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# modelling public space(s) in culture

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**Rethinking Institutional Practices in Culture  
and Historical (Dis)continuities**



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# Dissonance - A Pretty Harsh Term to Define

Towards Understanding the Importance of Safeguarding the Pluralism of Heritage Meanings in Public Spaces<sup>1</sup>

—Milica Božić Marojević

## Introduction

I started writing this paper on a *very special date*, very dissonant date – Friday the 13th. Some people consider it as a *bad day which brings bad luck*. It is *very popular in horror movies*, so many kids are afraid to go to school on that day. Even though 13 is a *symbol of rebellion* in the Bible, in China, for example, this is a *lucky number*. Hence, we can agree that *different people see it differently*. However, its legacy is sort of *intangi-*

<sup>1</sup> — This research is conducted within the project *Tradition and Transformation - Historical Heritage and National Identities in Serbia in the 20th Century* (Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia; No. 47019).



ble and not that important for people to seriously argue about it. But, when it comes to the things and situations that can or should shape our identities, that are by nature sensitive or becoming like that due to the circumstances – we need to say: “Huston, we have a problem!” and it is usually linked with presentation, interpretation, communication and management of contested past(s).

Joking aside, this example is a very convenient way to introduce such a *serious and complex term* like dissonance. When we say *dissonance*, in the context of heritage we usually think of the *diversity of meanings attached to it*, or so to say *of non-existence of the agreement* in the manner that heritage is *remembered, represented, understood and interpreted* by different actors (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996:20-33). Still, knowing that doesn't end our troubles, not just because we borrowed the term from musicology, but since dissonance is a quality that exists in every heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996:97; Ashworth and Graham 1997:381; Silvén and Björklund 2006:263). From that point of view, another question naturally arises - if that feature exists in all of our inheritance, why do we bother to emphasize it? Well, sometimes that dissonance is *vague* and not so problematic, because we have a long-term arrangement about what certain heritage is, what it means and represents. But if it comes to the situation that circumstances are changed, that new standpoints are found (whether they are scientific/factual whether political/ideological in nature) and some other meanings detected, it becomes more evident. Then, as a result, we can have discordance which can lead to political struggles, national tensions or regional confusions. In those situations, certain efforts have to be made so we could be able to talk about variety of meanings of the mentioned heritage (Božić Marojević 2014b:39; Silvén and Björklund 2006:263; Harrison 2006:154-196; Laclau 1994).

According to Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), there are several different situations when dissonance is really visible. One is when heritage within itself has *opposing messages, which consumers need to integrate to create its meaning*. The other is when the *message is received in a different way than anticipated*. The third situation occurs when we have some *political changes*, since heritage messages are dependent on the values that certain society has. And finally, we have that dissonance caused by the undesired heritage, or so to say *negative legacies from the past* (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996:29).

In the past, the dominant approach was to overcome it, to reduce that dissonance and to consult professionals that were going to create one and only truth<sup>2</sup>. That kind of approach, but also the fact that dissonance was mainly considered in the context of war legacies, has ascribed to it a negative connotation. However,

<sup>2</sup> — More on this issue and especially on “authorized heritage discourse” (AHD) in: Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge.

recently, we started to insist on the pluralism of meanings and we are accepting dissonance as a driving force for heritage safeguarding (Božić Marojević 2014a; Arendt [1951]2017). As complicated as it sounds, there is no one and only truth, and how we see it often depends from the perspective we take. Therefore, the ways we preserve heritage and its dissonant layers teach us, in fact, something much more important – how to accept others, their different opinions, to respect and understand their attitudes, how to improve mutual communication skills through argued dialogues and how to critically observe over and over again existing answers. From this perspective, heritage interpretation, presentation and memorialisation, from emphasizing one truth, are turning into a well-grounded re-examination of a certain political moment, and spatial memorials become its active incentives too<sup>3</sup>.

## Where Do Dissonance, Heritage and Public Spaces Overlap?

If we would like to describe public spaces, we wouldn't have a lot of problems. We are familiar with them and a lot of our usual activities occur in those places, since they are owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free, without a profit motive and any purpose other than contributing to the overall quality of urban life<sup>4</sup>. They can have many spatial forms, including parks, streets, market-places, beaches etc. That does not mean that all public spaces are simply 'open spaces', because a library, some school or other public facilities are also considered as public spaces.

Even though we also interact with heritage on everyday basis, its defining is much more complex, since the nature of heritage in the perception of the general public is more inconceivable. Some of us would say that there is no term or phenomenon that is directly related to museology and heritology, and that has so many different definitions and a wide range of uses, such as *patrimonium*. Although it originates in the Roman period, its popularity has become more intense in the past 40 years or so. Whether we name it as heritage, inheritance, a cultural good or with some other related term, it is a phenomenon that existed longer before its conventional, although still not standardized, name. Logically, then the question arises: when, how and why did *patrimonium* start to be more than what was inherited from

<sup>3</sup> — More on this issue in: Božić Marojević, Milica. 2015. *(Ne)željeno nasleđe u prostorima pamćenja: Slobodne zone bolnih uspomena*. Beograd: Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju.

<sup>4</sup> — The Charter of Public Space, UN Habitat Document.

the parents? Definitely the crucial moment is the French Revolution which led to a modern understanding of the nation and public interest, but the foundation for that was certainly given by the Enlighteners and the cultural and political climate that preceded the upheaval. Consequently, by forming Louvre as the first museum that people could visit free of charge, *patrimonium* gained the role of a promoter, but was also the tool for realizing national ideas and interests. Thus, the diversity of what is to be inherited, and at the same time important and transferable to the future, expanded. With time, folklore, industrial and scientific heritage was integrated into it, thus this concept began to imply all natural or man-made objects and values made, either tangible or not, regardless of time or place of creation, and whether they were inherited or collected (Božić Marojević 2015).

The fact that the space is a 'mental category' as well as 'constructed reality' is an important factor which affects values and meanings both of that place and its heritage. So the link between these two categories is not that elusive. Although the physical aspect of inheritance makes us see it at a glance as unchanging, its meaning, in fact, is never fixed, but it is agreed and subjected to change. As such, 'memories on spaces' do not survive due to their material objectivity, nor only because of their own aesthetics or symbolism, but above all because of the active role they play in the process of building collective identities. That is why heritage is more than a construct or representative. It is a cultural tool that nations, societies, communities, and individuals use to express, facilitate or build a sense of common, and the role of place itself is to provide a physical reality to those experiences (Smith 2006:74-75).

When spatial surroundings begin to change, the landscape changes too. The division of the state, as well as the lack of material artefacts (monuments, churches, factories, bridges, shops) weaken the connection with local heritage and undermine the collective value and memory. This happened also with the public spaces of the former Yugoslav republics.

Heritage is related to the semiotic approach to places in three different ways. Monuments, objects, events and personalities from the past, along with their ways of interpreting, are often the basic means by which places create a separate, characteristic identity. From this perspective, new towns lack identity just because they are irrelevant in this context. Secondly, by preserving the material objects of the past, we inevitably keep their accumulated messages. Finally, as heritage is an intentional creation of the ruling elite, then its production is an effective medium for the transmission of messages between rulers and those in power (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996:18).

As Miroslav Tuđman (1983) wrote not so long ago, the dominant knowledge in modern Western society is determined by public knowledge in the public space. That means that a person who controls public space also controls the flow of knowl-

edge, and in that way, he or she can also ensure the dominance of messages. Although the cultural monument is part of social knowledge, it cannot be separated from its public life. In this sense, cultural monuments are part of the organization of public space and therefore their coded message is part of collective memory and at the same time public knowledge (Tuđman 1983:77).

## Concluding Remarks

I started this article with the phrase “Houston, we have a problem” as in the movie *Apollo 13*. Many people actually do not know that the origin of this sentence can be traced to the phrase “Houston, we’ve had a problem here” that was used by the moon flight crew to report a major technical problem back to their base. In other words, they had a problem and they solved it. I often wondered why this sentence became sort of a general saying and additionally why it was wrongly interpreted. For the movie creators it’s logical – who would want to see a movie with a title that reveals everything in advance? Anyway, I used the misquoted one on purpose, to show that the fact that something is *more present* in our lives doesn’t necessarily mean that it is *more accurate* or true. On the contrary, it just means that it is *more acceptable*, and the reasons for that are as simple as ignorance, lack of interest or perhaps too much interest on the part of leading elites.

Debates over public memory and valorisation of history are often complex and politically provocative or to say dissonant. However, in extreme cases, they are frequently pretty straightforward. For any controversial theme, the first question we should ask is: how did the subject earn a place in our public spaces of remembrance? We do not negotiate about Holocaust or antifascism etc.

I do not argue that professionals seem to be tired from different so-called EU terms, unclear and general recommendations, a vast number of conventions etc. Nevertheless, when we think about heritage, taking into account different point of views and diverse values can only be a plus, and not a burden. Opposite meanings within (cultural) heritage, critical approaches, evaluations and discussions are normal, necessary or even welcomed. They create our inheritance, our identity, through understanding of all of its layers and help us to further develop and apply new models of integrative heritage safeguarding practices based on multidisciplinary and participativeness. However, the core issue stays within our work – we seem to lack a proper agreement on cultural heritage safeguarding standards and terms. If we solve that obstacle, we will be able to consider all these harsh words as useful tools for explaining or defining our field of expertise and not just as a nine day’s wonder.

‘The problem’ or *pluralism of meanings* will always exist, even as a recollection, even through different interpretations that led to that ‘problem’, through ways it is solving or could be solved. What remains to us is to decide what we are going to do with that knowledge now, today, and whether the awareness of its existence is going to help us to initiate a dialogue (not necessarily and a consensus) on the burning social, political and cultural misunderstandings that our everyday life is full of.

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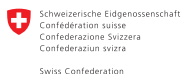
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