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The discourse of counter-monuments: semiotics of material commemoration in contemporary urban spaces

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses strategies of material commemoration in contemporary urban spaces. Deploying a philosophical and social-theoretical interpretation systematised by, in particular, Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies and its analysis of material commemoration, the article compares the semiotics of modes of commemorating through monuments and counter-monuments. As is argued, counter-monumental commemoration aligns much better than the traditionally static and non-dialogic monuments with the ongoing post-modern transformation and fluidity of contemporary urban spaces. By the same token, counter-monuments also allow commemoration of complex and difficult past events – such as the Holocaust – that are traditionally surrounded by multiple interpretations and often-conflicting attempts to commemorate them. The analysis at the core of the paper looks in-depth at counter-monumental installations known as Stolpersteine, or Stumbling Blocks, developed since the early 1990s by the German artist Gunter Demnig as a form of commemoration of victims of National Socialism and especially the Holocaust. As is suggested, counter-monuments such as the Stolpersteine carry multiple meanings and have multiple functions which allow for diverse patterns of interaction with past/present. They also allow embedding the dialogue between forms of commemoration (monument/counter-monument) various recipients (locals/tourists, spectators/passers-by) as well as their varied interpretations and expectations of commemoration in the discourse of contemporary urban space.

KEYWORDS

Counter-monuments; monuments; collective memory; commemoration; remembrance; urban space

1. Introduction

Cities are “the medium and the outcome of power” (Kong 2008, 13), not only in the economic or administrative but also in the symbolic sense. Apart from strategies of naming (places, squares, streets, etc.) and designing spatial order, commemoration remains the key tool of symbolic power and enacting symbolism and axio-normativity in city spaces. Therein, the salience of monuments and commemorations becomes crucial, also as a tool of creating an identity of a place and providing various tools for its redefinition.
and re-construction. Therefore, the analysis of modes of commemoration in urban spaces as well as their de-construction from the point of view of their key visual strategies and their salience for collective identity and memory are vital not only for socio- or anthropological analysis but also, more widely, for the aesthetic analysis of visual arts as political activity (Rancière 2011, 13).

This article analyses such strategies of material commemoration in contemporary urban spaces. Deploying an interpretation that combines philosophical, historical and critical-analytic dimensions, it compares collective modes of commemorating through monu-
ments and counter-monuments. The particular interest of the paper is in highlighting the unique character of counter-monuments as forms of commemoration. The aim is therefore to show that, as such, counter-monuments cater for many deficiencies of traditional forms of remembrance. They also respond well to the need for multiple (collective as well as individual, localised as well as displaced) modes of commemoration in contemporary urban loci. At the same time, counter-monuments also allow commemorating highly complex past events and occurrences – such as, for example, the Holocaust – that carry many interpretations and therefore many diverse needs for different types and forms of commemoration.

The analysis at the core of the paper looks in-depth at commemorative installations known as *Stolpersteine*, or Stumbling Blocks, developed since the late 1990s by the German artist Gunter Demnig and currently amounting to over 40 thousand brass blocks placed across several major European cities. As is suggested in the course of the analysis, the counter-monuments such as the *Stolpersteine* – which commemorate victims of National Socialism and in particular of the Holocaust – point to how the individual/collective intersection impacts upon the foundations of the contemporary urban genius loci and thereby alters the main codes of remembrance in urban space. As the article shows, the counter-monuments can be seen as contemporary artists’ reaction to not only the discourse of place/space identity but also to the localised politics of individual experience and of dealing with often “inconvenient” memories.

Departing from a reflection on the salience of monuments for collective identity building and power, the article first elaborates on and interprets the key features of monuments in order to explicate their “standard” elements as well as traditional ways of interpreting their role in collective remembrance and identity formation. The article then moves to discussing ideas behind, as well as key examples of, counter-monuments as a new and evidently more dialogic commemorative mode. It focuses, in particular, on the strategies of deploying counter-monumental commemoration with regard to as complex and challenging past events as the twentieth-century Holocaust. The article finally moves to highlight the multidimensional character of commemoration via *Stolpersteine* and emphasises how their format and function allow catering for different modes and expectations of remembrance while at the same time avoiding over-collectivisation and top-down projection of commemorative experience.

Throughout the paper, the analysis of various forms of commemoration – including monuments as well as counter-monuments – that eventually culminates in the in-depth discussion of *Stolpersteine* – draws inspiration from Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (Machin 2013; cf. also Machin 2014) and in particular its three-dimensional social-semiotic analysis of monuments and related formats of commemoration (Abousnouga and Machin 2013). Accordingly, the interpretation in the paper is systematised
by, inter alia, such multimodal critical-analytic dimensions as (cf. Abousnnouga and Machin 2013): semiotic resources as communicating social relations (elevation, size, angle of interaction, etc.), social semiotics of materiality (materials, solidity and fixedness) or visual grammar (e.g. modality). Drawing on the aforementioned categories as well as the wider aspects of philosophical and aesthetic reflection, the paper argues that counter-monuments align with the commemorative fabric of contemporary fluid urban space much better than the often non-dialogic monuments. Counter-monuments are hence a way of coping with the ever-present duality of commemoration: its necessity to be localised within particular (urban) space as well as inherent ability to narrate the past in relation to the city’s present.

2. Monument as traditional carrier of collective memory in material space of the city

Urban space can be perceived via focus on “relationships between the ‘social’/‘cultural’ and the ‘material’” (Hicks 2010, 26). The real/lived and the material duality allows viewing the urban as “the realm of physical items, produced by humans as well as events and spaces interconnected by and with local and global mentality, culture, tradition and social life” (Aronin and ÓLaoire 2012, 3). It is therefore often argued that, further to exploring the social fabric of the city, it is equally vital to analyse “artefacts and objects as well as landscapes, cityscapes, road-scapes, villages, localities, dwellings, private households and collective homes, public spaces and ways of their organisation and use” (Aronin and ÓLaoire 2012).

As in the majority of research on late-modern material culture, the need is emphasised to scrutinise the qualities of urban artefacts/objects as well as their use and production. The artefact-oriented analysis of the urban recognises the semiotic polysemy of the city that, through its material representations, communicates individual and collective visions, promises and opportunities often stimulated by past- or future-related utopian ideas of commonality (see More 1516/2009; Campanella 1602/2007; Howard 1898; Le Corbusier 1964; Levitas 2013). Such a polysemy allows viewing the city as a discourse: one that is striving to be filled with “topos of the good life” (Amin 2006, 1009) while at the same time transforming “the human condition into the urban condition” (Amin 2006, 1012).

According to the aforementioned views on contemporary urban space, several research paradigms have been trying to define monuments as part of contemporary city and as a central element of constructing late-modern urban genius loci via memory construction and commemoration. According to architecture and urban studies, a monument is:

A construction or an edifice filled with cultural, historical and artistic values. The conservation and maintenance of monuments is justified by those values. Historically, the idea of the monument is closely tied to commemoration (of a victory, a ruling, a new law). In the urban space, monuments have become parts of the city landscape, spatial points of reference or elements founding identity of a place. Monuments can be enriched by educational and political functions […] as well as artistic ones and those centred on commemoration. (Caves 2005, 318)

Located in the centres of towns and cities, monuments refer to and commemorate national struggles for independence or depict leaders (in overwhelming number, male) who proved to be great warriors, battle strategists and heroes. Monuments also present
rulers and leaders or artists of particular significance to the (local) collectivity and its group identity. They sometimes also refer to traumatic experiences of a nation/city collectivity such as, inter alia, epidemics (e.g. the Viennese Pestsäule that commemorates the great plague/epidemic of 1679) or natural disasters (e.g. monuments commemorating 1963 Skopje or 1995 Kobe earthquakes).

But monuments can also have a function of (local) landmarks, that is, conspicuous elements of space that are easily memorised by locals and guests and therefore functioning as commemorating tools. Symbolic landmarks are also vital for the place identification of the local community as is the case with, for example, the Manneken Pis in Brussels or the Mermaid statues in Warsaw or Copenhagen. Part of popularity of such monuments stems from legends and historical/historicised narratives that feature the persons/creatures depicted on the monuments (extinguishing the fire by a little boy; help received by the city from a woman-fish creature) but it often also extends to the monuments themselves. The most popular are, in fact, polysemous monuments that link several of key commemorative and associative functions. The best example of such polysemy is certainly Liberty Enlightening the World monument (otherwise known as the Statue of Liberty) placed on a dedicated island on New York’s Hudson River. Gifted to the American people by the French government as a symbol of freedom/independence and unveiled in 1886, the neoclassical realisation of the Statue is first and foremost the symbol of America’s national values. But it is also a tourist attraction and a sightseeing point or a symbol of New York City’s liberal values (“Statue as a rapper”). Adding to its polysemy, it also serves as a material sign for those coming to America and associating it with new opportunities that often were quickly disenchanted by the segregation politics executed towards migrant at the nearby Ellis Island.

On the other hand, the social semiotic and other approaches to material culture have offered a much more critical conception of monuments viewing them mainly as indications of what is crucial for collective memory. Sometimes it is even assumed that collective and other forms of memory are in fact “constructed through public monuments” (Miles 1997, 44). Thus,

In cities, towns and villages around the world we find monuments erected to those our societies wish us to mark as somehow outstanding. Those are erected through official processes, sometimes drawing the public into their design, in order to celebrate the kinds of ideas, values and identities we are to consider most, embody who we are at best, what we should ourselves strive towards, those to whom we most owe and fundamentally to remind us who we are by signposting points and personalities from our shared national and local histories. (Abousnouga and Machin 2013, 1)

The tendency to see monuments in relation to collective identity as well as power (cf. Kong 2008 and above) necessitates their analysis as “material devices for social control” (Molyneux 1995, 18) under assumption that “just as monuments construct hegemony, so heritage sites construct the past which conveniently fits civic aspiration and serves social stability” (Molyneux 1995; cf. also Berlant 1991; Miles 1997, 46). The practice of erecting/unveiling monuments and related organisation of public commemorative events is therefore also crucial (Abousnouga and Machin 2013). It is a practice that links past and present as well as helps sustaining the social and political status quo or (though much less frequently) improve visibility of claims of minority groups often disregarded in the past-to-present relation.
Moments of significant transformation or the outright crisis of the social status quo are often marked by heated debates in the public sphere (Koselleck 2006; Krzyżanowski 2009; Triandafyllidou, Wodak, and Krzyżanowski 2009) including as to who/why/where possesses the right to commemorate and be commemorated in/through the monuments. Thereby, times of social transformation often bring new modes of expression of power that “may be expressed through specific streetscapes, landmarks, buildings and monuments through their construction, demolition, redesign and use” (Kong 2008, 14). Such ideological deliberation in/via the monuments has been very visible in, for example, the post-1989 transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Looking, for example, on post-1989 Poland, we have seen, on the one hand, the process of renaming of streets and demolition of old monuments: especially of such key communist figures as Felix Dzerzhinsky (whose monument was demolished in Warsaw in 1989) or Vladimir Lenin (whose statue was famously destroyed in Krakow in 1990). On the other hand, new, and often quasi de-politicised monuments were erected at the same time, as was the case with the monument of Polish romantic writer J. Słowacki whose statue was placed in Warsaw in lieu of the aforementioned Dzerzhinsky’s monument in 2001.

As evidenced by the majority of monuments they are, in fact, ideological in nature. They should be seen as forms of spatial hegemony “by means of which domination and rule are achieved” (Gramsci 1973; Kong 2008, 15). They help emphasise that:

Hegemony does not involve controls which are clearly recognizable as constraints in the traditional coercive sense. Instead, hegemonic control involves a set of values which the majority is persuaded to adopt [ …] when hegemonic control is successful, the social order endorsed by the elite is, at the same time, the social order the masses desire. (Kong 2008, 15)

As the ideological debates about monuments show, the latter also become the key foci of struggle between different and often opposing interpretations of collective past whose elements are often embodied in/through the monuments themselves. Along with that process we see the fulfilment of Foucault’s famous thesis that:

in every society the production of discourse is simultaneously controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures whose role is to avert its powers and dangers and to cope with chance of events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (Foucault 1981, 52)

At the same time, the analysis of commemoration as a form of socially constructed discourse allows discovering multiple meanings inscribed in as well as communicated by the monuments (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013). In doing so, one is able to deconstruct the order of discourse (Foucault 1981; Fairclough 1992, 1995) inscribed into monuments. Thereby the key aim is to seize the materiality of the discourse of the city and the ways in which that materiality reflects not only spatial or visual but first and foremost socio-political change that takes place in the urban space.

However ideological, monuments often open the genius loci (Norberg-Schultz 1980) to meanings brought by “receivers” of the monument discourse and their diverse interpretations and preferences related to social and political contexts. But, in most cases, interpretations of monuments are limited to those who “are trusted in the decoding of multi-level meaning relations and enabled to decode the tacit meaning of values and features of the urban space” (Rewers 2009, 19). As monuments have traditionally been used to construct
collective identities and solidify collective belonging, “a monument may never lay claim to artistic autonomy from its social and historical context” (Carrier 2005, 32). By recalling collectively recognisable images and imaginations, monuments must draw on conventional public knowledge and be easily de-codable by an average mass receiver, even if often being complex (e.g. figurative, neoclassical and ornamental) in form.

But, crucially, since the second half of the twentieth century, monuments have also become tools of questioning and critiquing – and not only sustaining and institutionalising – social order and the (allegedly) universal values at the core of the society. Thereby, the monuments started to fulfil the need to not only re/construct the tacitly accepted social meanings traditionally embodied in monumental commemorations but also to de-construct the axiological fabric of the collectivity. By the same token, monuments started to be used to question the elite-oriented as well as elite-driven nature of public commemoration that, closed within the meanings produced by/for the symbolic elites, remained distant from public understanding and expectation of collective history.

Warner (1985), who reads monuments through the lens of cultural history – argues that they currently receive a lot of “public interest, despite the loss of their original purpose as a cultural signifier for a city” (Miles 1997, 47) while, at the same time, monuments become much more rooted in realism and faithfulness to local history (Molyneux 1995). However, this relatively new trend in urban monuments also has its challenges. The main of them is surely the fact that, while departing from the traditional and widely accepted forms and means of monument-based expression – into which generations have been socialised and learned to decode – monuments become much more complex in terms of their de-codability. While departing from the classic figurative forms, (post-)modern monuments have raised their “interpretive threshold” thereby often becoming criticised by the wider public which could not easily follow the proposed means and patterns of material expression. At the same time, monuments’ traditional function of being a “mark” or a “stamp” on the fabric of the city vanes and ceases to be obvious thus making them fluid, bystanding and, in the end-effect, often invisible (Musil 1957; Young 1999).

3. Counter-monument: redefining memory in material space of the city

As has been famously argued by Rancière (2012, 169), “art is readily ascribed a virtue of resistance”. The latter is also the central feature of counter-monuments (sometimes also referred to as anti-monuments) which, searching for new ways and patterns of expression significantly different than in monumental commemorations, aim to allow for commemoration while questioning and resisting the traditional limitations of monumental remembrance.

The crucial difference between traditional form of monument and counter-monument runs along the distinction drawn by Umberto Eco in his idea of “an open work” (Eco 1989). In Eco’s conception “traditional or ‘classical’ art […] could give the rise of various responses but its nature was such as to channel these responses in a particular direction: for readers, viewers, and listeners there was in general only one way of understanding what a text was about” (Robey 1989, x). Contrary to that, in open work (such as the counter-monument):
a great potential of meanings coexists in it, and none can be said to be the main or dominant one […] the text presents the reader with “field” of possibilities and leaves it in large part to him or her to decide what approach to take. (Robey 1989, x)

In a similar vein, “the open work assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it is it” (Eco 1989, 90; original emphasis).

The often-unusual form of the counter-monuments also aims to counteract the simplification of many meanings seen in the case of monumental realisations. Counter-monuments’ aim is to, as is argued above, resist: not only the legitimation of power central to the monument but also its often instrumental approach to the artist as the one creating and encoding the commemorated meanings. However, while doing so, the counter-monuments are almost always multi-meaningful with the multiplicity of their meanings open to the desired polysemy of interpretations of the counter-monuments’ end-receivers. Their resistance or the protest component are further emphasised by the fact that, as such, counter-monuments aim to bring to the fore and critique what is often forgotten, omitted or silenced by the collectivity – especially in relation to its collective history – in the official narratives of the past. Counter-monuments hence re-enact discourses of memory that were rejected, omitted or outright silenced by the (urban/local/national) collectivity and make virtue of what would otherwise be deemed difficult or inconvenient past.

Surely, in the case of counter-monuments, the receiver’s task is much more difficult than was the case above with the monuments. Counter-monuments are, namely, “unusual” in their form and depart from the traditional figurative code prevalent in the monumental forms of semiosis. Counter-monuments draw on multiplicity of meanings yet thereby as if “force” the receivers to follow patterns of interpretation that would not be provided in case of often mono-interpretive monumental projects. While possessing a wider interpretive scope, counter-monuments also allow for the identity-forging element to become more open, to not only official and collective narrations but also to their individual interpretations and re-descriptions. Counter-monuments hence not only commemorate or remind of people/places past, but also create an extensive interpretive plain that allows for that commemoration to be more multiple as well as more egalitarian.

As they have mainly constituted an attempt to “define an alternative type of monument whose qualities are measured against the classical model of an ornamental, figurative, sculptural monument” (Carrier 2005, 6), the counter-monuments have come to be seen as “ephemeral, objectless, undesirable” (Carrier 2005). However, exactly because of their “unusual” and even “objectless” character, and because they therefore cannot rely on deep-seated patterns of interpretation, commemorating through counter-monuments becomes much more difficult than otherwise. The idea of counter-monument also involves a form of a game in which the spectator is invited to interact in a novel way with identity of the place and its history (genius loci) and collective memory, all anchored in a specific space (cf. Halbwachs 1992; Rosenberg 2012).

Counter-monuments have been, at least initially, seen as temporal in nature thereby “challenging the desire for permanence inherent in the very concept of the monument” (Rosenberg 2012, 133). Yet, though not created to “last” in the urban space, counter-monuments have often, one may say unwillingly, become such lasting elements of the city. This happened once especially public debates developed about their authors and their desired ideas, indeed often much more frequently than discussions of the (frequently
misunderstood) materiality of counter-monuments as such. Yet, in whatever way they enter the public consciousness and imagination, once they do so, the counter-monuments usually become a stable and indeed a persistent element of the city’s collective consciousness of the local collectivity and society.

As if against their environment that often silences history, counter-monuments also remind about the past, very often in form of inconvenient histories or truths. They create new meanings and, especially, amalgamate these with the old ones. They become a metaphorical catalyser that forms new associations and meanings around past events and their commemoration. They enrich local public spheres by making them associational (Arendt 1998, 199; Matynia 2008, 53; Krzyżanowska 2012) and by changing the logic of local thinking about commemorated people and events through making them into core part of collective urban present and future.

A good example of counter-monuments’ dialogue with traditional format of the monument can be found in the works of Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko who sees his counter-monuments—such as The Hiroshima Projection (completed 1999) at the A-Bomb Dome in Hiroshima or Abraham Lincoln: War Veteran Projection (completed 2012) at Union Square in New York City—as elements of an ongoing “monument-therapy” (pomnikoterapia). Reconstructing his approach, Wodiczko argues that “monuments and also buildings become mute bystanders and witnesses of events in the public space […] both people and those monuments are in need of the same: reanimation, being revived once again” (Bojarska 2005).

Such reanimating effect can surely be seen in counter-monumental works of another contemporary Polish artist, Joanna Rajkowska, among whose famous counter-monuments is the “artificial palm” placed at one of central Warsaw’s major avenues called Aleje Jerozolimskie (The Jerusalem Avenues). The widely discussed and sizeable sculpture—officially entitled Pozdrowienia z Alej Jerozolimskich (Greetings from the Jerusalem Avenues, completed 2002)—was created by the artist to commemorate the Jewish population which historically inhabited this area of central Warsaw. While originally planned as just a temporary project, the “palm”, though reminding about Warsaw’s often forgotten multicultural past and its tragic ending throughout the period of the Holocaust, has become very popular among Warsaw’s population and was eventually institutionalised as a permanent project.

Rajkowska also authored Dotleniacz (Oxygenator, completed 2007) which she placed as a temporary installation on central Warsaw’s Grzybowski Square. According to the artist, the installation—basically a large temporary pond of fresh, cool water surrounded by seats and additionally equipped with air-ozonating and fog-creating equipment—was supposed to bring a new load of oxygen into the otherwise very busy space of the square. It had the revitalising/reviving effect mentioned above by Wodiczko. As Rajkowska herself argued, the oxygen was necessary there in order to bring new, fresh air to the otherwise dense atmosphere that historically hangs over the Grzybowski square, which, during the times of World War II, was part of the Warsaw Ghetto. The air was also necessary, according to Rajkowska, to change the atmosphere of commemoration of the Warsaw’s interwar Jewish population and to allow both inhabitants and visitors to commemorate yet without conflict-filled density of historical burden. Hence, by literally as well as metaphorically “clearing the air”, Rajkowska’s counter-monument reinstated long-lasting agreement between the commemorating visitors and non-commemorating
locals. It was particularly relevant to the latter, who, naturally immersed in everyday activities, were often silently accused – especially by the commemorating visitors – of inhabiting the space of reverence and trauma (Gorządek 2014).

While, to a large extent, undermining the traditional role of the monuments with respect to linkage of local memory and imagination/s of visitors, counter-monuments often traverse history of the place. An extreme example thereof may probably be found in central Vienna’s Judenplatz square, where the Holocaust Memorial called Nameless Library (completed 2000) by Rachel Whiteread shares the square with two other/earlier instances of commemoration related to the Viennese Jewish community. On the one hand, facing the Holocaust monument, there is the statue of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing – erected in 1934 but removed by Nazis in 1939 yet eventually reinstated after 1945 – impersonating the writer/philosopher known for promoting dialogue with and increased understanding of Judaism in Europe. On the other hand, as if behind Lessing’s statue, a small commemorative plaque is attached to the building known as the Jordan Haus to commemorate the so called Viennese Geserah (1420–21), that is, one of the most violent Jewish pogroms in history. The subtle interplay between the three posts of commemoration – and the way in which they, both individually and in a concerted manner, deal with very difficult place/community memory – emphasises Vienna’s tragic modern history while foregrounding Jewish cultural heritage so closely attached to Vienna’s past. In combination, the three formats of commemoration create a certain specific code of genius loci and an example of historically conditioned parallel social tensions envisaged in spatial, urban context.

4. The Holocaust cannot be represented? Counter-monuments and commemoration of the twentieth-century Shoah

As evidenced by several examples above, counter-monuments have been deployed in projects aiming at commemoration of victims of National Socialism and especially of the twentieth-century Holocaust of European Jewish community. Indeed, probably because of its very complex and indeed tragic character, the Holocaust seems to be one of the key objects of contemporary counter-monumental realisations (Miles 1997, 48; Balus 2014, 388).

Choosing counter-monuments as strategies of commemorating the Holocaust is dictated by the very tragic character of twentieth-century Shoah whose multiplicity cannot be, in most cases, reflected and commemorated in a classic way. While monuments embodied many ideas (and ideals) of humanism or enlightenment, the radical undermining of those by violence and tragedy of Holocaust makes monumental commemorations impossible thus calling for alternative, counter-monumental modes. It seems that, as a genre, counter-monument has the ability to avoid traditional commemoration’s entrapments often called as “forgetfulness of monuments” (Young 1988, 173) or the non-dialogic “monumentalization of memory” (Young 1988, 173).

One of the original “standard” counter-monumental examples of Holocaust commemorations is that of Horst Hoheisel’s Aschrottbrunnen Monument (completed 1987) located in Kassel, Germany. The installation was created “in order to rescue the history of the place as a wound and as an open question, so that history is not repeated” (Young 1999, 4). The counter-monument commemorates the Shoah by focussing on a fountain originally
built in central Kassel (as “a gift to the city”) by Sigmund Aschrott, a Jewish entrepreneur. Built in 1908, the original fountain was destroyed in 1939 by the Nazis to create space inter alia for Nazi rallies. The contemporary installation seems to act as a “negative” of the fountain that used to be placed there originally. Hence only the small hole placed at the centre of the shape of fountain becomes visible if approached from up close. Once one approaches the installation, the spectator sees that the shape of “negative” fountain is recreated under the ground also including an invisible (yet audible) spring of water whose sound is probably the only element so similar to the very original fountain.

Holocaust counter-monuments also include the widely known Berlin Memorial of the Murdered Jews of Europe (R. Serra & P. Eisenman, completed 2005) placed next to the German Reichstag. The counter-monument comprises several parts, the central one of which is an assembly of 2000 granite stones of various sizes. The stones are placed above four rooms of an information centre showcasing history of extermination of Jews in Europe. The floor of the information centre is filled with projections of letters (correspondence sent by the exterminated Jews from concentration camps) which correspond in rectangular shape with the stones above them. Hence, the letter as if originate from the stones above thus creating a “projection” of the past onto the floor as the “present” experienced by the visitors. All in all, the counter-monument links the collective history (presented in the centre) with individual histories (represented by the letters and their inscriptions) and constructs a discourse that shows both collective and individual dimension of Holocaust as human and European tragedy.

To be sure, the above are not the only examples of Holocaust commemorating counter-monuments. The latter also include, inter alia, such famous realisations as the Radegast Station (Łódź, Poland, 2004) authored by Polish architect Czesław Bielecki to commemorate liquidation of Litzmannstadt Ghetto though the site (a train station) of deportation of Jews from the Ghetto to concentration camps. Antony Gormley’s Empty Chairs (completed 2000) placed at the bank of Oslo Fjord to commemorate Norwegian Jews who were deported from there (by barges/ships) to death camps in Central Europe in 1943 is another prominent example. In fact, as Gormley famously argued explaining his Oslo project:

*the Holocaust cannot be represented*. I want to make a place to remember, to make a bridge between the living and the dead in order that these events and their implication should not be lost.1

Further to “making use” of (urban) spaces of historical relevance as indicated above, Holocaust commemorating counter-monuments in many cases also include highly complex and polysemous installations that call for recipients’ multiple forms of engagement. Of these, very likely, the most fascinating one remains the Homage to Raoul Wallenberg (2002) designed by Danish artist Kerstin Ortwed and completed by Aleksander Wolodarski and Gabriel Herdevall. Located next to picturesque Nybrohamn in central Stockholm, the counter-monument commemorates Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish financier, who, using his wealth and diplomatic connections, saved several thousand Hungarian Jews during WWII (NB: Wallenberg has previously been commemorated on many occasions, most prominently in counter-monument entitled “Hope” and placed outside United Nations’ headquarters on New York City’s 1st Avenue).
Stockholm’s Wallenberg “Homage” consists of three major elements that also form the stages through which one, as spectator, apparently needs to go through when following the counter-monument’s ideas. The first part-stage is a set of empty, shapeless brass benches placed apart from each other around the square and formed in a way that makes them unable to be seated upon. Next to the benches there is also a sizeable brass inscription, which, clad into the square, resembles Raoul Wallenberg’s handwritten signature. The benches (and the signature) are the only things visible at first sight thus not really implying commemoration of the Jewish community. Yet, the separated, scattered and irregularly shaped benches “lead” to the second element of the counter-monument, that is, a concrete spherical “ball”. While from afar, the ball seems to be ornamented with just horizontal stripes, once approached up close it becomes clear that each of the stripes includes a repeating inscription in several European languages. The inscription includes a sentence “The road was winding, dangerous and full of obstacles when Jews tried to escape their persecutors – it was simple and straight when Jews were taken to death.” The metaphor of the straight/simple road on the ball’s inscriptions finally leads to a third element of the counter-monument: a set of straight rails implying deportations (by train) of Jews to the concentration camps. Interestingly, the straight “railway” ends abruptly yet, if contextualised, it becomes obvious that it actually leads towards nearby Stockholm Synagogue at the same time implying that the latter should have been a beginning, not the end, of our journey. It hence becomes clear that we should have instead “walked” in an opposite direction: starting from the Synagogue, through the rails, to the spherical concrete monument and finally to the as if disappearing benches symbolising shattered lives of individual human beings. This implies that our often temporal understanding of remembrance (from x to y, from start to finish) cannot be followed in case of commemoration of events as complex in terms of contexts, individual lives and collective tragedies as the Holocaust.

Interestingly, the Stockholm’s Wallenberg Homage points to one of the common features of counter-monuments. Quite contrary to, for example, the Berlin memorial equipped with abundance of information (see above), Wallenberg memorial’s meaning is apparently undefined making the counter-monument, at least initially, uninformative. It also expects, multiple ways of spectator’s engagement. What is expected – and as if pre-planned for the spectator – is not only looking/seeing and following the chain of thought. One is also expected to walk in a particular direction and along pre-defined steps that only if completed – and if taken in a right order (see above) – eventually create the logical whole aligned with the intended logic of following the pathway of commemoration. This makes remembering into both a cognitive process (which it anyway usually is) but necessarily tied to a physical engagement – via effort of walking. Such a combination does not just “offer a healing or consolation, but suggests an active and open engagement with loss” (Rosenberg 2012, 134; see also Apel 2002, 5–6).

5. Stolpersteine: dialogic, counter-monumental (non)remembrance in contemporary urban space

As a unique form of counter-monuments, Stolpersteine or, literally speaking, stumbling stones/blocks, surely offer a way out of some challenges of Holocaust remembrance mentioned above. While they commemorate victims of National Socialism in general, the
Stolpersteine focus in particular on members of the Jewish community, who were either killed, died or went missing in the course of the Shoah.

Stolpersteine were initiated by a German sculptor Gunter Demnig who, since 2000, started installing them in several cities throughout Germany. By 2015, his ideas of commemoration have become international with the total number of installations exceeding 600 Stolpersteine placed in Germany, Austria and several other locations, especially across Central Europe. As the artist recalls on the website of Stolpersteine project (www.stolpersteine.eu), the inspiration for the project comes from a Talmud sentence that “a person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten”. Accordingly, the Stolpersteine commemorate those who do not have a grave or other form of commemoration and otherwise would have eventually been forgotten. Each of the Stolpersteine carries therefore a largely similar inscription which starts from “Here lived …” (Hier wohnte …), followed by a name of a person who is subsequently commemorated, his or hers date of birth, date and direction of deportation and the date and place of death. Hence, the uniqueness of Stolpersteine lays in the fact that, unlike most of known forms of Holocaust commemoration (see above), they do not aim at collective remembrance of the Jews and other victims of Nazi dictatorship. They also do not depersonalise the victims, as is usually the case in collective commemorations of “all” those killed in particular location or at a specific time. They also do not undertake commemoration in specially designed places like those of monuments or cemeteries.

In terms of their material features, Stolpersteine are small, square brass blocks/plaques placed on pavements and sidewalks – as if in lieu of the usual pavement blocks – in front of those remaining houses where people who wither died or went missing in the course Holocaust used to live (usually prior to deportation to ghettos or concentration camps). Depending on locations, there are sometimes individual but in most cases multiple Stolpersteine, often encompassing entire families (see Figure 1). Analysing Stolpersteine from a critical-analytic and multimodal/social-semiotic perspective (Abousnnouga and Machin

Figure 1. Stolpersteine as “Tombstones” in Berlin-Mitte district, Berlin, Germany [Photography by David Yates].
it is vital to commence with those distinctive features that facilitate production and communication of their possible meaning(s) as objects of commemoration:

- Looking at their spatial context, we see that *Stolpersteine* are placed on the ground/pavement suggesting their closeness to, and rootedness in, reality (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013, 42). In connection with their rather modest size (10 cm × 10 cm), *Stolpersteine* hence can be interpreted as not claiming control of the city-zens space of habitat. They are not forceful commemorations as would be the case with, for example, monuments usually erected in prominent spaces and outright dominating them. Instead, *Stolpersteine* communicate an intriguing invitation to search the meaning(s) of this unique way of commemoration.

- The semiotics of *Stolpersteine* leads us to conclusion that their regular, square form generally implies seriousness (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013, 46). However, a closer look reveals that their form is not quite geometric as all “corners” of the plaques are not sharp but rather rounded which conveys a “gentle, emotional” approach (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013, 43).

- As the material itself is a crucial carrier of meaning, the fact that and stumbling stones are made of brass makes them “long lasting and eternal” (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013, 48) as well as implies durability while still keeping the aforementioned non-intrusiveness. The choice of material also facilitates the reflexivity of *Stolpersteine*. They can be seen as small mirrors (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013, 51) which, by “catching” sunlight, make themselves present and visible. But this feature also enables the *Stolpersteine*’s dialogic features: they not only reflect the (changing) urban reality but also the spectator who looks at the from up close and whose face is reflected in inscription about those departed.

Moving to their wider interpretation from the point of view of commemoration strategies, it seems that *Stolpersteine* cater for several dimensions of commemoration simultaneously. First, they significantly alter the language of commemoration by articulating – in a lasting way – the names of those who are gone. They thus fulfil Wittgenstein’s claim that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 1922, 74) and de facto enrich the scope of local language of commemoration. Secondly, *Stolpersteine* actually commemorate those whose names are inscribed onto their brass plaques by combining their names with plaque as a lasting form of commemoration. Finally, they enable those who live in particular places to contemporarily create “new” memory of those who are gone. This new kind of memory, sometimes called counter-memory (Foucault 1977), is based on objection against the official, state-sanctioned memory. Counter-memory comprises “the residual materials that is not identical with the official meanings of the political public sphere” (Berlant 1991, 6). *Stolpersteine* as the painful remainder in urban loci are a visible sign of the fact that “counter-memory is the memory that challenges the interest at stake in collective memory” (Weedon and Jordan 2012,150). That memory also has a lasting character as the contemporary inhabitants of specific houses/places/spaces will continue on “stumbling” upon the *Stolpersteine* on a daily basis – in the space of their city, on their street/square, or at the entrance to a house. They will also find out that history does not consist of collective experiences (of Jews, Germans, Poles etc.), but that it consists of individual tragedies of those who were as if ripped off from their everyday world, be it as individuals or as families.
Stolpersteine strategically draw on recontextualisation of, in particular, tombstone-like patterns of commemoration. It is worth reminding that in several Judaic traditions, tombstones have acquired particular meanings. While, historically, other cultures allowed for, for example, burning of the dead, spreading their ashes, etc., the Jews have always emphasised the need to bury the body of the deceased. At the same time, the tombstones placed at the sites of such burial have become “a sign of respect for the deceased and the care of the living shown for his soul as well as a symbol for the generations to follow” (Biskup 2014; my translation). Traditionally called matzevahs, Jewish tombstones were in some traditions placed both vertically (esp. in case of Ashkenazi Jews) but also horizontally (esp. in the Sephardic Jewish tradition). Since the middle ages onwards, the standard feature of matzevahs is the inscription that includes names of the deceased as a very prominent element (Biskup 2014). Of course, just like tombstones in other cultures/religions, the Jewish matzevahs have evolved in their form over the years yet centrality of inscription remained. Interestingly, those features persisted despite many specifically Jewish elements (e.g. an obligatory burial of the body itself, without a coffin) eventually being abandoned by the most of Jewish communities across Europe.

Because of the absence of the deceased’s bodies, Stolpersteine are not graves as such, especially as and their understanding as a grave could be questioned by both Judaic tradition (which does not allow graves without burial and those being buried) and perhaps even more so by the Christian one (where walking on graves is seen as an act of profanation). But nevertheless, many visitors treat them almost identically to graves: by placing stones, flowers, lanterns and even flags or child’s toy (next to stone commemorating a two-year-old boy) in an almost monument-like fashion (Figures 1 and 2). While Stolpersteine cannot be considered tombstones as such, their horizontal position makes them carry matzevah-resembling features surely fortified by the presence of prominent

![Figure 2. Stolpersteine as “Tombstones” in Anderlecht district, Brussels, Belgium [Photography by Bella Swiatlowski].](image)
tombstone-like patterns of inscription (mentioning names; dates of birth; where to and when they were deported and, if known, died; see Figure 3). Effectively, in their entire form as well as symbolism, Stolpersteine seem to have symbolic value/role of miniature matzevahs.

A particularly vital aspect of Stolpersteine – and the one that particularly aligns them with counter-monumental patterns of commemoration – is their attempt to negotiate local identity of a place/space with those living in the present (yet by mentioning those who departed in the past). Constituting a positive intrusion into their everyday routines Stolpersteine as if force the passers-by to slow down or glimpse at them. At the same time, the present inhabitants will be aware of the Stolpersteine thus changing their approach to the space that they actually inhabit. Stolpersteine will therefore be vital for reopening the idea of a space as based on dialogue and deliberation, and will, through commemorating those departed and letting those present deal with the troubled aspects of genius loci, enable the contemporaries to look at space in terms of hope and openness (Tuan 1987, 13–14). Though past-oriented, Stolpersteine will emphasise that, although often “haunted by past structures of meaning and material presences from other times and lives” (Till 2005, 6 in Rosenberg 2012, 131), places acquire their true identity only when “their meanings are made in the present” (Rosenberg 2012, 131). Put differently, they enable constructing certain continuity of urban space identity by linking its “scope of experience” and “horizon of expectations” (Koselleck 2004) and thereby reconnecting those who lived there in the past with present inhabitants.

Figure 3. Stolpersteine in West-End district, Frankfurt am Main, Germany [Photography by Natalia Krzyżanowska].
The fact that Stolpersteine take up space for the purposes of commemoration, is also, or perhaps particularly, relevant in the case of departed members of the Jewish community. Looking at the development of the Holocaust it is obvious that, prior to their extermination, Jews were at first denied their living space – be it by being banned from parks, green and recreation areas (as was the case in, e.g. Berlin already since the early 1930s) and eventually most of public spaces, up to being closed in cramped ghettos (cf. Rosenberg 2012). Stolpersteine therefore make up for that spatial discrimination and offer deceased Austrian, German, Polish and other Jews their permanent space, in public sense (as symbolised by the sidewalks on which they are placed) yet also in relation to their private place of living (home/house) which they were also eventually deprived of.

Indeed, as far as home, Stolpersteine remark that those who died in the course of the Shoah were not allowed to die in the privacy of their home but that instead spaces in which they died were those of collective/mass murder often mentioned in the inscriptions (Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Theresienstadt, Kaunas, etc.). Hence, the location of Stolpersteine in front of homes of those commemorated also reminds us that their function is to as if return that home to those who were taken away from their spaces of living in a violent and abrupt way. Stolpersteine hence allow those deported/killed to regain home as a place “to which one rightfully belongs, on which his/her feelings are concentrated, where he/she finds shelter” (Morley 2011, 33).

As they take stock of unpredictability of our habits and patterns of using the urban space (Thrift 2004), Stolpersteine are equally effective in their strategies of interactive – and hence essentially counter-monumental – commemoration. The fact that they are placed “in between” various elements of the urban habitat enables us to see them – whether we walk, cycle or drive – and thus requires us to interact with them. They forge interaction between contemporary inhabitants of the houses (who, though getting used to them, are constantly reminded of them by their sheer permanent presence) and those who come there occasionally, by chance or as tourists (for whom they are often surprising, shocking, often initially unclear in their function and meaning). It is therefore probably the main “achievement” of Stolpersteine that, in so many places across Europe, they have contributed to the fact that:

by identifying their former homes, the deported Jews were given a presence in the neighbourhood that could not be ignored. Their memory was given a physical reference; the history of the deportation was told one by one, house by house […] the silence had been broken. (Rosenberg 2012, 139)

Stolpersteine have also become the permanent traces of existence of those whom they commemorate. Their character as a lasting trace acquires a peculiarly multiple form of what Skarga (2002, 213) called the tripartite “topos of imprint, scar and recalling” (topos piętna, blizny i wezwania). First, Stolpersteine are an imprint of negative past occurrences, more specifically of shameful crime unprecedented in its proportions. Secondly, they are as a scar, that is, a sign of “creating a wound; it reminds of pain, of tragic occurrences, of suffering and loneliness […] of losing something precious, being deprived of home and put into exile” (Skarga 2002, 213) Thirdly, Stolpersteine are an act of recalling the memory of those gone and departed, especially as each of the “stumbling stones” recognises and localises those concerned.
Figure 4. Individual & Multiple *Stolpersteine* in West-End district, Frankfurt am Main, Germany [Photography by Natalia Krzyżanowska].

Figure 5. Individual & Multiple *Stolpersteine* in West-End district, Frankfurt am Main, Germany [Photography by Natalia Krzyżanowska].
The fact that for his *Stolpersteine* installations Gunter Demnig choses entrances to the buildings/houses (see Figures 4 and 5) does not seem to be arbitrary either. Indeed, placing *Stolpersteine* next to doors/gates/entrances has a function of putting them as forms of commemoration into the absolutely key space of human (everyday) movement and that part of the space which also has the symbolic functioning of opening the space, showing its inclusiveness and openness. As the sociological perspective on the urban spaces reminds us, “passages and doors, gates and doorsteps are among those categories which are crucial to the social construction of the space” (Jalowiecki and Szczepański 2006, 326). The salience of symbolism of doors and gates have over centuries been emphasised by their ornamentations (porticos, columns, sculptures or their size as such) as elements that were supposed to construct as well as reflect the character of a place/space to which they constituted and entrance. Equally, Simmel (1975) emphasised the predominantly social importance of doors/entrances as passages.

Finally, the “stumbling stones” are installed as parts of pavements/sidewalks, hence a very ordinary element of our everyday realities. Yet, while we might not be looking at them everyday, at some times – rushing in the rain, returning home at night – we will notice their reflection. If we allow that “walking the streets, we only see just a part, a fraction of the city, one that in a particular time and place is evident to our eyes” (Glyda 2008, 167), *Stolpersteine* have the ability to broaden our spatio-temporal reality and add a new (past dimensions) to our always contemporised practice of seeing, and to the related “here and now” of our everyday conduct. Those “past dimensions” are spatialised articulations and embodiments of social memory as well as contributions to the past-related current local *genius loci*.

### 6. Conclusions

The present article has shown the multitude of interpretations that can be deployed in the case of various forms of public and individual commemoration. It has highlighted counter-monuments – such as the *Stolpersteine* analysed above – as a versatile semiotic form. As has been shown, they allow remembrance while, on the one hand, enacting past-related dialogue in contemporary urban space and, on the other, taking stock of many dichotomies that were traditionally key in urban politics of commemoration.

The particular virtue of counter-monuments resides in their ability to take stock of diversity of expectations that diverse individual/collective actors have with regard to commemoration. As evidenced in the analysis, the central feature of counter-monuments is their unique, discursively constructed *dialogic imagination* (Bakhtin 1981) and the fact that they can transgress and forge dialogue between, inter alia, modes of public and private commemoration. At the same time, counter-monuments – such as most notably the *Stolpersteine* – aim to deploy non-ideologised and often multiple semiotic forms (in our central case, miniature brass tombstones/plaques). Contrary to the often over-politicised monuments so often driven by such ideologies as, for example, nationalism, nativism or even sexism (Abousnouga and Machin 2013), counter-monuments allow for de-politicisation and de-ideologisation of commemoration that should be at the foundation of remembrance in contemporary urban spaces of diversity and inclusion.

The article has indicated that, also because of their inherent complexity, contemporary urban spaces are in an acute need for new forms of commemoration such as through the...
counter-monuments. As has been argued through a multitude of interpretive dimensions, counter-monuments fulfil many contemporary expectations of commemorative practice while also pointing to the existence of public need to appropriate “work of art as materialised and externalised structure of human memory” (Dybel 1999, 25; orig. emphasis). They do so mainly in response to the long-term (urban) politics of remembrance that continued “to delegate to monuments and commemorations the moral responsibility to guarantee remembrance” (Carrier 2005, 1) while failing to see that the top-down and largely non-dialogic character of monuments has long ceased to be relevant for commemoration as part of contemporary dynamics of social memory and (urban) space identity.

While, to be sure, counter-monuments are also often contested, it happens so mainly as a repercussion of their often complex form and the fact that many counter-monumental realisations expect particular forms of not only cognitive but also physical/spatial engagement from their spectators/viewers/users (that often becomes limited to the “initiated”). However, as has been shown, leading counter-monuments follow relatively simple semiotic code that draws on recontextualisation of discourses of forms and formats of commemoration from both public but also private/intimate sphere (as is the case with Stolpersteine linking features of commemorative plaques but also tombstones). Therefore, counter-monuments become a very efficient form of remembrance that actively deploys urban space as not only a locus but also a subject – or dialogic interlocutor – of thus enacted discourse of memory and identity.

Note


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