The symbolism of place: a geography of relationships between space, power and identity

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EDITOR’S NOTE

Cet article est une traduction de l’article La symbolique des lieux : pour une géographie des relations entre espace, pouvoir et identité.

1 In the vast empire of signs constructed by human activity across the known and imagined world, how can symbols be recognised? The focus here is on their material nature, particularly with regard to spaces as symbols, or symbolic places. Like all signs, symbols have meaning or “signify”, that is to say they carry the meaning that an individual or a group has endowed them with. But unlike other signs, symbols are recognisable of account of one particular feature, which is that they are concrete realities, objects, or physical actions, the factual existence of which is relatively independent from the meaning that is attributed to them. This differentiates symbols from other signs, such as words, or even certain objects the existence of which is wholly associated with their function as signs.

2 According to the approach adopted here, a word such as “power” is not a symbol, since it does not exist without the power that informs it, even if it can be materialised on a computer screen or a sheet of paper. The same applies, for instance, to traffic lights, which “signal” (or “signify”) when I am allowed to pass or when I must stop. They do not however symbolise the authorisation, I do not see the traffic lights as a materialisation of my “rights” and “duties”. In contrast, a policeman regulating traffic can be seen as a symbol of the established power, and the set of words forming the Constitution can be
considered as a symbol of my rights and duties: both exist beyond what they strictly signify.

3 Of course, in view of the accumulation of meanings of this word through the history of Western civilisations and up to the present day, the concept of the symbol is not easy to handle. It is however possible to retrieve this cultural heritage, while at the same time using a simple, operational definition: in European tradition, the symbol is something that connects across distances, it unites, it conveys, and it communicates (see Caillois, 1938, Eliade 1952, Chevalier 1969). It is a materiality that conveys the immaterial, a visible thing that shows the invisible, a gesture that signifies a value. Thus the symbol can be defined as a mediator between different registers of human experience and communication.

4 Indeed, human experience and communication have an irreducibly spatial dimension: the known and imagined world that human activity converts into an empire of signs is, among other things, geographical. This reality is therefore not foreign to the process of “semanticisation” of the world: precisely because of its materiality, geographical reality is indeed a privileged vehicle for the process of symbolisation, of conversion of concrete elements of human life into symbols. In this article, the emphasis will not be on the general characteristics of the process of symbolisation in space, studied by Bernard Debarbieux (1995) who explored their links with rhetorical figures, and in particular the synecdoche, whereby a part is made to represent the whole. Nor will we look directly at the metaphorical usages of space, as they appear for instance in the symbolic notion of social or racial “distance”, as analysed by Philip Ethington (1997).

5 The aim here is rather to demonstrate the symbolic issues underpinning apprehension of space, the well-recognised scope provided by space when something is to be symbolised, the usefulness of differentiating space by identifying places by way of their symbolic load and power. Reference will also be made to several case studies across the Americas, illustrating the way in this human ability to symbolise is used by groups and individuals to produce symbolic places, to influence the construction of collective identities, and to legitimise the exercise of an authority. Symbolisation can also be seen as one of the major factors differentiating space into places, since this process endows a portion of space with a name, an identity, a permanence, a reason for existing, and a particular relationship with certain values and meanings. This all contributes to the existential advent of places in the eyes of those frequenting or imagining them.

6 The symbolic dimension of space should not be taken lightly, since it is what gives internal coherency to the living space of each person. Indeed, the symbolic dimension has a role in the representation of a space that is proportionally greater where it is less in competition with a concrete experience of that space. On the scale of the individual, the system of meaning integrates into a whole both the direct personal experience of a limited number of places, and the accumulation of representations on a multitude of places of which the individual has only indirect knowledge.

Symbolic and hierarchical differentiations in time and space

7 Beyond its practical function, by its form and by the way it is used, a place has a composite social content that can be expressed in symbolic terms, and these are
themselves determined by the historical circumstances in which they are used. For instance, a factory can, concurrently or simultaneously, be a symbol of progress, of production and employment, of unemployment, of exploitation, or of pollution. Smelting works today can be a symbol of the economic crisis, while an electronic component factory can be a symbol of technological modernity, which at the same time will not prevent it from being seen in certain instances as a symbol of the archaic nature of industrial relations, just like a textile workshop. All places, because they are significative, carry with them something that is other than the material extent of the places themselves. It could be said that normally speaking all places have a symbolic dimension. Augustin Berque (1996: 79) refers, in this respect, to the intrinsic eco-symbolism (écosymbolicité) of the oecoumene. While this is true, it should be added that some places are more symbolic than others. The hierarchisation that appears here is socially grounded: it is the most widely shared symbols that are the most efficient in terms of communication and shared meaning. The most obvious symbolic places, those that are distinguished from the others on this score, are those where the symbolic charge is manifest or even essential to their identification as places. Only places identified as symbolic by a certain number of individuals are socially recognised as such, and it is within this movement of recognition that a group can form and give itself an identity.

This is why the symbolic dimension of space is both a power issue and a power instrument: the person who manipulates symbols can also manipulate processes of identification, and thus have influence over the constitution of the group that legitimises the exercise of power. The history of the construction of nation-states since the 16th century can provide a wealth of examples of this process: state authority defines the symbols that are to define the nation, which is supposed to correspond to the social reality over which the said authority is exercised. This is how all the American republics were formed in the course of the 19th century, and the absence or the weakness of this process of symbolisation could explain why Canada, whose head of state is still today the British sovereign, has not stabilised as a unified nation-state.

It has been said that what defines a symbol is that it relates or creates links between realities of different nature, and articulates different orders: the material and the ideal, the concrete and the imaginary, space and power. Thus the place of power can be thought to be, by definition, symbolic, at once the vehicle of power in the spatial order, and the vehicle of space in the order of power, which for instance justifies the aim of archaeologists to study social organisation by interpreting foundations or ruins. It also to a certain extent explains the media discourse that reduces governments or stock exchanges to the name of the city that houses them – “Washington has said that…”, “Mexico reacted”, and “New York plummeted taking Sao Paulo with it”.

However if we agree to consider the symbol as an essential mediator between different orders of reality, its interpretation implies a study of the cultural foundations of these orders, considered as so many categories that vary according to civilisations, their temporalities, and their spatialities. The analysis of the symbolism of place is therefore a semiology of spatial forms according to an interpretation grid of culturally grounded categories (authority, identity, centrality, legitimacy, monument, public, private, etc.). The issue is to understand how an organisation of space and a system of values become impregnated one with the other. In addition, changes in scale and temporality should be apprehended as changes in symbolic efficacy. A symbolic place does not have the same meaning seen from nearby or represented at a distance, by a small group or by a large
community, from inside or from outside, by “us” or by “others”, and through time. A hydroelectric dam, a pantheon, a cultural centre or a citadel, are symbols that have changing meanings depending on the point of view of the person considering them, and his or her position in time.

The Pre-Columbian sites of the Americas, such as the Teotihuacan pyramids in Mexico, proved a good example of the career of symbolic places. It can reasonably be thought that these places have symbolised at least seven different things:

1. Little or nothing is known about the meanings that the Teotihuacan site had for the society that erected it (which the archaeologists are endeavouring to reconstitute rationally).
2. It can reasonably be postulated that the site represented something rather different for this society’s neighbours (the awareness of this difference is indeed likely to have contributed to defining what was “local” and what was neighbouring, or “foreign”),
3. and also that it meant something different again for the indigenous societies that developed on the spot after the sites were abandoned (it is from the later Aztec narratives that the present toponym, meaning “place of the genesis of the gods”, was handed down to us).
4. Teotihuacan took on yet another meaning after the European conquest, when the pyramids became symbols of the savage paganism of the native Americans,
5. and later still they were appropriated by the Creole intellectuals in the age of Enlightenment and at the time of the granting of independence in the Americas as emblems of a history and a destiny that was specific to the Americas and justified their distancing themselves from Europe.
6. In the present day, pre-colonial remains are interpreted by the heritage lobby (intellectuals and elected representatives, see Monnet 1996) as proof of the axiomatic existence of the nation, itself justifying the exercise of the state authority (Monnet 1995),
7. while at the same time the vast majority of visitors, whether local or foreign, see nothing more than an exotic tourist attraction providing a remarkable aesthetic experience.

**Symbolic places and public spaces**

Symbolic places that are developed by public authorities are among the commonest symbols in a given society. They are common in two senses - they are understood by all, that is to say their symbolic dimension does not escape anyone inside the group, and they are shared by all, that is to say that their symbolic dimensions gathers all the spectators of the symbol into a whole. They are thus in every sense ”commonplace” (Monnet 1993:195). In societies where the institutional religious authority is strong, churches thus rank as places that are symbolic of public power. In Western societies (in Europe or the Americas) churches today are a widely present heritage rather than a currently operational power in the organisation of space on the national, regional and urban scales (but they are still strongly symbolic places on the scale of village communities or urban quarters).

The public space plays a determining role in the symbolic efficacy of a place. It is both a space of freedom (free circulation, contact between the sexes, different age groups, different social classes, exchanges of ideas, goods and services, etc), and also a space of public constraint (the sphere of application of rules and social norms, of laws on morality and order, etc). The public space is therefore that in which it is possible to gather the largest number of people sharing the same codes, the space in which a message can reach everyone, and in which the public power has the right to intervene to enable its delivery.
As a result there is a widespread "monumentalisation" of the public space whenever there is intervention by the public authority - the construction of prestigious buildings, the setting up of statues or fountains, the renovation of frontages and pavements, the development of parks, etc. An excellent example of this process can be seen in Brazil in the contrast between the very marked "monumentalisation" of the central public spaces in Rio de Janeiro in the second century of its career as a capital city (from the mid 19th century to the mid 20th century) and the very small degree of deliberate monumentalisation of Sao Paulo, the economic metropolis that was long maintained distant from political power.

The action of public authorities in space almost always exhibits a symbolic magnification of the authority itself:

- in the register of strength or power (castles, palaces, parade grounds, ministries etc)
- in the register of an incarnation in the public authorities of the group identity (for instance the bust of Marianne in France, and the pediments engraved with the words "liberté, égalité, fraternité", enabling the equation France = Republic = State)
- in the register of ideals and values (social justice, cosmic equilibrium, segregation or naturalisation of class, cast, and race)

The "public" processing (i.e. that performed by the authorities) of the public space shapes that space as an incarnation or expression of the power of the authorities. It is moreover possible to measure the actual limits of public power by observing the limits of its power or will to act in "abandoned" quarters, following logics that take different forms across the Americas: ethnic "ghettos" in the United States, "colonias proletarias" in Mexico, favelas in Brazil (Bastos et al, 1996), etc.

Conversely, certain quarters are systematically advantaged by public intervention in the processing of space. This is true, for instance, of the monumental treatment of city centres, which depends on the power balance among the different types of urban power. In the United States the public authorities make themselves available to a coalition of private actors for the purpose of monumentalising economic power by the skyscrapers of the Central Business Districts, according to a logic that does not obey a solely economic rationality (see Tuan, 1997 and 1984; Davis, 1990). And we should not forget the Civic Centres which are major symbols of power in the large cities or state capitals in the United States. In Los Angeles, the metropolis nicely described as "the world's most symbolic space of urban decentredness" (Soja, 1996:206), it is also often said that the Civic Centre is the most important seat of government in the United States after Washington DC, or even "one of the largest government complexes in the world" (Pitt & Pitt, 1997:267; see also for instance Soja 1989:236 and 1996:206).

In Mexico and the other countries of Hispanic America, the most pronounced monumentalisation and the richest symbolism are found in the "historic centres", where the public authorities have continually invested since the colonial period (Monnet, 1993 and 1994). In Brazil, it can be thought that the symbolic investment by the authorities follows a model rather similar to that of the United States.

The social production of symbolic spaces

Across the world, an appreciable part of the power of public authorities and institutions has been used to develop symbolic spaces, the prime function of which is to identify and
form the group that gives legitimacy to those authorities or institutions. In Latin America, a good example of this trend is the rapid production of a symbolism of citizenship in the course of the 19th century, by way of street furniture and monuments intended to pay tribute to civic virtues in the form of allegories (Justice, Freedom, Independence etc), or by way of human heroes: the formation of a citizen body was at the time an urgent need for the new Latin-American republics (for Mexico, see Lempérière, 1996). An overview of the interventions by authorities and institutions in the production of symbolic spaces shows three scales of intervention, articulated through the Americas according to differing temporalities: 1) the creation of new cities; 2) the definition of the public space (particularly by way of squares and wide avenues); 3) the erection of monumental buildings (palaces, churches, ministries, stadiums, etc).

Nevertheless, the individuals under the authority of a given power possess autonomy with respect to those governing them, which takes the form of the establishment of spaces for socialising and symbolic places, the production of which escapes the initiative of the public authorities. Civil societies can represent and use certain of the established power’s symbolic places in a way that is different from that initially intended by the authorities. For the choice of a rallying or dispersion point, or for pausing along the itinerary of a demonstration, organisers of political demonstrations opposing the established power often make use of symbolic places developed by the regime they are opposing. Thus the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" (mothers and wives of those who disappeared under the Argentine dictatorship) transformed the symbolic impact of the former Parade Square in Buenos Aires.

In Mexico City, the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (square of the three cultures) in the Tlatelolco area and the 110 modern buildings around it were designed at the start of the 1960s as a symbol of a great national destiny aiming to generate support for the "institutional revolutionary" regime from the incipient middle class. By when the regime opened fire on student demonstrations in 1968, it made Tlatelolco into a symbol of violence, oppression and arbitrariness, a symbol that was returned to in 1985 when the earthquake caused hundreds of deaths in the area, attributed to mismanagement by the authorities (Monnet, 1991). It was therefore not by chance that in the 1997 elections the most recent opposition movement, the Mexican Green Party (which had become the fourth political force in the country) chose to hold its gathering to culminate the campaign on this square, the symbol of democratic shortfalls and mismanagement of the environment.

However the autonomy of civil society in their relationship with symbolic places is not restricted to the political sphere, where the codes of the authorities and those of the opponents are similar. It also extends to social practices that the authorities may attempt to counter. Informal trading is a well-known example (Monnet 1993:70). When a society considers a street or a public square as symbols not just of trading exchanges, but also of social interaction, public authorities have great difficulty, if they attempt to do something, getting rid of street peddlers, whom the proponents of order equate with injustice, insalubrity, insecurity and indignity. Likewise, certain spaces have become symbols of leisure, without any control having been exercised over the phenomenon, this being the case with this or that green area, attraction park, fair ground, beach or river bank.
The symbolism of place and market rationality

We now broach the question of the market. Whenever a social practice generates a market offer, the intervention of economic actors is allied to the exercise of a power. In the Americas, the coordination of these actors was institutionalised from the start of the colonial period, first by way of the chambers of commerce and the trade corporations, and then via clubs, schools and trade unions. In the Spanish colonial cities, economic power was very soon symbolised by a monumental building, the ancestor of the stock exchanges and the head offices of business associations (for Argentina, see Videla, 1995). In addition, those who succeeded in business rarely resisted the temptation to show off their success by converting their rural estancias or urban offices and residences into the symbols of wealth which today form the bulk of the civilian architectural heritage of the colonial and 19th century periods. It is probable that the 20th century is not very different in this respect. For more than a century it has become common practice to entrust an architect, viewed as an artist, with the task of designing a home that corresponds to the increasingly sophisticated tastes of the most wealthy people. This is how the wealthiest neighbourhoods of the Latin-American cities came into being, remarkable in variety and in quality, and sometimes in the eclecticism and the daring of the architectural designs. Over the same period, businesses and those in charge of them came to consider architecture as something other than a skill in erecting the buildings best suited to their functions. For a century, the aim to elaborate a symbolism has been present alongside the requirements for the production of a professional building at the least cost. Two types of building are exemplary today at once of economic modernity and architectural modernism, of financial rationality and symbolic rationality: the sky-scraper and the supermarket.

There is no doubt that the skyscraper was originally a technical solution to an economic constraint – a means to obtain more square metres of functional space per surface area of land, in settings where land prices were rising and where there was a need to gather large numbers of staff in the same place. This explains the appearance of skyscrapers in Chicago and later New York at the start of the 20th century, but certainly not their appearance in Mexico City after the Second World War. The two highest skyscrapers in Mexico are "La Latinoamericana" (built in the 1950s by an insurance company), and the Pemex tower (built in the 1970s by the national petroleum company Petroleos Mexicanos). The sole cost of the land could not justify building towers more than 40 storeys high in Mexico City, all the more so because the seismic risk increases construction costs. The existence of these building can only be understood in reference to the symbolism of modernism and power associated with the skyscraper since it has been linked to the economic success and political power of the United States in the 20th century.

This symbolism appears to give the enterprise or the capitalist involved sufficient economic or social benefit to justify the financial investment for the building, independently from local conditions of land price or technique. From Los Angeles to Mexico City, Bogota, Quito and Lima there are numerous skyscrapers that are first and foremost symbols of power. Things do not appear very different in Brazil, a country known to symbolise political modernity by way of architectural modernism. In addition to companies seeking in this way to "sell" their dynamics and modernity, public authorities have also favoured these buildings, using these symbols of development to
signal towards those under their authority and the outside world. The Los Angeles Town Hall, 150 metres high with 28 storeys, inaugurated in the 1920s, was for four decades the only skyscraper in the city, so long as the city's anti-seismic regulations restricting the height of buildings to 50 metres remained in force, until the 1960s (which saw the start of the rise of the private skyscrapers, now more than 300 metres high with 70 storeys).

The supermarket or "hypermarket" (a retail outlet with a large surface area and a row of check-outs at the exit) appeared in the 1950s in the United States and in France, and spread through market economy countries in the 1960s. It is thus the most recent form of mass retail trade. The evolution of the architecture of these buildings is significant of the growing importance of their symbolism (see Capron 1995, 1996). At the outset, they were merely "shoe-box" architecture, the building being designed, built and located on the basis of functional concerns. From the 1970s and above all the 1980s, the companies employed well-known architects to enhance both the appearance of the buildings, and the way they fitted into the landscape.

25 Today it is unusual for a supermarket or hypermarket to be located in isolation. The new sites are almost always composite, with a "precinct" of small shops leading into the large retail outlet. The post-modern architectural movement is widely resorted to by decision-makers for the retail giants to create pastiches of urban public spaces, and offer recreational itineraries inside the shopping precincts, or in fact to make them into symbols of urban life. Originally, these outlets were located on cheap land, isolated in the peripheral areas of towns and cities. Today, they take part in ambitious property development operations in which the help of public authorities, in terms of public money or legal arrangements, is not lacking. These buildings, which are spaces open to the public and which have become symbols of universal access to the society of plenty, are now treated architecturally and frequented socially as air-conditioned and secure substitutes for the surrounding urban space.

Conclusion

27 The production of symbolic spaces can be seen today as being in the hands of the economic decision-makers, after having been controlled by the religious institutions in the colonial period, and by public authorities at the time of the construction of national citizenships in the 19th century. The underlying issue is that of the definition of identities. Because a symbolic place is an instrument of communication, it entails a social communion around a shared meaning, and thus defines the communing, communicating group. Although with a degree of exaggeration, it could then be said that the type of power that is dominant in the process of elaborating symbolic places contributes to the identification of the society, either as a community of believers, or as a nation of citizens, or as a consumer market or a labour pool.

28 Since any urban development has a meaning of some sort, study should not restrict itself to the factual, it should also explore the symbolism. Property promoters, who sell dreams just as much as they do functional objects, know perfectly well that the action or reaction of the group is determined by the meaning given to and received from space. The "dream" here is not just an illusion sold by promoters interposing between human beings and reality. The symbolic dimension is a vital and unavoidable need of human existence, because it enables the establishment of ties, and makes it possible to give a meaning to the environment, and to appropriate reality and render it intelligible. This is why the
symbolic manipulations by the different types of power should not be merely denounced as smoke screens masking reality: they need to be analysed and explored in detail so that each inhabitant or user of a space can produce the symbolisation that is the most appropriate for him or her in person.

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ABSTRACTS

The relationship between space, power and identity are necessarily mediated by symbols. A symbol is a concrete reality (a building, a statue, a coin, etc.) that communicates something intangible (an idea, a value, a feeling): consequently, a place of power is by definition a symbolic
place, which is a vehicle for power in the spatial order and for space in the order of power. The symbolic mediations between these different orders of reality are therefore produced and interpreted only in the context in which they emerge. A place can be considered as “symbolic” whenever it means something to a group of individuals, in such a way that it contributes to giving an identity to the group. With examples taken across the Americas, this paper investigates how symbolic places are produced and controlled by public authorities, civil societies and economic actors.

Keywords: symbol, symbolic, geography, space, place, power, identity

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