
Special Section – Part 1

*Introductory Note: Power Games and Symbolic Icons in Evolving Urban Landscapes*¹

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This Special Section stems from the panel on ‘Power Games and Symbolic Icons in Evolving Urban Landscapes’ convened by Giuliana B. Prato (Chair, Commission on Urban Anthropology) and Subhadra Mitra Channa (Chair, Commission on Marginalization and Global Apartheid) at the 2021 IUAES Congress on ‘Heritages, global interconnections in a possible world’ (Yucatan, Mexico – virtual mode).

The papers addressed different but interrelated aspects of the panel’s key topics. It was therefore agreed that they could be revised and submitted for publication as a special issue for *Urbanities-Journal of Urban Ethnography*. However, as some papers needed more time for revision, it was deemed more efficient to prepare two special sections for publication in this Journal; the first special section is published in the present May issue, the second will be published in the November issue.

This Special Section–Part 1 includes two revised papers; one by Sam Rumé on ‘The Legitimacy of Urban Things: Cuenca Between Heritage and Modernisation’, and one by Subhadra Mitra Channa on ‘Eroding History and Creating Myths: The Name-Game in Urban Delhi’. The Section also includes the article by Boris Komakhidze on ‘The Visibility of Georgian Hagia Sophia: Urban Religious Transformation in Poti, Georgia’, which had been accepted for publication in *Urbanities* and, it was felt, fittingly addressed the special section’s theme on the symbolic and ideological dimensions of urban heritage and the attendant power games that are at play at specific historical junctures.

Urban heritage, particularly historic buildings and landmarks that carry symbolic meanings, is an emotionally charged and often tension-laden territory. As such, it can generate conflict which often develops along political and ideological lines; for example, between the ruling élite and the broader society or between different groups of urban residents.

The power game of symbolic icons and the role they play in the urban landscape across the world raise important questions on who is represented by them, and what changes in identity formation lead to the re-interpretation of these symbolic icons. These re-interpretations may reflect how changing power hierarchies affect the historical memory of the city’s inhabitants. They encapsulate a wide range of meanings at different moments of urban change and, in some cases, overlapping but contrasting meanings for different groups, including historical residents and newcomers, or minorities communities.

Changes in the urban landscape and in the symbolic significance of specific icons may be determined by different factors. Politically- or ideologically-driven efforts are often made to erase or side-line certain icons (for example, statues, monuments, symbolic buildings), or to showcase them in a renewed fashion — for example, by renaming historically significant urban loci (such as, streets, squares, even entire areas) or using them in ways that would gain popular consensus, while hiding the

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intended political project and the direction of change. Parallel to these processes, new symbolic icons may emerge as a result of changes in cultural and moral values or of shifting power equations.

The panel's aim was to stimulate reflections on the shifting significance of popular icons and the emergence of new icons. We identified some key questions that we hoped would be examined in the individual papers. For example: How and why the meanings attached to certain places or symbolic icons (buildings, monuments, urban loci, etc.) change over time; How established élite or pressure groups use existing urban symbols or construct new ones in order to legitimise their position and gain popular consensus (Pardo 2006); How different groups — including historical residents and newcomers; minorities and marginalized communities; historical and contemporary diasporas — contribute to the 'history' and 'identity' of a city, or of specific areas/quarters (Graezer-Bideau 2018, Rautenberg 2018); How the power games that are played out in legitimising processes make democracy precarious (Pardo 2000).

Through in-depth ethnographic analyses of the listed questions, the panel aimed to stimulate reflections on the 'morals of legitimacy' (Pardo 2000; and, more recently, Pardo and Prato 2019) behind the above-mentioned shifting symbolism of urban icons. The panel also aimed to stimulate new directions in the study of the contemporary political rhetoric that drives the new 'global templates' of urban regeneration and policies of urban change that often affect vernacular landscapes (Krase 2012, Krase and DeSena 2020). It was hoped that the panel would help to broaden the scope for future comparative research and theoretical development in anthropology, while contributing to develop a grounded understanding of the implications of these dynamics and processes for good democratic governance (Pardo and Prato eds 2010).

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