

# Lecture 5 - Case Study 2: The Kissing Students in Tartu

This lecture engages with the theoretical and methodological framework outlined in Lecture 2 and 3, presenting an analysis of the multiple interpretations of the Kissing Students (fig. 1), a circular fountain with a sculpture featuring two kissing young people beneath a umbrella, unveiled in Tartu in 1998.



Fig. 5.1 – The Kissing Students. Picture taken 1.6.2015

**Name:** The Kissing Students (Estonian Suudlevad tudengid)

**Date of unveiling:** 1 September 1988

**Iconography:** two kissing students beneath a dripping umbrella

**Location:** Town Hall Square, Tartu

**Owner:** Tartu City Council

**Authors:** the sculptor Mati Karmin and the architect Tiit Trummal

**Sizes:** life-sized sculpture, basin is 7 meters of diameter ( $\approx$  23 feet)

**Materials of construction:** sculpture is made of bronze, the fountain of granite

**Chromatic categories:** the dark bronze colour of the sculpture varies according to cleanness of the surfaces

The lecture argues that the Kissing Students presents outcomes regarding a) **the embodied cultural and political meanings** and b) **the different ways in which these meanings are interpreted at societal levels**. The publicised function of the Kissing Students was **to reassess an old fountain** and in turn **to improve the appearance of its surroundings**. Its design choices created **an inclusive, people-friendly space**: its iconography is easily recognisable, its material design encourage interaction. As such, the Kissing Students reflects the intention to create **a people-friendly public space** suitable to include the plural daily practices by users.

The Kissing Students has been largely **assimilated into the daily life of Tartu citizens**. Only occasionally the fountain-sculpture has attracted practices that are different to the designers' intentions. Nevertheless, Tartu authorities have tolerated these practices, so that they have become integrated into the figurative and plastic dimensions of the Kissing Students.

This lecture analyses **the designers' stated intentions** behind the Kissing Students and **the ways through which users interpret these intentions**. The analysis is divided into **three parts**. First, **section 5.2** addresses the designers' stated intentions behind the Kissing Students - i.e. the intended meanings of the 'authors'. Second, **section 5.3** presents the interpretations of users and their practices within the space of the Kissing Students - i.e. the interpretations, actions and interactions of the 'readers'. Third, **section 5.4** identifies **three connections of the Kissing Students**: a) between the designers' stated intentions and the users' interpretations; b) between the Kissing Students and the built environment of Tartu; and c) between the Kissing Students and the urban identity of Tartu. Finally, **section 5.5** concludes by comparing the data presented in previous sections to progress toward the theoretical dimension.

Before organising and discussing data, **section 5.1** introduces the context of the Kissing Students and explains the reasons why it was selected as an appropriate case study.

## 5.1 Introducing the Kissing Students

The Kissing Students is a sculptural composition including **a circular fountain** and **a bronze sculpture**. The sculpture features two young people while kissing, arms around each other beneath a dipping umbrella.

The Kissing Students stands in front of the old building of the town hall in **Town Hall Square** (in Estonian Raekoja Plats, fig. 40), the central square of Tartu. Town Hall Square has been **the political and civic centre of Tartu** since the 13th century. To mark its historical function as seat of the town council, this place was called Town Hall Square in 1990 (Salupere 2013: 82).

The regimes that ruled Tartu during the 20th century have used the present-day Town Hall Square **as seat of government and location for public rituals of power**. After Estonia regained independence, the square has undergone **various transformations** aiming at preserving its classical style. Today, Town Hall Square is the location of the Tartu City Council and it regularly hosts **public rituals, official celebrations and cultural events**.



Fig. 5.2 – Town Hall Square and the old town hall. Picture taken 27.4.2015

During the Second World War, several bombings left the central area of Tartu in ruins. In the late 1940s, the Soviet authorities of Tartu reconstructed part of the damaged buildings of Town Hall Square. In this context, they ordered **the construction of a fountain in 1948**, to be located in front of the old town hall.

But **after Estonia regained independence**, the fountain fell into a state of disrepair (Püttsepp 1997). Hence, Tartu authorities held competitions to collect **design projects for the rebuilding of the fountain**. The project of the Kissing Students won the design competition. The fountain-sculpture was inaugurated on 1 September 1998.

There are a number of reasons why the Kissing Students 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:** Despite its life-sized proportions, the fountain-sculpture is easily visible to users standing in a salient location of Town Hall Square in front of the old town hall.

#### • **Reasons at the figurative level:**

**Significance for the city:** The Kissing Students has become an increasingly popular meeting point for Tartu citizens. It has assumed particular significance for young people and students. Thus, the image of the Kissing Students has been largely used in manifold media associated with Tartu. The large use of the Kissing Students as a sort of logo of Tartu has demonstrated its strong link with the city and the importance it has assumed for the local authorities.

**Iconography:** the student-related iconography was consistent with the urban identity of Tartu

#### • **Reasons at the political level:**

**Apparent lack of political meaning:** The project of rebuilding the old fountain did not openly express direct political purposes. Nevertheless, the Kissing Students as every built form presents specific cultural and political meanings.

## 5.2 The designers' stated intentions

The investigation of **the designers' stated intentions** behind the Kissing Students is based on **direct observation, documents and secondary sources**. The sculptor of the bronze sculpture was interviewed to collect opinions, beliefs, judgements, emotions and feelings he has on the Kissing Students.

### **Who are the designers?**

To reassess the fountain built by the Soviet authorities, Tartu authorities held **a design competition** in 1996. The proposed plans appeared to be too expensive and none was realised. A second competition was then held in 1997 (Ottas 1997). The terms and conditions of this competition were based mainly **on economical and functional criteria**.

This 1997 design competition received 35 entries, but the committee unanimously decided not to award the first prize due to lack of appropriate projects (Ottas 1997). In February 1998, the deputy mayor announced that the winning entry was one of the two selected third prizes: **Vivat Universitatis** by the sculptor Mati Karmin and the architect Tiit Trummal. A letter explained that this project was **selected for four main reasons**: resistance to weather conditions; suitability with the classical built environment of Town Hall Square; monumentality; and consistency with the urban identity of Tartu (Püttsepp 1997).

### **The purpose of erection and the iconography**

The 1997 design committee aimed to select a rebuilding project **to reassess the old fountain in front of the old town hall** and in turn **to improve the appearance of its spatial surroundings**. An artist in the 1997 design committee stated that it was urgent to rebuild this fountain because of its state of critical disrepair.

The winning entry provided for the redesign of the fountain basin and included **the bronze sculpture of the two young people kissing beneath a dripping umbrella** (fig. 52). The official name of the project was Vivat Universitatis. However, the whole complex of the fountain-sculpture assumed the official name '**Kissing Students**', after the sculptor Mati Karmin clarified that the two represented young people were students.



Fig. 5.3 – The sculpture of the Kissing Students. Picture taken 12.3.2016

The mayor of Tartu stated that the Kissing Students was selected because of its student-related iconography (Püttsepp 1997). Tartu is the seat of the national university and it is considered the “intellectual capital of Estonia” (Salupere 2013: 6).

### **The cultural context and the political dimension**

The rebuilding of the old fountain has assumed specific significance for Tartu authorities, so that they spent a significant amount of resources to implement this project.



The project for rebuilding the fountain was implemented even **before supposedly more urgent interventions** such as the return of the Kalevipoeg monument, i.e. a monument commemorating those who fell in the War of Independence, destroyed during the Soviet regime (fig. XX).

The project of rebuilding the old fountain **did not openly express direct political purposes**. The establishment of a built environment free from direct political meanings has **been a common cultural policy in independent Estonia** supposed to enhance the “marketability” of the post-socialist built environment (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 204).

Nevertheless, the Kissing Students as every built **form presents specific cultural and political meanings**. The Kissing Students dedicates a place to a significant part of the population of Tartu: the students. Estonians believe that Tartu students were crucial in promoting the main elements of Estonian culture and in creating the ground for **the Estonian national awakening** (Salupere 2013: 6). Located right in the central square, the Kissing Students recognises the significance students have for Tartu, as bearers of an Estonian national consciousness.

In the immediate vicinity of the Kissing Students, Tartu authorities regularly organise **the celebrations of public holidays** commemorating independence. The main celebrations take place **during Victory Day** (fig. XXX), a public holiday marking the day in which Estonians defeated the German troops in 1919 during the War of Independence.



Fig. 5.4-5.5 – Celebrations of Victory Day and St John’s Eve on 23 June 2015.  
Pictures available at: [tartu.postimees.ee](http://tartu.postimees.ee) [Accessed: 23 June 2016]

### 5.3 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 Kissing Students. This reflection is based on primary data collected through **interviews and observations** carried out during fieldwork in Tartu 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 Kissing Students.

#### **The users’ interpretations of the figurative level**

Interviewing on the figurative level of the Kissing Students concerned two main issues: **the iconography** and **the suitability of the fountain-sculpture** in relation to the urban identity of Tartu as a university city. All the respondents acknowledged the iconography of the Kissing Students.

7 respondents accepted the idea that the Kissing Students can be taken as the main **'symbol' of Tartu**. In respondents' terms, the word 'symbol' simply meant a recognisable and distinctive built form normally associated with Tartu. Conversely, 9 respondents called this issue into question seeing the Kissing Students as **too poor in meaning and artistic value** to be the symbol of Tartu. Yet, all the respondents generally agreed on the statement that the Kissing Students could be taken as **one of the symbols of Tartu**.

10 respondents identified in the iconography the reason why they considered the Kissing Students as one of the symbols of Tartu. They believed that the Kissing Students sculpture **appropriately represented student life and ideals related with youth**. 2 respondents from the oldest age band associated the Kissing Students with **love**.

*I think this [the Kissing Students] is the symbol of Tartu because it represents youth and love. Love and youth are related with Tartu. The sculpture represents also the relation between students and Tartu. (Interview 16, Estonian, born in 1953, female, language teacher)*

10 respondents described the Kissing Students as being **a popular meeting point among students and young people**. Observations confirmed the significance of the Kissing Students for **young people** and students. Very often young people wait for friends in front of the Kissing Students. **Fraternity and sorority students** gather around the Kissing Students during specific rituals and celebrations (fig. 67). Moreover, it is common for **newly** graduated students to take pictures with their families and friends in front of the Kissing Students after the **graduation ceremony**. Occasionally, groups of students take **a dip into the basin of the fountain**, following the legend saying that one should take a dip in the fountain to be considered a "real student" of the University of Tartu (Estonian Moments 2013).

Furthermore, observations demonstrated that the fountain is an attraction for **young people and small children**. Schoolchildren use the fountain for water balloon fights as celebration of the end of school in May and June. During these practices, students **occasionally put soap in the basin to create foam** all over the fountain (fig. 68).



Fig. 5.6 – Fraternity students drinking in front of the Kissing Students. Picture taken 19.10.2015



Fig. 5.7 – Schoolchildren in front of the Kissing Students full of soap foam. Picture taken 25.6.2016

## **The users' interpretations of the plastic level**

Interviewing on the plastic level of the Victory Column concerned two main issues: **the material appearance** and **the location**. No respondents expressed criticisms of the material design.

Only 1 respondent defined the sculpture as a modest urban decoration that may divert attention from “more valuable” monuments (Interview 18, Russophone, born in 1982, female, academic administrator). 5 respondents explicitly stated that the Kissing Students has **a good design** and stands in **an appropriate location**.

2 respondents considered the Kissing Students as **very visible**, being placed in a salient location of Town Hall Square. 11 respondents stated they **daily cross this area**. Furthermore, they reported that they visit Town Hall Square for attending **entertaining and cultural events**.

Observations demonstrated that the location of the Kissing Students has a higher level of **pedestrian traffic** all through the week. **During the weekdays**, there is quick crossing of students. Especially **at weekends** during the warmer times, citizens and tourists spend time in the outdoor seating of restaurants and cafes in Town Hall Square.

## The users' interpretations of the political dimension

Interviewing on the political dimension of the Kissing Students concerned the relation between the Kissing Students and those who took the initiative for its construction, i.e. **the Tartu City Council** and its affiliates. 4 respondents defined the Kissing Students as **a good project** implemented by Tartu authorities. 10 respondents manifested approval toward the design project because it conveys ideals connected with student life, youth and love. They identified these ideals **in accordance with the urban identity of Tartu**.

1 respondent directly referred to the political dimension of the Kissing Students - or better, to **the apparent lack of direct political purposes**. The respondent manifested a positive attitude toward the Kissing Students because it presents meanings disconnected from selective political messages and historical narratives.

*When I think about other statues in Tartu – for example, Juri Lotman in front of the library or Kristjan Peterson in Toomemägi Park - they all refer to specific spheres of interest. Conversely, the Kissing Students is something that almost everyone can relate to. It is what the city is about for everyone: it is about you, people, students and their relations...yeah it very relatable! [...] (Interview 3, Estonian, born in 1990, female, customer adviser)*

Tartu city authorities periodically organise **celebrations** of days of national or local importance in Town Hall Square. However, no respondents recalled to have attended any of these official celebrations. 1 respondent reported that they regularly observed **the commemorative events** in memory of the victims of the Soviet deportations in 1949, for the reason that a family member was deported (interview 28, Estonian, born in 1960, male, astrophysicist). Respondents affirmed to prefer visiting Town Hall Square during **entertaining or cultural events**.

## 5.4 Three connections of the Kissing Students

This section identifies **three connections** of the Kissing Students: a) **between the designers' stated intentions and the users' interpretations**; b) **between the Kissing Students and the built environment of Tartu**; and c) **between the Kissing Students and the urban identity of Tartu**.

As for the connection between the designer's intentions and the users' interpretations, the Kissing Students reveals a case in which the interpretations of users **match** with the designers' stated intentions **to a great extent**. Tartu authorities rebuilt the old fountain to improve the appearance of the central area of Tartu. **The positive attitude of citizens** and **the large use** during their everyday life are symbolic of the accomplishment of this task.

Design strategies such as **easily understandable iconography**, **life-sized proportions** and **continuity with the surrounding built environment** have facilitated the interaction between the Kissing Students and users. The meaning of the Kissing Students is **inclusive**: users do not require a specific knowledge to interpret its function and iconography. Consistent with this, all respondents acknowledged and endorsed its narrative.

Analysis registered connections between the Kissing Students and the built environment of Tartu. It interacts with the surrounding built environment, **without overshadowing existing built forms**. No major interventions were implemented and the original basin of the fountain was maintained. Moreover, the inclusive meanings of the Kissing Students have helped **to generate and support everyday practices** by citizens as well as **cultural and entertaining events** periodically arranged in its surroundings.

The fountain-sculpture articulates a set of **ideals that relate to student life, youth and love**. Respondents identified these ideals in accordance with **the urban identity** of Tartu. The large use of the Kissing Students **on manifold media** reinforces the association between the Kissing Students and **Tartu as a university city**.

The connections of the Kissing Students demonstrate that designers **implemented appropriate design strategies** to entice users along interpretations that conform to their intentions. **Users conform to the Model User foreseen by designers**, i.e. they interpret and use the Kissing Students in the ways designers have expected.

**Only a few practices differing to the designers' stated intentions** were registered, i.e. when young people put soap in the basin. However, these practices are only occasional and the Tartu authorities have not spent much effort to discourage them.

Therefore, the relation between the Kissing Students and users is **not confrontational**. Plastic and figurative design choices and the lack of direct references to selective political meanings and historical narratives have contributed to **the non-confrontational character** of the Kissing Students.

Whilst no political purposes were openly expressed, the Kissing Students still presents **the political meanings and cultural positions** of those that took the initiative for its erection. As with every built form, it articulates "one set of ideas, sequence of events, values and identities as opposed to another set" (Abousnougga and Machin 2013: 4). Avoiding confrontational political messages is still **a specific urban policy**, which has been largely used in the context of the transition to democracy and the subsequent changing of the concepts in the Estonian nation and society.

In Tartu, the general aim of this policy was **to establish a built environment that does not directly refer to the political storm** characterising Estonia throughout the 20th century. Yet, Tartu authorities decided to place in the central square a built form representing **a student-related iconography**, conveying ideals of youth and love.

As seen in Lecture 2 § 2.3, **location** largely affects the interpretations of built forms and in turn built forms influence the space in which they are located. Tartu authorities gave the Kissing Students **high visibility and significant ideological weight** by placing it in Town Hall Square. In turn, the Kissing Students helped the symbolic geography of Town Hall Square to turn from being the seat of the orthodox political power into a modern "cultural quarter".

**The everyday practices** observed within the space of the Kissing Students have demonstrated **the realization of this cultural reinvention**: the students meeting at the Kissing Students between classes, couples taking pictures mimicking the sculpture, tourist groups using the Kissing Students as the background for their pictures, children seeking to climb on the basin of the fountain to reach the water and many people walking along Town Hall Square to enter restaurants and cafes.

The establishment of **a built environment free from direct political meanings** has been **a common cultural policy in post-Soviet Estonia** as well as throughout post-socialist countries (Väljas and Lige 2015: 77).



Attractive in design and easily understandable in meaning, **non-confrontational built forms** have become cultural goods supposed to enhance the “marketability” of post-socialist cities (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 204).

As is usual for a city, Tartu has its own **monuments conveying direct political and cultural positions**. For example, there is a boulevard called Freedom Avenue (in Estonian Vabaduse Puiestee), constructed during the first Estonian independence to celebrate the newly achieved sovereignty. Along the avenue, there is a park, which has been the place to erect important monuments since the 1930s (Salupere 2013: 139). Here, **a memorial** was erected to commemorate those who served during the Estonian War of Independence (fig. 76).



Fig. 5.8 – The Kalevipoeg monument commemorating those who served during the Estonian War of Independence. Picture taken 12.4.2015

## 5.5 Conclusions: The multiple meanings of the Kissing Students

The erection of built forms and the public rituals centred on them help to embody specific histories and geographies in space. The built environment can be used as a form of discourse to construct and spread cultural and political meanings in space (Dovey 1999: 1). The design of the built environment can be used to educate users toward the kinds of ideals that elites define as “central” (Lotman 1990) and want users to strive towards. The table in the next page lists the isotopies that emerged from the analysis.

|                               | <b>Kissing Students</b>  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Figurative level</b>       | - Easily understandable iconography  |
|                               | - Reassessment of public space   |
|                               | - A place for public rituals and cultural events   |
| <b>Plastic level</b>          | - Life-sized proportions   |
|                               | - Good design  |
|                               | - Easy interaction   |
| <b>Political dimension</b>    | - Implicitly conveying cultural and political meanings   |
|                               | - A tool to convey cultural and political meanings: an everyday narrative for the general public |
| <b>Cultural context</b>       | - Reference to an undefined past and representation of specific identities (gender, age, race)   |
|                               | - No major controversies   |
| <b>Intertextual relations</b> | - Appropriate location: continuity with the surrounding built environment                        |
|                               | - No major interventions in the built environment  |
|                               | - Located in a cultural quarter  |
| <b>Users' practices</b>       | - A common feature in the daily life of citizens   |
|                               | - Unexpected uses  |

The Kissing Students has embodied **the intention to establish an inclusive space** presenting **soft meanings and everyday narratives**. Design strategies such as **easily understandable iconography, life-sized proportions and continuity with the surrounding built environment** have facilitated the interaction between the Kissing Students and users.

The Kissing Students has enhanced the “marketability” of Town Hall Square. Observations demonstrated that the area of the Kissing Students is today a “cultural quarter” bringing together **playful practices, tourism, leisure and general consumption of space** (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 204). As such, the Kissing Students can be seen as a practice of cultural reinvention to create sites of consumption symbolising Estonia’s shift to a market economy:

*The strong onrush of commercial architecture stuck out the most in the urban scene during the 1990s – office- and bank buildings, shopping centres and malls, car dealerships and hotels. (Väljas and Lige 2015: 77)*

The Kissing Students revealed a case in which **the interpretations of users match with the designers’ stated intentions** to a great extent. Respondents manifested **approval toward the plastic and the figurative levels** of the Kissing Students as well as toward its **non-confrontational cultural and political meanings**. They described the Kissing Students as **consistent with the built environment and the urban identity of Tartu**.

Yet, designers do not have complete control over users’ interpretations and practices. The Kissing Students has thus attracted **some practices that are different to the designers’ stated intentions**; however, these practices have become integrated into the figurative and plastic dimensions of the Kissing Students.

The interpretations and uses of the Kissing Students **may change over time** following change in social relations and in concepts of nation. At the moment, consistency was registered between the designers’ stated intentions and the users’ interpretations, between the Kissing Students and the built environment of Tartu and between the Kissing Students and the urban identity of Tartu.