

# The Symbolic Expression in the Material Form in Public Spaces

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**Abstract:** The article explores the topic of symbolic expression in the physical elements that form urban public spaces. It is done by giving an overview and analysing spaces that hold a widely-recognised symbolic value. The author discusses the means of encoding and perceiving meanings in the spacial composition, physical form and materials of its elements, and other aspects that influence the sensory or psychological perception of the observer. At the same time, different theoretical approaches to the perception of space are discussed, addressing not only architectural theory but also the ideas proposed in the fields of philosophy, fenomenology and cultural studies.

**Key words:** Architectural symbolism, memorials, public spaces, urban spaces.

## 1. Introduction

Christian Norberg-Schulz, well-known for addressing the issue of the phenomenology of place, notes that architecture has always been used by humans to make sense of their existence. By designing the architectural environment, humans have grounded themselves in space and time. Therefore, architecture addresses more than practical needs; it is related to existential meanings which arise from natural, human, and spiritual experiences. Architecture transforms these meanings into spatial forms. Norberg-Schulz emphasizes that architecture cannot be described in geometrical or psychological terms alone. Architectural or urban environment must be understood as meaningful (symbolic) forms [1].

In general, symbols are regarded as mediators. As noted by the philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco, who referenced Peirce's theory of signs, the purpose of a symbol is "to transmit information; to say or to indicate a thing that someone knows and wants others to know as well" [2]. Spaces and especially architectural or urban ones are always associated with

a certain social context, ideology, local traditions, history etc. and express that through the symbols encoded in the elements of the composition.

The article aims to analyze and discuss the ways intangible ideas are expressed in the material form in public spaces. This aspect is addressed by focusing on architectural symbolism, cognitive, phenomenological and communicational (narrative) theories as well as providing examples of case studies.

## 2. The Expression of Ideas in the Material Components of the Space

Architectural sociologist Joachim Fischer points out that architecture can be regarded as a heavy medium of communication. In this case, the heaviness is associated with the expression through the physical form and materials (concrete, glass, wood, etc.) which communicate certain ideas to the visitors of the space [3]. The aspect of architectural symbolism as means of communication is emphasized by the perceiver's direct interactions with the space itself. As French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes, the

relationship between a person and the world is embodied in perception. What is recognized depends on the presence of the subject and the physically experienced moment, which determines what and how we perceive the world: it exists around the person, not in front of them [4].

In the semiotic field, Stuart Hall, a representative of cultural and communication studies, describes understanding such messages as a process of encoding and decoding. This process focuses on how the receiver understands and interprets media messages. However, both the sender and receiver are active participants in the act of communication. Therefore, how the message will be decoded is not predetermined. Decoding is understood not only as discerning the message, but also as interpretation and evaluation, which varies based on the personal beliefs of the observer [5]. Based on the concepts of the French semiotician Roland Barthes, Hall distinguishes the connotative level of message decoding, where understanding arises from the context determined by sociocultural, emotional and other experiences [6].

Architecture and architectural spaces are understandable to us in several ways. Firstly, the understanding is formed in regards to the usage possibilities and function, such as recognizing that park benches are used for recreational purposes. This is detailed in U. Eco's [7] essay "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture" as denotative symbols. However, the author notes that without shared cultural codes<sup>1</sup>, we would often not be able to recognize the function. Recognition relies on cultural archetypes. For instance, a pre-modern person, from Eco's point of view, would not understand how to use an elevator, despite the designers' efforts to convey its purpose. Secondly, architecture conveys the purpose of the space through details with encoded connotative symbolic meanings. For instance, courthouses often have the Lady Justice (the Greek goddess Themis, the Roman goddess Justitia) portrayed in the decor. Similarly, religious

symbols such as crosses are used in sacred spaces—churches, cemeteries, etc. On the other hand, representative public spaces more often show formality by using monuments that depict a person or a figurative symbol of power, nation, etc.

A more complex form of communication than a simple reference to the purpose of the space is associated with the cultural context, which may include a suggested emotional state the space represents or a conceptual idea: ideology, traditions or collective memory. This can be materialized through the shapes of the compositional elements, choice of materials or even the size of the space, the scale of its details, the use of lighting, and visual perspectives. For example, an emotional experience can be influenced by the material properties of the compositional elements. One can seek to communicate the official aspect of a space through expensive materials such as marble used in it. Meanwhile wood can be associated with naturalness, coziness; glass with progress or transparency; red bricks with antiquity [8]. In a similar manner, elevating an object with the use of a pedestal above the eye level influences the perception of the object's importance. In the visual arts, such approach reveals a hierarchical concept of human existence. Rudolf Arnheim, who analyzed visual perception, describes the emphasis of the traditionally most important figures (elevated) in the center of the composition, while the secondary figures only surround it [9].

In the case of conceptual communication, the compositional elements of the space convey something that is not the element itself. That can be cultural identity and the ideas that define it: loss, solidarity, hope, and the like. A conceptual message that aims to establish such ideas can be communicated through visual expression and with the use of sensory stimulation. The importance of sensory evaluation of the space is emphasized by Arnold Berleant, who treats the perception of space not as a purely sensory or

<sup>1</sup> A *cultural code* is used as a term which describes a unity of values and/or socio-normative establishments (routines, rituals,

heroes, symbols), fundamental features of characteristics specific to a group of people.

psychological experience, but as a combination of both. He notes that the perception of the environment encompasses all senses that connect the body to the place [10]. The combination of physical observation, intellectual and emotional interpretation makes it possible to create spaces that are unified not only by physical properties but also by encoded meanings.

A notable example of using both visual and sensory stimuli is the P. Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin (Fig. 1). The meaning of spatial structure is conveyed by the configuration of space and by the nature of its elements. The architectural and urban environment offers a spatial narrative—ways to move within it, entry points, visual connections with other areas. According to the French sociologist and philosopher, H. Lefebvre [11], who suggested the guidelines for understanding social space, what the architectural environment says is

“dos and don'ts” which can be regarded as permissions and obstacles. Architecture is defined physically, by nodes, edges, paths or different levels, and often works without conscious awareness of the situation. For example, in the Holocaust Memorial, the idea of being lost in place and time is evoked by restricting the visual perspective while the visitor moves within the repetitive and confusing rows of columns [12]. Eisenman [13] describes it as a “field of otherness” that is created not by the use of traditional Jewish symbolism, but with the representation of feeling as “other” (the feeling of being a Jew in Germany at the represented period). Additionally, the chosen material (the concrete slabs) enhances the idea of heaviness and repression. Therefore, the symbolic dimension of the space is heavily influenced by its composition, its scale, and the material.

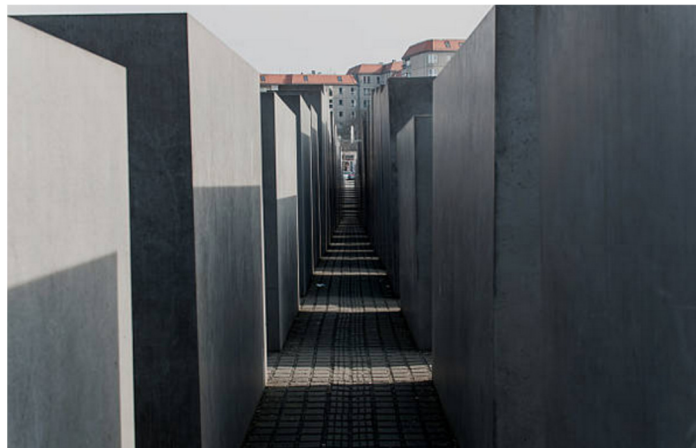


Fig. 1 Holocaust Memorial in Berlin.



Fig. 2 7 July Memorial in London.

The ideas that can be conveyed through architecture are cultural codes and the structuring of the space. This can be communicated both on a micro scale, as a portrayal of some aspect in one of the elements in space, and on a macro scale—by representing collective memory in the space as a whole. As an example, the 7 July Memorial in London Hyde Park lets the observer interpret the space by directly interacting with it as a whole and with individual objects that represent different scales of the same concept. In the area, visitors can walk amongst the 52 steel pillars that are arranged in four interlinked clusters (Fig. 2). Each pillar symbolizes the singular loss while the clusters represent the collective loss in different locations of the tragedy. Every pillar is anonymous (has no name inscribed) but is marked by the date, timing and specific location. Smaller elements such as a plaque with the victims' names at the edge of the composition are added to the whole. In this project, the pillars that often symbolise mortality, the connection between the material and existential planes, and the plaque help the visitors evaluate the space. The project's artistic advisor, Antony Gormley notes: "This monument uses the language of architecture to create order out of chaos. It is an opportunity for a lost subject to be in contact with a perceiving subject in a process of discovery, where the structure becomes completed by the presence and body language of the curious perceiver" [14].

However, the meanings encoded in the space cannot be regarded as a constant. Both the space and the larger structure it is a part of are connected by physical, aesthetic, and contextual ties. Therefore, the same characteristics may be interpreted differently based on the location or the changing surroundings. Architect Michael Benedikt illustrates this with the example of the change in the symbolic meaning of the medieval bell tower. He points out that while this architectural object is understood as a meaningful element in its historical context, transferring it to a contextually alien space, such as a shopping mall, inevitably undermines the bell tower's symbolic value. Despite the denotative

significance such as indicating time, its meaning changes into the association with the discrepancy between real history and the imitation of it. Thus any previous connotative meanings can be lost [15].

Similarly, the conditions of perception are related to the observer's own understanding and socially established codes. The perceptual capabilities of the space visitor are detached from the intentions of the creator. The comprehension process often takes place without regarding the time when the space has been formed but rather in the current historical context. The observer assigns meaning according to his own understanding, formed by previous experiences, knowledge of cultural codes and other factors that shape the personal worldview. The person's understanding of dominant ideas, social changes through history, ties to specific groups are some of the influences that help the observer interpret the meanings behind the symbols. The perception is affected by the extent to which the social codes of the creator and visitor of the space are linked together. As a consequence, a changing context can change the original meaning the space conveys, making it accessible only to the subject experts or widely acknowledged as different from the intended one.

An example of changing the meaning conveyed by a physical characteristic can be the sculpture "Kablys" in Vilnius (sculptor Mindaugas Navakas). In 1994, the sculpture was attached to a building designed in a style common in the Soviet Republic and built in 1957 (Fig. 3). The purpose of such typical buildings was to form recognizable Soviet public spaces with a recognizable functional typology, in this specific case—for the cultural leisure time of transport workers. As cited by architecture historian Marija Drėmaitė [16], the art critic Laima Kreivytė observes that "the sculpture defeated the building in terms of its scale, because the latter was Stalinist pomp, and the giant rusty hook turned the pomp into something comical". For the first time, cultural value was given to a building designed in accordance to a typical project. "Kablys" was presented



**Fig. 3** Sculpture “Kablys” in Vilnius.

as an ideal symbol of changes in post-Soviet countries. It was appreciated for the ironic relationship with the unwanted Soviet heritage, which was demonstrated by the architectural design of the building.

While discussing the same example, it is worth noting how the interpretation of the chosen material can change depending on the context where it is presented. The sculpture “Kablys” was created from welded rusted steel sheets (which later led to the building itself being referred to as “Iron Hook”). The rusted material used for the sculpture serves as a metaphor for clotted blood. Rust is regarded as that which destroys and breaks something down little by little [17]. Meanwhile, talking about the same material, the architect M. Šiupšinskas expressed the following perspective: “Rust is beautiful not so much because of originality in itself, but because of its naturalness. When it is used only as an “original idea”, in the long run, such a solution can start to seem banal. Most of the time, concrete, rust and other similar materials are beautiful to us because they do not mask their essence, they are not covered with a layer of plaster, paint or plastic, so they do not pretend. Here, like a painted face, imperfections are hidden, even though they create a character. This is also related to local (vernacular) architecture. In the countryside, nails, locks and other metal elements of the house are rusted (and there are such elements in old

urban houses as well) and no one considers them broken or damaged. They are like that because they cannot be otherwise. Unless you start to oppose nature, the effects of the environment, but maybe sometimes it is enough to let it do its thing and thus create beauty” [8]. As such, in places where rust is seen and interacted with as a natural part of living, the rusted material is associated with naturalness and simplicity rather than destruction.

### 3. Results and Discussions

As demonstrated in the case studies, the symbolic expression of the architectural and urban form varies depending on the goals of the author. Some symbols are used as elements that refer to the cultural perception or the purpose of the space itself. Usually, such goals are achieved by the use of universally easily recognizable symbols. Meanwhile, in more complex situations, the ideas are conveyed through the structural use of both spatial composition and the objects within it. Often it relies on the emotional impact on the visitor of the space. However, in both cases, the interpretation of the symbolic meaning can lead to different (and sometimes contrary) conclusions, as it is closely tied to the observer’s understanding that is formed by the context and cultural codes they acknowledge at the moment of interpretation.

#### 4. Conclusions

Architecture can be regarded as a form of communication that embodies certain intangible ideas in a physical form. A space can consolidate, extend, define social connections, cultural identity, interactions, actions, specific traditions, ideologies, and concepts. While most of the meanings conveyed in the space are not understood directly, interaction with the material form allows the visitor to perceive the meanings of individual elements or the whole composition of the spacial structure.

The symbolic elements can be used for different reasons. The most notable distinction is between denotative symbols that help the observer determine the purpose of the space and the connotative symbols. The latter symbols create a feeling or an idea, and suggest a secondary meaning that can be interpreted in accordance to various cultural codes or personal experiences. Such symbols can be expressed through the shape and size of the space or specific components that form it, material, lighting, the effect of open or closed spaces, and other characteristics that provide sensory or psychological stimuli.

The symbolic dimension of the space is not necessarily revealed by the use of traditional symbols that represent cultural identity or certain motifs (such as justice represented by the scales of Justicia). The concept and its expression can be abstract and revealed through specific emotional responses that prompt associations to events or archetypes encoded in the collective memory.

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