

# The methodological framework for the study of monuments

**Semiotic analysis** has rarely discussed the methods used for collecting primary data. In response, this lecture constructs and develops the methodological framework for **the empirical study of the multiple interpretations of monuments**.

The methodological framework includes the **research strategy, methodology and methods**. **As for the research strategy, section 3.1** begins by establishing the logic underpinning the case study research strategy, identifying the geographical location, the time boundaries and the communities of the study. **As case studies**, this research analyses two monuments in Estonia: a war memorial in Tallinn and a fountain-sculpture in Tartu.

**As for the research methodology, section 3.2** explains the rationale for using a qualitative approach. It then assesses the need for an extensive fieldwork and a multi-method approach for data collection. Building on the proposed qualitative methodology, **section 3.3** discusses the methods used for primary data collection: semi-structured interviews, participant observations and the investigation of documents. **Section 3.4** describes the process of coding interview transcripts and field notes. Finally, **section 3.5** presents the methods used for analysing primary data.

## 3.1 The rationale for the case study research

**A case study** is an event, a problem, an activity, a space, a process, a person or a group of individuals selected to address the research questions. The purpose of a case study is **to develop and test theory** (Yin 2009: 35). The case studies of this lecture will analyse **the multiple interpretations of two monuments in Estonia**.

There is a widespread belief within academia that case studies are incapable of contributing to scientific development. This belief is grounded on the idea that individual cases provide **poor generalisation**. **Flyvbjerg** (2011: 304) considered this belief as a “misunderstanding” coming from the growing application of natural science models within the social sciences. Based on this misunderstanding, academics may prefer research strategies believed to give more ground for generalizability, such as **statistical mathematical models**.

Moving away from statistical mathematical models, case studies build on an “analytic generalisation” that aims “to expand and generalise theories [...] and not to enumerate frequencies” (Yin 2009: 15).

There is a **set of domains** to which the results of this research can be generalised. This set is divided into **five different levels** that can be seen sequentially, one building on the other. The set is visualized in the schema of fig. 1, from the most general (built environment) to the more specific domain (the analysed case studies in Tallinn and Tartu).

The logic underpinning this schema is that the research results that are valid for the particular cases at the bottom can be generalised to the domains represented in the schema below.



Fig. 3.1 –The domains to which the research results can be generalised

## The case study design

This section identifies **the geographical location** (Estonia), **the time boundaries** (the contemporary interpretations of the Estonian monuments) and **the communities** (Estonians and Russophones) of the study.

•**Geographical location:** Estonia, a country in north-eastern Europe (fig. 2), emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990-1991.

In Estonia, monuments have been an issue that has taken on **a particular significance**. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the tearing down of monuments erected by Soviet authorities was a noticeable **sign of regime change**. Crucially, recently formed national elites used monuments as tools to culturally reinvent the post-Soviet built environment.

The cultural reinvention of the Estonian built environment has evolved through **two distinct but concurrent practices**: the redesign of the inherited built environment created by the Soviets and the simultaneous establishment of a **new built forms** reflecting the needs of post-Soviet culture and society. In this context, recently formed national elites have used monuments to educate citizens toward the current historical narratives and to set their cultural and political agendas.

Contrarily to the elites' expectations, cultural reinvention through monuments **has not been widely accepted in Estonia**, where **multiple historical narratives and identities** coexist at the societal level.

In Estonia, the controversies around 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; Smith 2008). For this reason, Estonia was selected as a relevant case to address the multiple interpretations of monuments.



Fig. 3.2 – Map of Estonia

•**Time boundaries: the contemporary interpretations** of the Estonian monuments.

This study relies on **contemporaneous events**. However, there are **three turning points** in Estonia's history that radically changed the ways in which the Estonian built environment was interpreted: the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Estonian EU and NATO memberships in 2004 and the relocation of a memorial to the Soviet Army in Tallinn in 2007.

With **the collapse of the Soviet Union** came a rethinking of the architects' and planners' profession and a consequent transformation of the Estonian built environment (Väljas and Lige 2015: 75-77). In this context, the recently formed Estonian Government have used **monuments to educate citizens** toward the current historical narratives and to set their political agendas.

The erection of new monuments gained momentum in 2004, with **the Estonian EU and NATO memberships**. The Estonian Government led by **Andrus Ansip**, prime minister of Estonia between 2005 and 2014, took various initiatives to marginalise, remove and relocate Soviet monuments and to establish new built forms aiming at signifying specific future expectations. However, the removals and relocations of Soviet monuments and the erection of new ones have not been accepted by the entire Estonian population. Thus, these practices have sparked **broad debates** and resulted in **civil disorder**.

**The relocation of the Soviet Army memorial in Tallinn** showed the kinds of issues that could arise in Estonia in response to the manipulation of monuments. This memorial was unveiled in 1947 to celebrate the third anniversary of the entrance of the Soviet Army in Tallinn. Estonians nicknamed this memorial '**Bronze Soldier**' because it featured a two-meter bronze statue of a soldier in a Second World War era Soviet Army uniform.

Although referring to Soviet aesthetics, the Bronze Soldier survived the tearing down of Soviet monuments after the restoration of independence. In independent Estonia, the Bronze Soldier continued to be **an important memorial for many** and especially for the **Russian community**.

However, many other Estonian citizens linked the Bronze Soldier to the experience of the Soviet regime, the loss of national sovereignty, and deportation. By promising to remove the memorial, **national-conservative parties** gained exceptional popularity promising to remove this memorial and won **the elections in 2007** (Tamm 2013: 666). Once in power, they honoured the promise starting the works for the relocation **on April 26th, 2007**.

Some Tallinn citizens - especially belonging to the Russian minority - perceived this act as **a provocation**: for them, the memorial represented **an important site of commemoration** disconnected to the crimes of the Soviet regime (Kattago 2009: 150).

According to Russian historical narratives, the victory of the Soviet Army on the Eastern Front during the Second World War paved the way for **the liberation of Tallinn and Estonia** from the Nazi regime (Pääbo 2008: 11-12). The area around the Bronze Soldier has been the main setting for the unofficial celebrations of this event (Kattago 2009: 158). For this reason, Russians wanted the Bronze Soldier to remain in its original location.

Nevertheless, the Estonian Government **removed and relocated** the memorial in a military cemetery, approximately two kilometres outside the city centre of Tallinn. As a result of the relocation, **two nights of disorder** broke out in the centre of Tallinn, during which a 20-year-old Russian was killed (Pääbo 2008: 22-23).

#### •**Communities: Estonians and Russophones.**

Estonia has a **multi-ethnic society**. The two largest ethnic communities are **Estonians and Russophones**. In this study, **the term 'Russophones'** is used to include all the Russian speakers that are in possession of Estonian citizenship, but do not define their ethnic identity as 'Estonian'. According to Statistics Estonia 2011, **Estonians are 68.75 % and Russophones are 24.82 %**.

Estonians are the main people ruling Estonian governmental organisations since 1991. After the "status reversal" in 1991, Russophones suffered status decline. The relations between Estonians and the Russophone minority have **not always been peaceful**. But to meet European standards in multiculturalism and political correctness (Ehala 2009: 152), the Estonian Government implemented **several strategies to integrate the Russophone community** into the Estonian society. However, Russophones in Estonia continue to be **marginalised** in respect to the national politics of identity and memory (Lehti et al. 2008: 409).

Some scholars defined the potential divergences in historical narratives as one of the reasons underpinning **the antagonism between Estonians and Russophones** (e.g. Kattago 2010). This antagonism has often resulted in **conflicts over the interpretations of monuments**.

## 3.2 Methodology: the rationale for qualitative research, extensive fieldwork and multi-method approach

### **The rationale for doing qualitative research**

This research focuses on the multiple interpretations of two monuments in Estonia. According to **interpretative epistemology**, to experience the built environment is to participate in it and simultaneously to construct its meanings. **Constructing meanings** in different ways, individuals interpret differently the built environment.

**Qualitative research** is better able to deal with **the multiplicity and the ambiguity of interpretations**. In this study, a qualitative approach allows investigating **the meanings users attach** to the monuments and connecting these meanings to **the real-life context** in which they are produced and interpreted.

In qualitative research, the researcher's identity, values, beliefs and emotions **inevitably influence** data collection and analysis. Qualitative data are thus produced as the researcher collects and interprets them (Yanow 2014: 17).

**Semiotics** has acknowledged the researcher's involvement in the collection and analysis of data. Since signification is both manifested in texts (**text-object**) and in the scientific discourses on the text (**meta-text**; Marsciani 1999: 9), the language of the texts-object has the same quality of the meta-language. There is **no explicit meta-language** to provide a distant account of the text-object. As a consequence, it is not possible for the semiotician to investigate meanings from a privileged position.

## The rationale for an extensive fieldwork

Qualitative research was conducted through **fieldwork** that allowed collecting **primary data and empirical material** on the interpretations of the researched monuments. Fieldwork was carried out in Tallinn and in Tartu, **between February and October 2015**. It provided an extensive contact with the real-life context of the monuments.

Envisioning **the semiotic theory of Greimas** (1970, 1983), the real-life contexts of the monuments were explored taking into account **the following dimensions**:

- 1.Cognitive,
- 2.Axiological,
- 3.Emotional,
- 4.Pragmatic.

In relation to the case study, **the cognitive dimension** refers to **the knowledge** users have about monuments. This knowledge affects how users evaluate the ideals, events and individuals represented in monuments. **The axiological dimension** considers users' personal **opinions and evaluations** of monuments. The question of the axiological dimension is whether users have **positive or negative attitude toward monuments**.

In consequence of their knowledge and evaluations, users have various **emotional reactions**. **The emotional dimension** identifies which kinds of **emotions and feelings** monuments elicit in users. Potentially, the same monuments in different users can elicit pleasant emotions or recall uncomfortable memories. Finally, **the pragmatic dimension** concerns how users **act and interact** within the space of monuments.

## The rationale for a multi-method approach

**A multi-method approach** allowed the comparison of data produced through interviews, observations and the investigation of documents. It reduced the variations from data produced by the individual perception and thus helped to improve the reliability of research.

## 3.3 Methods of data collection

Each method illuminated different dimensions of the researched monuments. This section discusses the methods used for data collection. **Semi-structured interviews** investigated the users' opinions, beliefs and emotional reactions, describable as the cognitive, axiological and emotional dimensions of users. **Participant observations** concentrated on the actions and interactions of users who daily cross and use the spaces of the monuments, i.e. the pragmatic dimension of users. **The investigation of documents and secondary sources** provided an account of the monuments as envisioned by their designers.

### Semi-structured interviews

**Semi-structured interviews** aimed to collect **a range of interpretations** on the researched monuments at non-elite levels. Interview data derived from **thirty-two interviews** with respondents that resided in Estonia their entire life, i.e. they had only left Estonia temporarily. Sixteen respondents were originally from Tallinn and sixteen from Tartu.

Noticeably, Tallinn and Tartu inhabitants were linked by other criteria. Above all, ethnic origins, age, gender, education and profession were criteria that could influence the interpretations of respondents on the monuments. Thus, a suitable balance of Estonians and Russophones, age bands, males and females, education levels and professions was guaranteed.

Specifically, eight respondents were **Estonians** and eight belonged to the **Russophone community**. As explained in § 3.1, the relations between Estonians and Russophones have not always been peaceful and this **antagonism** has often resulted in **conflicts over the interpretations of monuments**.

## Participant observations

**Observations** were undertaken to gain **insights into the spatial settings and the practices** surrounding the researched monuments. **Participant observations** were chosen **to preserve the naturalness of the public settings** and thus to observe phenomena as they normally occur. The researcher assumed **a covert role** to minimise disruption.

**An observation schedule** was created to reduce the variations from data produced by the researcher's individual perception and interpretation. The features were divided into **three main categories: visual dimension, intertextual relations and practices**. **First**, as explained in Lecture 1 § 1.1, **visual dimension** refers to the plastic and the figurative levels of monuments.

**Second**, observations investigated the **intertextual relations** of the monuments with the surrounding built environment. As explained in Lecture 2 § 2.4, monuments cannot be analysed separately from their interrelations with the surrounding built environment.

**Third**, observations aimed to register **the practices** within the space of the monuments. The observed practices were of **three types: authorised practices, everyday practices and unexpected practices**. **Authorised practices** included public rituals and official celebrations organised by Estonian national and local authorities as well as cultural and entertaining events arranged by multifaceted organisations. Observations on **everyday practices** offered a detailed understanding of the actions and interactions of users who daily cross the squares and variously engage with the monuments. During observations, particular attention was paid to **unexpected practices**, i.e. those practices significantly deviating from the uses intended by the designers and momentarily disrupting the everyday routine within the space of the monuments.

## Documents and secondary sources

**Documents** provided an account of **the meanings designers strived to convey** through the researched monuments. The collected empirical materials included planning documents, scientific literature, tourist guidebooks, and photography. Moreover, information considered as relevant from newspapers, magazines, movies, television programmes, web sites and online social networking services was registered in a fieldwork diary.

## 3.4 Coding data

To organise the data, a **verbatim transcript** was prepared for each interview and observational data were recorded in an **electronic fieldwork diary**. Data from interview transcripts and field notes were organised using **coding methods** as suggested in **Saldaña (2009)**. According to Saldaña (2009: 3), **code** is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salience, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data”. **Coding** is an “interpretative act” aiming to find “repetitive patterns of actions and consistencies in human affairs documented in data” (Saldaña 2009: 5).

There were **three groups of codes** that can be seen as a sequence, from the most general to the more specific. **First, summative codes** presented the most general concepts or types of social action. **Second**, a larger number of codes revealed **more specific information** about data. **Finally, codes emerging from the field** described the particular events or situations from the real-life contexts of the monuments.

The three levels of codes allowed discerning and labelling content and meaning of data. **After coding**, groups of similar data were organised into **overarching themes** (Saldaña 2009: 8). Theming data aimed to reduce the number of codes and provided a deeper understanding of why something happened in a certain way. Themes were the “outcomes” of coding and analytic reflection (Saldaña 2009: 13). They were added to identify what a segment of data is about and/or what it means (Saldaña 2009: 13).

Finally, **isotopies** allowed reflections on the possible links among the themes identified within interview and observational data. By connecting themes with the theoretical dimension of the study, isotopies helped to reach **an interpretative understanding** of the multiple interpretations of the researched monuments.

The traditional definition of **isotopy** was based on the concept of repetition (Greimas 1987). An isotopy was a repetition of **basic meaning traits** that continuously reiterated their content in texts and thus ensured coherence and homogeneity to texts (Pozzato 2001; Kourdis 2012: 106-107). **Eco** (1984: 189-190) expanded isotopy to include “diverse semiotic phenomena generically definable as coherence at the various textual levels”. He replaced the concept of ‘repetition’ with the concept of “direction”, defining isotopy as “a constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretative coherence” (Eco 1992: 65).

### 3.5 A multi-method and comparative approach to data analysis

**Data analysis** aimed to assess the extent and the potential of **the connection between the cultural-geographical and the semiotic aspects** of the researched monuments. It focused on the kinds of cultural geographical spaces that stemmed from the interplay between **the designers’ and users’ ways of attributing meanings** to the monuments.

**A multi-method approach and a comparative analysis** helped **to reduce the variations** from data produced by the individual perception and thus helped **to improve the reliability of research**. Data analysis compared data produced through investigations of documents and secondary sources, interviews and observations to shape **an original interpretation on the kinds of cultural geographical spaces** the researched monuments are.

Specifically, **the multi-method approach** allowed the comparison of data produced through interviews and observations. On the one hand, **observational data** were used as confirmatory to **interview data**. On the other hand, interview data referred to previous observations in the field. **The comparison and the interaction of interview and observational data** allowed gaining **a better understanding** of the relations between the built environment and users and on how users make sense of this relation through personal narratives.

**A comparative analysis between the case studies** was required to abstract their findings to the theoretical dimension (Manning 1987: 25). It identified **similarities and differences** between the interpretative processes of the researched monuments and make them cohere into a meaningful argument: that the built environment is **a form of discourse**, which can be shaped and transformed through design in order to convey **specific cultural and political meanings**.