History, Memory, Participation:
Social media and the image of the places
in the historical center of L'Aquila

Storia, Memoria, Partecipazione:
i social media e l'immagine dei luoghi
nel centro storico dell'Aquila

Il terremoto dell'Aquila del 2009 ha provocato un temporaneo, ma ancora in parte in corso, svuotamento del centro storico. Le trasformazioni dovute al sisma hanno portato ad una momentanea non fruibilità e non riconoscibilità degli spazi che sono scaturite in una perdita di senso e di identità dei luoghi della città. La percezione della città continua ad oscillare tra il ricordo di essa prima del sisma e quello che sarà alla fine dei lavori. Numerose pagine e gruppi, sui vari social network, pubblicano e creano interazione pubblicando fotografie, immagini e ricordi passati, di luoghi della città e scene di vita quotidiana. La ricerca è stata condotta analizzando le immagini postate sui social media, geolocalizzandole e correlandole attraverso una mappa online, secondo un approccio di Digital Humanities applicato alle immagini del paesaggio urbano. La mappa si propone come strumento utile per la raccolta di documentazione visiva, per l'analisi dei fenomeni in atto, per lo sviluppo di attività di educazione al patrimonio.

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The 2009 L'Aquila earthquake caused a temporary, but still partially ongoing, emptying of the historic center. The transformations due to the earthquake led to a temporary non-usability and non-recognizability of the spaces which led to a loss of meaning and identity of the places of the city. The perception of the city continues to oscillate between the memory of it before the earthquake and what it will be at the end of the works. Numerous pages and groups, on various social networks, publish and create interaction by publishing photographs, images and past memories, of places in the city and scenes from everyday life. The research has been conducted by analysing the images posted on social media, geolocating and correlating them through an online map, according to a Digital Humanities approach applied to images of the urban landscape. The map offers itself as a useful tool for the collection of visual documentation, for the analysis of ongoing phenomena, for developing heritage education activities.

01.
Screenshot of a page dedicated to the collection of historical photos of the city of L'Aquila.

02.
Screenshot of the discussion about a photograph of a historic building.

03.
Comparison between two photos of Piazza IX Martiri in 2013 (left) and 2024 (right), before and after the restoration of the square and surrounding buildings.

04.
Comparison between historical photos and photos taken in 2011 and 2024 of the squares of San Pietro and San Marciano.

HISTORY AND MEMORY IN THE COLLECTIVE PERCEPTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cultural heritage is linked to a cultural and social process associated with the act of remembering. This act serves as a vehicle to define ways of understanding and engaging with our surroundings, encompassing both the past and the present [Smith, 2006]. Consequently, all heritage is initially intangible, not to deny its physical dimension, but to integrate the tangible dimension, which traditionally enjoyed privileged self-evidence, into processes of negotiating the social meaning and practices associated with defining the shared meaning of a social and cultural context, with the aim of to involve in the process all the stakeholders.

In this sense, sites, places, and artifacts have an intrinsic relevance in terms of signification, making them objects of appreciation and attention. Their physical aspect becomes the embodiment of broader and more complex cultural and social manifestations, which enlarges and expands their value and meaning [Bernardo & Casakin, 2012; Jenkins, 2009]. Cultural heritage is thus seen as the foundation for constructing and negotiating a series of identity visions, social and cultural values, and meanings in the present. This perspective conceptualizes heritage as a "discourse," involving not only debates about the concepts included in the definition and understanding of specific cultural goods but, what is more, "discourse" as an active, everyday social practice that engages the shared feelings, thoughts, and actions of individuals, particularly the identity of society itself.

In an approach where the relationship with cultural heritage revolves around discourse and participatory processes, the interplay between history and memory becomes central. On one side lies history as a system of critically and scientifically historiographical studies; on the other, the individual and collective memory of the community. The intertwining of history and memory gives rise to a sense of individuality and identity, as well as an idea of authenticity, intended as the daily practice and relationship of local inhabitants with the heritage itself [Smith, 2006, pp. 35-40]. Thus, heritage is configured as a cultural process linked to the act
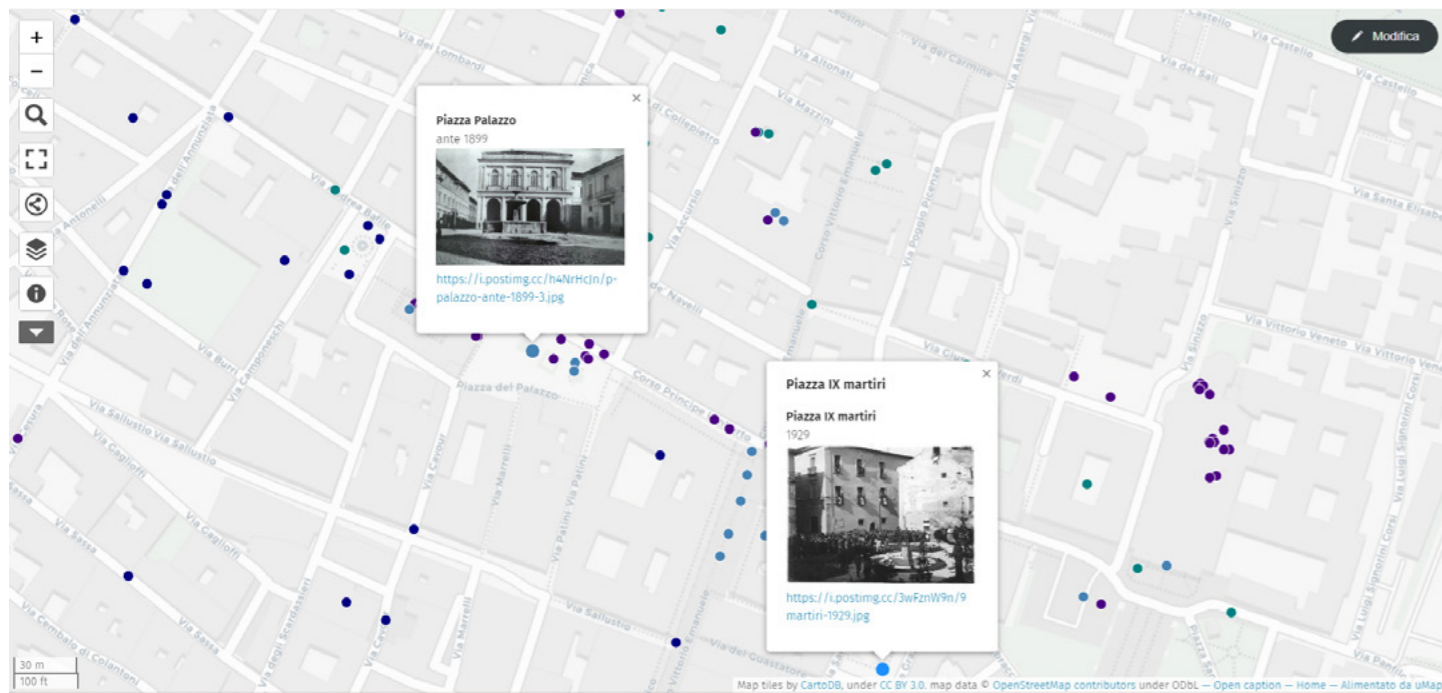
05.

Example of the pop-up image display on Umap.

06.

Georeferenced photographs presented through Umap interface.

of "remembering," which serves as a means of developing ways to engage with the present. Consequently, heritage requires an experience—it becomes an experience itself—where memory, remembrance, and performance play a central role.

Remembrance should not be intended merely as recalling the past but as an embodied and participatory act involving all stakeholders and the heritage itself, creating new memories. Memory, in particular, has an intimate relationship with the present. Collective memory, whether firsthand or transmitted, can form the foundation for a sense of identity and connection to a place or tradition. Collective memory fosters a sense of belonging rooted in predominantly social processes. This social approach, based on performance and collective memory, underscores the importance of objects, artifacts, rituals, sites, and locations. Their materiality can hold significant symbolic value for defining local values and identities.

These material and physical aspects align with Smith's foundational assumption: the intangible does not exclude the tangible but includes it. The importance of place, with its ontological physical dimension, induces a sense of positioning within the intangible system of social relations, from which meanings—and thus heritage—arise. From this signification process emerges the concept of "landscape" [Smith, 2006, p. 78].

PRESERVING MEMORY: THE CASE OF L'AQUILA

The case of the historic city of L'Aquila, presents itself as an interesting field for evaluation of these dynamics. The 2009 earthquake temporarily, and still partially, emptied the city's historic center. The extensive damage caused by the earthquake, followed by significant structural reinforcements and numerous construction sites, led to a temporary inaccessibility and loss of recognizability of spaces. This resulted in a loss of meaning and identity for the city's places. Reconstruction is still ongoing, and the city's perception oscillates between memories of its pre-earthquake state and what it will become after the work is completed, inevitably creating a new reality different from the previous one.

The prolonged "temporary" state of detachment from the historic center has highlighted

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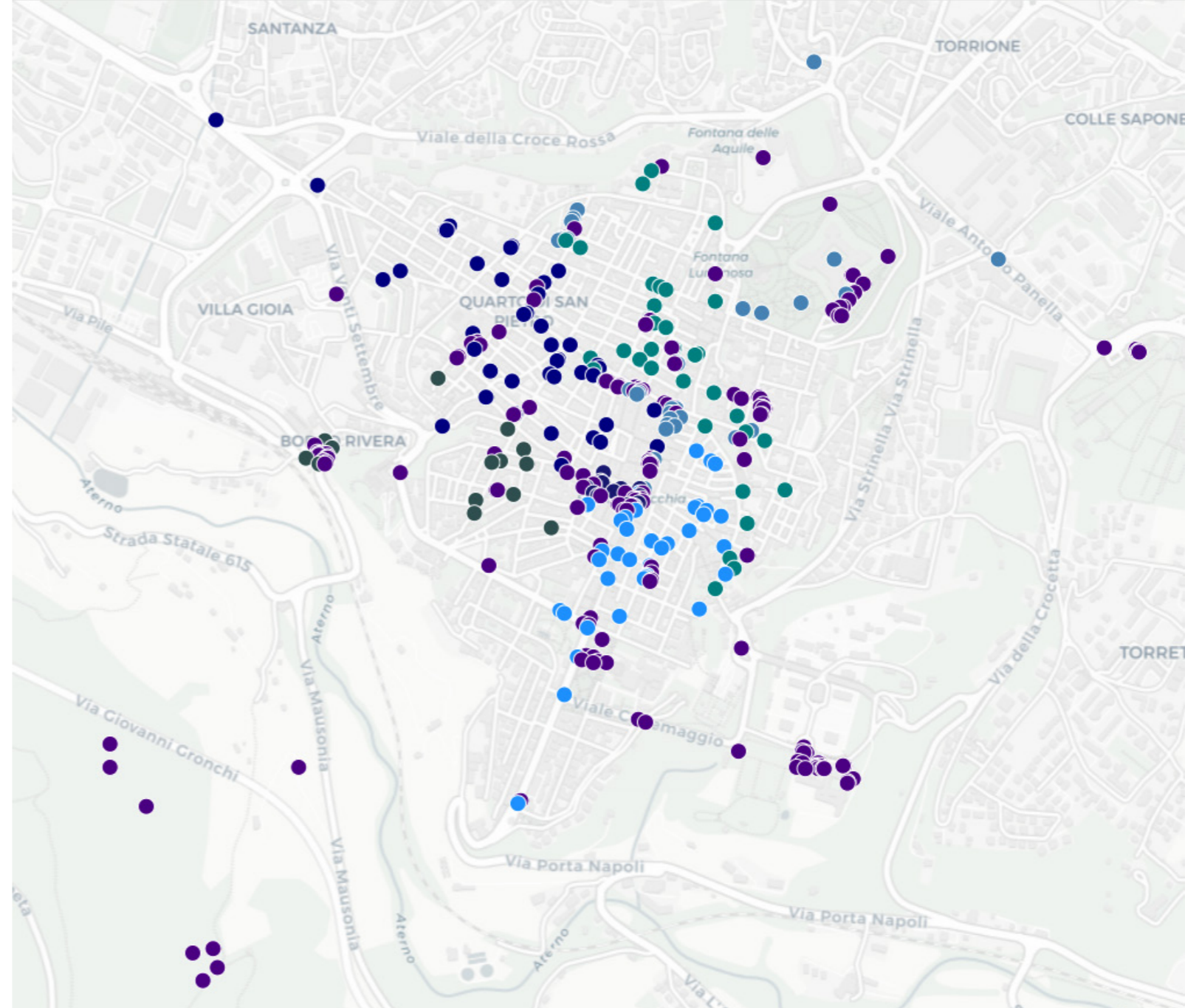
a growing desire among the population to preserve the memory of the city and its life before the earthquake, to maintain the sense of identity that once bound them to the city [Brusaporci, Centofanti & Maiezza, 2017; Brusaporci, Graziosi, Franchi, Maiezza & Vernacotola, 2018]. Over the years, numerous pages and groups have emerged on social media (Fig. 01.), where many people share and interact daily by posting photographs, images, and memories of the city and scenes from daily life (Fig. 02.). These pages have gained significance, not only in recreating a community fragmented by the earthquake but, importantly, in transmitting memories of the past to younger generations. After sixteen years of inaccessible and empty spaces, these youths lack any direct remembrance of the historic center and its previous life [Tata, 2023].

While these social media pages provide a remarkable repository of memory, the gap between images of the past and the current state of the places is widening. This is due to the prolonged inaccessibility of locations, drastic changes caused by damage, provisional structures, and reconstruction work. It is increasingly difficult to recognize these places—not only for younger individuals without prior memories but also for adults who rarely visit the historic center (Figs. 03., 04.).

The experience carried out aims to aims to bridge this gap between historical and contemporary imagery using basic augmented reality (AR) applications. By making historical images accessible through an interactive map, the system georeferences the user's device and allows navigation through historical photographs within the physical environment [Manovich, 2023] (Figs. 05., 06.).

Operationally, a first selection of more significant photographs was made, intended as a starting point to be increased in subsequent developments. For each image, the point of capture has been reconstruct as precisely as possible, correlating it with the photograph itself. The project adopted an open research model, developing an information system based on collaborative open-source platforms. This approach enables progressive data collection, flexible management, and integration. Experiments demonstrated the effectiveness of using synergistic tools and platforms, with particular emphasis on interoperability. OpenStreetMap's Umap platform, an open-source project, proved especially useful. It supports complex spatial information systems (SIT) without significant limitations, offering customization and integration into third-party websites. Its versatility allows users to create maps within the platform or import layers from GIS software or CSV files. This last feature allows you to use as source for the presentation of the layers of spreadsheets processed with a software such as Microsoft Excel or by online tools like Google Sheets. By using cloud tools, the system can dynamically update data, ensuring it remains current even during modifications or maintenance. Future developments, in addition to the systematic implementation of additional graphic and photographic materials, may involve events such as community walks, guided tours and public meetings to build around this georeferenced photographic collection a community not only active and recognizable on social networks but also in the social reality. In this sense the synergy between virtual and physical sociality uses the physical space of the city, re-read through an application of Augmented Reality, as a disintermediation tool in a process of heritage education.

The activities carried out, considered under this light also respond to a purpose of promoting accessibility [Candito & Meloni, 2022; Sdegno & Riavis, 2023], both physical and conceptual, favoring the principles of communication and presentation of cultural heritage promoted by the Ename Charter [ICOMOS, 2008].

CONCLUSIONS

Focusing on cultural heritage reveals how the mechanisms of remembering and engagement generate an imaginary, creating meaning by connecting the physicality of experiences, places, and objects with people's memories. This process fosters new emotions, memories, and social relationships. Dallari writes: "The memories on which these processes of ethical and aesthetic reworking intervene are therefore the result of a collaboration between reality and fantasy, between reliability and reinvention, between memory and nostalgia. The imagination is not only a faculty that voluntarily put into action, but it is a constituent element of our identity, the connective tissue that articulates our lived, from outline and completeness to the interior refractions of real experiences, and models in a story that day by day constitutes us and regenerates us" [Dallari, 2023, pp. 92-93].

In this sense, the experience aims to support the development of a «social imagination […] defined as the participation of individual imagination in a collective phenomenon» [Dallari, 2023, p.69-70], able to reconnect the tissue of memory, collectivized through social networks, to the physical warp of the city, returning to animate on a more articulated level of reality the dialogue between history and memory.

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