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Tomo 6

Espacialidades y Ritualizaciones

Coordinador
José Luis Caivano



Proceedings of the 14th World Congress of the International
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Imagen utilizada para la tapa: *Sin pan y sin trabajo*, Ernesto de la Cárcova, 1894.



A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments. An Analysis of the Multiple Meanings of Monuments in Tallinn, Estonia

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1. Introduction: What can semiotics and cultural geography contribute to the study of monuments

Monuments exist in many different forms. They can be war memorials, public statues, monumental buildings, squares, memorial gardens, cenotaphs and even entire areas of the city. They can be of various sizes, made of different materials of constructions, have different shapes and colours.

What is common among monuments is that they have both commemorative and political functions. Officially erected to preserve the memory of specific events and identities, monuments present the worldviews of those that took the initiative for their erection. As such, they are necessary partisan, presenting the cultural and political worldviews of those in power, while wittingly or unwittingly concealing others. In particular, monuments help to convey dominant historical narratives and reinforce sentiments of national belonging. While promoting a uniform memory and identity, they legitimate and reproduce political power of those who want them erected.

National elites are aware of the power of monuments and use them as tools to legitimate the primacy of their cultural and political power. However, individuals interpret monuments in ways that can be different or even contrary to the elite intentions. Monuments embody the agency of generations and can assume different functions as time passes: for example, monuments legitimising dominant power can turn into sites of resistant political practice (Hershkovitz 1993, Benton-Short 2006). In other cases, monuments sacred for an elite can become the object of scorn and ridicule (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998). As Kattago (2015: 185) explains: “the original meaning is not really written in

stone at all. Instead, it might be remembered completely differently later on or become the unexpected site of controversy. The memorial may even become invisible and unnoticed”.

An interdisciplinary approach based on the connection between semiotics and cultural geography can be very useful to explore both the intended meanings of designers and the multiple interpretations of the everyday users. Here, the term “designers” indicates the wide set of actors that have the mandate to design and erect monuments –state, local authorities, architects, planners, artists, heritage departments and construction companies. “National elites” refers to the leadership group that preside over the national government organizations, whose decision-making is inspired by a large number of ideas and values, but eventually produces consistent resolutions. “Users” indicates those who use monuments during the course of the everyday life through a myriad of different practices.

These proceedings contain a brief outline of the research presented at the Congress and are divided into two parts. Part 1 introduces an interdisciplinary approach connecting semiotics and cultural geography to explore the meaning making of monuments. To engage with this approach, Part 2 analyses two monuments in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, each representing a different stage in the process of cultural reinvention of the Estonian urban space. “Cultural reinvention” refers to a set of practices aiming to fill the urban space with specific cultural meanings through redesign, reconstruction, restoration, relocation and removal of built forms, including monuments. A full analysis of the role that monuments have in the cultural reinvention of the Estonian urban space will be published in the forthcoming book *The meanings of the built environment. A semiotic and geographical approach to monuments in the post-Soviet era* (Bellentani 2020).

2. Part 1: A semiotic and geographical perspective on the meaning-making of monuments

Several cultural geographers have provided a theoretical and methodological basis to understand the ways in which monuments could reinforce political power and reproduce social order (Harvey 1979, Hershkovitz 1993, Johnson 1995, Withers 1996, Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998, Osborne 1998, Dwyer 2002, Whelan 2002, Hay et al. 2004, Benton-Short 2006). This research has mainly focused on the intentions of those who have the power to erect monuments and thus have paid little attention to how monuments are interpreted at the societal level.

By inviting questions on “readership”, semiotics has sought to overcome the restricted focus on the elite intentions. There has been a limited but expanding semiotic research on monuments (Peet 1996, Auster 1997, Elsner

2003, Pezzini 2006, Abousnnouga and Machin 2013, Krzyżanowska 2016, Huebner and Phoocharoensil 2017). This research has considered monuments as having implications beyond its aesthetic and commemorative dimensions, as being forms of discourse which can be designed to convey specific meanings and to influence a community of interpreters (Nanni and Bellentani 2018: 384). From this assumption, semiotic analysis has begun to focus on monuments addressing the effects they have had at the societal level.

The semiotic analysis of monuments has grounded itself on a rigid notion of symbolism where specific plastic elements were believed to communicate specific meanings, e.g. glass used as a construction material necessarily conveys ideals of transparency. Abousnnouga and Machin (2013: 57) have claimed that a “repertoire of semiotic resources” is available to designers to convey specific meanings. For instance, stone as a construction material conveys “longevity and ancientness”, but also “naturalness”; when carved in smooth and rounded shapes it could communicate “softness” (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 134). There is a theoretical black box here: stone is certainly durable and present in the wild –justifying its longevity and naturalness. Yet, other qualities of stone may stand out, while other materials are similarly long-lived or natural. Deploying stone in monuments does not suffice to convey naturalness or longevity (Nanni and Bellentani 2018: 382). Rather, monuments embody a boundless set of potential meanings, each one being activated by users depending on their knowledge, evaluation and emotional reactions.

In brief, two key limitations of the geographical and the semiotic perspectives can be identified: 1) the relationship between designers, users and the urban space has remained under-theorised; 2) how design materials and choices convey meanings has been neglected. To overcome these limitations, these proceedings call for an interdisciplinary perspective able to link the semiotic and the cultural geographical approach. This perspective provides a conceptual basis that conceives the interpretations of monuments as depending on four interplays: 1) between the visual and political dimensions; 2) between designers and users; 3) between monuments and the cultural context; 4) between monuments and the built environment.

1. Visual–political. Monuments have a visual and a political dimension. The political dimension relates to the circumstances under which monuments promote political messages and perpetuate power relations. The visual dimension refers to monuments as material forms, and so as distinguished from the political dimension. Greimas (1989) divided the visual text into two autonomous but related levels: the plastic and the figurative. Both the plastic and the figurative level are visually perceptible and thus they can be grouped under the visual dimension of

monuments. The figurative level regards the visual representations and the conventional symbols embodied in monuments. Monuments stage scenes and represent characters, objects, actions and interactions in material forms: these are all parts of the figurative level of monuments. The plastic level refers to physical aspects such as shapes, materials of construction, colours, topological distribution and sizes.

2. Designers–users. As textual interpretations, the interpretations of monuments lie in an intermediate point between the designers’ and the users’ interpretations. A set of strategies is available to designers to entice users along specific interpretations of monuments. Paraphrasing Eco (1979: 7-11), Marrone (2009: 27) calls Model Users those individuals that conform to the designers’ intentions and that develop patterns of behaviour that are consistent with the envisioned function of monuments. While designers strive to entice users along their interpretations, users can interpret and use monuments in ways that are different or even contrary to these intentions: for example, they can turn monuments into spaces for resistant political practices (Hershkovitz 1993, Whelan 2002, Benton-Short 2006). In other cases, they can use monuments for less politicised practices that are still diverging from their original function, such as inattentive crossing, meeting, eating, playing and so on. The unforeseen interpretations and practices play a critical role in the meaning-making of monuments.

3. Monuments–cultural context. Monuments cannot be analysed separately from the cultural context. Culture can mould the designers’ and the users’ interpretations and even influence actions and interactions within the space of monuments. In turn, monuments convey cultural meanings in space contributing to the shaping and reshaping of culture.

4. Monuments–the built environment. Monuments cannot be analysed separately from their interrelations with the surrounding built environment. As texts reinterpret other texts (Eco 1984: 68), newly erected monuments actively affect the interpretation of the existing built environment. The spatial settings in which monuments are located largely affect their interpretations. The location of monuments can have “site specific connection to events and people commemorated” (Benton-Short 2006: 300). In other cases, monuments are erected in locations they themselves contribute to charge ideologically. Often, the built environment is reconstructed or redesigned to provide appropriate location for future monuments. The manipulations of spatial surroundings can also affect the meanings of already existing monuments.

3. Part 2: The multiple meanings of monuments in Tallinn, Estonia

3.1. Setting the scene: the kind of issue monuments are in Estonia

The ideas presented in the previous section are explored through an examination of monuments in Estonia, the northernmost of the Baltic countries. Estonia declared its independence from the Soviet Union on 20 August 1991. Right after this event, the spontaneous tearing down of monuments erected by the Soviets was a noticeable sign of regime change. As soon as it could, the new government took various initiatives to remove and relocate some other remaining Soviet monuments, while establishing new monuments reflecting the needs of post-Soviet culture and society.

More initiatives were taken after 2004, when Estonia joined European Union and NATO, which provided adequate resources and security in such a manner as to underpin the redesign of Soviet monuments and the erection of new ones (Ehala 2009: 152). The erection of new monuments gained new momentum in 2018, when Estonia celebrated its 100th anniversary: Estonia reached independence for the first time in 1918 by winning a war in the aftermath of World War I, known as the War of Independence. Monuments have thus played a crucial role in the cultural reinvention of the Estonian urban space and especially that of its capital Tallinn.

However, this process has not been widely accepted in Estonia, where multiple historical narratives and identities coexist at the societal level. The marginalisation, relocation, removal of Soviet monuments and the erection of new ones have often sparked broad debates and resulted in civil disorder. Controversies over monuments have been so intense that scholars have used the terms “War of Monuments” to refer to a series of small-scale conflicts over the interpretations of monuments starting from the early 2000s (e.g. Bruggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 435).

This part briefly presents analyses on two monuments in Tallinn to illustrate different stages in the cultural reinvention of the Estonian urban space:

1. The removal and relocation of a Soviet memorial: the Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn, the so-called Bronze Soldier (1947).
2. The establishment of a memorial representing Estonian historical narratives: the War of Independence Victory Column (2009).

The analyses in the following sections are based on fieldwork carried out in Estonia between February 2015 and June 2016 and on further field visits up until November 2018. Primary data were collected through interviewing, observations and the investigation of documents.

3.2. Translating the past: the relocation of the Bronze Soldier

In 1947, Soviet authorities erected a memorial to celebrate the third anniversary of the entrance of the Red Army in Tallinn. According to Soviet-Russian historical narratives, the victory of the Red Army on the Eastern Front during the Second World War paved the way to the liberation of Tallinn and Eastern Europe from Nazism. For this reason, the memorial was named “Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn” (Smith 2008: 422). People nicknamed it the Bronze Soldier because it featured a two-meter bronze statue of a soldier in a Red Army uniform (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The statue of the Bronze Soldier. Picture taken on October 29, 2015.

Although referring to Soviet aesthetics, the Bronze Soldier survived the tearing down of Soviet monuments in the post-Soviet era and remained standing in a park in Tallinn city centre. As such, the memorial continued to be an important site of commemoration for many in independent Tallinn and especially for the community of Russian-speakers, which today makes the ~37% of the Tallinn population (Statistics Estonia 2017). Here, the term “Russophones” is used to refer to Russian-speakers living in Estonia who may be in possession of the Estonian citizenship and do not define their identity as “Estonian”.

Since the 2000s, in the context of the so-called War of Monuments, tensions elevated towards the public display of totalitarian material remains. In this context, the Estonian government felt that it was time to take concrete action on the Bronze Soldier. By promising its removal, national-conservative parties gained exceptional popularity and won the parliamentary elections in 2007 (Tamm 2013: 666). Once in power, they honoured the promise starting the works for the removal. In April 2007, the memorial was finally removed and relocated in a military cemetery outside Tallinn city centre. As a result of this, two nights of disorders broke out, during which a 20-year-old Russian citizen died.

Placing the Bronze Soldier in a peripheral location had spatial and ideological consequences, demonstrating that both the visual-plastic and the political dimension play a role in the meaning-making of monuments (§ 2): it was not only an excision of a material object from Tallinn city centre, but also an attempt to define the memorial and its meanings as alien to what is today's central culture (Lotman 1990). Relocating the Bronze Soldier can be seen as a "translation strategy" implemented by the Estonian government to transform the meanings of the memorial as to be in tune with the current cultural and political condition (Osimo, in Torop 2010: xxvi and 230).

Yet, the Bronze Soldier was not completely excised, but relocated to the Defence Force Cemetery of Tallinn, the foremost military cemetery of independent Estonia. The relocation in such a cemetery, as opposing to total excision, was meaningful in itself: it demonstrated that the Estonian government still embraced the commemoration embodied in the memorial. Placed in such a military cemetery, the meanings of the Bronze Soldier have today switched to a more neutral sentiment of mourning. At its new location, the memorial is still visited today by members of the Russophone community, that use it for their commemorations.

Scholars in different disciplines have described the relocation of the Bronze Soldier as the event that create a disruption in the everyday interaction between the two main ethnic communities of Estonia, i.e. the Estonians and the Russophones. To move beyond ethnic division, the relocation of this memorial can be seen as a political matter, rather than an ethnic one alone. National conservative parties and ethnic activists made the relocation strategically look as an ethnic clash between Estonians and Russophones. Following a *divide et impera* strategy, they gained and maintained power by breaking up the common layers of meaning that were shared by the largest segments of the Estonian population and, simultaneously, by highlighting the potential conflicting ones. A real semiotic war was created: as more the Estonian government attempted to marginalise the Bronze Soldier, the more Russophones began to see it as an important symbol of their identity to be protected; and the more the

Russophones had such a great consideration for the memorial, the more the Estonians started to call for its removal, linking it to the traumatic experience of the Soviet regime.

3.3. The multiple interpretations of monuments: the Victory Column

Two years after the relocation of the Bronze Soldier, 500 meters from its original location, the War of Independence Victory Column was unveiled (Figure 2). This is a large column-shape memorial commemorating those who served in the Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920), which ended with the first recognition of Estonia as an independent state. For this reason, Estonian historical narratives link this war with ideals of freedom and sovereignty. To celebrate this event, Estonian authorities established many local memorials throughout the country during the period of first sovereignty for Estonia (1918-1939). However, a central memorial was not erected before 2009, when the Estonian government made up for this lack establishing the Victory Column.



Figure 2. The War of Independence Victory Column. Picture taken on October 5, 2015.

Once erected, the Victory Column was defined as the most important monument established after Estonia regained independence in 1991 (Mattson 2012). The resources spent for its construction mirror the significance that it has

assumed for the Estonian government. Articulating specific historical narratives, the function of the Victory Column went beyond commemoration helping to reflect and sustain the cultural and political agendas of the Estonian government. The memorial was a firm resolution by the government to emerge as a winner from the War of Monuments and to turn a new page in the construction of the national politics of memory and identity. However, the meanings that the government strived to convey through the memorial were not reflected at the societal level: its figurative and plastic design came in for a great criticism as well as its general political meaning.

As for the figurative level, the Victory Column presents a highly hermetic iconography, featuring a Greek cross topped on a column. This is a large representation of the Cross of Liberty, the first Estonian military decoration to honour remarkable services during the War of Independence and thus a symbol associated with Estonia's fight for freedom. Only those familiar with the historical experience of the independence war can correctly recognise what this iconography represents. To acknowledge this iconography is unlikely for visitors and difficult also for the younger population of Tallinn.

The writings behind the Victory Column also demonstrate the hermetic character of the memorial: these include the name and the years of the commemorated war and part of a poem written by the Estonian poet Gustav Suits. The writings are only in the Estonian language and no information plaque in other languages are provided. It is common within the main tourist paths of Tallinn that information plaques inform about important places into many different languages. This is not the case with the writings behind the memorial. This lack gives no weight to touristic needs nor to the foreigner countries which were allied to Estonia during the War of Independence.

The hermetic iconography and the language barriers of the Victory Column contribute to establish an exclusive space of commemoration for a select audience, that does not address those who are alien to the Estonian culture and history, who may easily misinterpret its logic (Lotman 2009: xxii).

As for the plastic dimension, the Victory Column has sparked a broad debate among the public. Tallinn citizens believe that its modern-looking, imposing structure made of glass is inappropriate and disconnected from the adjacent medieval architecture. Moreover, they consider the loss of natural and historical heritage caused by the earthworks to build it to be not a worthwhile cost.

The Victory Column thus reveals a case in which users have reinterpreted the designers' stated intentions. Due to design choices such as hermetic iconography, large size and elevated location, Estonians see the memorial as presenting conservative political messages: ironically, its original intention was to commemorate ideals of freedom and sovereignty. Moreover, they express

discontent because the remembered events and identities were presented through a hermetic iconography and a controversial design, in a location that does not facilitate interactions and that does not fit in with the adjacent built environment.

Due to this negative attitude, the Victory Column has remained unused. It is very rare that users climb the staircase to approach the memorial, which attracts practices of commemorations –i.e. practices in accordance with its intended purpose– only during public rituals periodically arranged by the Estonian government. For the rest of the year, the memorial attracts only unexpected activities that are different from those envisioned by the designers, e.g. skating and biking.

The gap between the intentions of the designers and the interpretations of the users demonstrates that monuments “can be used, reworked and reinterpreted in ways that are different from, or indeed contradictory to, the intentions of those who had them installed” (Hay et al. 2004: 204). Designers have access to a “repertoire of semiotic resources” to convey specific meanings. However, they do not have complete control over the interpretations of monuments and users can interpret them in multiple ways (§ 2). As such, monuments embody a boundless set of potential meanings, each one being activated by users depending on their knowledge, evaluation, emotions, as well as on the cultural, social and political context in which monuments are interpreted.

4. The multiple meanings of monuments in the post-Soviet era

Monuments exist in many different forms. What is common among them is that they have both commemorative and political functions. These proceedings demonstrated that commemoration and national politics are strongly interlinked: while commemorating specific events and identities, monuments present the cultural positions of those who erect them. As such, the worldviews embodied in monuments are necessary partisan, encompassing a whole set of meanings, identities and events while concealing others.

National elites and their affiliates are aware of the power of monuments and use them to promote the kinds of ideals they want citizens to strive towards. However, individuals interpret monuments in ways that can be different or even contrary to the designers’ intentions.

This meaning changeover of monuments has been evident in the post-Soviet city and in Estonia in particular. Here, both the redesign of monuments inherited from the Soviet regime and the erection of new ones have been potent practices of cultural reinvention to shape worldviews consistent with the new political and cultural situation.

These proceedings analysed two monuments in Tallinn to illustrate two stages in the cultural reinvention of the Estonian urban space. They reveal two steps of the trajectory of cultural reinvention through monuments that characterised Tallinn since Estonia joined European Union and NATO in 2004.

The first step of this trajectory is to remove and relocate Soviet monuments to translate their meanings into the current cultural and political conditions. With the relocation of the Bronze Soldier, the Estonian government aimed to define the memorial as alien to today's Estonian culture and to transfer its Soviet-oriented commemoration into a more neutral sentiment of mourning (§ 3.2).

The second step is the establishment of new monuments promoting the new society's rule of play. Memorialising a victory through which Estonia reached independence for the first time, the Victory Column helped to reflect and sustain the cultural and political agendas of the Estonian government (§ 3.3). As such, it conveyed the intention of the government to establish an exclusive space of commemoration for a select audience. However, the meanings that the government strived to convey were not reflected at the societal level. The memorial thus revealed a case in which users have largely reinterpreted the designers' stated intentions.

Focusing on the geographical and semiotic aspects of monuments can inform urban planners and policy makers by providing solutions to comprehend how interpretations are negotiated between different agents involved in the design of monuments, urban policies and practices. Following this approach, I am currently planning to undertake future researches on how to limit broad debates and social conflicts resulting from ill-advised national politics of memory and identity in post-Soviet cities as well as all over the world.

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