

Research Article

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Mnemotope as a Safe Place: The Wind Phone in Japan

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Abstract: There is a conceptual discrepancy between the expression “space of memory” and “place of memory.” In a different realm, the same seems to happen with the terms “safe space” and “safe place.” Coexisting but distinct worlds are explored in this article through the lens of the *safe mnemotope*: a place where memories have a fertile ground to settle and condense, where people find a safe dimension to externalize their inner emotions connected to the past. Based on a personal encounter with the *Wind Phone* in Japan, the article identifies some of the attributes that can make a place of memory a safe place, proposing them as initial guidelines to inspire the recognition and enhancement of realities that support the expression of complex feelings, providing a refuge where individuals can confront with their grief.

Keywords: safe place, mnemotope, place of memory, safe mnemotope, wind phone

1 Introduction

The title of this article might give the impression that we already have a clear comprehension of what a *safe mnemotope* is. More realistically, the purpose of the article is to set and share some of the attributes which can help explain this concept within the context of the relationship between spaces, places, and memory. While these terms may seem transposable at first glance, a nuanced discrepancy exists between the terms “space of memory” and “place of memory,” representing different layers of engagement with the past. The former, “space of memory,” suggests a more abstract, often metaphorical concept; the latter, “place of memory,” refers to a concrete, physical setting where memories are actively preserved and externalized by individuals and communities. Beyond this distinction we can find the *mnemotope*, eliminating the need for interpretive distinctions like “places of” or “spaces for” memory, offering a flexible framework for understanding the diverse forms that emerge from the intersection, including realities interwoven with a traumatic past. Introducing the idea of safety, the research will explore how mnemotopes can function as *safe places* rather than safe spaces. To investigate the issue, the article will present a specific case study: the *Wind Phone* (風の電話, “Kaze no Denwa”), located near Ōtsuchi, a town in northern Japan devastated by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Passing through an autoethnographic approach, allowing a more direct and emotional analysis, the main contribution of this work will be a list of features that make a mnemotope, such as the Wind Phone, a safe place. These characteristics will serve as initial guidelines for the recognition and enhancement of other safe mnemotopes, especially in contexts where trauma, mourning, and self-expression expression are prominent.

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2 Space, Place and Memory

In what we might call an age of *mnestic hypertrophy* (Tarpino, 2022), i.e., a tremendous amount of memory-related works with a parallel “overextension of the term [memory] to every area of knowledge without selective criteria both in public and in scientific discourse” (Galasso, 2024, p. 37), the existence of a relationship between memory and place seems obvious, especially in the field of cultural studies. Authors such as Halbwachs ([1950] 1980), Warburg (1929), and more recently Nora (1984–92), Connerton (1989), Assmann (1992, 1999), Erll and Nünning (2010) and De Nardi et al. (2020) have devoted years of research to the many facets of this correlation. From the intricate synaptic networks within our brains, where specialized neurons known as *place cells* (Moser et al., 2008) in the hippocampus map and track our movement through physical space (Schiller et al., 2015), to the habitual routines that define our daily lives, memory is profoundly intertwined with the concept of space. Our cognitive processes do not exist in isolation but are deeply embedded in our spatial environments, where memories are often linked to specific locations or physical contexts (McNamara & Valiquette, 2004). The interaction between place and memory is not only a personal, biological experience but a deeply social question, linked to the formation of communities and the recognition of both individual and collective identity. For Halbwachs (1980) memory “unfolds within a spatial framework. Now space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in the mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings” (pp. 139–140). Furthermore, memory and identity are mutually constitutive, “memories both inform and are informed by identities, and these articulations take different forms in different places” (Drozdowski et al., 2016). Viewed in this way, memory has the power to model the meanings of places, keeping them fluid and dynamic over time. The coaction of place and memory, therefore, extends beyond individual recollection; it is a social process that influences our sense of belonging, community, and identity in ever-evolving ways. This relationship reflects the concept of *place-identity*, which Proshansky et al. (1983) define as a “potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings” (p. 60).

Despite the extensive scale of this connection and the uncountable attempts to unfold it, its definitional status still seems to be blurred. It is undeniable that memory is inherently spatial: memories are bound to spaces in their physical dimension. The internal representation of our memories navigates through spatial locations, evoking the classical mnemotechnics known as the method of *loci* (Yates, 1966), “resting on the principle that the human mind remembers data attached to spatial information much more easily than it remembers data organized along some other lines” (Wassmann, 2011, p. 353). By mentally situating memories in these spatial contexts, we give them structure and organization, and this arrangement not only helps to make our experiences more tangible but also enhances their communicability.

Exploring the relationship between memory and space means also dealing with the semiotic processes of *externalization*, i.e., textualizing and inscribing memory in a system endowed with expression and content (Panico, 2020; Violi, 2014), and materialization (Salerno, 2021, p. 88), as memory “condition of existence lies both in its capacity to take a recognizable cultural form within a given context and to break away from that very context, in order to be transmitted across time, space and generations” (ivi, p. 87). This phenomenon is evident in personal narratives or descriptions of events, where people tend to externalize and communicate not only *what* happened but also *where* it happened (Casey, 1987). Describing memory in spatial terms is also an act that is part of our common language: we use metaphors to explain memory as a deposit or a storehouse (Sebal, 2014). We can then follow the *peircean externalism* (Peirce 1931–58, 5.493, 7.364), taking into consideration that “cognitive activity is essentially externalized insofar as it is semiotic, [...] and one cannot think except through signs, which are nothing more than ways of connecting to some premise the evidence of a possible conclusion” (Paolucci et al., 2008). Considering spaces as externalized signs of memory, they are not “mere supportive devices; instead, they undertake tasks which simply could not be performed by the brain alone” (CP 7.364 paraphrased in Hoffmeyer, 2015, p. 252). Spaces, in their physical lasting experience, function as external archiving (codification), storage, and re-circulation (retrieval) medium of memories, as an external domain into which communicative acts and information can be entered, i.e., cultural meaning (Assmann, 1999). By externalizing memories through space, we can not only give them geolocation, making them findable and

walkable but also make them more enduring by incentivizing their sedimentation, a form of spatial translation in which a memory of the past is expressed and made public.

Considering the enduring significance of the space/place/memory connection, which spans centuries and is an integral part of our daily lives, it is reasonable to question certain terminological – and, we could argue, conceptual – issues. For instance, why do we commonly use the term “spatiality of memory” and not “platiality of memory” (Buell, 2001), or refer to “places of memory” and not “spaces of memory”? To find an answer, we need to take a step back and focus on a fundamental question: What is a space or a place? (Digan, 2015). “Though the concepts of space and place may appear self-explanatory, they have been (and remain) two of the most diffuse, ill-defined and inchoate concepts in the social sciences and humanities” (Hubbard, 2005, p. 41). Given that space and place are about the “where” (Agnew, 2011), several scholars have tried to dissolve or at least explain this differentiation over the years.

Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his pioneering book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), supports the distinction and codependence between the two concepts, affirming that “space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted” (p. 3), but “‘space’ is more abstract than ‘place’”. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value, so space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning” (p. 6). The status of place is thus located within the human experience, “when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place” (p. 73), an aspect that is also echoed by Sack (1997): “From the perspective of experience, place differs from space in terms of familiarity and time. A place requires human agency, is something that may take time to know” (p.16).

Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), further complicates the distinction between space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*) by emphasizing the role of human practices. He states that “a place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence [...] an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability” (p. 117). The space instead “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus, space is composed of intersections of mobile elements” (de Certeau, p. 117). In substance, “space is a practiced place” (de Certeau, p. 117) not a static entity but is continuously shaped and redefined through everyday practices, such as walking, navigating, and interacting with the environment. De Certeau contrasts this with the more abstract concept of space, which, like the aforementioned Tuan, he views as an open field of potential that only becomes meaningful through human engagement. According to political geographer Agnew (2011), the contemporary era is increasingly *placeless*, and “spaces tend to reflect the notion of absorbing place as subsumed and from the viewpoint of technologies, the notion of place is increasingly becoming obsolete, while space is gradually conquering place” (Rajendran & Odeleye, 2020, p. 4). From this perspective, the place seems to remain anchored in the past: “Place is [...] associated with the world of the past and location/space with the world of the present and future. From one perspective, the place is therefore nostalgic, regressive or even reactionary, and space is progressive and radical” (Agnew, 2011, p. 7). While the spaces seem to move towards the future, the places seem to stand still, to settle down. Their image is one of stability and permanence (Tuan, 1977). Casey (1987) remarks on this concept, stating that “the most characteristic effect of place is to maintain or preserve rather than to divide or disperse. This is what lies behind idioms such as “march in place,” “have a place of one’s own,” “it’s a nice place to be,” “put oneself in place,” etc. In each case, the expression draws on the peculiar power of place to hold or keep in” (p. 186). This helps us return to the original question about the difference between *space* and *place*. What remains evident, despite the unstoppable obsolescence of the terminological definitions, is that memory is innately tied to a place, a *locus*, to a topical device, and that a memory without its place is an evanescent, unstable, momentary entity (Anceschi, 1992). “Giving place to a memory therefore means giving it existence and providing it with stability that transcends the passage of time” (Galasso, 2024, p. 24). Today, speaking of spaces of memory seems to transport us to a more superficial view, meaning in this case, what is above, what we can see and measure as a result of the space/memory interaction. It is no coincidence that the term is often used in architecture, as Tuan (1977) says, “architects talk about the spatial qualities of place” (p. 6). The concept is also used to describe processes of urban regeneration, processes in which the past conforms with the present by changing form as a “kind of laboratory where new ideas taking place in architecture and related disciplines are being tested” (Kabrońska, 2017). If we move into the field of neuroscience, the studies about spatial memory explain how we remember, where we are and

what kind of neural structures are involved in remembering the where (Allen, 2004), but they do not focus on the nature and content of recollection.

The shift in emphasis from ‘spaces’ to ‘places’ of memory has been particularly well-documented since the foundational studies of Nora (1984–92). In his *lieux de mémoire*, “places of memory,” the most important thing to transcend the temporal dimension, seems to be the palimpsest that establishes the link between place and memory, and so the focus of attention shifts downwards, inwards, to what places preserve, even without manifesting it on the surface. It is important not only *what* is remembered, but the *there* where memory works. These realities represent complex aggregates of past experiences and their interpretations, which over time acquire meaning precisely because of the layering of events; objects of values, shaped “by fixing its identity in terms of temporal, spatial and symbolical boundaries and by selecting a certain narrative, to the detriment of others” (Salerno, 2021).

A dynamic and progressive process that reflects the complexity of our relationship with the past and with the place, providing an essential key to understanding the world around us and the way we remember it. Taking into consideration the aggregative nature of these entities, in this article, we will not use the term “place of memory,” but we will choose the lesser-known compound term *mnemotope* (Galasso, 2023, 2024) to emphasize the synergy between place and memory, that condense, preserve and transmit to contemporaneity the elements of the past, while others are inevitably forgotten, also shaped by the social and cultural constructions. They “need practical and agentic activations to become meaningful places. They come to life through the body of the percipient, through its olfactory, visual, acoustic and haptic perceptions as individual acts of empathy with the past” (Hubner & Dirksmeier, 2023, p. 105).

3 Mnemotope as a Safe Place

The composite and multifaceted nature of *mnemotope* allows it to encapsulate the relationship between place and memory in a single term, eliminating the need for prepositions that often lead to interpretive ambiguities (e.g., places *of*, *for*, or *with* memory), and removing the need for interpretive distinctions like “places of” or “spaces for” memory. At the same time, it serves as a broad and flexible term, capable of describing the diverse range of *-topoi*, recurrent forms that emerge from the intersection of locations and remembrance (Galasso, 2024). We are thus dealing with a multitude of *mnemotopic* declinations: the individual ones, the collective ones, the creative ones (*ivi*, p. 75), just to mention a few. There are those who preserve memories that are the result of *acts of trauma* that “provide space for reflection on the experience of suffering, they can coherently frame trauma, and can be visited in ways that evoke understanding and raise awareness of past injustice now situated in present discourses” (Hubbel et al., 2020). From this broad perspective, we can also consider integrating the concept of a *safe mnemotope*.

While acknowledging the inherent limitations of such a merger, it is worth exploring how the notion of *mnemotope* can be linked to the idea of a safe space, but even more to the idea a *safe place*. This integration could offer valuable insights into how these specific locations serve as anchors for memory and its safe expression, at both the individual and collective levels. However, before delving further, a critical question arises: What distinguishes a *safe space* from a *safe place*? Talking about safe space, “the term comes up in academic thought through the development of queer, womanist, and critical race theories” (Ali, 2017). Today, it is predominantly used in the field of psychology and psychotherapy (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015), education (Palfrey, 2017; Winter & Bramberger, 2021), social dynamics, and trauma studies (e.g., trauma-informed approach) referring to a physical or psychological environment where individuals feel secure, free from threat, and able to process emotions without fear or danger. They are studied in the field of education as environments in which students can explore ideas and express themselves in a context with well-understood ground rules for the conversation (Palfrey, 2017). However, when we shift our focus to the concept of a *safe place*, it becomes apparent that this notion has received comparably less scholarly attention and lacks the conceptual clarity found in related terms. If we go back to Tuan (1977), one sentence can give us a preliminary interpretive framework. The geographer says that “place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the

one and long for the other.” We can find here the fundamental aspect of *meaning*: a place acquires sense over time, and this leads to attachment – place attachment (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2021) – but also to a feeling of comfort and well-being. A safe place thus appears as something that evolves with the involvement of the person and their own perception of what is familiar (Tanriverdi, 2023), emerging as “a meaningful location imbued with emotional resonance” (Tuan, 1977), where an individual feels secure or protected. As Yi-Fu Tuan explains, such places offer “a stable point of reference in a chaotic world” (Tuan, 1974), providing emotional grounding through their familiarity and constancy.

How can we analyze these assumptions to understand a mnemotope as a safe place emphasizing the possibility of considering a *safe mnemotope*? As already observed, often mnemotopes are expressions of traumatic experiences. They can be huge sites giving visibility to memories of extreme suffering, sometimes within the framework of national discourses of the past (Hubbel et al., 2020), or small realities created and maintained by local communities or even individuals to convey their complicated past. There are indeed instances where a mnemotope, as a conglomerate of mnesic meanings, can transcend its traumatic origins. Such mnemotopes have the potential to compress and combine the present and future, creating a space that allows for reflection and self-expression. In these cases, a collective memory site becomes a place where individuals feel emotionally secure enough to confront their personal memories or grief, not in isolation, but within a controlled and supportive environment. Here, the mnemotope is not only a repository of memories but also a vital, evolving site that facilitates both individual and communal processes of remembrance. To better understand the concept of the *safe mnemotope* and its characteristics, this article will explore a specific case study: the Wind Phone (*kaze no denwa*) in Japan. Located in Iwate Prefecture, near the small coastal town of Ōtsuchi, an area severely impacted by the devastating 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, it offers a peculiar example of a place that, while rooted in a traumatic past, being constantly filled every day with intimate, private memories, has become an inclusive environment, free from expressive barriers. However, before delving into the case study in detail, a brief methodological overview is necessary to set the context for this analysis.

4 Recounting a Safe Mnemotope

In qualitative research (Sharan, 2009), and more specifically in a memory-related area as the one in which this research is situated, stories hold a central role not because they are empirically or objectively true but because of their emotional resonance and ability to connect with readers on a personal level (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). In narrative inquiry (Bochner, 1994; Bruner, 1986), the stories themselves become the raw data (Bleakley, 2005). Defining features of the narrative approach include the collection of narratives from individuals or small groups (Butina, 2015), but can also include the *autoethnography method*, considered as “stories that feature the self or that include the researcher as a character (Ellis, 2004, p. 38)”, “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). This type of research, writing, and approach links the autobiographical and personal with broader, external cultural and social dimensions. It often incorporates elements such as specific actions, emotions, physical experiences, self-awareness, and introspection, drawing on the techniques typically associated with literary writing (Ellis, 2004). In this case, “the researcher is both the observer and the participant, the researcher and the subject, and an insider using an outsider’s view or perspective” and the aim is to “provide insight into possible alternative perspectives, and the influence in a specific field or body of knowledge” (Stichler, J. in O’Hara, 2018, p. 1). One key element of this narrative style is the use of first-person narrative, which allows individuals to share their own perspectives. Through this lens, experiences are framed not just as isolated events but as part of the experience and the research of the author that don’t just recount events as abstract memories; they relive them, emotionally and sometimes even physically, in the act of narration. Situated within perspectives of “I,” autobiographical narratives create opportunities to express internalized memories (Smorti, 2011 in Walker, 2017) and in turn, the externalization of suppressed memories produces cultural artifacts in which narratives of self are outwardly projected in a language that generates new opportunities for learning and transformation for researcher and reader. This type of approach seems to

be effective in the case of *safe mnemotope* and will be used in the next chapter to further explore the selected case study, i.e., the Wind Phone, as a story that stayed with the author, inspired her, occurred in a period in her life (i.e., the doctoral research path) and that affected her future academic work, not as an autobiography but a story presented with a scholarly way (O'Hara, 2018), albeit told in an evocative manner with intentional literary echoes. The main reasons for choosing this alternative research framing are inherent in the attributes of the autoethnography stated so far, adding that, in the case of an article concerning the relationship between place, memory, and safety, these become even more compelling and articulated.

More specifically, the use of autoethnographic storytelling rather than a typical academic language and recounting methods, “seems more conducive to a ‘feel’ for the emotional elements lurking between the cracks of words and pauses” (De Nardi, 2016, p. 107). It seems more useful to tell the emotional impact of the encounter between place and memory (Davidson et al., 2007) in a safe space and being narratives of the self are inherently spatial (Pile, 2002, pp. 111–112), and writing about memory is a spatial rearrangement by which ‘the past is bent into strange shapes so that what should be furthest away is in fact the closest’ (Probyn, 1996, p. 113), this approach can shine a light on the importance of place in this research.

Additionally, writing about the self can be an intense and emotionally charged process, often painful, it can trigger a deeply embodied experience, and it can be part of a rehabilitative process from trauma. This kind of introspective writing contributes to immersing into the experience of a safe mnemotope. The autoethnographic approach can become a valuable medium for representing its features in a less static way, capable of conducting its emotional involvement in a research environment.

5 The Wind Phone

The phone booth stands in a carefully tended garden, a classic white object, what landscape architecture would call a decorative element. At first glance, there is nothing to suggest a remembrance-related location, perhaps one could wonder why such an object is to be found in the very north of Japan, but nothing more. It is called a place of resilience, but I don't know if this definition fits best, I prefer to call it a place of memory.

I arrive in Namiitakaigan on an August morning, after a long journey that has the flavor of a secular pilgrimage. It is common knowledge that summer in Japan is very hot, but above all humid. Clothes stick to your body and do not leave you until the evening. The sun does not seem to mind the hat or the countless portable fans. A few of us get off at the tiny train station and we immediately go our separate ways. Families with excited, sunscreen-smeared children hurry to the beach, ready for the coveted beach trip. I make my way to Whale Mountain, *Kujira-Yama* as they call it. The ascent is gentle but steady, and the asphalt intensifies the feeling of heat as the ocean disappears from view. I wander around for a while as the satellite directions are unclear. I do not meet anyone, the only faces staring back at me are those of the candidates for the upcoming elections, their posters filling every available space. After about 20 min, I see the only sign in Latin letters in the area: *Bell Gardia*. It is bright green, the writing is yellow and graceful, and everything else is a mixture of hiragana and kanji.

I unequivocally arrived.

I have imagined this entrance so many times, read articles, seen photographs, and watched videos. However, the preliminary research rarely matches the place that stands before us when we arrive (Figure 1). And I say “stand before” because that is exactly what it is: a vivid image manifests before our eyes. It is not better than our expectations, it is not worse, and it's just different. From the laptop, you do not feel the heat, from the screen you do not hear the loud chirping of the cicadas, the pixels do not carry the green that turns into the yellow of sunburnt grass. No photo can prepare you for the booth's dazzling white silently awaiting you after a few steps in the garden. It seems to be there for you and always has been. You feel prepared. The kilometers you have covered to reach this point fade away; your feet are no longer tired, and your pace quickens. You just want to get inside, then you have enough time to explore the other things the garden has to offer.

Everything is so neat and tidy that at first impact, even if you are familiar with the history of the place, you have a sense of calm. The place is a pause in movement, says Tuan (1974). Here, in the garden of Bell Gardia,



Figure 1: Bell Gardia garden, The Wind Phone of Itaru Sasaki, Otsuchi, Japan, 2023 (the author).

this is precisely the case: a suspension. An interval from what we have experienced up to this moment. A green pause on your path, a break your thoughts long for. A place just for you, there is only room for one person in the cabin.

Initially, the phone booth was intended for private use. Then the owner, Itaru Sasaki, decided to put inside a disconnected telephone, one with a heavy handset and rotating keypad that Generation Z has certainly never seen. After the devastating events of the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck the coast of Japan following the Fukushima nuclear power plant explosion, claiming nearly twenty thousand lives, it unexpectedly became a shared place.

Over the years, people began traveling worldwide to communicate privately with their missing loved ones via the phone in the booth.

I have thought a lot about what I could have said, and whether I would have found the right words. Would I have succeeded or would I have remained silent? Would the words have chased each other as if in a river, or would they have left room for incommunicability? I thought about what was best to say, what was most important, even if that might not even exist. I tried to prepare a speech, almost as if it were a lecture. Irrationally, I viewed this booth from a distance as a podium from which I would speak. I even dressed well for the occasion. But it did not turn out that way. The curious and fast pace of the entrance immediately gave way to a slower and more thoughtful movement. Who will I call? What number do I dial? Will they answer me? Will they want to listen to me?

The telephone covered in black lacquer without a cable connecting it to the world of the living is not immediately visible, as the reflections of the glass hide its presence. There is also a bench to make waiting easier, to help you think and prepare, if you like. I sit down, it's as warm as the air you breathe. It takes me some time to get into the booth. But I am not in a hurry, I do not feel like I am being hounded by messages and deadlines. It's just me and the booth. I can feel the sweat trickling down my temples, but it does not weigh me down. I am where I want to be. A soft, almost inaudible sound catches my attention. With precise gestures, a lady is removing the weeds in a corner of the garden. She does indeed own the garden, I conclude that she must be the owner. I barely notice her presence, our lives are happening in the same place at the exact

moment, but they are independent, which is another power of Bell Gardia. A private garden that opens its gates and becomes free and inclusive. It abolishes all possible distinctions of belief, origin, and motivation. There are no differences here; we are all survivors. The welcoming and barrier-free environment between the house and the lodge is astonishing. Even the scattered signs, which I laboriously translate with the digital translator, say: “Welcome! I have been waiting for you. There is no hurry. Organize your mind a little at a time.”

For a moment, I think I will not make it. My legs are heavy, my thoughts are tiring. Then I get up, move the iron bolt, open the creaking door and step inside (Figure 2). At first, I only feel a great heat, and then, it's like a cascade of feelings. Everything stops, even the tears freeze as if they do not want to obscure my gaze. I have to feel everything. I pick up the phone and dial the number. Instead of the classic “*tuu tuuuuu*” that normally interrupts the waiting time, the silence increases exponentially: all sounds outside seem to be silent. The senses are activated simultaneously, and what was a piece of furniture becomes a mnemotope. Your mnemotope, a place where your innermost thoughts, your most painful unspoken words, your most beautiful and heartbreaking messages are stored. But it is also the mnemotope of all those who were there before you. Of all the people who have opened that door, who have brought the receiver closer to the mouth to meet the inaccessible world of those who are no longer part of reality.

You are not alone. Picking up the receiver, the words whispered or shouted through the old device gather and begin to populate the place. Imperceptible but palpable sensations, emotions, disturbances, pain. A great deal of pain, almost breathtaking. When you enter the phone booth, you come into contact with the past, with what has been. You have the opportunity to immerse yourself in the same atmosphere experienced by the person you called, creating an unprecedented, individual space-time encounter, generating a new relationship with loved ones (Imai Messina, 2021), made of words, black – *kuro* – phone, white – *shiro* – booth and green – *midori* – grass. In this refuge, so private and shared at the same time, I pause and the words begin to flow. One after the other. Speaking in a phone booth without a conversation partner may seem strange, but the dialogue continues to build. I talk out loud, not in my thoughts. I informed the people on the other side of the wind about what has happened to me in recent years: “You know, I did my PhD, it was so hard without you, especially on dissertation day, but I did it. Your brother opened a restaurant. You have become an uncle.”

I also find myself singing. I sing at the top of my lungs in a white booth in northern Japan. Shamelessly. I want you to hear my voice wherever you are. I lower the receiver, next to it lies a notebook to which people from all over the world have entrusted their memories. Dedications for those who are no longer here. Many



Figure 2: Inside the booth, Wind Phone of Itaru Sasaki, Otsuchi, Japan, 2023 (the author).

thanks to those who have made this place possible, but above all to those who have made it public, open, free for anyone who feels the need: “Remember that I love you.”

I go out and turn to the lady still arranging the flower beds. My Japanese is poor, but I managed to tell her that I am from Italy, and I thanked her with emotion. I hope she has understood that there is much more behind my stunted thank you, *arigato gozaimashita*: “You gave me a safe place where I could connect the past with my present, you left it to me for as long as I needed it. Your silence and discretion were a true sign of hospitality.” She leaves me alone and quickens her steps, walking to the small greenhouse next to the bench. She returns with a small handmade chenille potholder. It is a gift, a souvenir, *omiyage*.

Every time I use the potholder, I remember the sense of cure. It helps me not to burn myself, not to feel the heat of the fire. Just as *kaze no denwa* becomes a place that protects you, a place that makes you free from scruples and embarrassment so that you can express even the most painful suffering and then leave it to the wind in an act of therapeutic memorification.

6 Safe Mnemotope

Given this autoethnographic recounting, we can already perceive the mnemotopic evolution of the Wind Phone. It was born to save an object that would otherwise have been thrown away by a commercial shop (Van Dyke, 2022) – the booth – and then inserted as a decorative object in a private setting – Itaru Sasaki’s garden. The owner decides to place a telephone inside to speak to his missed cousin, and it was a personal act. Then, the tsunami flooded large parts of Japan’s east coast. Local communities, the country’s backbone, collapse: You cannot help, you cannot ask for help, everyone has suffered losses, and everyone suffers equally. Not even *gaman*, variously understood as “endurance,” “patience,” or “perseverance” (Lloyd Parry, 2017), was enough to endure the *gareki*, the rubble left by the wave.

The Wind Phone, a spectator and survivor of the event, begins to attract dozens of people who seek relief from its presence. It makes no distinction, welcoming everyone who needs to experience its place. The booth begins to layer memories within it, intangible and immaterial, that make it a hybrid space on the border between *individual mnemotope* (Galsso, 2024, p. 54–58), a fragile entity linked to the private dimension of remembrance, and an unofficial memorial (Boyce, 2022) that arose spontaneously in response to a tragic event. In the booth, memories cannot be seen, but they can be felt, and this generates a pole of attraction for a non-institutionalized pilgrimage. Although from a distance, the white cabin may look like a “postcard from Ōtsuchi,” mnemotopic activation through Itaru Sasaki’s creative operation makes it a repository of memories. However, the Wind Phone is not a traditional place of memory; it is not merely a place of commemoration (Wolschke-Bulmahn, 2001), not a monument, i.e., human, intentional manifestation of the past, a form of externalization of memory to remember events, deeds, or characters, mostly figurative, following a vertical progression and standing on a pedestal, which occupies a semantic field that brings together the concepts of memory and power (Gaglianò, 2016). It is more similar to the idea of memorials, “more intimate evocative places of remembrance that allow the real experience of memory, less mediated by marble and solemnity” (Galasso, 2024), more complex and practicable spatialities (Bassanelli, 2015).

Despite the similarities, the Wind Phone is difficult to inscribe in a settled category. What happens inside the booth seems to go beyond conventional memorial practices. Austere and meditative moments of reflection and silence give way to voices. Those who travel miles to reach it, entering the booth, speak fearlessly with their loved ones, without embarrassment, or shame in expressing their most profound feelings.

Thus, we can reason about the specificities that make this site a *safe mnemotope*.

- **Position** is crucial. The telephone is not far from Ōtsuchi, one of the towns most affected by the 2011 tsunami, located near the ocean which has tragically become a graveyard. In this way, the mnemotope, characterized by deeply intimate and individual traits, undergoes a process of public recognition that makes people feel more legitimized to mourn. On the other hand, the *Bell Guardia* garden offers no direct view of the sea, and even the sound of the waves is blurred. This temporary separation from the seascape momentarily displaces the sense of tragedy and extends the feeling of security.

- The **physical environment** is an essential element. The connection with nature enhances the meditative dimension. Sasaki-San himself states that “getting here is an exercise in mindfulness” (Imai Messina, 2021). The organic atmosphere, which changes with the seasons in terms of color, temperature, and sounds, can calm the mind and allow moments of silence and reflection. In addition, being in an isolated environment can give a deep sense of seclusion from outside judgments and distractions. Away from the hustle and bustle of urban life, people are protected from the constant barrage of stimuli often accompanying contemporary life. This quiet sanctuary minimizes environmental stressors and provides a pause for our mental and emotional well-being.
- The booth is a **confidential setting** (Van Dyke, 2022), a closed place where only one person can enter, and this aspect reinforces the feeling of privacy. No one can hear what people are saying, allowing emotional expression and fostering the sedimentation of individual memories.
- While usually, in traumatic situations, the pain destroys language (Scarry, 1985), being in a solitary, private, protected space (Van Dyke, 2022), allows one to safely speak out loud in an audible speech that does not require “selection of words, syntax ... so that the other person understands” (Hagort, 2019 in Van Dyke, 2022). The booth becomes a medium of remembrance expression and contributes to making the unspeakability of trauma the **speakability of trauma**, leading to emotional outpouring and multiple sharings of grief.
- The booth is an **ordinary object** recognizable by most people. This makes it easy to use and removes the veil of sacredness from memorials, offering “an interactive sensorial encounter that is not necessarily available through traditional material objects associated with mourning, such as gravestones, statues, plaques” (Boyce, 2022, p. 91). The act of communication is thereby simplified, and the “use of this nostalgic form of media [...] through the lack of physical connection to any material phone line [...] (provides) an alternative infrastructure necessary to connect to the dead” (ivi, p. 92).
- Inside the Wind Phone people can stay as long as they need. Setting time restrictions can create pressure and anxiety, but without time constraints, individuals can feel safer to explore their trauma at their own pace, without fear of being rushed or judged. **Removing time limits**, the booth fosters a gradual and nonlinear unfolding of feelings without synthesizing efforts that could undermine the emotional moment.
- The *Bell Guardia* is an isolated but private garden. This makes the Wind Phone a **welcoming place**. The presence of the owners next door, combined with their total respect and discretion, makes people feel protected even in a moment of extreme vulnerability. In addition, the familiarity conveyed by the garden evokes a sense of home as an environment where “the objective reference points in space, such as landmarks and the cardinal positions, conform with the intention and the coordinates of the human body” (Tuan, 1977). A place where you feel comfortable and nothing wrong can happen to you, where you can free the remembering process because “in smaller, more familiar things, memory weaves her strongest enchantments” (Stark, 1948).
- Entering the cabin, people feel part of a **community** that has left its memories there, that knows what they are feeling, understands their pain, and empathically supports them. Through the intangible memories perceived within the booth, people get into a process of involuntary, implicit mutual aid, what might also be called healing community (Winkler, 2022): when a community member opts to begin healing, everyone connected to them is affected in some way (Ensign, 2018). This process produces a strong place attachment, accompanied by a continuous proliferation of word-of-mouth referrals that steadily amplifies the garden’s renown.
- A traumatic event is one that leaves an individual feeling overwhelmed, out of control, or helpless, and unable to assimilate or integrate the experience (Clark et al., 2014). One of the most damaging effects of trauma is that it exceeds the person’s capacity to cope. Entering the booth means joining the collective of *izoku*, the **trauma survivors** (Imai Messina, 2021), which generates a sense of belonging. In this shared space, individuals feel more legitimate in expressing their sorrow, free from judgment. In a way, the Wind Phone unintentionally functions as a trauma-informed space, fostering a sense of security and emotional safety.
- The Wind Phone is an **inclusive place** embracing individuals without regard to gender, religion, or nationality, cultivating an environment of openness and freedom. It is a place of tolerance and acceptance, where all are welcome to come and go, unencumbered by the constraints of prejudice or discrimination.

- Reaching *Bell Guardia* entails a **ritual**. “Many visitors describe their journeys to the wind phone as a “pilgrimage,” implying the sacred site specificity of this artifact” (Boyce, 2022). The countless steps to reach a remote place promote awareness of motivation and enable people to arrive more prepared for their destination (Imai Messina, 2021). Furthermore, the booth’s practice seems to recall the Japanese *butsudan*, the house altar dedicated to the ancestors, on the one hand, and a Catholic confessional on the other, thus inviting consolation and reconciliation.
- The experience inside the Wind Phone has been compared to a “form of expressive or imaginative therapy” without a therapist (Van Dyke, 2022, p. 116). Its **therapeutic potential** seems to lie in the ability to vent emotionally by talking to the lost loved ones, and, through verbal representation, to make an introspective self-journey, conscious and unconscious, “to bring partial order to a disordered part of the psyche, and to heal (ivi, p. 119).”
- The object “booth” through the reuse put in action by Itaru Sasaki, with the involvement of a **creative process** becomes a memorial, or even better, a counter-monument (Young, 1992), an experimental, unofficial form of memorialization whose existence is based on the concepts of emotional involvement, active participation, and absence (Galasso, 2024).
- The booth, evolving into a safe mnemotope, gradually gains **public recognition**. This allows it to acquire an aura of respectability and be regarded as a trusted, authentic place. This being said, the constant stream of visitors does not turn into a crowd, neither of people nor of words, due to the total privacy of the place. What is said in the cabin remains in the wind, no one can have access to it unless a message is left written in the guestbook.

Psychologist David Trickey defines trauma as a “rupture in meaning-making” (Shiro, 2023). Thanks to all the intertwined aspects just described, the *kaze no denwa* enters into a process of reconceptualization that promotes the reconstruction of meaning – the relationship with lost loved ones – in an intimate and familiar way, thus becoming a *safe mnemotope*.

7 Remediation of a Safe Place

Today, the Wind Phone is no longer just a remote place in Japan. Its safe, almost therapeutic being has made it fertile content for international remediation, inspiring films, novels, news articles, and other media (Boyce, 2022). The *remediation process* for mnemotopes is crucial, “virtually every site of memory can boast its genealogy of remediation, which is usually tied to the history of media evolution” (Erll & Rigney, 2009, p. 5). Remediation means keeping memory alive and dynamic through its transformation into other communicative systems (Galasso, 2024, p. 72).

In the case of the booth, the most striking case is Laura Imai Messina’s novel, *The Phone Box at the Edge of the World*, published in 2020, and now translated into more than 20 countries. It is a fictional novel in which the protagonist Yui meets the story of the Wind Telephone after losing her mother and daughter in the 2011 tsunami. From then on, a repeated journey to reach the place begins. The aforementioned traumatic relationship with the sea manifests itself in the nausea she feels every time she sees the ocean, even from a distance: “Retch after retch she felt as though she was being liberated of liters of salty water and debris from the disaster, of the foul sludge she had kept down for years out of fear that her memories would flow out with it” (Imai Messina, 2020, p. 118). It is also interesting that her healing is not directly related to the booth, which she cannot enter for months, but to the meeting with the community of survivors. In this case, the safe place where she can laboriously but freely express her pain is not only the physical place, but also the people who share the same suffering and make her open up and find the word “mother” again.

The protagonist of the film *Voices in the wind* (2020) by director Nobuhiro Suwa embarks on a similar therapeutic journey. Eight years after the devastating tsunami, Haru, a teenage girl, lives with her aunt in Hiroshima after losing her entire family in the flood. The trauma has caused her to lose her voice, and she wanders mutely through a city and a home that she does not feel is hers. To alleviate the pain, she secretly sets

off on a long, eventful hitchhiking trip to Ōtsuchi, her hometown: in the dilated timeframe of the cinematic narrative, in a rarefied atmosphere, encounters unfold, and dialogues of the deepest humanity that emerge together from grief. Haru finds her safe place, the place where she was born and where she lived with her family, in ruins: only the tangled outlines of the walls of her house remain. But her journey comes to a different ending in her encounter with the Wind Phone. Only there does she finally feel safe and find the words that now taste of rebirth.

Today, there is no longer just a wind phone: this safe mnemotope has become a sort of *mnestic template* and has crossed the borders of Japan not only through the media as we have just seen, but also as an object. Many countries, including Italy and Wales, have decided to construct and locate their version of the booth. In this context, “each wind phone has different cultural contexts, geographic locations, and environments, but their purpose remains consistent: to give people a chance to speak to and feel heard by their departed loved ones” (Boyce, 2022, p. 91). The exportability of the booth makes its essence as a safe place even more evident. Indeed, the need for places in which to express deep and traumatic memories knows no medial or geographical boundaries.

8 Conclusions

Based on a personal encounter with the Wind Phone, this article analyzed the peculiarities of the safe mnemotope: a place of memory that seems to leave aside great monumentality and sacralization to make room for a more limited place, usually creative-oriented, for the intimate expression and sharing of painful memories. While studies on traditional memory sites are now settled and shared, the field of safe mnemotope appears yet to be investigated in many aspects. Mnemotopes are not always safe places, they can be public, exposed, crowded sites where the externalization of self-feelings is not even taken into consideration, prevailing a perspective of institutionalization of remembrance and its fixity. The parameters described in the article are still preliminary and open to interdisciplinary implementations. One thing seems evident: the relationship between a place of memory and a safe place, as in the case of the *kaze no denwa*, can generate a vital and ever-evolving organism, which attracts visitors and fosters a sense of communal belonging able to amplify the significance of the place and its human, emotional value. Such realities can also become exemplary model, crossing territorial boundaries, and going through processes of communicative remediation that make them more accessible and understandable. However, as these sites gain broader recognition and visibility, the challenge of preserving both their security and authenticity may arise in the future.

The research path regarding safe mnemotopes is still long and rough, but the case study of the Wind Phone, analyzed through the autoethnographic approach, allowed us to shed light on the importance of having and recognizing safe mnemotopes as realities to open up and dig into the emptiness of loss. This investigation highlights the transformative potential of these places as environments that support the expression of complex feelings, providing a refuge where individuals can safely grapple with their inner grief in a protected, emotionally secure setting.

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