



Joint Technical Research Brief

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1. Introduction

MEMORY ESCAPE is an Interreg Italy–Croatia project that involves young people in discovering dissonant heritage through innovative phygital escape room experiences that combine cultural heritage, storytelling, and gamification.

The project partners are working together to identify historical narratives, memory sites, and key themes that will form the basis of the future MEMORY ESCAPE experiences.

Since the first KoM in Labin on 25 and 26 February 2026, the partners have discussed monuments, themes, narratives, artefacts, and strategies to be shared, also walking around the city sightseeing and looking at the elements of dissonant heritage.

In March 2026, the partners met again online to define the working methodology, youth engagement, and the guiding thread that will connect the two future phygital rooms of the cross-border project between Italy and Croatia, i.e. labour and social life in the Fascist era.

Between April and May, workshops were held with students in Labin and young participants in Bertinoro, under the supervision and coordination of school teachers and youth centre trainers respectively.

The research has focused on the main monuments of dissonant heritage in each territory, highlighting aspects related to themes of labour, such as mining in Labin and social life and non-working time as is the case of the thermal baths in Bertinoro, while identifying symbols of totalitarian power, as the key transnational fil-rouge unifying the two territories.

With the support of architects, scholars and teachers specializing in twentieth-century history and memory studies, the young participants engaged with historical sources and images from the period, retracing the history of totalitarian regimes in the two Adriatic countries and in their respective municipalities. Buildings and their socio-cultural contexts were analysed in connection with



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government propaganda, consensus-building, labour laws and mining rules, empathy, dissent, and personal responsibility.

The analysis focused on the meaning these places and monuments had in the past and how they are interpreted and experienced today by younger generations, with particular attention to how this awareness and knowledge of the past can be translated into a physical and digital experience.

2. Sources

Starting from local and national historical sources, interesting ideas were drawn to be placed in the escape room as phygital elements.

LABIN

Primary sources

- State Archives in Pazin (archival records on the construction of Podlabin)
- Labin National Museum (artefacts by Olja Višković)
- ATRIUM – Council of Europe Cultural Route
- Historical records on Società Carbonifera Arsa (SAC) and Azienda Carboni Italiani (A.Ca.I.)
- Literature on Fascist città di fondazione (e.g., Raša, Carbonia)
- Period press from the 1930s (Italian sources)

References:

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- Istituto Luce, "Mussolini visita le opere pubbliche di Forlì e provincia" [filmato d'archivio], Roma: 1935, Archivio Storico Luce.

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- Antonucci Micaela, "Architettura e regime: le opere realizzate dal Fascismo in Romagna", in Castellucci Claudia et al. (a cura di): Architettura, regimi totalitari e memoria del Novecento. Contributi alla nascita di un Itinerario Culturale Europeo, Forlì: Casa Walden Editrice, 2013.
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Webography

- Istituto Luce Historical Archive, <<https://www.archivioluce.com/>>.
- Atrium Association, <<https://www.atriumroute.eu/>>.
- Visit Bertinoro, <<https://www.visitbertinoro.it/it/>>.





3. Key themes

Regarding the social policies, labour, and heritage of the Fascist regime, key themes are as follows:

- Work: The regime employed labor as a mechanism of worker control. The mining heritage of Podlabin and Raša embodies values of industrial progress, urban planning, and collective identity, while also being a product of an authoritarian Fascist regime. In Bertinoro, the regime also extended its control over workers beyond the workplace, shaping their leisure time through facilities such as the thermal baths and social spaces located in the Casa del Fascio.
- Social Policies as Propaganda: The regime utilized a sophisticated propaganda machine, rather than force alone, to transform citizens into active supporters. Social policies aimed at workers were central to this effort.
- Construction of Consent: Membership in the National Fascist Party offered social benefits, professional advancement, and public recognition. These rewards were designed to build loyalty, making support for the regime a practical necessity. In Bertinoro, the Thermal Baths, and the Fascist party building embody the Fascist “pact of consent” — welfare and infrastructure in exchange for obedience.
- Conformism vs. Dissidence: In this totalitarian system, many conformed due to fear or habit. Consequently, dissent was largely clandestine and silent to avoid repression.

Shared Themes and Perspectives

Despite different local contexts, both workshops highlighted how 20th-century architecture, infrastructure, and social life were shaped by authoritarian systems. Participants explored the tension between the architectural value of these sites and their difficult political histories.

Key thematic areas included:



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- The role of labor, welfare, and economic dependency in social behavior.
- The relationship between ordinary citizens and authoritarian systems.
- Propaganda, consensus-building, and ideological control.
- Collective memory and the selective interpretation of history.
- The balance between conformity, survival, solidarity, and resistance.

4. Dissonant Heritage

Labin and Bertinoro: Shared Heritage and the Memory of Work

The common thread linking Labin and Bertinoro is the theme of working time and non-working time as part of a unique mechanism of consensus-building.

The Municipality of Labin chose the mine of the Labin area, particularly the mining-industrial complex of Podlabin and the mining town of Raša.

Labin developed as an important mining centre and experienced its greatest growth during the period of Italian administration, particularly in the years between the First and Second World Wars. These buildings formed a complete system for work and daily life.

Miners' everyday lives were shaped by a system of organised nutrition through company canteens, strictly regulated working schedules, and limited opportunities (dopolavoro) for leisure and social interaction within planned settlements. The mining infrastructure—including the shaft tower, lamp room, Marble Hall, and canteen (later known as the “fourth meal”)—embodied not only industrial modernisation but also the regime's broader efforts to regulate and control workers' daily lives.

The Municipality of Bertinoro chose three significant sites built during the Fascist period:

1. The Column of Hospitality (Colonna dell'Ospitalità);





2. The Grand Hotel of the Fratta Thermal Baths (formerly the Workers' Spa managed by the National Fascist Institute for Social Security (INFPS);
3. The former House of Fascism (Casa del Fascio) in Fratta.

The three selected sites reflect different aspects of this shared heritage. The thermal complex and the House of Fascism were constructed between 1933 and 1935 as part of broader Fascist welfare and social policies aimed at workers. The Column of Hospitality, meanwhile, represents a much older local tradition centred on welcoming travellers and pilgrims. During the Fascist period, this medieval symbol was reinterpreted and incorporated into the regime's narrative.

Column of Hospitality

The current monument was inaugurated on 5 September 1926 and designed by the architect Leonida Emilio Rosetti from Forlì. Its construction revived the historical memory of Guido del Duca and Arrigo Mainardi, who, according to local tradition, promoted the establishment of a column between 1202 and 1218 to regulate the hospitality offered to travellers and foreigners by the noble families of Bertinoro.

During the Fascist period, the monument was reinterpreted to align with the regime's values and integrated into the redesigned civic space surrounding the House of Fascism. This case exemplifies how historical symbols can be appropriated and imbued with new political meanings. Specifically, the regime promoted the re-inauguration of the column as a revival of both *romanità* and medieval traditions, transforming it into a rhetorical symbol of hospitality of Romagna. Ultimately, the Column of Hospitality was weaponized as an emblem to celebrate the greatness of Romagna—glorified primarily as the birthplace of the Duce.

Grand Hotel of Fratta

The therapeutic use of the Fratta thermal springs began in the nineteenth century. In 1854, the Croppi family from Forlì acquired the area and initiated the commercial development of the waters, following a model already adopted at Castrocaro.



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A significant transformation took place during the Fascist era. Archaeological and hydrogeological investigations conducted in the late 1920s led to the identification of ancient springs and wells. New facilities were subsequently constructed, including a pavilion completed in 1930 and an extensive park featuring recreational, cultural and leisure amenities. All this was consistent with the regime's use of 'Romanity' as a reference to the greatness to which Italy was destined thanks to Fascism.

In 1933, a new accommodation facility was commissioned to complement the existing structures. Managed by the National Fascist Institute for Social Security (INFPS), the building was intended to provide periods of rest and physical rehabilitation for workers, reflecting the welfare policies promoted by the regime. Against a backdrop of the denial of political rights and strict social control, social policies – largely controlled by the National Fascist Party – served as a means of control and consensus-building.

Former House of Fascism

The expansion of the thermal complex contributed to the population growth in the Fratta area, attracting workers and employees together with their families.

Within this context, the construction of a House of Fascism responded to the regime's objective of establishing a local political and administrative presence. Like many similar buildings erected throughout Italy during the 1930s, the structure served multiple functions, including political meetings, administrative activities, and public events.

The building also reflects broader strategies adopted by the Fascist regime to extend its influence into rural communities, where political consensus was often less consolidated than in urban centres. As such, it represents an important example of the relationship between architecture, political communication and social control during the period.



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5. Historical Artefacts

Labin

- Historical mining documents (employment contract from 1919, accident report from 1937)
- Miner's letter with hidden message (Labin Republic context)
- Technical drawings of a mine cart (vagonet) and production records
- Signal bell system used for communication in mines

Bertinoro

For each location, a specific artefact has been identified. The three puzzles that structure the escape room are centred around these artefacts:

- A deck of Romagna playing cards. Still widely popular among people of all ages, the Romagna card game was already extremely widespread during the Fascist era. The Nobel Prize-winning author Grazia Deledda describes scenes of farmers gathered around a table, immersed in play and surrounded by the thick, acid steam of the thermal baths.
- A video from the Istituto Luce, "Mussolini visita le opere pubbliche di Forlì e provincia." In the summer of 1935, Mussolini returned to Romagna to inspect several public works projects carried out in the province of Forlì. The propaganda film produced by Istituto Luce also documents his passage through Fratta Terme, where he leaves the Casa del Fascio and inaugurates the Workers' Thermal Baths (19 July 1935).
- The rings of the Column. Since the Middle Ages, each noble family of Bertinoro has set its own ring into the Colonna dell'Ospitalità—twelve in total—where travellers could tie their horses. Through this symbolic gesture, each traveller became the guest of one of the twelve families, welcomed within a tradition of shared responsibility and mutual hospitality.





6. Memory Escape: Educational Activities

The co-design process also yielded significant methodological insights into engaging young people with challenging historical topics.

The escape room is not only a game, but a learning experience combining logic, history, and emotional engagement.

Players are guided to:

- interpret dissonant heritage as layered and complex
- connect individual human stories to broader historical processes
- recognize the importance of memory, solidarity, and labour rights
- reflect on the importance of personal choices and responsibility

Escape room in Labin

Players assume the role of miners trapped in the Labin coal mine complex, a site characterised by industrial growth, migration, and tragedy. As they move through dark corridors and historical spaces, they discover fragmented documents, objects, and records from various periods of mining history (1919–1942).

They face challenges such as decoding signals, interpreting hidden messages, solving logical and mathematical tasks, and reconstructing lost identities and events. To escape, they must collaborate to uncover the truth about miners' lives, working conditions, accidents, and resistance, revealing the dissonant heritage of Labin.

Through five interconnected puzzles, players are invited to critically engage with the complex and often conflicting history of the Labin mining region. The experience is designed to foster:

- an understanding of dissonant heritage and how historical sites can simultaneously embody progress and tragedy



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- reflection on contested historical narratives, particularly those linked to Fascism, labour exploitation, and resistance
- awareness of migration and the multicultural dimensions of labour history, with a specific focus on the Labin–Bertinoro connection
- the development of historical empathy towards miners and their families
- the strengthening of teamwork, communication, and critical thinking skills

Escape room in Bertinoro

In the present day, a group of teenagers challenge one another in the Parco delle Terme della Fratta. Their dare is both simple and unsettling: to descend in complete darkness to the lowest surviving step of an ancient Roman well. The Memory Escape participants accept the challenge. They find a weathered sheet of paper, worn by the passage of time.

Driven by curiosity, the players continue deeper into the well and, as if passing through a hidden gateway in time, suddenly find themselves transported to 1932, inside the grand hall of the Fratta Thermal Baths. From this point onward, players progress through the story by solving a series of puzzles. As the narrative unfolds, they follow the experiences of four newly enrolled members and gain insight into the social mechanisms through which the Fascist dictatorship cultivated public consensus. Their journey takes them across the three historical sites that form the setting of the escape room: the Workers' Thermal Baths of Fratta Terme, the Casa del Fascio of Fratta Terme, and the Colonna dell'Ospitalità of Bertinoro.

Through these locations, players explore how architecture, leisure, public ceremonies, and social participation were woven into the broader system of Fascist propaganda and consensus-building.





7. Conclusion

This Joint Technical Research Brief summarises the main conceptual and methodological outcomes of the MEMORY ESCAPE project, developed within the framework of cross-border cooperation between Italy and Croatia under the Interreg programme.

The activities implemented by the partnership have enabled the joint identification and analysis of shared narratives of dissonant heritage, with a specific focus on labour history, social policies, and the built environment in Labin and Bertinoro. The comparative approach has highlighted the complex interplay between industrial development, welfare systems, propaganda, and mechanisms of social consensus during the Fascist era.

Through the integration of archival research, field-based analysis, and co-design methodologies, the project has established a common interpretative framework for the development of phygital escape room experiences. This approach has proven effective in translating complex historical content into accessible, engaging, and educational formats targeting younger generations.

The co-design process with young participants has further demonstrated the value of participatory and game-based methodologies in fostering historical awareness, critical thinking, media literacy, and engagement with dissonant heritage.

