

# REMINISCENCE OF THE FIRST MEETING: REACTIVATING URBAN VOIDS THROUGH PERFORMATIVE URBANISM STRATEGIES

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## Abstract

Urban voids—often neglected and underutilised spaces—present opportunities for temporary, low-cost ephemeral invasive interventions that can reshape public space dynamics. This research investigates the potential of tactical urbanism and performative urbanism in reactivating such spaces, transforming them into platforms for social interaction, memory-making, and engagement. Through the case study of “*Do you remember how we met?*”, a temporary intervention in the centre of Bratislava, the study examines how participatory design and performative strategies can foster new spatial narratives. The intervention, an object-based installation, engaged passers-by in an interactive process, prompting reflection on first meetings and collective memory. Data collected from participants’ recollections revealed distinct layers of remembrance, illustrating the emotional and psychological dimensions of urban experience. The study further explores how tactical urbanism enables flexible, adaptive transformations of urban voids, while performative urbanism activates space through embodied social participation. Findings highlight the potential of ephemeral interventions to catalyse urban vibrancy, but also reveal challenges related to material resilience, engagement sustainability, and unintended interactions. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on temporary urbanism, advocating for experimental and participatory approaches that reimagine public space as a dynamic and socially responsive entity.

**Key words:** tactical urbanism, public space, voids, invasive intervention, urban tourism

## Introduction

Urban environments are complex and layered systems in which spatial voids—unused, abandoned, or transitional spaces—can either remain latent or be activated as catalysts of social, spatial, and cultural transformation. Rather than perceiving these voids as failures of planning, contemporary landscape architecture and urban design recognize them as dynamic territories full of latent potential. Recent scholarship underscores the importance of rethinking these spaces as opportunities for unconventional, socially engaged interventions that can bring forgotten urban pockets back into the public consciousness (Back Prochnow & Čibík, 2022). In an era marked by rapid urbanization, social fragmentation, and ecological uncertainty, the ability to reinterpret and activate such spaces becomes increasingly relevant. Temporary and participatory interventions offer a compelling framework for exploring how memory, affect, and everyday human presence can shape the life of a place. This article investigates the role of tactical and performative urbanism in activating such urban voids, with a particular focus on the temporary intervention “*Do You Remember How We Met?*” by artist Nikola Čižmárová, curated by Katarína Jankechová. Installed in 2021 in Bratislava, this object-based installation—composed of ashtrays and binaural audio recordings—sought to evoke memory and interpersonal connection in public space, inviting passers-by into an intimate, interactive encounter. The intervention aligns with recent trends in landscape architecture that emphasize adaptability, emotional resonance, and functionality. As Tóth (2022) suggests, planning today must occur across multiple scales and involve layered narratives that respect both environmental and social dimensions. Similarly, the transformation of leftover urban spaces must integrate both bottom-up and participatory strategies—what Fornal-Pienak and Biľušová (2022) describe as responsive, context-specific approaches. By placing emphasis on emotional, ephemeral, and community-driven aspects of spatial design, “*Do You Remember How We Met?*” acts as a prototype for rethinking the role of temporary artistic installations in urban transformation. It demonstrates how low-cost, small-scale, and time-limited interventions can uncover hidden social and spatial values.

## Materials and methods

This research builds on a qualitative case study approach, centered on the analysis of the “*Do You Remember How We Met?*” intervention as an applied example of performative urbanism. The installation, located in a transitional urban space near Kunsthalle Bratislava, served as both a spatial experiment and a participatory research tool. Through its form—object installation using ashtrays—and its content—sound recordings reflecting on first encounters—it invited a public audience to engage through both physical presence and reflective memory. The methodology embraces hybrid practices at the intersection of spatial design, artistic intervention, and social inquiry. As described in the article “Mapping the In-Between – Approaches and Methods of Researching Urban Voids” by Čibík (2024), combining spatial analysis with artistic and performative strategies allows researchers to better understand the emotional and social layers of urban voids. Additionally, small-scale, invasive interventions—such as this one—are shown to have the capacity to stimulate micro-level urban renewal, not through permanent transformation, but by provoking memory, curiosity, and spontaneous social interaction (Čibík and Jankechová, 2023).

This study draws from documentation of the installation, curatorial and press materials, reflective accounts from passers-by, and contextual literature in tactical urbanism and landscape architecture. It also references interdisciplinary works that explore the reciprocal relationship between temporary interventions and the character of the host environment. The goal is to frame “*Do You Remember How We Met?*” as more than an isolated artistic gesture, but as a method of exploring how performative strategies can reimagine public space as a shared emotional and experiential landscape.

## Results

The installation was visually understated yet symbolically loaded. Arranged ashtrays—mundane, often discarded objects—were embedded in the environment, prompting curiosity and inviting closer inspection. Their worn, personal aesthetic contrasted with the surrounding urban void, drawing attention through subtle visual friction. The ashtrays acted as spatial anchors, referencing specific moments of past encounters that took place on three nearby streets. Their strategic placement created a fragmented but walkable narrative path, inviting participants to traverse the space while reflecting on their own recollections (Fig. 1).

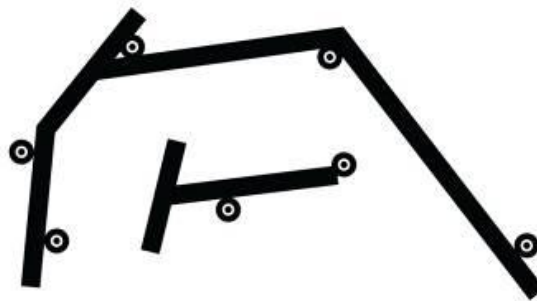


Fig. 1: This map shows the stylization of specific street spaces in the city, where black dots symbolize the places of the first meeting - the socializing moment while smoking (ashtrays). Source: Čižmarová 2021, vectorized by Čibík, 2025.

Each ashtray was paired with a sound component, accessible via QR code, featuring binaural audio recordings based on the dual recollections of the artist and her friends. The layered, spatialized sound experience mimicked the disjointed yet intimate nature of memory, enveloping listeners in moments that felt simultaneously personal and universal.

## Participant Experience and Quotes

Several participants reflected on the emotional depth of the experience and the subtle power of the installation to unlock memories. One visitor remarked: “*I didn’t expect a cigarette ashtray to make me think of my father. I haven’t thought about those quiet conversations we had outside for years.*” Another described the installation as “*a soft reminder that the smallest objects can hold entire histories*” reinforcing the emotional resonance of material memory. The installation’s ability to provoke recollection was not limited to those familiar with the artist. A passer-by who engaged with the audio described: “*I felt like I was eavesdropping on someone’s past... but then it triggered a scene from my own life. That shift—from them to me—was strangely powerful.*” This feedback highlights the

transferability of memory in performative installations—how shared spaces and narratives can act as mirrors, reflecting the personal within the public.

### Emergent Themes in Memory Layers

Three distinct levels of memory recall emerged from both the participant experiences and the audio narratives:

- Full recollection, where individuals recalled events with clarity and emotional vividness.
- Fragmented memory, where only partial images or feelings remained.
- Absent memory, represented by a complete lack of recollection—voiced in one narrative simply as: *“Sorry, I don’t remember.”*

These memory types were intentionally juxtaposed in the sound recordings, producing dialogues that occasionally contradicted each other. This contrast invited reflection on the unreliability of memory, challenging the listener to consider how personal truth is constructed and reshaped over time.

### Social and Spatial Interaction

The intervention also facilitated unplanned interpersonal proximity. The arrangement of the installation encouraged lingering, pausing, and listening—behaviours uncommon in transitional public spaces (Fig. 2). While some participants interacted directly, others experienced a silent form of communion, simply coexisting in a shared reflective space. Artist Nikola Čižmárová noted that her own attitude toward isolation and nostalgia changed during the process. Her reflections—“It’s more a falling into painful nostalgia, and a desire to meet, make acquaintances and socialise”—underscore how the work became a vehicle for her personal transformation, while also enabling collective affective engagement.



Fig. 2: Social interactions and performative urbanism. An example of how a temporary, low-cost intervention can transform an underutilized space into a vibrant public area. Source: archive Kunsthalle Bratislava / Adam Šakový (2021).

### Conclusion of the Findings

Although its lifespan was cut short, the installation proved that even modest, low-tech, and ephemeral interventions can deeply resonate with the public. Through the subtle interplay of form, narrative, sound, and space, the project revealed how performative urbanism can not only activate neglected locations but also elicit emotional and cognitive responses that redefine the experience of place.

### Conclusion

Urban voids, though often overlooked, possess latent potential to become meaningful spaces of memory, interaction, and transformation. This study has demonstrated that performative and tactical urbanism—especially when grounded in participatory and artistic strategies—can activate these spaces in ways that are socially and emotionally resonant. Although the exhibition was prematurely cancelled due to acts of vandalism, the intervention generated valuable insights into how ephemeral and emotionally charged installations can engage public space and its users. It served as a spatial and social prototype, showing how ephemeral, low-cost installations can reframe forgotten urban corners as places of encounter and reflection. By engaging the public in a shared experience rooted in memory, the project revealed the depth of emotional and psychological responses that such spaces can evoke. The findings support a broader understanding of public space as a dynamic, relational, and responsive environment. They advocate for temporary, flexible, and interdisciplinary approaches that go beyond functional design to embrace human experience. In doing so, this research contributes to

the evolving discourse on temporary urbanism and opens new pathways for how we plan, design, and live in cities.

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## Souhrn

Jedním z opomíjených fenoménů městského prostředí jsou tzv. městské prázdnoty – opuštěná, nevyužívaná nebo přechodná místa, která často zůstávají mimo zájem veřejnosti i urbanistického plánování. Tato studie zkoumá potenciál těchto prostorů jako nositelů nové identity a místa pro aktivaci společenských interakcí prostřednictvím taktického a performativního urbanismu. Výzkum je založen na případové studii umělecké intervence *“Do You Remember How We Met?”*, realizované v roce 2021 slovenskou umělkyní Nikolou Čižmárovou ve spolupráci s Kunsthalle Bratislava. Instalace se nacházela na přechodném veřejném místě v centru Bratislavy a skládala se z objektů popelníků doplněných o zvukové nahrávky, které evokovaly vzpomínky na první setkání. Projekt byl navržen tak, aby aktivně zapojil náhodné kolemjdoucí do interaktivního procesu připomínání si minulých událostí a zároveň inicioval nové sociální vazby. V kontextu období pandemie, kdy byla osobní setkání omezena, nabídl prostor pro reflexi mezilidských vztahů a kolektivní paměti. Studie využívá kvalitativní metodologii kombinující analýzu prostorového designu, umělecké intervence a společenského výzkumu. Instalace je chápána nejen jako dočasné umělecké dílo, ale jako nástroj zkoumání veřejného prostoru prostřednictvím participace a prožitku. Metody vycházejí z interdisciplinárního rámce spojujícího krajinářskou architekturu, urbanismus a vizuální umění. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována konceptům efemérnosti, emocionality a sociální odezvy prostoru. Výsledky ukazují, že malé, invazivní a dočasné zásahy mohou mít výrazný dopad na vnímání a využívání veřejného prostoru. Aktivují zapomenutá místa, podporují spontánní interakce a přispívají k rozvoji kolektivní paměti a městské identity. Zároveň však výzkum poukazuje na výzvy spojené s udržitelností materiálů, dlouhodobým zapojením veřejnosti a nepředvídanými interakcemi v prostoru. Tato práce přispívá k diskusi o dočasném urbanismu a navrhuje chápat veřejný prostor jako živý, flexibilní a společensky citlivý organismus. Zdůrazňuje význam participativního přístupu, experimentální praxe a interdisciplinárního myšlení při navrhování budoucích městských zásahů. Intervence tak představuje nejen estetický počín, ale i nástroj výzkumu a prostředek k navazování nových sociálních vztahů ve veřejném prostoru.

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