

Lecture 4 - Case Study 1: The Victory Column in Tallinn

This lecture engages with the theoretical and methodological framework outlined in Lecture 2 and 3, presenting an analysis of the multiple interpretations of **the War of Independence Victory Column** (fig. 1), **a war memorial unveiled in Tallinn** in June 2009.



Fig. 4.1 – The War of Independence Victory Column. Picture taken 5.10.2015

Name: War of Independence Victory Column (Estonian Vabadussõja võidusammas)

Date of unveiling: 23 June 2009

Purpose of commemoration: to commemorate all those who contributed to reach Estonia's first independence.

Iconography: the Cross of Liberty, a military decoration to honour remarkable services during the War of Independence

Location: Freedom Square, Tallinn

Owner: the Estonian Government

Architects: Rainer Sternfeld, Andri Laidre and Anto Savi

Builder: Sans Souci

Sizes: 23.5 meters-high column (\approx 86.6 feet)

Materials of construction: 143 glass plates supported by 8 concrete blocks

Chromatic categories: whitish colour hardly changing with weather conditions and light. Wholly illuminated during hours of darkness

This lecture argues that the Victory Column presents outcomes regarding a) **the embodied cultural and political meanings** and b) **the different ways in which these meanings are interpreted at societal levels**. Memorialising a victory through which Estonia reached **independence for the first time**, the Victory Column has promoted **a selective understanding of the past**, while symbolising **a range of possibilities about Estonia's future**.

Articulating specific conceptualisation of the past, present and future, the Victory Column has helped **to reflect and sustain the cultural and political agendas of the Estonian Government**. As such, the Victory Column has reflected the intention to establish **an exclusive space** filled with dominant cultural and political meanings.

However, the meanings that the Estonian Government has strived to convey through the Victory Column are **not reflected at the societal level**. Users have largely **reinterpreted** the designers' stated intentions behind the Victory Column. Furthermore, **the unexpected interpretations** of users have spawned uses that are different from those envisioned by the designers of the memorial.

This lecture analyses **the designers' stated intentions** behind the Victory Column and **the ways through which users interpret these intentions**. The analysis is divided into **three parts**. First, **section 4.2** addresses the designers' stated intentions behind the Victory Column - i.e. the intended meanings of the 'authors'. Second, **section 4.3** presents the interpretations of users and their practices within the space of the Victory Column - i.e. the interpretations, actions and interactions of the 'readers'. **Section 4.4** identifies **three gaps** of the Victory Column: a) between the designers' stated intentions and the users' interpretations; b) between the intended purpose of the Victory Column and its plastic and figurative levels; and c) between the Victory Column and its location. Finally, **section 4.5** concludes by comparing the data presented in previous sections to progress toward the theoretical dimension.

Before organising and discussing data, **section 4.1** introduces the context of the Victory Column and explains the reasons why it was selected as an appropriate case study.

4.1 Introducing the Victory Column

The War of Independence Victory Column is a large column-shape **memorial** commemorating those who served in **a war against Soviet Russia and Baltic German forces** between 1918 and 1920. The war ended with **the first recognition of Estonia as an independent state**. For this reason, in the current Estonian historical narratives, this war is known as the '**War of Independence**' or 'Freedom War' (in Estonian Vabadussõda) and it is closely linked with ideals of freedom and sovereignty.

In consequence, the soldiers who served in this war are seen as **freedom fighters** against foreign occupation. To celebrate them, Estonian authorities erected many local monuments and memorials throughout the country. However, **a central memorial** to commemorate this war and the freedom it brought was not erected at that time.

The first ideas to erect a central memorial dated back to **1919**, before the end of the war (Pihlak et al. 2009: 42). In the 1930s, plans to erect this memorial were not realised for scarcity of resources or for lack of agreement on design issues. The Second World War obstructed any plans for its erection. The incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union prevented the erection of this memorial celebrating the independence of the Estonian nation. After Estonia regained independence, questions about erecting a memorial arose again from time to time.

After a controversial design process, the memorial was unveiled in **June 2009**, with the official name of **War of Independence Victory Column**. The memorial was erected on an elevated platform of **Freedom Square** (in Estonian Vabaduse väljak, fig. 2), a large square on the southern edge of Tallinn's Old Town. The name 'Freedom Square' was first given to welcome the Estonia's independence in 1918 and it was later restored in 1991 to celebrate the regaining of sovereignty.

The regimes that ruled Tallinn during the 20th century have used the present-day Freedom Square for their **public rituals of power** (Lige 2014: 153). During the last years of the Soviet regime, Freedom Square lost its function as venue for public rituals of power and turned into an open-air parking lot. In 1998, Tallinn City Council manifested the need for **revitalising** such a symbolic urban space and held an architectural competition (UNESCO 2014). Between 2008 and 2009, the square underwent **a complete reconstruction** aiming to provide a venue for **public rituals and cultural events**.

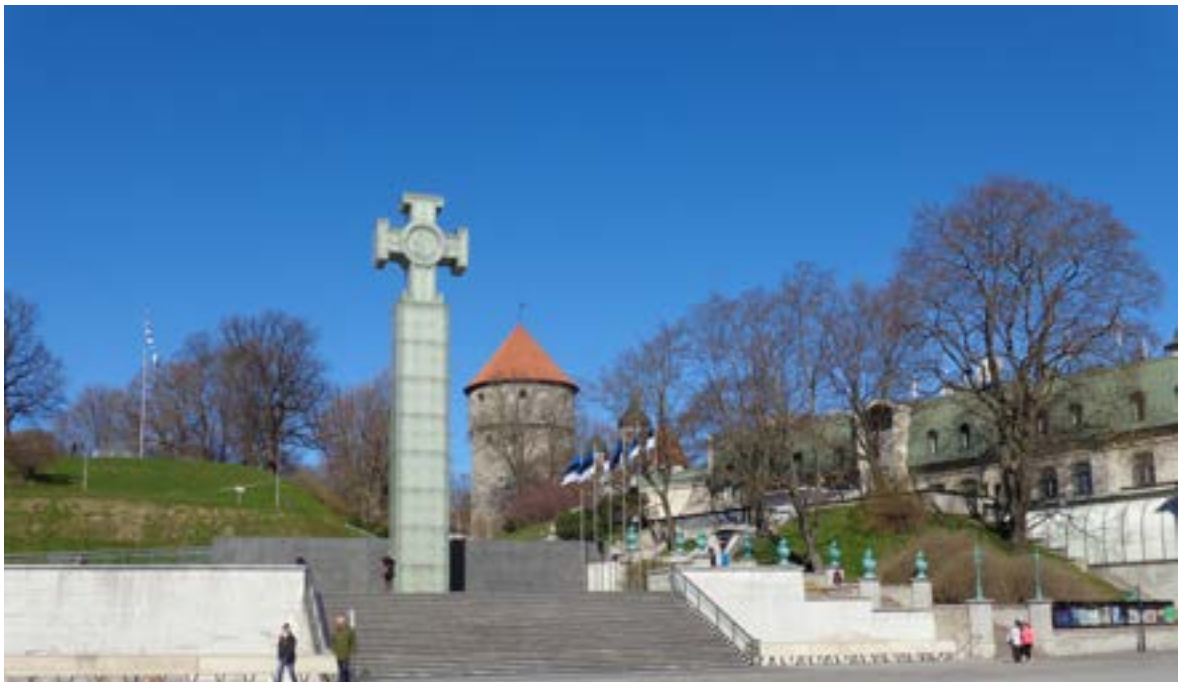


Fig. 4.2 – The Victory Column in Freedom Square. Picture taken 14.03.2015

There are a number of reasons why the Victory Column provides an appropriate case study. Following the conceptual scheme defined in Lecture 2, these reasons can be divided between **three dimensions**: plastic, figurative and political.

•Reasons at the plastic level:

Size: The Victory Column is the largest memorial to the soldiers who served in the Estonian War of Independence. Due to the imposing size, the memorial is visible from many parts of Tallinn.

Design choices: The modern-looking design of the Victory Column differs from the adjacent medieval built environment of Tallinn's Old Town. Furthermore, the location of the Victory Column in Freedom Square has been used throughout history as an arena where different political regimes have tried to assert themselves via architecture, monuments and public rituals.

•Reasons at the figurative level:

Purpose of commemoration: The Victory Column commemorates the soldiers who served in the war that created the basis for Estonia's first period of independence (Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009). Due to the significance of this commemoration within Estonian historical narratives, the Victory Column has been considered as "the most important monument erected in Estonia after the country regained its independence" (Mattson 2012). However, the significance it has assumed for the Estonian elites have not been widely recognised at the societal level.

Iconography: The iconography featuring a military decoration sparked broad debate due to resemblance with totalitarian aesthetics.

- **Reasons at the political level:**

Memory and identity politics: The memorial served to keep a memory as well as a power alive by reinforcing the political power of the Estonian Government in charge. As such, the Victory Column has become a political tool to legitimate the primacy of the political power of the Estonian Government that took the initiative for erecting the memorial.

4.2 The designers' stated intentions

The investigation of **the designers' stated intentions** behind the Victory Column is based on **direct observation, documents and secondary sources**. One of the designers was interviewed to collect opinions, beliefs, emotions and feelings he has on the memorial.

Who are the designers?

In spring 2005, **the Estonian Parliament** decided that a column should be erected in Tallinn to celebrate all those who served in the War of Independence (Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009). The Estonian Parliament entrusted **the Ministry of Defence** to lead the development phase of the project. The Ministry of Defence sponsored a design competition on 14 March 2007. The selected winning entry was **Libertas**, designed by the engineering students Rainer Sternfeld, Andri Laidre and Anto Savi. The Czech company **Sans Souci** was chosen to build the memorial. The works to realise the project started in July 2008. **An opening ceremony** was organised on 23 June 2009 for the unveiling of the memorial.

In Estonia, 23 June is a public holiday named '**Victory Day**' (in Estonian Võidupüha), marking the day in which Estonians defeated the German troops in 1919 during the War of Independence. This public holiday became associated with ideals of freedom during Estonia's first period of independence.

The purpose of commemoration and the iconography

The Fact Sheets of the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009) explained **the primary purpose** of the Victory Column: to celebrate the soldiers who fought in the War of Independence and **all those who contributed in every possible way to reach Estonia's first independence**.

The iconography of the Victory Column features a Greek cross topped on a column. This is a large-size representation of **the Cross of Liberty, a military decoration** established to honour remarkable services during the War of Independence (fig. 3). According to the project drivers, this military iconography could function as a symbol to celebrate the entire Estonian nation.

The Cross of Liberty was the first Estonian state decoration. During Estonia's first period of independence, the Cross of Liberty became **a symbol associated with the War of Independence** and, in turn, with the Estonia's fight for freedom and sovereignty.



Fig. 4.3 – The Cross of Liberty at the top of the Victory Column during the constructions.
Picture from Pihlak et al. 2009: 120.

Behind the Victory Column, there is a wall dividing the area of the memorial from a green area. On this wall, there are **writings in silver letters** including the name of the commemorated war ('Eesti Vabadussõda' –Estonian War of Independence, fig. 5), the years of the War of Independence ('1918-1920', fig. 5) and part of **a poem** written by the Estonian neo-Romantic poet **Gustav Suits** in 1919 (fig. 6):

Raise the flag! In this turn of time / witness the winds twist / over the land and water and road: / hour has come to swear an oath / that never again will bow down / under a yoke this nation.



Fig 4.4 - The name and the years of the War of Independence and the poem on the wall behind the Victory Column. Picture taken 7.10.2015

Tallinn citizens were mostly **unacquainted with the presence and the significance of the poem** behind the Victory Column. 5 respondents reported that they never noted the presence of writings behind the Victory Column. 8 respondents stated that they were informed about the presence of the poem, but not about its contents. Observations showed that it is **very rare** that users climb the staircase to read the writings behind the memorial.

The poem behind the Victory Column is **only in the Estonian language** and there are no translations provided. It is common within the main tourist paths of Tallinn that information plaques give details about important places into many different languages. This is not the case with the writings behind the Victory Column. **The lack of translations** for these writings gives no weight to touristic needs; nor, arguably, to the foreigner countries which were allied to Estonia during the War of Independence.

The cultural context and the political controversy

As noted in Lecture 3 § 3.1, **the Estonian EU and NATO memberships** have provided opportunities to gain symbolic capital through the redesign of the built environment and the erection of new monuments (Ehala 2009: 152). This **cultural reinvention of the built environment** largely affected the space of Freedom Square and its immediate surroundings. In April 2007, **the Bronze Soldier** was removed and relocated outside Tallinn's city centre. Two years later, the Victory Column was unveiled in Freedom Square, less than **500 meters from the Bronze Soldier's original location**.

The initiative for both the removal of the Bronze Soldier and the erection of the Victory Column was taken during the mandate of **Andrus Ansip**, prime minister of Estonia between 2005 and 2014. Some scholars argued that the erection of the Victory Column was a direct response of the troubled events following the relocation of the Bronze Soldier.

This argument did not take into account that the design competition for the Victory Column was announced on 14 March 2007, before the Bronze Soldier's relocation on 26 April. However, it is true that the process leading to the erection of the Victory Column was **rushed after the events following the Bronze Soldier's relocation**.

The Estonian Government saw in the Victory Column a means to emerge as a **winner from the conflicts around monuments**. Furthermore, Andrus Ansip saw in the Victory Column **an opportunity to gain political consent** among those who strongly wanted this memorial to be erected, in view of the upcoming **elections** scheduled for 4 March 2007 (Mattson 2012). For this reason, The Ministry of Defence speeded up the work of construction and made a number of changes to the original plan without including public contests or participatory methods (Mattson 2012).

The time pressure created by the deadline resulted in different issues that characterised the development phase of the design: **lack of participative planning practices, non-transparency of financing, shortage of adequate supervision and defective works during construction**. Due to controversial design, the erection of the Victory Column sparked a broad debate among artists and architects as well as among the public.

4.3 The interpretations, actions and interactions of the users

This section presents **the interpretations of users and their actions and interactions** within the space of the Victory Column. This reflection is based on **primary data** collected through **interviews and observations** carried out during fieldwork in Tallinn between February and October 2015. This section is split into **three parts** to investigate the users' interpretations and criticisms of the plastic, figurative and political dimensions of the Victory Column.

The users' interpretations of the figurative level

Interviewing on the figurative level of the Victory Column concerned **the purpose of commemoration** and **the iconography**. **All respondents acknowledged the intended purpose of the memorial** to commemorate those who served in the War of Independence. However, observations did not register **any commemorative practice**, if not during the formal commemorations arranged by the Estonian Government and its affiliates.

The iconography of the Victory Column came in for **a great deal of criticism** during interviews. 8 respondents clearly manifested negative attitudes toward the iconography of the Victory Column. Among them, 4 respondents claimed that this iconography conveys **meanings of might and control** rather than freedom and mourning, as the purpose of commemoration would suggest.

[The memorial] seems to symbolise not freedom, but might or control. That...perhaps...it is not a necessary thing or the most important thing to represent in the centre of the capital of Estonia. (Interview 11, Estonian, born in 1959, male, academic).

Among these 8 respondents, a Russophone respondent from the oldest age band associated the iconography of the Victory Column with **totalitarian aesthetics** (interview 24, Russophone, born in 1959, female, academic). In her opinion, the Victory Column presented a Nazi iconography, being a military insignia used by Estonian soldiers fighting alongside the German army during the Second World War.

3 respondents argued that the iconography of the Victory Column is **highly hermetic** and not many users can understand what the cross represents - visitors as well as Estonian citizens themselves. Consistent with this, **3 respondents were unacquainted with the iconography**.

The users' interpretations of the plastic level

Interviewing on the plastic level of the Victory Column concerned two issues: **the design choices** and **the location**. 3 respondents defined the material design of the memorial as “*unprofessional*”. Specifically, **the material of construction** and **the size** of the Victory Column came in for a great deal of criticism.

As for **the construction material**, 4 respondents considered glass panels as an “*inappropriate*” material for **two reasons**. **The first** reason concerned practical problems related to weather conditions: glass panels do not easily resist the harsh Estonian winter. In fact three glass panels appeared to be defective right after the erection. **The second reason** concerned the inconsistency of a glass construction in Tallinn's Old Town. For respondents, glass was seen as a present-day construction material that does not fit in with the adjacent medieval built environment.

As for **size**, 6 respondents defined the Victory Column as “*too big*”. Their concerns about the size related with the issue of the Victory Column's location. These respondents argued that the large size of the memorial **does not fit in with the adjacent medieval built environment** of Tallinn's Old Town. They considered the verticality of the Victory Column as **confronting near-by vertical built forms**.

Respondents expressed discontent toward **the chosen location** for another reason: to build the elevated platform of the Victory Column, encroachments on the nearby park and on the medieval bastions were necessary. Respondents considered the erection of the Victory Column **not worth losing this natural and historical heritage**.

Consistent with this view, observations showed that **the elevated platform** of the Victory Column **remained largely unused**. Users crossing Freedom Square remain literally at the feet

of the memorial, that **does not facilitate comfortable interactions**: users have to look upwards and from an appropriate distance to have a complete vision of the memorial.

The users' interpretations of the political dimension

Interviewing on the political dimension of the Victory Column concerned two main issues: **the design issues** and **the political meanings** that the Victory Column has assumed for users. As for **the design issues**, respondents agreed that the development of the original plan was **controversial**. 6 respondents recalled the debate around the material design choices and the defects during and after the construction of the Victory Column.

As for **the political messages**, 7 respondents defined the Victory Column as a memorial erected to convey **dominant political power**. These respondents considered the power of the Victory Column as something “*controversial*” for a memorial erected with the intention to commemorate ideals of freedom and sovereignty. 1 Estonian respondent stated that the memorial “*communicates might rather than freedom*”. Ironically, 2 Estonian respondents born in independent Estonia considered the Victory Column as resembling typical monuments erected during totalitarian regimes:

And it [the Victory Column] looks like really Soviet for me. [...] Actually it is a combination of Nazi German and Soviet aesthetics. [...] For me, it is like a combination of something that we fought against for so long time. That is why it is odd. (Interview 1, Estonian, born 1991, female, hostel receptionist)

2 Russophones considered the Victory Column as a direct result of the Bronze Soldier's relocation. They considered the erection of the Victory Column as **a firm resolution to annihilate the ideological weight of the Bronze Soldier**. 1 of these respondents saw the memorial as a provocative act of the Estonian Government against Russophone communities living in Estonia:

I don't like the Cross [the Victory Column]. First of all because of when and why it appears here [in Freedom Square]. And after what [the troubled events following the Bronze Soldier's relocation]! [...] But what is this Cross about? I don't know... More than anything else, it has the function of the red cloth of the torero in front of the bull. (Interview 27, Russophone, born in 1982, female, journalist)

4.4 Three gaps of the Victory Column

This section identifies **three gaps** of the Victory Column: a) **between the designer's stated intentions and the users' interpretations**; b) **between the intended purpose of the Victory Column and its plastic and figurative levels**; and c) **between the Victory Column and its location**.

As for the gap between designer and users, **only the purpose of commemoration was correctly recognised and respected** by the totality of respondents. Otherwise, the intended purpose of the Victory Column and the significance it has assumed for Estonian political elites have not been widely recognised at the societal level. Specifically, respondents expressed discontent toward the fact that this event was presented in such **a hermetic iconography** and **resonating design**.

The Victory Column spawned **uses that are different from those envisioned by the designers**. Due to flat ground and sharp curbs, **skaters and bikers** use the space of the Victory Column for their tricks during the warmer weather. The memorial attracted **the expected practices of commemoration only during public rituals and ceremonies** organised by the Estonian Government and its affiliates (fig. XXX).



Fig. 4.5 – Laying of wreaths in front of the Victory Column during the celebrations of the Independence Day, 24 February 2015. Available at: Postimees.ee [Accessed: 24 February 2015]

Regarding the gap between the intended purpose of the Victory Column and its plastic and figurative levels, the memorial celebrates an event that, according to Estonian historical narratives, is linked with ideals of freedom and sovereignty. However, design choices such as hermetic iconography, large size and elevated location have linked the Victory Column with **powerful messages and totalitarian aesthetics**.

The gap between the publicised intended purpose of the Victory Column and its figurative and plastic levels demonstrates that **specific design choices cannot communicate specific meanings**. The built environment signifies insofar as **routinised patterns of interpretation** are created and such patterns emerge when design choices are repetitively used to convey certain meanings.

As for the gap between the Victory Column and its location, the conservative political messages embodied in the Victory Column are **in conflict with the public space of Freedom Square**. The objective behind the reconstruction plan of Freedom Square was to provide Tallinn with “*a public space open to everyone and filled with diverse content and events*” (Lige 2014: 152). Conversely, the Victory Column presents conservative political messages and its design choices resemble those used for monuments erected in totalitarian regimes or in places where there is high control over the population.

The gap registered between the Victory Column and its location supports Lige’s thesis that:

There is a strong conflict in the value categories of the square and the column subconsciously experienced by everyone using the space. It is a place that creates a simultaneous experience of pride and freedom but also embarrassment and elation. (Lige 2014: 153)

4.5 Conclusions: The multiple meanings of the Victory Column

The erection of memorials and the public rituals centred on them are **political tools** by which specific histories and geographies become embodied in space. Political elites erect memorials **to educate users toward the kinds of ideals** that they define as “central” (Lotman 1990) and want users to strive towards. To do that, elites use **a set of design strategies** to entice users along specific interpretations. Memorials can be seen **as texts** able to implement those strategies and to construct the intended meanings of designers.

However, users can interpret and use memorials in ways that are **different from those envisioned by designers** (Hay et al. 2004: 204). The meanings of the Victory Column arise from the interplay between designers’ and users’ interpretations. The table below lists the **isotopies** that emerged from the analysis.

Symbolic level	- Hermetic iconography - Language barriers
	- Commemorative purpose
	- A place for public rituals and cultural events
Plastic level	- Overpowering
	- Controversial design
	- Uncomfortable interaction
Political dimension	- Explicit: a concrete manifestation of political power
	- A tool for the national politics of memory and identity: an ideological understanding of the past for a select audience
Cultural context	- Reference to precise past event and identities to signify future possibilities
	- Link with the socio-ethnic controversies over the interpretation of the past
Intertextual relations	- Disconnected from its spatial surroundings
	- Loss of natural and historical heritage
	- Located within a representative space of the nation
Users' practices	- Scarce use
	- Unexpected uses

Estonian elites erected the Victory Column to promote **an ideological understanding of the past** to symbolise **a range of expectations about Estonia's future**. The Victory Column emphasized **past links** with the war whose victory led to Estonia's first independence. The reference to this victory meant to recall the memory of **Estonia's first period of independence** in order to signify the aspiration of returning to **pre-war traditions and institutions**, that were destroyed by foreign regimes (Tamm 2013: 654). The first Estonian independence is here remembered as a pre-Soviet "golden age" creating the ground for the development of Estonian national culture (Young and Kaczmarek 2008: 54).

In doing so, the memorial has helped to construct **sentiments of national belonging** and to promote **practices signalling devotion for the entire nation**. In brief, the Victory Column was **an important tool for the national politics of memory and identity**. As such, the Victory Column sought to legitimate the power and to set the cultural and political agendas of the Estonian elite.

The intentions of the Estonian Government behind the Victory Column were mainly **political: to gain political consent** among those who strongly wanted this memorial to be erected, such as the relatives of the soldiers who fought in the War of Independence; **to put an end to the social conflicts over the interpretations of monuments** that has characterised Estonia starting from the early 2000s; and, in consequence, **to turn a new page in the construction of the Estonian national memory and identity**.

However, the meanings that the Estonian Government strived to attach to the Victory Column were **not reflected at the societal level**. The Victory Column revealed a case in which users have **largely reinterpreted the designers' stated intentions**.

A great deal of criticism regarded the way in which the War of Independence is remembered through **the plastic and the figurative design choices** of the memorial. Tallinn citizens expressed discontent toward the fact that the remembered events and identities were presented through **a hermetic iconography and controversial design**, in a **location** that does not facilitate interactions and that it does not fit in with the adjacent built environment.

The negative attitudes of respondents link with the fact that the Victory Column has **remained largely unused**. Observations revealed that it is **very rare** that users climb the staircase to approach the memorial. The memorial attracts practices of commemorations - i.e. practices in accordance with its intended purpose - only during public rituals periodically arranged in its surroundings. For the rest of the year, the memorial attracts **only unexpected practices** that are different from those envisioned by its designers.

The interpretations and uses of the Victory Column **may change over time** following change in social relations, in concepts of nation and in views on past events. Designers can encourage this process attaching new meanings to the Victory Column. A new interpretative pattern may originate once Estonian authorities reduce the anxiety towards their original intentions and accept the plurality of interpretations, practices and relationships embodied in the memorial.