann (2006, 2014) subsequently developed the concept of cultural memory by emphasizing the importance of institutions, symbolic forms, and mechanisms of transmission. From another perspective, Connerton (1989) highlighted the embodied and ritual dimensions of remembering, demonstrating that communities reproduce their relationships with the past through repeated social practices. Together, these approaches shifted the study of memory away from an exclusively individual phenomenon toward an understanding of remembrance as a socially organized, culturally mediated, and historically changing process.

Urban space occupies a particularly significant position within this theoretical framework because memory becomes materially inscribed in the city. Boyer (1994) and Huyssen (2003) conceptualized the urban environment as a multilayered landscape in which traces of different historical periods accumulate and interact. Consequently, monuments, architecture, street names, memorial complexes, and other elements of the symbolic landscape are not neutral representations of history; their meanings can be preserved, displaced, reinterpreted, or contested as social conditions change. Gillis (1994) emphasized the selective character of commemoration, while Winter (1995) demonstrated how official memorial landscapes coexist with popular and spontaneous practices of mourning and remembrance. Giesen (2004), in turn, distinguished between triumphant and traumatic forms of collective memory, broadening the analysis to include both celebrated and painful interpretations of the past.

This plurality also means that cultural memory cannot be reduced to a single consensual narrative. Individual experience and collective frameworks continuously interact, while different social groups participate unequally in defining what deserves public remembrance (Confino, 1997; Crane, 1997; Misztal, 2003). Memory is consequently embedded in relations of communication, interpretation, and symbolic power. Wertsch (2002) draws attention to the coexistence of different voices in collective remembering, whereas Zerubavel (1997) demonstrates how socially shared cognitive frameworks organize perceptions of time and historical continuity. Kansteiner (2002) further emphasizes the importance of examining the institutional and social conditions under which memory narratives are produced rather than treating collective memory as a simple aggregation of individual recollections.

These questions have become particularly significant under conditions of contemporary transformations in urban memory. The reassessment of historical narratives and symbolic landscapes increasingly turns public spaces into arenas where governmental institutions, professional communities, activists, and ordinary residents articulate different interpretations of the past (Semenenko, 2026). At the same time, digitalization has altered the mechanisms through which memories are created, circulated, preserved, and contested. Digital archives, social networks, virtual memorials, and other online environments expand opportunities for participation in commemorative processes but may also contribute to the fragmentation and multiplication of competing narratives (Erll, 2011; Fedotova, 2018). These transformations make it necessary to examine cultural memory simultaneously as an institutional, social, spatial, and communicative phenomenon.

Russian scholarship has contributed substantially to understanding these processes within the specific historical conditions of post-Soviet urban environments. Fedotova

(2018, 2020) conceptualized urban cultural memory through its historicity, social conditioning, dynamism, and capacity for deliberate construction, identifying commemoration as an important mechanism through which this memory is structured. Gornova (2017) examined the relationship between collective memory, commemorative practices, and urban identity, while Turkina & Antonova (2019) emphasized the significance of symbolic narratives in residents' identification with the city. Vandyshv et al. (2013) demonstrated the analytical potential of mental mapping for identifying sites of memory and the symbolic capital attributed to urban territories. More recently, Semenenko (2026) has examined public spaces through the dynamics of identity politics and transformations of the symbolic landscape. Research on intergenerational remembrance likewise indicates that significant historical events may continue to function as an "axis of intergenerational solidarity," particularly through family transmission and commemorative practices (Andreeva & Omelchenko, 2025, p. 3).

Despite this extensive theoretical and empirical literature, important analytical gaps remain. Existing research has frequently examined particular dimensions of urban memory separately, emphasizing institutional memory policies, symbolic landscapes, individual perceptions, specific commemorative events, or digital forms of remembrance. Less attention has been devoted to analyzing how institutional, emotional-cognitive, and spontaneous commemorative practices interact within local urban communities and how their coexistence influences urban identity, social solidarity, intergenerational transmission, and memory conflicts. Furthermore, the simultaneous transformation of official and grassroots remembrance under conditions of digitalization requires analytical approaches capable of connecting institutional structures with residents' everyday experiences and interpretations.

Against this background, the scientific novelty of the present study lies in approaching commemorative practices as an interconnected, multilevel system rather than as isolated manifestations of collective remembrance. The proposed analytical framework considers three interacting dimensions: institutional practices represented by museums, archives, public monuments, and official ceremonies; emotional-cognitive practices associated with education, cultural production, and subjective interpretations of the past; and spontaneous practices emerging through grassroots memorials, informal rituals, and community initiatives. This framework is complemented by a mixed-methods strategy that combines quantitative and qualitative evidence, making it possible to examine both the prevalence of commemorative practices and the

meanings attributed to them by different groups of urban residents.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to identify and analyze the commemorative practices through which local communities construct and maintain the cultural memory of the city and to determine their role in shaping urban identity and social solidarity. Particular attention is devoted to the distribution and significance of different commemorative practices, the factors influencing residents' participation, the interaction between institutional and spontaneous forms of remembrance, and the mechanisms through which memory conflicts emerge. By integrating sociological, cultural, spatial, and communicative perspectives, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary cities remember, reinterpret, and negotiate their past and how these processes influence the social and symbolic development of local communities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a mixed-methods research design grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that integrates sociological, cultural, and semiotic perspectives. The theoretical and methodological approach draws particularly on communicative and constructionist conceptions of cultural memory, according to which memory is not understood as a fixed representation of the past but as a dynamic social phenomenon continuously constructed, negotiated, and transmitted through social interaction and symbolic practices (Assmann, 2004; Fedotova, 2018). Particular attention was given to the German tradition of memory studies, especially the contributions of Assmann (2004), which emphasize the role of symbolic forms, cultural institutions, and communicative processes in the preservation and transmission of collective and cultural memory (Turkina & Antonova, 2019).

The empirical study was conducted between 2024 and 2025 in three cities of the Russian Federation selected to reflect differences in historical age, population size, and the structure of local cultural memory. A methodological triangulation strategy was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to examine commemorative practices from individual, community, institutional, and media perspectives. The empirical component comprised a questionnaire survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews, an expert survey, and content analysis of urban media and social networks.

The quantitative component consisted of a questionnaire survey of 1,200 urban residents, with 400 respondents from each city. Quota sampling was applied according to gender, age, and educational attainment. The questionnaire

examined respondents' awareness of memorial sites, participation in commemorative events and practices, and perceptions of the significance of these sites and activities for the local community. This component provided quantitative evidence on the prevalence and distribution of commemorative practices and enabled comparisons among different groups of urban residents.

The qualitative component included 54 semi-structured in-depth interviews, with 18 participants from each city. Respondents were selected according to the principle of maximum variation, considering differences in age, occupation, and length of residence. The interviews incorporated the method of verbalized mental maps, in which participants described significant urban places and articulated the memories, meanings, and experiences associated with them rather than producing conventional visual maps. This adaptation broadens the applicability of mental mapping to sociological research by emphasizing narratives and socially constructed meanings attached to urban space (Fedotova, 2018; Vandyshv et al., 2013).

To examine the institutional dimension of commemorative practices, an expert survey was conducted with 27 participants representing local government bodies, museums, urban activist groups, and journalist. This component focused on the mechanisms through which commemorative policies are formulated, implemented, and interpreted, as well as on the relationships between institutional initiatives, public participation, and competing representations of the urban past.

Finally, a content analysis of urban media and social networks covering the period from 2022 to 2025 was conducted to identify public discussions concerning the cities' pasts, memorial sites, commemorative events, and related initiatives. This analysis complemented the survey and interview data by capturing the public circulation and negotiation of memory narratives in traditional and digital communication environments. The integration of these four methodological components enabled the triangulation of quantitative, qualitative, institutional, and media-based evidence, providing a multidimensional analysis of how cultural memory and commemorative practices are produced, transmitted, and transformed in contemporary urban contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical study made possible not only to confirm the significance of the theoretical conclusions reached by previous researchers but also to identify new dimensions in the functioning of commemorative practices within contemporary local communities.

Based on the analysis of the empirical material, a typology of commemorative practices was developed and structured according to two criteria: the level of institutionalization and the mode of influence on collective consciousness. The first type comprises institutional practices associated with the activities of specialized organizations (museums, archives, research institutions) and official bodies (public authorities) that implement deliberate memory policies. These practices primarily include the construction and maintenance of monuments, the organization of ceremonial events, and the renaming of streets and squares. As Fedotova (2020) notes, institutional practices "ensure the very process of preserving and transmitting the cultural meanings of the city" (p. 8). The survey results show that 72% of respondents consider official monuments and memorial plaques to be the most visible elements of the urban environment, while only 38% regularly participate in official commemorative ceremonies. This indicates a gap between visibility (passive perception) and active involvement in institutional forms of commemoration.

The second type comprises emotional-cognitive practices mediated through images and narratives. These include works of art (painting, sculpture, films, literature), educational programs, and public lectures. As Erokhina (2017) rightly notes, "films, animated films, and comics, by depicting entire historical eras, exert a broader and more effective influence on the public than books and museum exhibitions". The findings confirm this argument: 61% of respondents identified feature films and books as important sources of knowledge about the history of their city, while the level of trust in "image-based" sources was higher than that in official historical information (53% versus 41%). According to respondents, emotional practices create a deeper connection with the urban past, particularly among young people under the age of 30.

The third type comprises spontaneous (grassroots) practices initiated directly by urban residents rather than by official institutions. These include spontaneous memorials established at the sites of tragic events, local rituals, online projects for collecting memories, graffiti, and other forms of street art representing historical narratives. Practices of digital commemoration are of particular interest, including the creation of thematic groups on social media, online memory maps, and virtual tours. As demonstrated in Fedotova's dissertation research, the digitalization of commemorative practices opens up new opportunities for preserving cultural memory but simultaneously entails the risk of multiplying versions of the past, which may lead to the fragmentation of collective memories (Fedotova, 2018). In the present study, 44% of respondents reported learning about events from the city's past through social media, while 29% had participated in online discussions devoted to urban history (Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1. Distribution of respondents' answers regarding the frequency of participation in different types of commemorative practices (%).

Type of practice	Participate regularly	Participate occasionally	Do not participate but are familiar with it	Not familiar with it
Visiting museums/exhibitions	18	43	30	9
Participation in city celebrations	12	38	42	8
Watching films/reading books about the history of the city	27	34	26	13
Discussing the history of the city on social media	11	18	33	38
Creating/supporting spontaneous memorials	4	12	29	55

Note: Data from the large-scale survey (N = 1,200) conducted by the author in 2024–2025.

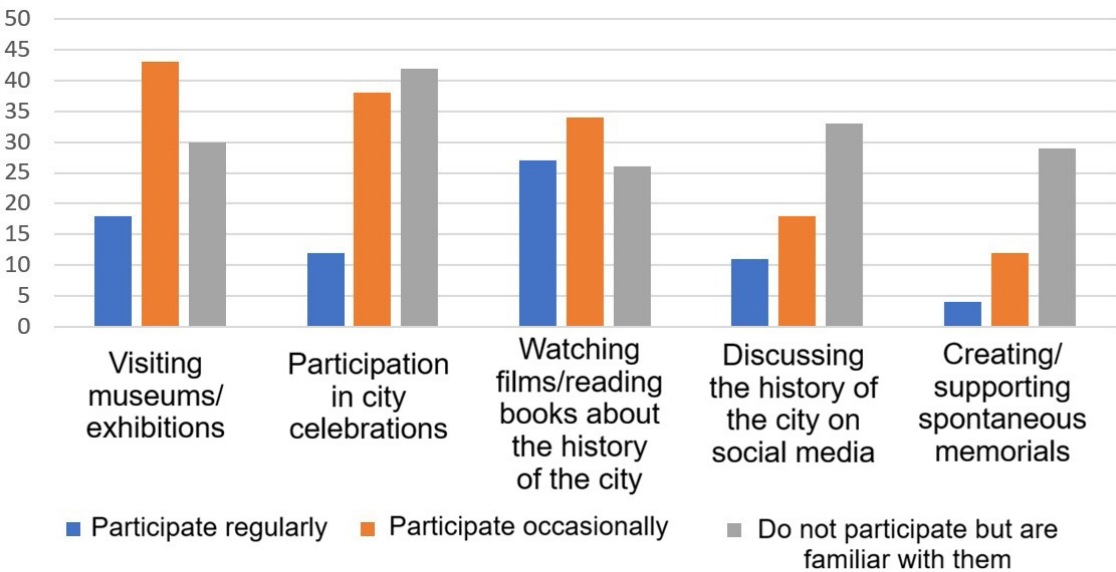


Fig 1. Distribution of respondents' answers regarding the frequency of participation in different types of commemorative practices (%).

Construction of Urban Identity

The analysis of the in-depth interviews shows that commemorative practices play a key role in the formation of local identity; however, their effectiveness is determined not so much by their mere existence as by the nature of urban residents' involvement in processes of interpreting the past. The strongest identification with the city is demonstrated by respondents who have experience of family-based remembrance, particularly stories told by older generations about significant events associated with specific places. This finding is consistent with the observations of Andreeva & Omelchenko (2025) that the memory of significant historical events “remains an axis of intergenerational solidarity” and is transmitted primarily through the family and commemorative practices. At the same time, respondents' answers reveal a critical attitude toward official commemorations, which are perceived as formalized institutional rituals. As Gornova (2017) notes, commemoration in Russia often takes the form of “conscious repetition” that is “often excessively intrusive” (p. 18). This critical attitude is particularly pronounced among residents of cities where memorial objects have been actively replaced or modified over the past decade, giving rise to conflicts of interpretation.

Memory Conflicts

The study documented cases of memory conflicts arising from revisions of the symbolic landscape of the city. In two of the three cities studied, public discussions concerning the renaming of streets or the removal of monuments took place between 2022 and 2024. These conflicts demonstrate a clash among different interest groups: political actors and institutions promoting particular historical narratives; professional historians and local historians claiming scholarly objectivity; and ordinary residents, for whom the renaming of streets represents a rupture with familiar toponymy and established emotional attachments. Notably, 43% of respondents expressed a negative attitude toward renaming,

arguing that “historical names are part of identity” and that “this erases memory,” even when the changes involved restoring historically justified names. This paradox (resistance to historical justice for the sake of preserving familiar memory) indicates that cultural memory functions not as an accurate representation of the past but as an emotionally significant construct embedded in everyday practices (Gornova, 2017, p. 19).

Digitalization of Commemoration

Active development of digital forms of commemoration was observed in all three cities studied. Local activists create online maps featuring photographs of historic buildings and comments by long-term residents, organize virtual tours, and maintain thematic blogs. At the same time, experts note that the digitalization of commemorative practices produces ambiguous effects. On the one hand, it democratizes access to information about the past and makes it possible to incorporate the voices of marginalized groups into remembrance. On the other hand, it fragments collective memory by creating multiple competing versions of the past. As Fedotova (2018) rightly notes, the digital environment may become a space in which different interpretations collide, making it difficult to establish an objective picture. The study agrees with this argument; however, the present study demonstrates that, for local communities, this risk is offset by intensified communication and opportunities for collective discussion, which ultimately strengthen social ties.

The empirical study conducted enables the formulation of a position regarding a number of theoretical propositions presented in the scholarly literature.

First, the study shares N.G. Fedotova's key idea that the cultural memory of the city is a social construct that can and should be shaped through processes of actualizing meanings (Fedotova, 2018). The empirical data confirm that revisions of the symbolic landscape (such as street renaming, the installation of new monuments, and the organization of anniversary events) do indeed influence collective perceptions of the past, especially among younger generations. However, it is necessary to clarify that such construction is effective only when it is based on already existing meanings shared by the local community. Studies of memory concerning the Second World War on the Soviet front show that the most enduring narratives are those supported at the level of family memory rather than solely through official rhetoric (Andreeva & Omelchenko, 2025, p. 5).

At the same time, the study does not fully agree with the optimistic argument advanced by some researchers that a culture of memory automatically strengthens social solidarity and local patriotism. The interviews conducted show that a high concentration of memorial objects and an active commemorative policy may produce a sense of “memory fatigue” among some urban residents,

particularly young people and members of the intelligentsia, as well as a critical attitude toward what is perceived as the over-politicization of urban space. As one study has shown, young people question memory practices that appear overly directive in patriotic education (Andreeva & Omelchenko, 2025, p. 5). This finding calls for greater attention to the balance between official and spontaneous practices, as well as between ritualized forms of commemoration and open dialogue about the past.

The role of digital commemorative practices is not sufficiently articulated in the works of G.V. Gornova and other researchers. Although some authors mention the risks of memory fragmentation on the Internet, the mechanisms through which the digital environment structures cultural memory require more detailed examination. The present study shows that digital platforms perform a dual function: they serve as spaces for archiving memories (for example, through social media groups devoted to urban history) while simultaneously becoming arenas for interpretive conflicts in which competing versions of the past confront one another. Unlike traditional institutions of memory, such as museums and archives, the digital environment lacks built-in mechanisms of verification, which creates risks of disseminating distorted narratives.

While agreeing with the theoretical conclusions of Assmann (2004) regarding the symbolic nature of cultural memory and its dependence on institutions (Turkina & Antonova, 2019), it is necessary to supplement the proposition that cultural memory functions exclusively within institutional frameworks. The empirical data indicate the existence of a substantial layer of non-institutionalized memory practices, including family narratives, local legends, spontaneous memorials, and online initiatives. These practices may exist and develop relatively autonomously from official institutions while still exerting a strong influence on the formation of urban identity.

Finally, the study shares I. Semenenko's view that urban public spaces become “counterpoints of identity discourses,” where the interests of different groups intersect and collide (Semenenko, 2026, p. 93). However, the present study indicates that such confrontations do not always take the form of open conflict. They often manifest themselves in latent ways, for example, through residents' limited participation in official events, the creation of alternative narratives on social media, and the practice of “quietly” preserving old place names in everyday speech. It is important that these alternative forms of engagement also become an object of sociological analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

The theoretical and empirical findings demonstrate that commemorative practices in the contemporary city constitute a complex and dynamic system in which institutional, emotional-cognitive, and spontaneous forms of

remembrance interact. Their articulation shapes both the cultural memory of local communities and the construction of urban identity. Institutional practices contribute to the reproduction and legitimization of established narratives, while emotional-cognitive practices connect the past with individual and collective experiences. Spontaneous forms of commemoration, in turn, reveal the persistence of grassroots memory.

Participation in commemorative practices is not homogeneous but varies according to sociodemographic and biographical characteristics, particularly age, education, and length of residence in the city. Older generations show greater involvement in institutional commemorative initiatives, whereas younger residents tend to engage more actively through digital environments and informal forms of remembrance. Despite these differences, family memory remains a significant mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of meanings, experiences, and representations of the urban past. This finding highlights the importance of recognizing the coexistence of formal, informal, familial, and digital channels in the formation and continuity of cultural memory.

The study also shows that conflicts surrounding monuments, place names, memorials, and other elements of the symbolic urban landscape reflect the plurality of collective memories and competing interpretations of the past. Such tensions should therefore be understood as an inherent dimension of contemporary memory processes rather than merely as obstacles to be eliminated. Their management requires participatory mechanisms capable of incorporating different perspectives and creating spaces for dialogue among public institutions, experts, community organizations, and residents. In this context, sustainable commemorative policies depend on deliberation and social participation rather than on the unilateral imposition of a single interpretation of the past.

Digitalization is simultaneously transforming the production, preservation, circulation, and appropriation of urban memory. Digital archives, social networks, virtual commemorations, and other online resources expand opportunities for participation and make memory practices more accessible to broader segments of the population. However, these transformations also entail challenges related to fragmentation, decontextualization, and the circulation of unverified narratives. Municipal cultural policies should therefore integrate digital practices with institutional and community-based forms of commemoration while promoting reliable digital archives, professionally supported platforms, and mechanisms that preserve the contextual integrity of historical information.

Commemorative practices can ultimately constitute a meaningful resource for urban development, social cohesion, and the strengthening of local identity when they reflect authentic local meanings, recognize the diversity of

memories, and encourage residents to participate in the construction of the symbolic landscape. The findings indicate that particularly significant initiatives emerge through interaction between institutional and grassroots practices, transforming residents from passive recipients of established narratives into active participants in the production and reinterpretation of urban memory. Future research should deepen the analysis of the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory in digital environments, compare commemorative practices across different urban and national contexts, and develop methodological approaches for assessing how memory policies contribute to urban development, social cohesion, and the well-being of local communities.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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