

The cultural reinvention of the Estonian built environment: A comparative analysis between the Victory Column and the Kissing Students

This lecture proposes **a comparative analysis** between the case studies in order to establish **the generality of the findings** and to abstract them to the **theoretical dimension** (Manning 1987: 25). As seen in Lecture 3 § 3.5, **comparative analysis** identifies the similarities and differences between the interpretative processes of the researched monuments and makes 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**.

The analysis of this lecture compares **the analytical findings** presented in Lecture 4 and 5 in order to assess the extent and the potential of the connections between **the cultural-geographical and the semiotic aspects** of the Victory Column and the Kissing Students.

The Victory Column and the Kissing Students are **different in a number of aspects**, but they also present several **similarities**. **Section 6.1** presents the differences and the similarities of the researched monuments in order to create the ground for understanding the rationale for the comparative analysis, presented in **section 6.2**.

Sections 6.3-6.5 address three objectives: **section 6.3** describes the kinds of cultural meanings and national politics embodied in the monuments; **section 6.4** compares the ways in which the monuments were interpreted at societal levels; **section 6.5** discusses the kinds of practices occurring within the space of the monuments.

6.1 The rationale for an unusual comparison

Estonian citizens consider the Victory Column and the Kissing Students as **very different built forms**. Interviews and observations registered many differences on their **plastic, figurative and political aspects**.

The plastic levels differ greatly between the two monuments. The Victory Column is monumental, it is placed on an elevated location and it is made of regular-shaped glass plates. The Kissing Students has life-sized proportions and it is placed on a circular platform on the ground level; the fountain is made of granite and the sculpture of bronze. **As for the figurative level**, the Victory Column presents a military iconography that only a few can easily recognise. The Kissing Students sculpture represents the everyday narrative of two students while kissing with arms around each other.

As for the political dimension, the Victory Column was conceived as a tool to reinforce the power of the political elites who took the initiative for its erection. The design of the Victory Column was rushed to accommodate political needs. The time pressure resulted in a lack of participative planning practices and non-transparency of financing. The lack of dialogue between designers and users has ignited a controversy around the ways in which this memorial presented the commemorated event, i.e. the victory that led to the first independence of Estonia. On the other hand, the Kissing Students did not openly express direct political purposes.

Different in a number of aspects, the Victory Column and the Kissing Students also present **several similarities**. Both have become **important landmarks** in the central areas of Tallinn and Tartu. Due to their significant locations, **their immediate surroundings** are regularly used for public rituals and **commemorative practices**.

Differences and similarities of the locations

The differences and similarities of the Victory Column and the Kissing Students are **reflected in their locations** – respectively Freedom Square and Town Hall Square. **At the plastic level**, Freedom Square underwent a complete reconstruction implemented through contemporary design choices, including modern detailing and furniture. Conversely, Town Hall Square in Tartu has preserved its classical style through the years. The ground of the two squares has encouraged practices that are different from each other: for example, the flat ground of Freedom Square has attracted skating and biking practices, impossible on the cobblestone of Town Hall Square.

At the figurative level, the reconstruction of Freedom Square aimed to provide Tallinn with a pedestrianised public space open to different cultural events. However, the hermetic meaning of the Victory Column has had such an impact that 3 respondents defined Freedom Square as an empty place eliciting cold emotions. Conversely, 7 respondents explained that Town Hall Square is a popular public square with a relaxed and joyful atmosphere.

As for the political dimension, the reconstruction of Freedom Square aimed to provide Tallinn with a venue for Estonia's public rituals. The erection of the Victory Column filled the square with conservative political meanings. Conversely, the erection of the Kissing Students helped to turn Town Hall Square from being the former seat of the orthodox political power into a modern "cultural quarter" (Abousnoug and Machin 2013: 204).

However, it is possible to identify **several similarities** between Tallinn Freedom Square and Tartu Town Hall Square. **At the plastic level**, the recently reconstructed built environment of Freedom Square highly differs from the classicist-look of Town Hall Square. Nevertheless, the locations of the squares have analogous functions: both squares are popular meeting points or places to cross to reach other functional parts of the city. Moreover they are periodically used for entertaining and cultural events.

At the figurative level, Estonian elites have always considered these squares as symbolically important within the contexts of Tallinn and Tartu. Thus Estonian elites spent a lot of resources for the reconstruction and the preservation of their built environment. Furthermore, they chose these squares as locations to erect important built forms and monuments, such as the Victory Column and the Kissing Students.

As for the political dimension, both squares function as urban stages for public rituals and celebrations of days of national and local importance. Both are the location of the city council. Finally, both squares are occasionally used as the geographical point for civic demonstrations and protests.

6.2 The rationale for the comparative analysis

The rationale for comparing the Victory Column and the Kissing Students is **twofold: first**, they show two different ways of conveying cultural and political meanings; **second**, they present different ways in which these national politics are interpreted at societal levels.

As for the first point, the Victory Column helped to promote **an ideological understanding of the past** and thus to symbolise **a range of expectations about Estonia's future**. Through the Victory Column, Estonian elites sought to establish **an exclusive place for national mourning and commemoration** as well as to reinforce the primacy of their **political power**. On the other hand, the Kissing Students did not openly express direct political purposes: it presented soft meanings and everyday narratives aiming at embellishing its spatial surroundings and enhancing the marketability of the central area of Tartu.

As for the interpretations at societal levels, the Victory Column revealed a case in which users have **largely reinterpreted** the designers' stated intentions. Conversely, the Kissing Students presented a case in which the interpretations of users **match** with the designers' intentions to a great extent.

Despite the different ways of realisation, the Victory Column and the Kissing Students can be seen **as part of the cultural reinvention** implemented to create a built environment in accordance with the current political and cultural agendas of the Estonian elites. Even if in a less obvious manner than the Victory Column, the Kissing Students presents **specific cultural and political meanings**, promoting the kinds of ideals that designers define as “*central*” (Lotman 1990) and want users to strive towards.

6.3 The cultural meanings and national politics embodied in the Victory Column and in the Kissing Students

As seen in Lecture 1 § 1.1, monuments are essential tools to promote a **uniform national memory** and reinforce sentiments of **national belonging**. Articulating historical narratives, monuments can inculcate particular conceptions of the **present** and encourage **future** possibilities (Massey 1995; Dovey 1999; Dwyer 2000; Osborne 1998). Hence, elites use monuments as tools **to legitimate the primacy of their political power** and **to set their political agendas**. This is also the case of apparently less confrontational built forms that still present specific political meanings and cultural positions.

The analysis in Lecture 4 demonstrated that the Victory Column was a **concrete manifestation of power**. The memorial aimed to establish a place for national mourning while creating the basis to gain political consent. Great size, verticality and elevated position were material **design choices** used to convey powerful meanings in space. These material design choices resemble those used for monuments erected **in totalitarian regimes** or in places where there is a high control over population. The figurative level of the Victory Column was designed for a select audience informed on Estonian language and on Estonia's history.

The Victory Column was conceived to produce a **Model User** able to understand the writings in Estonian language, to correctly recognise the iconography and to acknowledge the commemorated events. Moreover, the Model Users should have shown respect for the celebrated dead and approached the memorial with sentiments of mourning and commemoration.

The analysis in Lecture 5 demonstrated that the Kissing Students did not openly express direct **political purposes**. Nevertheless, the Kissing Students presented **specific cultural and political meanings** of those that took the initiative for its erection. The establishment of a built environment free from direct references to the political storm characterising Estonia in the 20th century has been **a common cultural policy** in post-Soviet Estonia (Väljas and Lige 2015: 77).

Attractive in **design** and easily understandable in **meaning**, the Kissing Students has enhanced the “*marketability*” of Tartu's central area, turning Town Hall Square into an attractive “*cultural quarter*” (Abousnougga and Machin 2013: 204). The figurative level of the Kissing Students refers to **open meanings**, while dedicating a place to a significant part of the population of Tartu: the students. The material design of the Kissing Students is consistent with the surrounding built environment. Its life-sized proportions allow an **easy interaction** with users.

The **Model User** of the Kissing Students was supposed to recognise the significance of students for Tartu as a university city. Moreover, the Model User should have engaged with the fountain-sculpture during the course of the daily life, without trying to directly access it.

The table below compares the kinds of cultural meanings and national politics embodied in the Victory Column and in the Kissing Students:

Victory Column	Kissing Students
Deliberate political purposes	Free from direct political messages
Concrete manifestation of political power	Urban ornament presenting an everyday cultural narrative

6.4 The interpretations of the cultural meanings and national politics at societal levels

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 and memorials that has characterised Estonia from the early 2000s; and, in turn, to turn a new page in the construction of the Estonian national memory and identity.

Using the Victory Column for such political purposes, the Estonian Government established a space at which the primacy of its political power distinctly becomes legitimated. However, users have differently interpreted the powerful intentions embodied in the Victory Column. Tallinn citizens expressed **disapproval of various aspects** of the Victory Column: they considered the **hermetic iconography** of the memorial as not suitable for the purpose of commemoration; they expressed discontent toward **the material design**, too resonating and grandiose to commemorate ideals of freedom. In brief, the Victory Column revealed a case in which the designers' stated intentions have been largely reinterpreted.

Conversely, the Kissing Students presented a case in which the interpretations of users **match** with the designers' stated intentions to a great extent. Tartu local authorities erected the fountain-sculpture **to improve the appearance of Tartu's central area**. Its erection can be seen as **a practice of cultural reinvention** seeking to enhance the **attractiveness** of Estonian cities. Practices of the like have recently become common throughout Estonia as well as throughout the post-socialist countries.

The positive attitudes of citizens have been symbolic of the general approval of the Kissing Students at the societal level: the totality of respondents have acknowledged and endorsed its **everyday narrative**; they have expressed general approval toward **the iconography and the material design**. Design strategies such as easily understandable iconography, life-sized dimensions and continuity with the surrounding built environment have facilitated the interaction between the Kissing Students and users. Altogether, the Kissing Students has been largely assimilated into the everyday itineraries of Tartu citizens.

The table below compares the different ways in which the political and cultural meanings embodied in the Victory Column and the Kissing Students have been interpreted at societal levels:

Victory Column	Kissing Students
Reinterpretation of the designers' intentions	Endorsement of the designers' intentions
General disapproval	General approval

6.5 The different practices occurring within the space of the Victory Column and the Kissing Students

The ontological experience of spatial practices has an impact upon the interpretations of monuments. **Interpretation and practice** should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as **interdependent** ways of understanding the built environment and monuments specifically.

Observations demonstrated that the Victory Column has attracted **practices that are different** from the expected commemoration and mourning; for example, skaters and bikers trying out their tricks. Beside these practices, the memorial has remained largely unused during the course of daily life.

Conversely, the Kissing Students is **a common feature that is crossed everyday in the itineraries of Tartu citizens**. Interviews and observations demonstrated that the Kissing Students is largely used as **a meeting point**.

The Kissing Students has occasionally attracted some practices that are different to the designers' stated intentions, especially **playful practices**. The Tartu local authorities have not spent much effort to discourage these practices; therefore, they have become integrated into the figurative and plastic dimensions of the Kissing Students.

The table below compare the different kinds of uses and practices occurring within the space of the Victory Column and the Kissing Students:

Victory Column	Kissing Students
Scarce use	Large use
Unexpected practices	Unexpected practices