



Cultural Sustainability of Cities with Nostalgic Trams: The Case of İstanbul T2

ABSTRACT

Nostalgic trams constitute significant components of urban cultural heritage while continuing to serve as functional modes of public transportation. While trams and other urban transportation systems have mostly focused on optimizing speed, capacity, and efficiency to date, the impact of these vehicles on the urban fabric, as well as their dynamic role in preserving cities' cultural memory and shaping everyday spatial practices, has not been sufficiently examined. Cultural sustainability in architectural structures and urban heritage studies, however, has been addressed primarily through static elements such as monuments and historic facades. Therefore, the role of a mobile urban infrastructure element in keeping collective memory alive has been theoretically incomplete. This study examines how nostalgic trams, a dynamic form of urban infrastructure, contribute to the cultural sustainability of cities, foster relationships among diverse people, and shape the spatial experience of the journey. The case study research approach, one of the qualitative research methods, was selected as the research methodology; the İstanbul T2 tram line was selected as the case study. This line exemplifies the first nostalgic tram, which was deliberately reintroduced to revive urban memory and reestablish human-scale mobility following the pedestrianization of İstiklal Street. The findings indicate that nostalgic tram lines enrich the urban experiences of both residents and visitors while making a significant contribution to cultural sustainability. As one of the first points of interaction with the city in everyday life, nostalgic trams play an important role in shaping perceptions of place and fostering connections between people and the urban memory. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the necessity of integrating urban landmarks into public transit planning to preserve urban identity against rapid modernization, and highlights how these landmarks help sustain diverse cultures within dynamic urban infrastructure. Ultimately, nostalgic trams are dynamic urban infrastructure elements that connect landmarks along their routes and offer a uninterrupted cultural journey.

Keywords: İstanbul T2 Tram, Urban Landmarks, Cultural Sustainability, Urban Memory.

INTRODUCTION

A tram journey has become commonplace and a part of daily life, Lefebvre (1991) maintains that space is both a concept created by social interactions and a physical object (Onur, 2021). In everyday life, nostalgic trams are among the first places where local people and visitors connect with the city. This means of transportation has identified itself with the story it contains. This location creates its own culture over time and tries to maintain it. According to Bhabha (1994), cultural diversity is cultivated by cultures' readiness to understand one another. Both shared values, practices, and social processes contribute to place (Relph, 1976). Nostalgic trams are one of the urban settings where many cultures mix and blend. They give people the chance to experience both the city's cultural identity and the community's cultural values by uniting people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to travel together. Unlike traditional public transportation, nostalgic trams are popular among locals, tourists, and visitors, serving as places for cultural interaction and communication as well as for transportation. Thus, they support the city in several ways, including preserving cultural heritage, advancing cultural sustainability, and enriching urban life. Besides being a mode of transportation, nostalgic trams are an important part of urban memory and are necessary for maintaining a city's cultural characteristics. Despite their importance, there is little academic research on their role in city identity and cultural sustainability. Previous research has examined trams from economic performance, historical evolution, operational efficiency, and a transport perspective. But there is still much to learn about the tram ride as an urban experience and its role in the city's cultural life. The social and cultural aspects of nostalgic tram travel have been largely ignored in the literature; previous studies have mainly focused on the operational performance and physical infrastructure of tram systems. Furthermore, no prior research has identified a specific form of transportation as a means of advancing cultural sustainability. Thus, by analyzing how nostalgic trams shape urban identity, promote community involvement, and enhance İstanbul's urban experience, this study seeks to evaluate their contribution to cultural sustainability. Based on the results, the

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study explores the potential of the nostalgic tram as a vehicle for cultural sustainability and assesses its cultural contributions to the city.

TRAMS AS A CULTURAL URBAN ARTIFACT

Trams, one of the earliest modes of public transportation, have been in use since the Second Industrial Revolution and are widely used worldwide. According to Roth & Van Heesvelde (2023), they have demonstrated extraordinary durability by withstanding major shifts in urban environments with minimal changes to their mechanical properties and tangible features. Urban mobility systems are evolving into immersive cultural experiences that enhance the allure of tourist destinations, going beyond simple transit. Urban exploration is encouraged by the unique architectural, social, culinary, and cultural features of historical neighborhoods (Carvalho et al., 2023).

Nostalgic trams are a great example of this multifunctional exchange. Trams, valued for their cultural significance, give locals and tourists a chance to learn about the city's history and culture. They are an essential kind of transportation that connects the city's many cultural and tourism attractions, including museums, art galleries, and nature reserves. This improves visitors' experiences of the city's varied cultural and tourism offerings. For example, according to Zhou & Lin (2022) the century-old Dalian tram line showcases its traditional mechanical design and wooden interiors, evoking life from a century ago. The tram tracks weave through the city, illustrating its historical changes and developments.

The tram, one of the urban elements where Levebre's ideas about everyday life are most clearly evident, functions not only as an infrastructural element but also establishes a connection with the space in which passengers find themselves, allowing this journey to transform from a routine part of daily life into a cultural element. The fact that trams are still found in and around historic districts serves as a particularly telling example of this. In this public transportation experience, what sets it apart from other forms of public transit is not so much the desire to reach a destination, but rather the experience along the route, and the connections formed with both fellow passengers and the route itself.

Culture is the defining element of an individual's identity, shaping their sense of self. Integrating cultural elements into development policies is a proven strategy for ensuring human development (Onur, 2020). It contributes to numerous Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including sustainable cities and communities, economic development, reducing inequality, environmental sustainability, and promoting gender equality and inclusive societies. Thus, culture is a central tenet of the Sustainable Development Goals (The UNESCO Courier, 2023). According to Soini & Birkeland (2014), the concept of cultural sustainability includes the preservation of beliefs, practices, cultural existence, and heritage. It also addresses whether certain cultures will remain relevant in the future. The objective of cultural sustainability is to address the necessity for heritage cultural layers to confront the challenges of the contemporary era from a conservative perspective. That is, it concerns the continuity of a value that links past, present, and future (Al-Hagla, 2004).

Every element of a city can serve as a landmark that contributes to cultural sustainability. The important thing is to understand how to use these elements and aim to create an experience accordingly. The continuity or discontinuity of the thought and belief systems that define societies' identities is reflected in the tangible consequences that shape daily life (Eroğlu and Aksu, 2024). While certain rituals and ceremonies are often seen as necessary for the continuity of culture, in fact, the routines that have persisted for centuries in everyday life are the most important for sustaining that culture.

Urban memory is a particular form of collective memory shaped by cultural norms and experiences. It covers the everyday lives of locals, the historical evolution of urban areas, and important urban happenings. While a decline of urban memory indicates a gradual deterioration in urban culture and way of life, its preservation helps cities retain their identity and relevance (Gök et al., 2009). Cities that preserve their memories are valued and accepted by society, thereby promoting the integrity of identity. Lacking urban memory, on the other hand, is a sign of cultural deterioration and a serious threat to a sense of belonging. This highlights how crucial it is for a community's demographic notions to be geographically transmitted to maintain urban memory (Ensarioğlu, 2023). Also, cities are intricate places where the intersection of everyday routines and collective memories shapes people's interactions with metropolitan areas. Urban memory uses places, things, and symbols to capture the continuity of societal experiences. Pierre Nora's idea of "sites of memory" emphasizes how deliberately constructed symbolic and material locations take the place of conventional memory contexts as modernity advances. Architecture and landmarks are examples of memory spaces where collective memory is expressed and conserved (Nora, 1989). The relationship between architectural landmarks and urban memory is actually much deeper than it appears. Historic buildings serve as repositories of this collective memory within the city. They may differ from one another in the ways they reflect this memory, some through their

facades, some through their acoustic design, and others through the supporting elements in their surroundings, conveying this fabric to those who wish to experience it. For instance, vehicles are one type of infrastructure element that can be considered a supporting element. These vehicles serve the buildings along their routes and help keep passengers' memories alive.

METHOD

Istanbul, with its multi-layered historical fabric and status as one of the major hubs of global tourism, offers a rich setting for exploring the reflections of cultural sustainability on an urban scale. Unlike static cities, the rapid spatial transformations the city has experienced and the efforts to preserve urban memory during this process have made it an urgent necessity to determine the approaches through which cultural heritage can be sustained for this city. Within the scope of this study, the case study research approach, a qualitative research method, was adopted to examine the contribution of the Istanbul Taksim–Tünel (T2) tram line, which is a pioneering project launched in 1990 with the aim of revitalizing urban rail systems in Türkiye. To date, in studies on Istanbul's urban heritage, the T2 tram line has been positioned solely as a nostalgic marketing tool or a decorative tourist attraction, and the tram's impact on the spatial configuration of the street in everyday life has not been sufficiently examined. This line was selected for analysis as it is the country's first nostalgic tram and provides a valuable perspective for better understanding the contribution of trams to cultural interaction along a historic corridor.

The relationship between the tram line and selected urban landmarks along its route was examined through document analysis and field observations. Four landmarks, the Tunnel, Galatasaray High School, Taksim Square, and the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM), were purposively selected based on their historical, architectural, and cultural significance. Each landmark was analyzed as a tram stop using a set of cultural sustainability criteria, including historical continuity, architectural value, accessibility, urban identity, collective memory, and contribution to cultural heritage preservation. This methodological framework enabled a systematic assessment of the role of the T2 tram line in sustaining Istanbul's cultural landscape.

Istiklal Street, also known as Cadde-i Kebir, Büyük Street (Büyük Cadde), and Grand Rue de Pera, is located in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district. The avenue, known as Pera, is situated between Taksim Square and Tunnel Square. Taksim Square is the highest point in Pera, which is a hill surrounded by lowlands and hills. The Ottomans called the route between Tunnel and Taksim squares Cadde-i Kebir, while the Levantines dubbed it Grand Rue de Pera (Türker, 2016). In the 1960s, Istanbul began phasing out trams due to the emergence of new modes of transportation and their slow speed. With the pedestrianization project of Istiklal Street, a nostalgic tram line was opened at the end of 1990, using the cars of the old electric trams on the Taksim-Tünel line. The closure of Beyoğlu to traffic helped bring the tram back into service on this route. The trams that had been stored at the old vehicle museum in Kadıköy were maintained by İETT and returned to service. Beyoğlu's entertainment culture gained momentum with the introduction of the tram (İETT, 2017). As of 2024, the transition to locally produced battery-powered trains (Figure 1 and Figure 2), which offer environmental benefits while preserving a nostalgic aesthetic, has commenced. The objective is to transition all vehicles to battery-powered models over time, eliminate the overhead electric line on the street to mitigate visual pollution, and establish a safer, more environmentally friendly transportation system (İETT, 2024). The main reason this tram is still in use is that it was designed to preserve the area's urban memory and the street's texture. The Taksim tram, situated within the historic fabric of the city, is in fact an integral part of that fabric; indeed, this mode of transportation is the most crucial element in preserving the city's urban memory. For this reason, a tram ride along Istiklal Street is virtually a journey into the past.



Figures 1 and 2: New battery-powered train
Source: Photo by the author, 2024

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When evaluating the cultural sustainability of the T2 line, it is crucial to analyze the spatial dialogue between the tram route and the significant architectural elements that characterize İstiklal Street. In this context, the iconic urban structures, which we can also call urban landmarks, along the route play a leading role in shaping both passengers' and pedestrians' perceptions of Beyoğlu. Landmarks are just as significant as paths, nodes, edges, and districts in the creation of a mental image of a city. They are often physical objects such as a building, a sign, a store, or a mountain. Urban landmarks are frequently used as clues to identity and even to structure, and seem to be increasingly relied upon as a journey becomes more recognizable (Lynch, 1960: 48). Therefore, the landmarks along the route constantly feed the journey, adding new meaning to it. The passengers grow used to the idea that this route is part of everyday life.

To examine the relationship between the T2 tram line and the urban environment, this section investigates selected landmarks along the route, namely the Tunnel, Galatasaray High School, Taksim Square, and the Atatürk Cultural Center. These landmarks are evaluated for their contributions to urban culture, while their architectural characteristics are discussed as significant elements of the city's spatial identity. The İstanbul T2 tram, which runs in a loop along a single line and has five stops, begins at Tunnel, just ahead of the historic funicular line. Also known as Halit Ayar, this stop is within walking distance of the Tunnel, which gives it its name. The following stops, in order, are Odakule, Galatasaray High School, Hüseyin Aga Mosque, and Taksim (Figure 3).

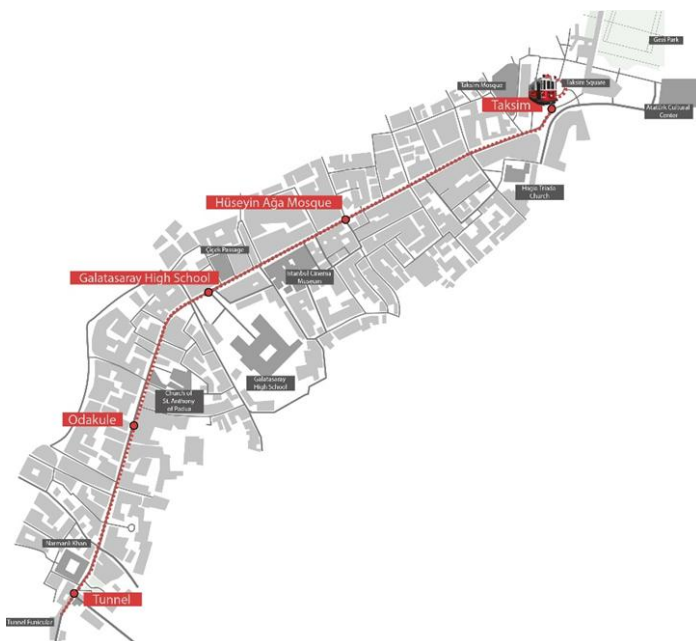


Figure 3: Istanbul T2 Tram Map

Source: Made by the author, 2026.

The Funicular Tunnel, which also gives its name to the station, considered the starting point of the tram journey, is regarded as the second-oldest subway in the world after the London Underground and is the first step in this nostalgic journey (Figure 4). Designed by the French engineer Eugene Henri Gavand, this mode of transport is also the closest companion of the nostalgic tram. Gavand, who observed people as they traveled between Galata, the heart of the social life of the time, and Pera, the commercial center, came up with this project, which was built in 1871 and began carrying passengers in 1875 (İETT, 2026).



Figure 4: Tunnel Funicular
Source: Photo by author, 2024.

Like the T2 tram, the tunnel continues to foster a sense of 'nostalgia' on this route, respecting the living history of the area and best reflecting the romantic journey to the passenger, while also providing transportation integration services. The tunnel is one of the important tools for maintaining flâneur culture. It also allows passengers who explore the city at a leisurely pace and on foot to reach İstiklal Street, preparing them for this feeling. In the collective memory, the tram and the tunnel are intertwined. As the tram proceeds northward, the next prominent structure encountered along the route is Galatasaray High School, which also lends its name to the third tram stop. Welcoming passengers through its monumental wrought-iron entrance gate, the building is one of the most significant architectural landmarks on İstiklal Street. The school was founded in 1868 by Sultan Abdulaziz under the name Mekteb-i Sultani. During this period, it served as a significant institution where both non-Muslim and Muslim students pursued their studies in a shared environment, thereby addressing the need for an educational institution that would offer instruction at a level between primary and higher education (Engin, 2007). Another aspect of Galatasaray High School that is not well known is its social impact, which has increased its recognition in society alongside its role in education. During both the Ottoman period and the early years of the Republic, the high school functioned as a prominent cultural venue, hosting exhibitions and concerts in Istanbul. Consequently, beyond its role as an educational institution, the school also served as a significant cultural hub, contributing to the city's cultural and artistic memory (Sinanlar Uslu, 2018). These exhibitions contributed to the rapid development of the infrastructure and facade arrangements around the High School (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Galatasaray High School Exhibition News (Cumhuriyet, 1930)

Source: Cumhuriyet Newspaper. (September 3, 1930) High School Local Goods Exhibition News. p.2.

Given its dual role as an institution of education and a cultural hub, which has hosted exhibitions, concerts, and meetings since its inception, the school's significance in fostering the sustainability of art and education culture is remarkable. The high school has also contributed to the spread of French culture in Turkey and its impact on daily life, as the language of education is based on the French system. Thus, it has increased the influence of French literature and art in Türkiye. As the high school is named after a stop on the Taksim Nostalgic Tram, it allows tram users to observe the building's architectural details and ponder its historical significance, thereby increasing the school's accessibility (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Galatasaray High School and Tram 28
Source: Photo by the author, 2026

Departing from the Galatasaray High School stop, the tram passes a sequence of Gothic and Baroque churches, historic arcades, and embassies of diplomatic significance, linking the architectural continuity of Levantine apartment buildings with the city's religious heritage along a single urban corridor. The route culminates at Taksim Square, widely recognized as one of Istanbul's principal spaces of urban memory. In this respect, the T2 tram line functions as a spatial and historical continuum, traversing the multilayered urban fabric of İstiklal Street and symbolically connecting the architectural legacy of the Ottoman period with the modern urban identity shaped during the Republican era.

Taksim, which gives its name to the final stop on the tram line, derives its name from the water distribution building built in the area during the eighteenth century. For decades, it has functioned as one of Istanbul's principal interfaces between the global and the local, accommodating diverse social, cultural, and political practices. Throughout its history, Taksim has preserved its character as an inclusive urban space open to diverse forms of public life. Consequently, it has evolved into a pivotal public realm that serves as both a meeting point and a space of collective belonging for individuals from diverse social backgrounds. The construction of the Republic Monument in 1928 (Figure 7) endowed the square with strong symbolic significance and established it as a major spatial representation of Republican identity within Istanbul's urban landscape (Konkur İstanbul, 2020).



Figure 7: Construction of the monument (Gülersoy, 1986, 32).

Source: Gülersoy, Ç. (1986). Taksim: The Story of a Square. İstanbul: İstanbul Kitaplığı. *Taksim: Bir Meydanın Hikâyesi*. (In Turkish)

Throughout its history, Taksim Square has served as the setting for numerous public demonstrations, political protests, social movements, and civic gatherings, thereby emerging as one of the most significant symbols of Türkiye's public sphere and protest culture. A historical examination of the square reveals that it has undergone successive spatial and functional transformations from the Ottoman period to the Republican era, reflecting the political, social, and urban dynamics of each historical context. Despite this multilayered historical evolution, concerns have increasingly been raised regarding the preservation of the square's urban memory, particularly as the spatial identity of several areas surrounding the square has become fragmented or insufficiently defined through recent urban interventions. Another factor that enhanced the significance of this square was the T2 Tram, which was brought back in 1990; this contributed significantly to the square's tourist and historical impact, with the tram becoming an element that defines and gives meaning to the square (Figure 8). The nostalgic tram also embodies the significant events and shared experiences embedded in the collective memory of Taksim Square. Beyond its transportation function, it has become one of the defining symbols of the square, contributing substantially to its cultural identity and reinforcing its appeal as one of Istanbul's most recognizable tourist destinations.



Figure 8: Nostalgic tram in Taksim Square
Source: Photo by the author, 2024

As the nostalgic tram reaches Taksim Square, its final stop, the Atatürk Cultural Center, located on the eastern edge of the square, comes into view for the passengers. The origins of this landmark and its original purpose were the opera house planned for Taksim Square in the mid-1930s to host artistic events in Istanbul; however, the initial design by Auguste Perret was never completed due to financial constraints (Gelen, 2016). Years later, it was designed by architect Hayati Tabanlıoğlu and opened in 1969 as the Atatürk Cultural Center. Following a fire in 1977, it was rebuilt. After the fire, the redesign of the Atatürk Cultural Center was carried out by Tabanlıoğlu Architecture. Recently renovated, the ACC reopened in 2021 (İtez, 2022). The building continues to serve its users in its current form (Figure 9).

The Atatürk Cultural Center has become an integral part of Istanbul's urban landscape, playing an active role in the city's daily life. Its unique form and functional characteristics have garnered it a place of distinction in the city's cultural infrastructure. Residents have also contributed to its cultural legacy by imaginatively reproducing it in their own creative works. Throughout its history, ACC has established a strong relationship with Taksim and has gained permanence independent of social memory, becoming an important symbol of the region's culture. The edifice's significance transcends its artistic and cultural value, extending to its role in preserving urban memory. It is one of the symbolic structures of the modernization culture that started after the establishment of the Republic.

The Nostalgic Tram in Taksim plays an important role in preserving the city's cultural heritage by fostering a visual and contextual relationship with the Atatürk Cultural Center, situated in the square from which it originates. Just as the tram returned to Taksim after many years, the Atatürk Cultural Center was reborn after the demolition and reconstruction that occurred throughout its history, just as the tram line. While the tram is a romantic representative of Taksim's history, the Atatürk Cultural Center is a symbol of its modernization and innovation.



Figure 9: Atatürk Cultural Center
Source: Photo by the author, 2026

CONCLUSION

With its unique sound, Istanbul's nostalgic tram, in service since 1914, symbolizes an important part of the city's cultural legacy. Because it is ingrained in society's experience, preserving this intangible cultural value depends on increasing public awareness (Yelmi, 2017). The journey allows an individual to recognize and discover the place to which they belong, and to redefine that space in conjunction with themselves. While feeling like a stranger in one's surroundings is part of this journey, the journey itself begins to transform the unknown into the known (Akyol et al., 2019). When this short tram ride along Istiklal Street transcends mere transportation and becomes an experience of discovering the places along the route, it offers even a regular passenger the opportunity to rediscover the route as if they were a stranger. The street's historical fabric, the architectural language of the buildings, the cultures they represent, and the continuation of nostalgia all come together to take on new meaning. Thus, the nostalgic trams demonstrate the ability to integrate urban landmarks into a coherent narrative of place identity. Istanbul's Taksim-Tünel T2 tram connects culturally significant areas such as Taksim Square and Istiklal Street, reflecting the city's modernist aspirations while evoking collective memories of its historic urban form. The studies have shown that with the presence of some consulates in this area, many buildings from the Ottoman period that still exist and form the identity of Istiklal Street, and the contemporary architectural structures (Atatürk Cultural Center, Yapı Kredi Culture and Art Center, etc.) that came with the modernization movement after the Republic, this line more clearly reflects the cosmopolitan structure of Istanbul and the different layers in its urban memory to its users. The fact that the T2 Taksim-Tünel Nostalgic Tram passes both the Church of St. Anthony of Padua and the Taksim Mosque exemplifies the cosmopolitan character of the Taksim-İstiklal corridor. This coexistence reflects a spatial environment in which diverse cultural and religious traditions intersect and interact. As Bhabha (1994) argues, cultural hybridity emerges through such encounters, in which established cultural boundaries are negotiated and new identities are continually constructed. In this sense, the urban landscape of Taksim and İstiklal Street represents a dynamic space of cultural exchange where multiple historical and social layers coexist. Beyond its function as a mode of transportation, the T2 tram line constitutes an important component of Istanbul's cultural landscape and urban identity. The cultural structures, historic passages, consulates, and religious buildings (such as St. Antuan, Çiçek Pasajı, and Galatasaray High School) located along the route serve as architectural landmarks representing the city's layered diverse identities. While these fixed structures preserve different cultures (commercial, educational, religious, etc.) and urban memory, the T2 tram serves as a kinetic connector and a dynamic catalyst, transforming these disparate landmarks into a uninterrupted cultural journey. While doing so, the tram continues to preserve its own nostalgic character through its bell sound, slow travel speed, and integration at street level. As a result of this role, the line possesses considerable cultural, touristic, and branding value, reinforcing Istanbul's image while enhancing the accessibility and visibility of its urban heritage. In conclusion, nostalgic trams; are not merely mechanical vehicles that produce urban identity on their own and by themselves; rather, they are indispensable dynamic contact hubs and catalysts for cultural sustainability that connect the architectural landmarks along their routes and the cultural

values they represent, much like a belt, and, through their slow kinetic rhythms, keep the city's collective memory alive through everyday practices.

The findings of this study demonstrate that preserving cultural sustainability is fundamental to maintaining urban identity, safeguarding collective memory, and ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage. In this respect, cultural sustainability also contributes to the broader objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to sustainable cities, cultural heritage conservation, and inclusive urban development. To build upon these findings and offer more explicit recommendations for future research, subsequent studies must adopt diverse methodological frameworks to measure these social impacts. Specifically, comparative studies analyzing nostalgic tram systems across different global urban contexts are highly recommended to establish a broader theoretical framework. Furthermore, integrating user-based and participatory research methods, such as direct rider feedback, ethnographic observations, and community engagement studies, could provide deeper, more nuanced insights into the exact mechanisms through which tram networks support cultural sustainability, urban memory, and place identity. Such methodological and comparative additions will significantly strengthen both the theoretical contributions of transport-related cultural heritage studies and their broader relevance to sustainable urban planning globally.

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