

# The limitations of the geographical and the semiotic perspectives on monuments

There is a significant and growing literature on **monuments**. Since the **'interpretative turn'** (Geertz 1973), research in the humanities and social sciences has proposed **a meaning-focused understanding** of monuments. Despite different approaches, most of this research converges on one assumption: **monuments can confer meanings in space**.

This lecture provides an overview of the disciplines that have consistently dealt with monuments, memorials, public statues and commemorative sites: **geography and semiotics**. Specifically, it focuses on **the geographical and semiotic literature on monuments**, highlighting limitations and future recommendations.

**Section 2.1** focuses on the geographical literature on monuments. **Section 2.2** provides an overview of the semiotic literature on the interpretations of monuments.

Finally, **section 2.3** concludes by outlining **two key limitations** that have been predominant in both the geographical and the semiotic approaches to monuments: **first**, that the connection between the plastic, figurative and political dimensions of monuments has been often overlooked; and **second**, that the relationship between designers and users has remained mostly under-theorised.

## 1.1 The geographical perspective on monuments

This section completes a review of the literature on monuments in **human and cultural geography**. It first examines the geographical conceptualisation of monuments as tools to articulate a uniform national memory and identity and to reinforce political power. It then goes on to discuss the multiple interpretations of monuments.

### Monuments as media of power

A great deal of geographical research has investigated **the cultural and political significance of monuments**. This research has empirically focused on different built forms and urban areas: monumental buildings, public statues, squares, memorial gardens, civic precincts, cenotaphs, war memorials, etc. Moreover, it has concentrated on a range of geographical locations and time periods.

**Despite such variety in empirical analysis**, geographical research on monuments has been based on **two common assumptions**: 1) monuments play an important role in the definition of **a uniform national memory and identity**; 2) monuments are **tools to legitimise and reinforce political power**.

As for 1), monuments have been considered as **repositories of memory** since the beginning of their academic investigation. Riegl (1982: 69) stated that monuments in its original sense have "the specific purpose of keeping particular human deeds or destinies [...] alive and present in the consciousness of future generations".

Several geographers have demonstrated that **political messages are wittingly or unwittingly attached to the commemorative function of monuments**.

*Commemorating an individual or an event, public monuments are not merely ornamental features of the urban landscape but rather highly symbolic signifiers that confer meaning on the city and transform neutral places into ideologically charged sites. (Whelan 2002: 508)*

Following this view, monuments can fix in space **particular understanding of the past**, focusing attention on **events and individuals that are preferred by elites** (Hay et al. 2004: 204). Hence, elites can design monuments **to educate citizens toward what to remember and what to forget of the past** (Tamm 2013: 651).

Monuments are thus **political constructions**, recalling and representing histories **selectively**, drawing popular attention to specific events and people and obliterating or obscuring others (Hay et al. 2004: 204). Articulating historical narratives, monuments can thus inculcate **particular conceptions of the present and encourage future possibilities** (Withers 1996: 328).

Scholars in the humanities have recently conceptualised **memory as the basis for identity building** (Tamm 2013: 652). Human and cultural geographers have focused on the spatial processes through which **a uniform identity could be promoted within the national territory** (Cosgrove 1990: 564; Johnson 1995: 54) and on the ways through which monuments shaped and reinforced **sentiments of national distinctiveness** (Johnson 1995; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Whelan 2002).

**The first assumption** showed that national elites could manipulate memory and identity for political purposes. Hence, monuments could help to promote a uniform national memory and reinforce sentiments of national belonging. Tamm (2013: 652) used the terms **“national politics of identity/memory”** to distinguish the elite attempts to promote a uniform national memory and identity from the non-elite efforts calling for the recognition of memories and identities.

The politics of memory and identity are integral part of **national politics**. Contemporary nation states **create and often privilege elites** and, as part of the state, **urban planning can be used to serve their needs** (Yiftachel 1998).

This is also the case for the design of monuments. National elites have **more power and resources** to erect monuments and thus **to present and reproduce their political and cultural meanings in space** (Dwyer 2002: 32; Till 2003: 297). Hence, national elites use monuments as tools **to legitimate the primacy of their political power and to set their political agendas**.

*Monuments are the most conspicuous concrete manifestations of political power and of the command of resources and people by political and social elites. As such, they possess a powerful and usually self-conscious symbolic vocabulary or iconography that is understood by those who share a common culture and history. (Hershkovitz 1993: 397)*

## **The multiple interpretations of monuments**

Some geographers have recognised that the interpretations of monuments are **“mutable and fluid”** (Hay et al. 2004: 204). They have explained that, once erected, monuments become **“social property”** (Hershkovitz 1993: 397) and thus they “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).

Nevertheless, few geographers have assessed how multifaceted meanings of monuments emerge at the societal level. Individuals interpret monuments **in ways that can be different or even contrary** to the intentions of those who have them erected.

Monuments embody **the agency of generations** and assume **different functions in different time periods**.

Monuments legitimising elite power can turn into sites of resistant political practice (Hershkovitz 1993; Whelan 2002; Benton-Short 2006). For example, after the fall of Communism, popular movements suddenly used Communist monuments to demonstrate against the same regime that installed them. In less spectacular way, memorials of a bygone era can turn into **neutral urban landmarks**.

Some geographers have explored cases in which monuments legitimising elite power turned into sites of **oppositional and resistant political practice**. For example, Hershkovitz (1993) showed how Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the centre of political power in China, came to symbolise public political expression and resistance to the dominant power.

Other geographers have analysed cases when monuments considered sacred by those who have them erected became **the object of scorn and ridicule**. For example, Atkinson and Cosgrove (1998) showed how the Vittoriano in Rome has been derided throughout its history.

These cases showed that **the meanings of monuments are not fixed once and for all: unexpected practices** can continuously challenge the elite intentions of monuments.

*[...] 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. (Kattago 2015: 185)*

Geographers have recognised that **generating multiple interpretations** is a common feature of monuments. Osborne (1998: 453) defined monuments as “dynamic sites of meaning”. Benton-Short (2006: 300) described memorials as essentially “polyvocal”. Other geographers used the terms ‘negotiation’, ‘struggle’ or ‘conflict’ to describe the contended interpretations of monuments (Whelan 2002: 508; Hershkovitz 1993: 395). **Henri Lefebvre** had previously described the capacity of monuments to generate multifaceted interpretations using the metaphor of “**horizon**”:

*A monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a ‘signified’ (or ‘signifieds’); rather, it has a horizon of meaning: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of - and for the sake of - a particular action. (Lefebvre 1991: 222)*

## 1.2 The semiotic perspective on monuments

Scholars in semiotics have explored the concepts of **space, place, landscape and built environment** using different paradigms ranging from the **semiological tradition associating spatial forms with texts** (e.g. Marrone 2009) to more **ecological understanding of landscape** (e.g. Lindström et al. 2014).

Inspired by the debate around **the conflation between memory, history and place** (e.g. Nora 1989), semiotics has begun to analyse monuments as **communicative devices** to promote selective discourses on the past (Pezzini 2006; Sozzi 2012; Abousnoug and Machin 2013).

This section first presents an overview of **the semiotic literature** on urban space and built environment, in order to introduce the context in which the semiotic analysis of monuments has originated. It then goes on to review the semiotic research addressing **the conflation between memory and space**.

### **The semiotic aspect of the city: A review of urban semiotics**

From the late 1960s, **architectural semiotics** has been the first attempt to propose a semiotic

conceptualization of space investigating the processes through which architecture can convey meanings (Barthes 1970; Eco 1997; Lotman 1987).

Since this proposal, semiotic scholarships have started to investigate urban space creating a specific field called '**urban semiotics**' (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986: 1). Urban semiotics aimed to describe the essential criteria defining a given space as 'urban'. To achieve this aim, urban semiotics undertook analyses of existing urban spaces and their representations "to reveal underpinning power relations and cultural values" (Stevenson 2003: 143).

In the wake of this research program, many semiotic analyses have appeared providing a range of approaches to **the semiotic aspects of the city** (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986; Volli 2005; Marrone and Pezzini 2006, 2008; Marrone 2009; Pilshchikov 2015). Subsequent works have proposed semiotic investigations of **architecture** (e.g. Hammad 2003; Montanari 2012) and **the built environment** specifically (e.g. Randviir 2011; Remm 2011).

Moreover, case studies have analysed specific urban areas – such as **urban peripheries** (Cervelli 2005) and **urban districts** (Montanari 2008). Whereas, other studies have empirically focused on wider urban spaces such as **the post-socialist city** (Czepczynski 2009) and the post-war city (Maz-zucchelli 2010). These semiotic analyses have provided a methodological basis for the analysis of the signifying aspects of urban space. However, there is still **no unified method or consistent approach** discernible in urban semiotics.

Rather, analyses have grounded themselves on **four main paradigms**. First, **the semiological paradigm** has based on de Saussure to describe urban spaces as sign systems. Second, **the generative paradigm** has investigated the configuration of layers of signification within existing urban spaces (Lagopoulos 1993; Greimas 1970, 1983). Third, **the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School** has revised the textual paradigm to provide a more pragmatic understanding of the city, extending the discussion to urban planning (Remm 2016: 34). Finally, **the Peircian paradigm** has proposed an interpretative method to determine the interpretative habits of individuals and groups within the city (Arnesen 2011).

## **The conflation of memory and space: A semiotic approach**

**Memory** has recently attracted much attention in semiotics (Demaria 2006, 2012). Moving from the psychological concept of memory **as a mental faculty, semiotics has described memory as external to human mind and as manifested in texts, documents and everyday objects** (Violi 2014: 27). Semiotics has discussed the modalities through which material devices articulate a specific "**discourse on the past**" (Violi 2014: 11, my trans.).

Scholars in semiotics have recognised that discourses on the past could be designed **to convey specific historical narratives**. As such, discourses on the past always presented a "partial vision" focusing attention on selective histories while concealing others (Eco 1976: 289-290).

As a consequence, **discourses on the past** could affect present and **future identity** as well as the ways in which individuals represent themselves and relate to each other (Violi 2014: 18).

Moreover, discourses on the past could convey collective meanings supporting **a uniform national memory and identity** (Johnson 1995; Withers 1996). Nevertheless, individuals and groups could interpret differently the same discourses on the past.

The semiotic analysis of memory representation has aimed to explain how sites of memory can establish **specific understandings of the past** addressing **the effects** a given material representation of memory has had **at the societal level**.

The semiotic analysis of memory representation has grounded itself on different methodological perspectives and has explored different site of memory, such as **museums** (Pezzini 2011; Violi 2014), **monuments** and **memorials** (Pezzini 2006; Sozzi 2012; Abousnoug and Machin 2013; Krzyżanowska 2016; Bellentani and Panico 2016; Nanni and Bellentani in press).

Nevertheless, there is an assumption common to all these analyses: **space is a privileged modality for articulating discourses on the past**. Uspenskij et al. (1998: 6.1.3, 6.1.5) defined space as a **primary modelling system**: as in natural languages, so in space a given expression conveyed specific contents.

As such, **space could reveal ideas and values of a society**: “it is one of the primary modes of representation of a society, it expresses itself as a signifying reality” (Marrone 2001: 292 my trans.). Following this idea, space can **simultaneously embody and produce memory** (Violi 2014: 21).

### 1.3 Conclusions: Two limitations of the cultural geographical and the semiotic perspective on monuments

**Human and cultural geography** provided a methodological basis to understand the ways in which monuments could **reproduce social order and reinforce political power**. However, the geographical approach to monuments has grounded itself on **two key limitations**.

**First**, the geographical approach has grounded itself on a **rigid notion of symbolism** where specific plastic aspects such as material of construction, location and size were believed to communicate specific meanings. For example, Atkinson and Cosgrove (1988: 45) argued that the vertical spatiality of the Vittoriano in Rome extended its meanings “from the depths of the tomb to the heights of atmosphere, from death to life and from past to future”.

**The second key limitation** of the geographical approach is a **restricted focus on elite intentions and prominent built forms**. Little attention has been paid to how monuments are interpreted **at the societal level**. Geographers have mainly focused on the intentions of those who have the state mandate to regulate and develop public space (Yiftachel et al. 2001: 4) and consequently the authority to design and erect monuments.

A significant number of publications in human and cultural geography has recognised that **unexpected practices** often challenge the elite intentions embodied in monuments (Hershkovitz 1993). However, few geographers have assessed how multifaceted meanings of monuments emerge at the societal level.

**Semiotics** has aimed to explain how sites of memory can establish specific understandings of the past, especially addressing the effects a given material representation of memory had at the societal level. **By inviting questions on ‘readership’**, semiotics has sought to overcome the restricted focus on the designers’ intentions that has characterised the geographical approach. However, **the first limitation** identified in the geographical literature **persists**.

**Abousnnouga and Machin** (2013: 57) claimed that a “repertoire of semiotic resources” is available to designers who combine them “to communicate specific meanings in context”. 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). 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.

**In conclusion**, this lecture identified **two key limitations** of the geographical and the semiotic approaches to monuments and memorials:

1. There has been no extended discussion of how the plastic and figurative levels of monuments actually convey political meanings and thus of how they can effectively reinforce political power.
2. Little attention has been paid to how monuments are interpreted at the societal level.