

Space and Memory: Intangible Heritage in the Public Spaces as Scenographic Practice

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Abstract: *Tangible and intangible cultural heritage embody values that have been gradually eroded by processes of standardization and acceleration. To restore the common ground lost in this transition, a redefinition of these values is essential. This article examines the intersection of intangible heritage, community, and public space through the lens of scenographic practice.*

Focusing on events organized in recent years, the study explores how ephemeral spatial interventions, performative acts, installations, and temporary architectural gestures can operate as mediators of collective memory and cultural identity. These transient forms engage the public not only aesthetically, but also emotionally and symbolically—inviting reflection and participation.

Drawing on case studies—including the work of Scena Urbană in Cluj-Napoca—the article positions scenographic practice as both a method of safeguarding intangible heritage and a framework for its imaginative reinvention in contemporary urban contexts. In doing so, it argues for scenography not simply as an artistic gesture, but as a means of spatial storytelling capable of rewaving the connections between people, place, and memory.

Keywords: *scenography; public space; intangible heritage; architecture; memory; performance; spatial practice; cultural identity;*

Introduction: Stage for memory

Intangible heritage holds a foundational role within communities, shaping shared practices of remembrance, ritual, and belonging. Acts of commemoration are revealed as powerful tools of spatial and cultural intervention. By reconceptualizing scenography as a method for engaging communities and activating memory within the built environment, this paper emphasizes the value of transdisciplinary approaches to urban and heritage practices.

Cities are not only composed of buildings and infrastructures; they are made of stories, gestures, sounds, and rituals—intangible elements that structure collective identity. As societies urbanize and globalize, these intangible dimensions face erosion, often overlooked in planning processes focused on material preservation.

Public spaces are repositories of collective memory, continually shaped by social practices, rituals, and symbolic gestures. Intangible heritage—encompassing oral traditions, performative customs, communal knowledge, and shared values—finds in these spaces not only a stage, but also a living archive. Scenographic interventions in public space function as a means of engaging with and transmitting intangible heritage, offering an ephemeral yet powerful vehicle for cultural continuity.

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Communities have the central role in shaping and sustaining material or immaterial heritage. In this light, public space emerges as an arena for memory-making. Scenographic practice, in turn, enables the poetic staging of these memories, activating the city as a shared cultural archive.

1. Scenography Beyond the Theater: A Transdisciplinary Framework

Scenography has traditionally been rooted in theatrical design—crafting visual and spatial contexts for performance. However, contemporary scenographic theory reframes it as a broader methodology of spatial storytelling and embodied meaning-making. Beyond the proscenium, scenography becomes a perspective through which experiences are designed, perceptions are shaped, and everyday spaces are reimagined as sites of affect and imagination.(Fig.1)

This reconceptualization aligns with broader transdisciplinary currents in performance studies, architecture, and urban design. Scenography engages with light, sound, materiality, and movement – elements intrinsically linked to how communities remember, perform, and transmit their heritage². Operating at the intersection of form and feeling, it offers a multisensorial pathway into memory. When applied to public space, scenographic practice reveals new possibilities for representing intangible heritage—ways that resist its fossilization and instead sustain its vitality through lived experience³.



Fig. 1. *Public screening of City Lights by Charlie Chaplin.- Scena Urbana*

2. The Ephemeral and the Enduring: Intangible Heritage in Urban Spaces

Memory is inherently spatial. It is tied to places – streets, squares, buildings – where events unfolded, rituals took place, and voices lingered. Yet intangible heritage resists fixity; it survives through repetition, transformation, and transmission. In this sense, the ephemeral nature of scenography closely mirrors the dynamics of intangible heritage.

² Rachel Hann. 2019. *Beyond Scenography*. London: Routledge, p. 6.

³ Kosmidou, Eleftheria R. & McMurtry, Leslie G., eds. 2024. *Intangible Cultural Heritage and New Methodological Frameworks*. London: Routledge. Introduction, p. xvii.

Temporary installations, performative mappings, and spatial dramaturgies offer impermanent yet powerful interventions that resonate deeply with cultural memora.

Unlike monuments or museums, intangible heritage exists in flux. It is not displayed but practiced – through oral storytelling, seasonal rituals, communal dances, and traditional crafts.

These cultural forms depend on space not only as a setting but as a medium for transmission through shared experience. In contemporary urban contexts, however, such practices are often displaced or rendered invisible by processes of gentrification, homogenization, and infrastructural development.

Even so, public space remains a potent medium for reactivating this living heritage. As a commons, it can host performative acts of memory that reconnect people with place. Temporary scenographic interventions – such as processions, pop-up stages, or sonic mappings – reintroduce tradition into the urban sensorium. These are not nostalgic reenactments but adaptive strategies for continuity, rooted in local identity and open to transformation⁴.

Scenographic practice, in this light, generates cultural spaces that are at once affective and political. It allows for:

- Embodied recollection: Memory is not static; it is evoked through movement, sensation, and ritualized presence.
- Negotiated heritage: Communities are not passive inheritors of tradition, but active participants in its reimagining.
- Spatial justice: Marginalized narratives find space to emerge in the public realm, challenging dominant aesthetics and planning norms.

Through scenography, public space becomes a canvas for collective memory – hovering between fiction and reality, between inherited forms and renewed meanings.

3. Case Study: Scena Urbană, Cluj-Napoca⁵

One of the most compelling examples of scenographic engagement with public space and intangible heritage is Scena Urbană (The Urban Stage), an interdisciplinary initiative based in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Founded by architects, artists, and urbanists, the project activates underutilized or symbolically charged public spaces through participatory events, installations, and performances. It blends architecture, performance, and community involvement to foreground historical narratives, lived memories, and local identities.

Through its diverse events – staged in historic courtyards, forgotten fortifications, botanical gardens, cemeteries, and transit hubs – Scena Urbană reclaims intangible cultural elements such as traditional music, oral storytelling, ritual gestures, and community memory. Each intervention operates scenographically: crafting sensory experiences that reconnect people with place.

Cetățuia Hill: Reactivating the Fortress

The initiative's first major intervention in 2012 focused on Cetățuia Hill, the site of a former Vauban fortress overlooking the city. Though little remains of the original structure, its historical resonance endures.

⁴ Arno van der Hoeven. 2016. *Networked Practices of Intangible Urban Heritage: The Value of Oral History in Rotterdam*. International Journal of Cultural Policy 25 (2): p. 183.

⁵ *Scena Urbană*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 10, 2025, from <https://scenaurbana.ro>.

Through a combination of land art, performance, guided tours, and community activities, Scena Urbană reframed the area as a cultural incubator.

International artist Denis Tricot and local artist Emil Dobriban created large-scale wooden installations – a nest and tower – that invited both interpretation and interaction. The program featured concerts, children's workshop, film screenings, and a classical recital staged by the Opera Group Project. The event not only activated public imagination but also drew institutional attention to the site's cultural potential.

Botanical Garden: Memory in Bloom

In 2013, Scena Urbană turned to the Cluj Botanical Garden, a site layered with personal and collective significance. Artists and community members were invited to share memories tied to the garden – first kisses, secret meetings, quiet moments of solitude. Sculptures bearing these stories were placed throughout the grounds. A grand ephemeral sculpture by Denis Tricot became the event's symbolic anchor.

The programming merged high art with play: Puccini's *Suor Angelica* was staged in a natural amphitheater, followed by puppet shows and rock concerts. Children explored the "Haye Labyrinth" during the day and relaxed in hammocks under the stars at night. Workshops, a scent- and sound-based tour for blind children, and performances in the Japanese Garden illustrated the site's potential as both pedagogical and poetic space.

Central Cemetery: Requiem and Remembrance

During the Days of the Dead (October 29 – November 1), Scena Urbană invited the community to revisit the Central Cemetery as a cultural archive. Through the event Requiem, guided tours introduced visitors to notable personalities buried there – writers, scientists, artists – while musical performances such as Mozart's Requiem and Ave Maria cast the cemetery as a space of reflection and quiet celebration. Visitors contributed stories and biographies, helping to build a living map of memory.

Mihail Kogălniceanu Street: The Street as Stage⁶

A different kind of scenographic intervention took place on Mihail Kogălniceanu Street. In 2013, this central street was temporarily pedestrianized and transformed into a participatory performance space. French artists Denis Tricot, Gill Viandier, and Eric Cordier constructed a sound sculpture that doubled as an interactive stage. Passersby became actors, dancers, and musicians. Guided tours explored the street's architectural and cultural history, while debates addressed its future as a civic space.

In the follow-up Butterfly Effect project, children aged 10–15 designed proposals for the street's transformation, which were interpreted and discussed by local architects. The initiative sought to foster dialogue between generations and disciplines, emphasizing the street's identity as both lived space and learning space.

The Railway Station: Portal

At the city's edge, the Cluj Railway Station became the site for another transformation. Between its historical building and a neglected modern structure, Scena Urbană staged concerts, installations, and participatory performances that reframed the station as both a symbolic gateway and an overlooked urban void.

⁶ Michael Hebbert. 2005. *The Street as Locus of Collective Memory*. *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*. 23 (4): 581–596.

A highlight was Voices of Fire, the concluding event of the Butterfly Effect series. It combined music, flame, and memory into a visceral performance. (Fig.2) A cello, a soprano and baritone, and Tricot's towering sculpture – assembled from materials used in previous interventions – were set ablaze in an operatic ode to transformation. The flames traced the silhouettes of trains, paths, and imagined departures, offering a poetic meditation on transit, memory, and renewal.



Fig. 2. Voices of Fire – Scena Urbana

Other Sites and Future Visions

Beyond these emblematic interventions, Scena Urbană has activated various other urban areas – Primăverii Park, Oașului Park, and sections along the Someș River (Fig.3) – continually questioning how public space might evolve. These experiments invite us to imagine urban futures where heritage is not preserved in stasis, but co-authored, experienced, and lived.

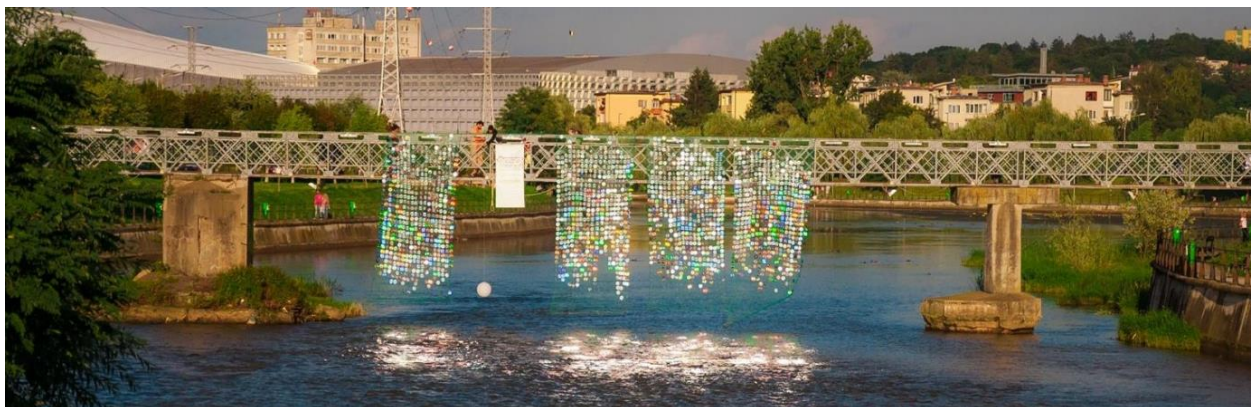


Fig. 3. River reflections – Scena Urbana

The interventions curated by Scena Urbană illustrate the transformative capacity of scenographic practice when applied beyond the theater and into the public realm. By activating memory through light, sound, ritual, narrative, and spatial arrangement, these events demonstrate how scenography can operate as a dynamic medium for engaging with intangible cultural heritage. Rather than preserving heritage as a fixed, museumified object, Scena Urbană proposes a model of living heritage – one that is situated, participatory, and evolving. Each site-specific intervention foregrounds the ephemeral, not as a limitation, but as a strength: a way to respond to the temporality of memory, the fluidity of identity, and the layered textures of urban life.

Through its transdisciplinary approach – bridging architecture, art, performance, and civic dialogue – Scena Urbană reveals how scenography can serve as a form of civic memory work. In this framework, public space becomes not only a container of historical traces, but a stage for cultural continuity, reinvention, and negotiation⁷.

Ultimately, the case of Scena Urbană supports a broader rethinking of heritage practice. It suggests that intangible heritage cannot be fully safeguarded through documentation alone, but must be performed, shared, and felt. Scenographic practice, in this context, is not simply decorative or representational – it is deeply social, affective, and political. It enables us to reimagine the city as a sensorial archive, where memory lives not in monuments, but in movement, voice, and the ephemeral gestures that connect people to place.

4. Scenographic Practice as Cultural Strategy

Scenographic practice in public space does not aim to monumentalize heritage, but to animate it – to keep it alive through ritual, play, and affective experience. Unlike heritage plaques, statues, or museums that seek to preserve cultural memory through permanence, scenographic events embrace transience. They create ephemeral yet powerful frameworks in which memory is performed, shared, and felt. This temporal and embodied quality allows for a kind of engagement that is dynamic and open-ended, inviting participants to co-create meaning in situ.

As a cultural practice, scenography moves beyond aesthetics to operate as a medium of lived experience. It blends visual design, narrative, sensory perception, and collective participation to generate meaning through space. It offers tools for staging everyday life, mediating public memory, and reactivating intangible cultural heritage and becomes a way of composing not only performances, but atmospheres, gestures, and communal rituals.

As an urban intervention strategy, scenography offers a flexible, low-impact, high-affect method of reimagining space. In contrast to permanent infrastructural changes or top-down urban planning, scenographic interventions work through temporality, improvisation, and participation. They can be deployed to activate underused or symbolically charged sites – courtyards, cemeteries, parks, abandoned buildings, or historic streets – through performative, visual, and tactile encounters. These interventions do not erase or overwrite the existing character of a place; rather, they amplify its layers, drawing out stories, memories, and identities that might otherwise remain invisible or forgotten.

In this sense, scenography functions not only as a creative tool, but as a form of cultural infrastructure. It invites communities to engage with place in reflective, playful, or ceremonial ways, using memory not as a static record of the past but as a resource for imagining futures.

⁷ Scott Palmer. 2013. *Civic Scenography: Mapping Memory in the Urban Landscape*. Performance Research 18 (3): p. 47.

Scenographic work in urban environments makes space not only visible, but emotionally legible – inviting citizens to dwell, to remember, and to reimagine.

This mode of practice, civic scenography is a form of public engagement that views the city as a site of spatial dramaturgy, memory work, and social dialogue. Within this frame, scenographic interventions contribute to urban resilience by cultivating attentiveness, empathy, and shared authorship. They offer alternatives to both the spectacle of consumerized urban space and the inertia of heritage formalism.

Moreover, scenography's inherent interdisciplinarity makes it especially suited to contemporary urban challenges. It can be deployed in tandem with community-based design, participatory planning, cultural programming, and heritage preservation. As an urban strategy, it values responsiveness over rigidity, meaning over monumentality, and presence over permanence.

In the context of intangible heritage, scenographic practice offers a unique way to embody tradition without fossilizing it. It facilitates spaces of encounter where memory is activated through movement, sound, atmosphere, and storytelling. These experiences are not merely representations of culture, but performative enactments of it – transmitted through the senses, through bodies in motion, and through shared time in place.

In sum, scenography as both cultural practice and urban intervention enables the city to be read and experienced as a living archive – not through static preservation, but through ongoing acts of presence, participation, and poetic reimagining

5. Conclusion: Towards a Poetics of the Commons

In the age of urban acceleration, the need to preserve and regenerate intangible cultural heritage grows increasingly urgent. Yet preservation must not mean stasis. Intangible heritage lives through people, places, and practices – it is “constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity”⁸

This dynamic nature calls for equally adaptive strategies. By integrating scenographic methods into urban practice, we can create open-ended, participatory, and affective frameworks for heritage. Scenographic interventions do not seek to fix meaning but to make space for its emergence – through ritual, play, memory, and collective imagination.

In doing so, they contribute to a poetics of the commons: an approach to public space that values presence over permanence, co-authorship over authority, and lived experience over static display. Scenography becomes not only a cultural tool but a civic one – activating the city as a living archive, shaped by its communities, its histories, and its hopes the age of urban acceleration, the need to preserve and regenerate intangible cultural heritage grows urgent. Yet preservation must not mean stasis. By integrating scenographic methods into urban practice, we can create open-ended, participatory, and affective frameworks for heritage.

⁸ UNESCO. 2003. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Article 2.1. Retrieved from <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.

Acknowledgements

This article was developed with the support of interdisciplinary research and community initiatives focused on cultural heritage and urban space. The author wishes to express gratitude to the team of Scena Urbană in Cluj-Napoca for their commitment to reimagining public space through collaborative cultural practice.

Special thanks to colleagues and collaborators in the fields of performance studies, architecture, and cultural heritage who offered valuable insights during the early stages of this research. Appreciation is also extended to the local communities whose participation and lived experiences continue to shape our understanding of intangible heritage and public space.

The author is particularly grateful to the Academy of Music "Gheorghe Dima" and Professor Ina Hudea, whose openness to interdisciplinary dialogue and contributions to the intersection of music, performance, and memory have enriched this work in both substance and spirit.

This work benefits from the transdisciplinary dialogue encouraged by platforms committed to artistic, cultural, and urban research.

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