

The potential of the connection between cultural geography and semiotics for the study of the built environment

This lecture first recalls the context in which this course has originated. **Section 7.2** then discusses the key arguments made within each lecture, highlighting the contributions that can be claimed as original. **Section 7.3** outlines the limitations of the thesis. Finally, **section 7.4** indicates directions for future research.

7.1 Recalling the context

This series of lectures aimed to make an original contribution to the understanding of **the interpretations of monuments** by proposing **a theoretical framework based on the connection between semiotics and cultural geography**. The lectures claimed that this framework can advance the understanding of what strategies designers use to design monuments and how monuments are variously interpreted at societal levels.

Monuments were defined as **built forms with celebratory and commemorative functions** that directly or indirectly present **political purposes**. They promote specific conceptualisations of the past, present and future. In doing so, they can set **political agendas** and reproduce **social order**.

Thus, elites design monuments striving to **reinforce their political power** and to **legitimise dominant dynamics of inclusion and exclusion**. Nevertheless, designers cannot fully control the interpretations of monuments: **users differently interpret monuments** following their opinions, beliefs and feelings.

7.2 The original contributions to the multiple interpretations of monuments

This section discusses the **key arguments** made within each lecture, emphasizing the original contribution to the multiple interpretations of monuments. Building on the research aims, the contributions of each lecture are here divided into **theoretical and empirical contributions**.

Three key theoretical contributions

Lecture 1, on 'The limitations of the geographical and the semiotic perspectives on monuments', identified the **key limitations of the geographical and the semiotic literature** on monuments. Human and cultural geography provided a methodological basis to understand the ways in which monuments could reproduce social order and reinforce political power. Nevertheless, the geographical approach to monuments grounded itself on **two key limitations**: first, geographers have grounded themselves on **a rigid notion of symbolism** where specific plastic aspects were believed to communicate specific meanings; second, they had **a restricted focus on the designers' intentions**.

Semiotics has sought to overcome the restricted focus on the designers' intentions that has characterised the geographical approach. However, the key limitations of the geographical approach persisted in semiotics.

Lecture 1 concluded identifying **two limitations** that have been predominant in both the cultural geographical and the semiotic approaches to monuments:

1. There has been no extended discussion of how the plastic and figurative levels of monuments actually convey political meanings and thus of how they can effectively reinforce political power.
2. Little attention has been paid to how monuments are interpreted at the societal level.

Lecture 2, on 'The connection between cultural geography and semiotics: A holistic perspective on meaning-making of monuments', proposed a **theoretical framework to overcome these limitations** and thus to contribute to the understanding of the multiple interpretations of monuments.

This framework was based on a **holistic perspective** that conceives **four interplays** as central: a) between the plastic, figurative and political dimensions; b) between designers and users; c) between monuments and the cultural context; and d) between monuments and the built environment.

The proposed theoretical framework has a number of consequences that open three original perspectives.

1. **The plastic, figurative and political dimensions** of monuments always function together and influence each other through continuous mediations. These dimensions equally contribute to the creation and development of a **better** understanding of how the meanings of monuments are constructed and negotiated.
2. The meanings of monuments originate at **the intersection between the designers' and the users' interpretations**. A set of strategies is available to designers to entice users along specific interpretations of monuments. Nevertheless, not all users conform to the designers' intentions. Unforeseen interpretations and practices thus play a critical role in the meaning-making of monuments.
3. The interpretations of monuments are determined **by culture and by the interrelations monuments have with the built environment**. The meaningful nature of monuments cannot be analysed separately from the cultural context and separately from its interrelations with surrounding built forms.

Empirical contributions

Two **case studies** were analysed: the Victory Column in Tallinn and the Kissing Students in Tartu. These two monuments had different appearance, but both contributed to **cultural reinventions** seeking to create a built environment in accordance with the current political and cultural agendas of the Estonian elites.

Lecture 4, on 'Case Study 1: The Victory Column in Tallinn', analysed the **War of Independence Victory Column**, a war memorial unveiled in Tallinn in 2009. Analysis showed that the Victory Column is a **concrete manifestation of power** signifying the power of the Estonian Government who took the initiative for its erection. Its plastic and figurative design strategies establish **an exclusive space for a select audience**: the memorial does not address those who are alien to the Estonian culture and history, who may easily misinterpret its logic. Yet the Victory Column creates a distant relation even with the addressed audience.

Analysis demonstrated that there is an evident **gap between the designer' stated intentions and the users' interpretations** of the Victory Column. The Victory Column was erected to articulate specific understandings of the Estonian national memory and identity and to support dominant power interests. However, the selective meanings that the Estonian Government strived to convey through the Victory Column are not reflected at societal levels.

Users have mostly reinterpreted the political and the cultural positions embodied in the Victory Column. Furthermore, the memorial has not attracted the expected practices of commemorations and sentiments of mourning.

Lecture 5, on 'Case Study 2: The Kissing Students in Tartu', extended the discussion to a less confrontational built form: **the Kissing Students**, a circular fountain with a sculpture featuring two kissing young people under an umbrella, unveiled in Tartu in 1998. This lecture argued that the analysis of **less controversial built forms** can be as revelatory as that of more politicised monuments in understanding the connection of the cultural geographical and the semiotic approach to the built environment.

The Kissing Students presents a cultural reinvention extensively used in post-Soviet Estonia: to establish **a built environment free from direct political meanings** and not directly related to the political storm characterising Estonia throughout the 20th century. Analysis showed that plastic and figurative design strategies help to create **a people-friendly built form** and to encourage interaction with users. The purpose and iconography of the Kissing Students are easy to understand for Estonians as well as for outsiders.

Analysis demonstrated that the users' interpretations of the Kissing Students **match with the designers' stated intentions** to a great extent. Tartu citizens have welcomed the cultural positions embodied in the fountain-sculpture and included it in their everyday itineraries. **Citizens have mostly approved** the material design of the Kissing Students and seen it as consistent with the surrounding built environment. They have considered the Kissing Students as suitable and representative for the urban identity of Tartu.

Lecture 6, on 'The cultural reinvention of the Estonian built environment: **A comparative analysis** between the Victory Column and the Kissing Students', proposed a comparative analysis of the case studies. Comparative analysis identified the **similarities and differences** between the interpretative processes of the monuments and made them cohere into a meaningful argument: that **the built environment is a form of discourse** that designers can shape and transform to convey specific cultural and political meanings (Dovey 1999: 1). However, designers do not have complete control over users' interpretations and practices and thus **users differently interpret** the built environment following their opinions, beliefs and feelings.

The results that emerged from the analyses indicated that elites use monuments as **a form of discourse** to construct and spread meanings in space. Designers use **complex semiotic strategies** to channel users' interpretations, but users interpret monuments **in ways designers may have never intended**. The holistic perspective **connecting semiotics and cultural geography** can be very useful to understand **what strategies designers use** to design monuments and **how these are variously interpreted at societal levels**.

7.3 Limitations of the thesis

While it is hoped that this approach can contribute to the understanding of the connection between cultural geography and semiotics, there are some apparent **limitations** concerning the concepts chosen for discussion and the methods of data collection.

Limitations concerning the concepts chosen for discussion

The thesis primarily concentrated on the cultural geographical and semiotic aspects of monuments and to the ways they connect. More concepts from geography and semiotics themselves could be discussed to give a broader picture: for example, concepts and methodologies from **biosemiotics** and from **semiotics of culture** could enrich understanding of the interpretative aspects of monuments.

Methods of data collection

Measures were taken to minimise the researcher effect on data collection. However, the researcher's personal identity inevitably influenced the collection and analysis of data. **Data collection and analysis are essentially subjective** and necessarily reflect cultural conventions, education, past experiences, needs as well as transitory physical and emotional states of the researcher.

Secondly, data collection may have overlooked important information due to **the language barriers of the researcher**, that has only an elementary knowledge of Estonian and Russian. For this reason, relevant material in Estonian and Russian not translated into English may have been disregarded. Secondly, the researcher interacted mostly, but not exclusively, with relatively well-educated Estonian and Russian respondents that speak English as a foreign language. However, recruiting Estonian citizens with a fair knowledge of English was an easy task and using English as an interview language was an effective strategy to reach more confidentiality in respondents.

7.4 Future directions

The first question to take further concerns the ways in which concepts from cultural geography and semiotics can inform **practical planning and management policies** in relation to monuments. The analytical results could provide **'solutions' for planners and policy makers** to comprehend how interpretations are negotiated between different agents involved in urban planning policies and practices. In this respect, since interpretation is closely connected with individual bodies, **interpretative semiotics** is open to a reflection for the approach known as **biosemiotics** (Sebeok 2001a; Kull 2005; Hoffmeyer 2008; see also Cobley 2001b: 163-164). **A biosemiotic approach** is recommended to enrich the understanding of the semiotic mechanisms underpinning the individuals' interactions with the built environment.

Concepts from **semiotics of culture**, such as the notion of "explosion" (Lotman 2009), are also needed to map the dynamics of social and political change in relation to urban space and consequently to improve urban planning and management policies (Lindström et al 2014: 126).

Secondly, future research will concern the ways in which the research results can offer 'solutions' for the practical planning and design of monuments in the context of **the post-socialist city**. Further research on **Estonian national politics of memory and identity** is desirable. This desire stems from the large amount of data collected that were not included here due to the limits in scope and in space. Further analysis on the field cases is continuing and will be presented in future papers. Furthermore, other built forms in Estonia can be compared with the case studies analysed in this thesis.

Finally, comparisons with other case studies can be done to advance the understanding of the current national politics of memory and identity throughout **the post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in Central Asia** as well as in other **transitional and changing societies**.