

The connection between cultural geography and semiotics: A holistic perspective on meaning-making of monuments

The previous lecture provided an overview of the geographical and semiotic literature on monuments, highlighting **two key limitations**. **First**, the connection between the plastic, figurative and political dimensions of monuments has been often overlooked. **Second**, the relationship between designers and users has remained mostly under-theorised. This lecture aims to overcome these limitations by advancing **the understanding of the connections** between the geographical and the semiotic approaches.

To do so, it develops a **holistic perspective** that conceives the interpretations of monuments as depending on **four interplays**: a) between **the plastic, figurative and political dimensions**; b) between **designers and users**; c) between **monuments and the cultural context**; and d) between **monuments and the built environment**. Below is the **conceptual scheme of the theoretical framework** conceiving these interplays.

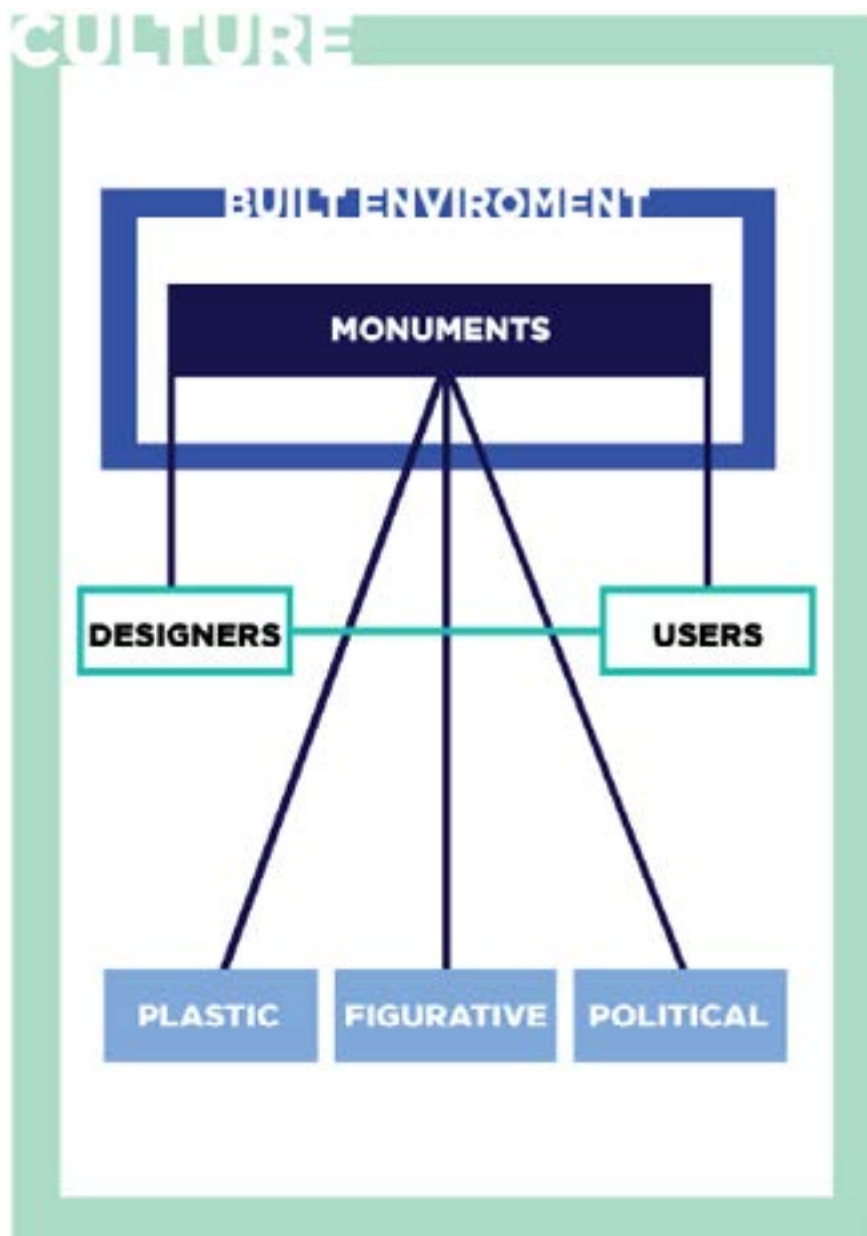


Fig. 2.1 – The conceptual scheme of the theoretical framework

In this scheme, **monuments** are symbolically represented at the centre. The scheme presumes that a relationship is established between **the plastic, figurative and political dimensions** of monuments, represented in three distinct but interdependent ovals. Double-headed arrows represent the interdependence between them. An arrow linking the rectangles visualises the interaction between '**designers**' and '**users**'. A polygon visually representing the term '**culture**' is added at the top of the scheme.

Each section of this lecture discusses one of **the four interplays**, identifying **the theoretical framework** on the basis of which to study the multiple interpretations of monuments. **Section 2.1** provides the conceptual basis to conceive the plastic, figurative and political dimensions as interacting in the interpretations of monuments. **Section 2.2** develops a model for the multiple interpretations of monuments that conceives the interplay between designers' and the users' interpretations. **Sections 2.3 and 2.4** connect the meaningful nature of monuments with the cultural context and the built environment. The lecture concludes by **listing the theoretical assumptions** on which the holistic perspective on the meaning-making of monuments is based.

2.1 The visual and the political dimensions of monuments

Monuments have **a visual and a political dimension**. **The visual dimension** refers to **the plastic and the figurative levels** of monuments, as distinguished from their political messages. **The political dimension** relates to the circumstances under which monuments promote political messages and perpetuate power relations.

The visual and the political dimensions **equally influence the meaning-making of monuments**. Plastic, figurative and political may be useful analytical terms, but in practice **they function together and influence each other** through continuous mediations.

The visual dimension of monuments

The visual dimension refers to monuments as **material forms**, and so as distinguished from the political dimension. **Greimas** (1989) provided a methodological perspective for the semiotic analysis of visual texts. He divided the visual text into two autonomous but related levels: **the figurative and the plastic**. Both the plastic and the figurative levels are visually perceptible and thus they can be grouped under the visual dimension of monuments.

The figurative level is recognised on the basis of a correlation with objects of the world. It regards **the visual representations** and **the conventional symbols** embodied in monuments. Monuments stage scenes and represent characters, objects, actions and interactions in material forms.

The plastic level refers to **physical aspects** such as shapes, materials of construction, colours, topological distribution and sizes. The list below shows the categories for the analysis of the plastic level of monuments. The list includes some of the categories used by Abousnoug and Machin (2013: 41-57) for the descriptions of memorials in the United Kingdom, combined with the plastic categories by Greimas (1989).

- 1.Sizes: big/small, large/narrow, high/short;
- 2.Location: degree of elevation, distance/proximity, angle of interaction;
- 3.Materials of construction: solidity/hollowness, texture of the surface;
- 4.Topological categories: position; orientation.
- 5.Eidetic categories: shapes; regularity/irregularity, curvature;
- 6.Chromatic categories: colours, brightness/opacity, lighting.

Traditional research in visual semiotics (e.g. Thurlmann 1982: 108) has associated the distinction between **expression and content** with that between **plastic and figurative levels**. It has therefore conceptualised **expressions as ontological entities** regarding the physical and visually perceptible aspects of texts. As such, expressions have become meaningless substances to which intangible meanings correlate. Considering expressions as having an ontological status, traditional semiotic analysis has assumed that meanings can be “extracted” directly from the materiality of visual texts without any active interpretation process (Chandler 1995).

Contemporary semiotic research has demonstrated that the plastic and the figurative levels cannot be automatically associated to expression and content respectively (Paolucci 2010). This research has defined **more complex relations between the levels**: expression/content and plastic/figurative are **in a mutual relation** able to define, from context to context, something as expression/plastic and something else as content/figurative. Following these proposals, semiotic analysis has granted meaning potential to both the plastic and the figurative levels.

The political dimension of monuments

The political dimension relates to the characteristic of monuments to perpetuate **social order and power relations**. Monuments embody political messages that can “transform neutral places into ideologically charged sites” (Whelan 2002: 508). For this reason, **national elites** use monuments to legitimate the primacy of their political power and to set their political agendas.

Monuments can **articulate selective historical narratives**, focusing attention on events and individuals that are preferred by elites (Hay et al. 2004: 204). Through the articulation of historical narratives, monuments could inculcate particular conceptions of **the present** and encourage **future possibilities** (Massey 1995; Dovey 1999; Dwyer 2000; Osborne 1998).

2.2 The interpretations of monuments between designers and users

This section develops a model for the interpretations of monuments that conceives the interplay between **the designers’ and the users’ interpretations**. **‘Designers’** is a generic term to indicate a wide set of actors - state, local authorities, architects, planners, artists, heritage departments and construction companies - that have the mandate to regulate and develop public space and consequently the authority to design and erect monuments (Yiftachel et al. 2001: 4).

The term **‘users’** simply indicates those who use monuments during the course of the everyday life through a myriad of different practices: (in)attentive crossing, practices of commemoration and mourning, sightseeing, learning, resistant political practices and so on. Each user interprets monuments differently and, on this basis, develops specific patterns of behaviour within the space characterised by monuments.

Conducting a review of interpretative theories in the literary domain, **Umberto Eco** (1984) showed that **research on textual interpretation** had polarised those stating that text can be interpreted only according to the intentions of the authors and those affirming that text can support every possible interpretations of the readers. Later, Eco (1990: 50) suggested that textual interpretation lies in **an intermediate point** between the authors’ intentions and the total arbitrariness of the readers’ interpretations.

Eco (1990: 145) dubbed this intermediate point **‘intention of the text’** or *intentio operis*, that interacts with the *‘intentio auctoris’* and the *‘intentio lectoris’* - that are the intention of the author and the intention of the reader respectively.

Envisioning the intention of the text has overcome the idea that **'appropriate' interpretations** occur only when readers follow **the intentions of authors**. In the wake of these proposals, semiotic analysis has begun to include interpretations deviating from the authors' intentions. However, Eco (1990: 143) explained that texts necessarily impose certain **constraints** on interpretation and make certain reading more desirable than others.

Textual strategies are thus available to authors to entice readers along a specific interpretation. Eco grouped these textual strategies under the terms "**Model Reader**" (Eco 1979: 7-11). According to this model, empirical authors write texts making **assumptions** about the readership's social background, education, cultural traits, tastes and needs.

Hence, empirical authors **foresee and simultaneously construct their readership**, emphasising certain interpretations while concealing others (Eco 1979; Lotman 1990). Although authors seek to control interpretations, texts do not function as mere "communicative apparatuses" to directly imprint meanings to readers (Eco 1984: 25). As such, texts became the place where authors and readers continuously **negotiate their interpretations**.

The model describing the complex interaction between authors, readers and texts can be applied to the built environment and monuments specifically. As textual interpretations, **the interpretations of monuments** lie in an intermediate point between the designers' and the users' interpretations. As texts, monuments can anticipate a set of interpretations and discomfort others.

Elites design monuments striving to entice users along interpretations that conform to their political intentions. Paraphrasing Eco, Marrone (2009, 2013) 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.

The definition of Model User is based on **three assumptions**. **First**, strategies are available to designers to limit the range of interpretations and uses of monuments. **Second**, the meanings of monuments originate at the intersection between the designers' and the users' interpretations. **Third**, users interpret monuments in line with their knowledge, experience and needs. **Model Users** rely on preferred readings, which occur for example when users accept the function of a monument, fully understand its iconography and use it as envisioned by its designers.

Nevertheless, not all users conform to the designers' intentions. Users may interpret and use monuments in ways that are different or even contrary to the designers' intentions (Hay et al. 2004: 204): for example, users can turn monuments into spaces for resistant political practices (Hershkovitz 1993; Whelan 2002; Benton-Short 2006), but they also can use monuments for less politicised practices, 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. As a consequence, designers do not have complete control over the interpretations of users. Therefore, the theoretical framework proposed in this lecture conceives **the interplay between designers and users** on the basis of which to treat the multiple interpretations of monuments.

2.3 The semiotic concept of culture

Monuments cannot be analysed separately from **the cultural context** and separately from their **interrelations with the surrounding built environment**.

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**.

The semiotic concept of culture is structured in different levels of organisation. Stano (2014: 67) conceived culture as having a “split soul”. Sedda (2012: 11) described culture as simultaneously “one and multiple, coherent and contradictory, systemic and procedural, regular and irregular, predictable and unpredictable, hierarchical and unstable, [...] orderly and chaotic”. On the one hand, the exclusive focus on culture as a whole neglects the particular manifestations of culture. On the other hand, focusing only on **particular manifested cultures** overlooks the mechanism holding them together.

A semiotic analysis of culture should thus consider both “the abstract and theoretical complexity of the cultural dimension conceived as a whole” and “the concrete and varied dimension of the cultural life” (Stano 2014: 67).

Eco (1984) divided culture into **global and local levels**. The global level included the cultural knowledge as a whole and the local level defined the routinised ways to use that knowledge. Eco (1984) introduced the notion of ‘**Encyclopaedia**’ to indicate the stock of shared signs that interpreters use during their interpretative processes. **At the global level**, the encyclopaedia contained all the potential interpretations circulating in culture. **At local levels**, there was the routinised set of instructions to interpret specific portions of the socio-cultural space (Eco 1984: 68). Eco called this **routinised set of instructions** “encyclopaedic competence” (Eco 1984: 2-3).

According to Eco, local cultures could select **relevant portions of knowledge** to delimit their own **areas of consensus** and thus **to differentiate themselves** from other cultures (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003: 27). Local culture could be seen as a “collective intelligible social practice” (Reckwitz 2005, quoted in Othengrafen and Reimer 2013: 1272) including “a number of incorporated and (implicit) routinized ‘recurrent regularities’ about how to behave and act in specific situations” (Othengrafen and Reimer 2013: 1273). Thus, **cultural identity** could be seen as based on **a socially constructed signifying system**, actively produced and continuously changed by the present needs of society.

Peeter Torop (2002: 593) defined culture as a “mechanism of translation” characterised by the constant interaction between its abstract, global level and its concrete, local manifestations (Torop 2002: 593). In this view, the specificity of a culture originated from the friction between these two levels. **Lotman** (2005) described this process through **the centre-periphery hierarchy** (Lotman 2005; see also Lotman 1990: 123-204).

The hierarchy centre-periphery was one of the mechanisms for the internal organisation of the semiosphere. At the centre of the **semiosphere**, there were the “most developed and structurally organised languages, and in first place the natural language of that culture” (Lotman 1990: 127). **Central cultures** continuously attempted to prescribe conventional norms to the whole culture. The majority of members of culture embodied these norms and perceived them as their own ‘reality’. In this view, culture consisted of the symbolic set of meanings that are “essential” and “obviously valid” for a society, an organisation or a nation (Othengrafen and Reimer 2013: 1273; Torop 2002: 594).

However, **peripheral culture** could always arise and influence the central norm. In doing so, peripheral cultures were vital sources for the definition and the development of the central culture itself. As more developed and organised, central cultures were seen as rigid and incapable of development (Lotman 1990: 134). Conversely, more flexible peripheral cultures continuously refashioned the more regulated central cultures.

The centre-periphery hierarchy by Lotman can be useful to explain the interpretative dynamics of monuments. As explained in Lecture 1 § 1.1, **national elites** use monuments as tools to legitimate the primacy of their political and cultural power – promoting the kinds of ideals they define as “central” (Lotman 1990) and want users to strive towards.

For this reason, monuments “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). Every culture defines **its own spatial and design models** to convey its symbolic vocabulary in space.

But the ways in which monuments are designed can elicit **a range of different interpretations at the societal level**. Culture consists of different **'interpretative communities'** (Yanow 2000), each one having its particular way to frame social reality based on specific cultural traits, political views, socio-economic interests as well as contingent needs (Yanow 2000; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). In practice, interpretative communities select **relevant portions of knowledge** to delimit their own specific **areas of consensus** on the basis of which they **differentiate themselves** from other cultures (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003: 27).

Interpretative communities interpret differently monuments on the basis of their shared stock of knowledge. Thus, the same monument can be for one community a sacred place of commemoration, for another a source of traumatic memories.

2.4 The intertextual relations of monuments

Monuments cannot be analysed separately from their **interrelations with the surrounding built environment**. Linguistic and semiotic research has used the notion of "intertextuality" to define the process through which texts establish relations with other texts (Manning 1987: 42). Post-structural geography has used the term **'intertextuality'** to describe the relations that built forms establish between them (Duncan 1990: 22-23). As texts reinterpret other texts (Eco 1984: 68), newly erected built forms 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. It has been broadly used in **the post-Soviet city** as a strategy to lessen the visibility and the "ideological weight" of Soviet monuments (Ehala 2009: 140).

2.5 Conclusions: A holistic perspective on meaning-making of monuments

This lecture developed **a holistic perspective** to conceive the interpretations of monuments as depending on **four interplays**:

- a) **plastic-figurative-political**;
- b) **designers-users**;
- c) **monuments-cultural context**;
- d) **monuments-the built environment**.

The feasibility of the holistic perspective on the meaning-making of monuments presented in this lecture is based **on the following theoretical assumptions**:

- a) As texts, monuments consist of **a plastic and a figurative level**. Plastic and figurative are in a mutual relation able to define, from context to context, something as plastic and something else as figurative.

b)Monuments present **the cultural meanings and political messages** of those who erected them. As such, they can be used to serve political needs. Often, national elites use them as tools to legitimate the primacy of their political power and to set their political agendas.

c)A set of strategies is available to designers to entice users along specific interpretations of monuments. **Model Users** are those individuals that conform to the designers' intentions and that develop patterns of behaviour that are consistent with the envisioned function of monuments. Nevertheless, not all users conform to the designers' intentions. This means that:

d)**The unforeseen interpretations** and practices play a critical role in the meaning-making of monuments.

e)Monuments cannot be analysed separately from their **cultural context**. Culture affects how monuments are produced and interpreted. In turn, monuments convey cultural meanings in space.

f)Newly erected built forms actively affect the interpretation of the existing **built environment**.