



'Sites of memory': an urban perspective

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ABSTRACT. The collective identity has, as main references, various 'sites of memory' that are not only mental constructions, but also physical places related to the collective common space, shared by a community – the city. The transformations occur at the level of cityscape, transformations that have as their object the sites of memory, and determine a series of modifications at the level of the collective narrative identity. This paper explores a range of political changes imposed at the cityscape level, approaching different aspects of the processes involved. Presenting some relevant concepts in order to sustain the theoretical frame of the research, in its second part the paper focuses on the complex relation between memory, narrative identity, city and political power, revealing the dynamics of this relation and of the representation of the sites of memory.

Keywords: cultural memory, cityscape, narrative, collective identity.

'Lugares de memória': uma perspectiva urbana

RESUMO. A identidade coletiva tem, como principais referências, vários 'lugares de memória', que não são apenas estruturas mentais, mas também lugares físicos relacionados com o espaço comum coletivo, partilhado por uma comunidade – a cidade. As transformações ocorrem ao nível da paisagem urbana, transformações que tenham como objetivo os locais de memória, e determinam uma série de modificações ao nível da identidade narrativa coletiva. Este artigo explora uma gama de mudanças políticas impostas ao nível de paisagem urbana, abordando diferentes aspetos dos processos envolvidos. Apresentando alguns conceitos relevantes, ao fim de enquadrar no quadro teórico da pesquisa, o trabalho se concentra, na segunda parte, na complexa relação existente entre memória, identidade narrativa, cidade e o poder político, revelando a dinâmica desta relação e da representação dos locais de memória.

Palavras-chave: memória cultural, paisagem urbana, narrativa, identidade coletiva.

Introduction

The study correlates the characteristics of the individual and collective identity to assume stable identity references as elements of a coherent narrative with specific cultural and collective 'sites of memory'. The city is analyzed as a complex structure where the personal and collective identities define themselves using different sites of memory embodied with cultural meaning. The identity references are transposed in the physical space; "[...] the constitutive relationship between memory and place is most obvious in the realms of material culture [...]" (HOELSCHER; ALDERMAN, 2004, p. 350).

The city is a clear representation of the collective identity of a community; it can be regarded as a map of cultural memory, a map where all the important sites of memory, which play a role in the process of defining the identity, can be found: streets, corners, buildings, crossroads, all invested with cultural and emotional meaning. The city is defined as a

[...] physical landscape and collection of objects and practices that enable recollections of the past and that embody the past through traces of the city's sequential building and rebuilding (CRINSON, 2005, p. xii).

The value and the interpretation offered to different places transform them into sites of collective and cultural identity. The representations of different sites of memory are constantly changing, depending on the historical, cultural, and political movements. The main objection related to the concept of sites of memory concerns its close correlation to the national perspective and ideological meaning (DEN BOER, 2010). The present study shows that both change and re-evaluation are present at a national level, the same place being reinterpreted and redefined according to the temporal political needs.

Space and identity

The research is based on the relation between memory and identity references seen as landmarks

of memory, stable points that keep the structure and the coherence of the narrative identity. The first direct connection between memory and place mentioned by scholars is that of the mnemotechnic processes involved in the art of memory. The process, defined as an 'inner writing' (YATES, 1999), was seen in Greek antiquity as an exercise of memory that meant associating places (*topoi*) to words, images, or representations, and these associations were considered to create very rigorous systems.

[...] The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of loci or places. The commonest, though not the only, type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type (YATES, 1999, p. 3).

The succession of places keeps the succession of information as the 'orderly arrangement' is an essential element for 'good memory' (YATES, 1999). The art of memory is in fact an art of places, an art based on the capacity of the memory to remember more easily the images of places instead of words. The memory operates through different places that help to maintain the order of information, and the same process acts at the level of the collective memory and identity. The community shares a common physical space and common identity references that sustain a coherent collective narrative, and this narrative is based on different physical or/and cultural places that act as sites of memory, as a "[...] placeholder for the exchange and transfer of memories among contemporaries and across generations [...]" (RIGNEY, 2010, p. 345). Developing further the concept of collective memory (HALBWACHS, 1992), Jan Assmann militates for a distinction between cultural memory and communicative memory as distinctive forms in which collective memory can express its content. The cultural memory, as a form of collective memory, is shared by a community characterized by a common collective identity. The cultural memory is defined through its exteriorized forms that can be transferred in different contexts and times:

Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent. They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. [...] Our memory, which we possess as being equipped with a human mind, exists only in constant interaction not only with other human memories but also with things, outward symbols (ASSMANN, 2008, p. 110-111).

The cultural memory, existing in 'disembodied form' and requiring 'institutions of preservation and

reembodiment', expresses itself through places and texts, rituals and monuments, with other words through sites of memory. For Pierre Nora, *les lieux de mémoire*, the sites of memory – the general inscriptions, where memory 'crystallizes' and 'secrets' itself – represent:

[...] the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it. [...] Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders – these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity. [...] We buttress our identities upon such bastions ...*lieux de mémoire* – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded (NORA, 1989, p. 12).

A site of memory can be represented by a material aspect of reality, from a spatial-temporal perspective – such as the monuments or the museums – but also by a mental and abstract construction – a specific symbol or motto. From a top-down approach the sites of memory are conceived as materialization of national, and political identity (WINTER, 2010). Thus, memory is attached to sites conceived not only in their concrete and physical forms, including cathedrals, prisons, monuments, battlefields, etc., but also in their non-material forms: celebrations, rituals, historical figures, and commemorations. One thing is certain, points out Bartelson (2006), the association of memory with spaces and places, whether material or symbolic. If the art of memory was based on *loci memoriae*, the cultural memory, as defined by Assmann, is based on the sites of memory. These include not only the information with which they were correlated but also the affective meaning invested in them. This affective meaning comprises the personal memories of the past, as it is the case with the memory of different events and moments related to that specific site: the first connection with that site of memory, the time spent there or the memories of its original purpose and meaning for the community, etc.

The relation between place, landscape and national identity is essential for the creation of the nation-state. Analyzing the relation between myths, monuments and the constitution of national memories, Bartelson (2006) considers that the connection between memory and identity

is specific to the modern age as well as the association of memory with spaces and places, whether material or symbolic, which become 'coextensive' with the territory of the modern nation state. Assmann also observes an increase in the use of the external symbols, and he points out the possibility 'to create' a collective memory "[...] by means of things meant as reminders, such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions [...]" (ASSMANN, 2008, p. 111).

Speaking about the disappearance of the traditional memory, Nora (1989, p. 13) indicates that the modern memory is especially archival, relying on the "[...] materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording [...]" and on the visibility of the image". From this point of view the memory becomes a system of gathered information, an exterior archive. Following this approach, and under the influence of the institutionalization process that affects the cultural memory, the sites of memory are transformed into places of commemoration where collective memory is publicly assumed, but they are also becoming a possible target for the political regime's manipulation attempts. Under the influence of the political regime, the sites of memory are often invested with ideological meaning and become resources used for the reinterpretation of the past and for the creation of a new official collective narrative: "Most *lieux de mémoire* were created, invented, or reworked to serve the nation-state" (DEN BOER, 2010, p. 21). The manipulation of memory is the result of the ideological phenomenon centered on obtaining power. In this area of research, expressions such as 'memory abuses', 'repressed memories' or 'instrumentalized memory' (TODOROV, 1998) are generally used. But what is happening with the cultural map used to sketch our identity and the identity of our community? What are the implications at the city level and in which way are mutations that occur in the cityscape transposed at the cultural identity level? In his book *Present Past. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen tries to offer an answer, using the notion of palimpsests and defining the cities as palimpsests of history:

After the waning of modernist fantasies about *creatio ex nihilo* and of the desire for the purity of new beginnings, we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space, monuments as transformable and

transitory, and sculpture as subject to the vicissitudes of time (HUYSEN, 2003, p. 7).

Changing the city, changing the past

To modify the cityscape through the reinterpretation or destruction of the sites of memory means to influence directly the collective and cultural identity of a community. Robert Bevan speaks about "[...] the destruction of the cultural artefacts of an enemy people or nation as a means of dominating, terrorizing, dividing or eradicating it altogether [...]" (BEVAN, 2006, p. 8).

Two different cases are presented in the following part: the destruction of the cityscape as result of a traumatic past event that targeted the destruction of a cultural, religious or ethnical community, and the major changes resulting on the cityscape level when a totalitarian regime tried, during a long period of time, to re-write the past and in this way to create the arguments necessary to sustain its abusive dominance. To re-write history means to construct a new national identity, having as references a set of different cultural and political values and figures. The political power needs to offer a new vision of the past, to re-interpret the events or to suggest a new way of reckoning with the past (STAN, 2009). In this process sometimes the material aspects interfere – buildings, statues, places – and these reminders of the past need to be erased, destroyed or reinterpreted in a new light, as the current ideology requires:

The worth of such places increases where efforts to destroy them remind communities of this value. If the touchstones of identity are no longer there to be touched, memories fragment and dislocate – their hostile destruction is an amnesia forced upon the group as a group and on its individual constituent members. Out of sight can become, literally, out of mind both for those whose patrimony has been destroyed and for the destroyers (BEVAN, 2006, p. 16).

The sites of memory represent the core of the national and cultural identity, and their destruction represents a traumatic event for the related community or nation. The case of the destruction of Stari Most, Mostar's historic bridge (1566) and the symbol and social hub of the once cosmopolitan city of Mostar, is relevant for the study proposed here and offers various arguments to sustain the relation between the sites of memory, city and collective identity. Mostar is a city situated in southern Bosnia-Herzegovina. Including religious and ethnically different citizens, Mostar was named once as one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the former Yugoslavia. The collapse of the state in 1992

changed this fact and the destruction caused by war is visible not only at the infrastructure and economic level, but at the community level. In the case of Mostar's multi-ethnic and multi-religious community, the destruction of the Stari Most bridge was a real shock as the memories of different people show. This destruction led to community segregation based on religion and ethnicity. Bevan presents the case of a woman, then a Muslim teenager in Mostar, who recalls how "[...] everybody emerged after hiding from the shelling in basements for ten months to weep at the destruction of the old bridge [...]" (BEVAN, 2006, p. 24). When the inhabitants were asked to describe the moment when their city 'died' they indicated the moment when the old bridge was destroyed (BOLTON; MUZOROVIC, 2010). The restoration of the bridge didn't bring the hoped-for reconciliation, and segregation remained visible even at the level of institutions of public life. Various initiatives tried to surpass these difficulties and offered possible solutions, from the initiatives to bring back into the public sphere the symbols banished during the war, to the development of new areas of multi-ethnic interaction and communication (BOLTON; MUZOROVIC, 2010).

The official version of the past is part of the politics of memory sustained and implemented by the political regime in power. Its version of the past and its vision regarding the desired national identity determined the actions made at the sites of memory level. For example, the book-burning events are sadly related to this attempt to control the past, and the processes of destroying the libraries under different political regimes was a practice used as a way to revision the past, to eliminate what was not considered deemed to be kept or even to erase some authors or events from history. The destroying of the Bosnian National and University Library on the night of August 25, 1992, in an operation that targeted many other cultural institutions: the Oriental Institute, the Bosnian National Museum, the National Archives of Herzegovina or the library of the University of Mostar (BATTLES, 2003), all symbols of 'common heritage', is a relevant example in this direction. The cultural memory is targeted and the identity references are destroyed in these attempts to re-write the past and control the present.

Those with the most at stake in political terms, and those with the greatest ability to exercise power, have a vested interest in the production of sites of cultural heritage and bring the past into focus to legitimize a present social order [...]. (MCDOWELL, 2008, p. 44).

Nora points out that the sites of memory are defined by their material, symbolic, and functional

meanings and that they exist because of their true capacity for metamorphosis, "[...] an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications [...]" (NORA, 1989, p. 19). This capacity of metamorphosis and its connection with the ideological power are highlighted by the following analysis of the changes that occurred in the architecture and cultural symbols of city of Iassy (Iași), an analysis that offers relevant insights into the various transformations suffered by many other cities during different forms of governing. Iassy, one of the most important cities of Romania, is situated in the North-East of the country and was the Romanian capital during the First World War, and here in 1860 the first Romanian university (Alexandru Ioan Cuza University) was founded.

The communist regime tried to seize political power and legitimacy in Romania as in many other places imposing and maintaining a permanent state of terror and oppression, but also changing the meaning and the importance of different sites of memory, and, in these attempts to re-write the past, the city and its various sites of memory were also targeted. The elements that were reminders of the former national glory and pride became one of the main targets for the totalitarian regime: buildings, monuments, statues of important cultural or political figures, streets that didn't have a 'proper' name, the community shared space – the open-piazza-like areas, etc. The political legitimacy of the regime depended on its success to impose its own ideology upon the meaning of the sites of memory that were valued at the level of collective identity. Everything needed to correspond to the new ideologies as the regime used the capacity of sites of cultural heritage to represent power (MCDOWELL, 2008) and to transmit ideological meaning. Any major historical or cultural figure could easily be designated as a 'class enemy', or be catalogued as 'bourgeois', an etiquette applied inclusively to the architecture of buildings. Many of the past buildings were destroyed, no matter what their cultural value and position in the cityscape was, and replaced by blocks of flats or buildings of an industrial type. As Bevan (2006, p. 12) demonstrates, buildings are not 'political' but are 'politicized' by the moment and the elements that count for their building, by the way they are appreciated by the political power or by the decision to destroy them when they stop to serve the political regime in power. A significant cultural building of Iassy was Academia Mihăileană (1835-1847/ Figure 1), precursor of the first Romanian university, where, in the beginning, courses of philosophy and law were taught. Its headquarters were demolished during the communist period, in

1964, in order to make room for a block of flats, without any consideration for its role for the cultural memory of the city and country. These types of sites of memory were considered dangerous especially because their cultural significance could spark memories of national pride unrelated to the communist regime and, implicitly, the attempt to fight or to resist the new regime.



Figure 1. Academia Mihăileană
Fonte: Postcard (1958).

For a totalitarian regime, even more important than the buildings are the historical monuments that could easily be shaped according to its ideology. The historical monuments are, in general, ordered by the state and can be demolished when the balance of power shifts. Many important historical statues were demolished by the communist regime and in Iassy, one of the representative destructions targeted a marble statue named 'The Unification Monument' (Figure 2), situated on one of the most important boulevards of Iassy. The statue was made in 1924 by Princess Olga Sturza, Rodin's apprentice, and offered to the city hall. The monument was deliberately destroyed following a disposition of the Armistice Commission in 1947.

The monument represented Romania as a feminine personage surrounded by all her children: the other territories lost and now reunited with the mother country, including Basarabia (now the Republic of Moldavia) which was entirely occupied by the Soviet Union after the Second World War. It was forbidden to represent the Soviet Union as a possible enemy of Romania, so any evidence or potential symbols were destroyed, the historical books that presented facts other than those established by the Communist Party were interdicted and their authors faced prison and years of suffering. History was changed in the name of the Communist Party. This was the political context in

which 'The Unification Monument' was destroyed without any consideration for its value. In 1999 a copy was created to replace the original. Another example is Titu Maiorescu's statue, which represented a well-known Romanian literary critic, but who was considered by the communist regime as a representative of the bourgeois class. The statue, situated near the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, was destroyed in 1951 in accordance with the new cultural tendencies of the period. Another intriguing case is that of the group of statues named 'Kings', that was created in 1933 and which contained eight statues of Romanian kings and princes; a couple of statues represented two Romanian kings: Carol I, the first Romanian king of modern Romania, and Ferdinand I, another important figure from the period when Romania was a monarchy. Both statues were demolished and replaced by two other statues of princes considered 'harmless' for the regime. When the recent past was not considered 'safe', the tendency of the totalitarian regime was to bring in discussion of other periods of time and other historical figures, considered neutral or uncontaminated. Huyssen (2003) considers the monumental characteristic as politically suspect, whatever the period, because it is a representative element of the nineteenth-century nationalisms and of the twentieth-century totalitarianisms.



Figure 2. The Unification Monument
Fonte: Postcard (1929).

The communist regime also influenced the cityscape by destroying the public space – a space of cultural and collective memory – the space of squares, open-piazza-like areas, or street cafeterias. This kind of shared space are understood as locations "[...] in which different groups come

together through shared experience; collective identities are forged and traditions invented [...]” (BEVAN, 2006, p. 12). They were, in time, abandoned or destroyed, and the collective level became the main area of repression in a terrifying attempt to control everything. The open space became used only when there were prior arrangements, and when ordered by communist manifestations. The overwhelming changes to a ‘familiar’ and ‘treasured physical environment’ (BEVAN, 2006) not only increased the fear of the communist regime’s power, but also dislocated the individual and the community. The public and common space as a place to meet friends, wander around, or just relax was for a long time, including in the post-communist period, just a space for political discourses.

During the post-communist period, the process of erasing the traces of the communist regime was reinforced by the tendency to construct new memorial monuments and to restore the historical and religious places that were forgotten for fifty years. The post-communist cities were confronted by the challenge to rapidly adapt to a world that continued to move and to change while they were stationary, captured by the communist ideology. The solution seems in many cases to be that of a selective oblivion, in an attempt to reverse the communist movement the monuments that lost their importance in the new city were completely forgotten, and the statues were moved into the secluded places of the public parks or onto small streets. The attempts to bring new icons into the public sphere (BUCUR, 2004), such as the process of placing with great honor new statues of other important historical figures in public spaces, also knew a rapid growth.

Conclusion

The cityscape and the cultural identity references are in direct relation; the change of political power is transposed at the level of new constructions and re-interpretation of the past historical events, their re-interpretation depending on the requirements of the political regime. Different processes or manifestations based on this re-interpretation of the past are relevant: the process of obliterating or neglecting the historical personalities who do not serve the interests of the political regime in power, the destruction of monuments and statues, as well as the repeated change of street names (MITROIU; ADAM, 2009) – the act of naming being used as “[...] a tool of control, a means of inscribing and

reifying certain cultural and political ideologies [...]” (ALDERMAN, 2008, p. 204) – or the attempt to offer new icons (BOLTON; MUZOROVIĆ, 2010) who correspond to the political regime’s ideology.

The fragmentation resulting at the city level is correlated with the changes observed at the community level, and the study reveals the difficulties with which a community and the city memory are confronted in the struggle to define and maintain a coherent narrative identity, especially after a historical period dominated by totalitarian actions or after major traumatic events. The sites of memory become the main target when the political power is changing and this change is reinforced by a new ideology that imposes the reinterpretation of the past, or the destruction of the identity references specific to an ethnic or religious community.

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