

## URBAN SPACES

*Christian Wicke***Cities and memory politics**

“Urbanity” and “city” have often been overly glamorous terms, sometimes involving a good deal of romanticism and nostalgia for the past and future, and celebrating the social and cultural diversity of the restless metropolis as opposed to a supposedly monocultural, natural, rural life, where time stands still. Urbanity, thus, can be articulated as a utopia, as a value or virtue associated with social tolerance, pluralism, and progress. But it can also evoke the problems affiliated with diversity or change, of chaos and conflict. As social change and social memory enjoy an intimate relation, both perspectives suggest that urban transformations affect the development of historical cultures, that is, society’s practical articulation of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 1994).

There are virtually endless types of cities (the student city, the garden city, the industrial city, the port city, the capital city, etc.). And cities can differ tremendously within, as a place of many places. What is it then that makes cities different from the country as a sphere of memory activism? Cities are larger and more densely populated than rural settlements and they accommodate a relatively higher concentration of changing economic, cultural, and political activity. Cities offer a relatively higher degree of interaction as well as autonomy (if not anonymity) between individuals and social groups. They are “public realms” (Senett, 2018) of both social exchange and co-existence, though usually with complex, structural, and historical hierarchies between changing social groups and classes. This complexity also holds for their historical cultures, which are formed and negotiated, and occasionally clash, to a greater extent than in smaller, more homogenous and remote rural communities. Further, cities offer socially and politically more significant spaces for highly representative and symbolic sites, or lieux de mémoire, designed to be exhibited and perceived by the masses. Politically and ideologically, we can see today that big cities usually accommodate a greater left-leaning population, more critical of conservative traditions than their rural counterparts. Cities are therefore often lively spheres of memory politics, where social groups negotiate the meaning of their changing physical space in a changing social, political, and cultural context. Cities are not only *spheres* of historical contestation, but also powerful “*objects*” of contestation for memory activism. This may hold also, to some extent, for rural sites or landscapes, and the opposition between the urban and the rural should perhaps not be overemphasized, as memory activism can happen

anywhere. In cities, however, naturally the degree of social interaction, diversity, and change as well as the density of heritage sites, museums, memorials, and places of memory is greater.

In socially diverse cities, historical cultures can peacefully co-exist, as long as they are not suppressed or threatened, and develop parallel to each other within the communities to which the city provides a home. Having said this, history, memory, rites, and traditions that are embodied in the built environment of cities have often not been questioned in society, but been taken as a given, as proven, or as quasi-natural, and have been internalized passively in their everyday life rather than been actively reformed and democratized (Billig, 1995). When they are perceived more reflectively, however, as the result of structural and ideological changes, the urban environment may become politically and historically discursive. It may therefore seem that memory activism takes a very romantic form of urban protest: it makes the invisible visible. In fact, it often is more than that: it often is also a struggle for recognition and survival of urban communities. Ultimately, memory activism seems necessary to facilitate a democratic historical culture in our cities.

Since the 1960s, we have seen efforts to revolutionize historiography by constructing the past “from below” (Berger and Wicke, 2019). This went hand in hand with growing demands in society for the democratization and a more critical evaluation of official memory regimes: efforts challenging the modern articulation of public memory as a national, official, unitary, true, and quasi-scientific explanation of the past (Wicke, 2019). There has been a growing understanding that the past as memory and heritage, and history in general, is always political (Lowenthal, 1998; Berger, 2014). It is no surprise that with the boom and democratization of memory and heritage since the late 1960s cities have also become such vibrant spheres of memory activism.<sup>1</sup> This had two important consequences:

- 1 As opposed to previously more consensual historical cultures, struggles over the national past were increasingly fought over sites in cities. For example, the conscious politicization of narrations of the past visible in the many “history wars” fought in societies around the world was centering predominantly on places of memory in cities, such as monuments or museums, and it was these controversies over urban sites which actually triggered such wider national controversies over the past (Wicke and Wellings, 2018). It is therefore important that we recognize not only nation-states but also cities and their particular cultural topographies as important arenas, and objects, of memory politics (see, e.g., Huyssen, 2003).
- 2 Neighborhoods, such as working-class quarters with their particular urban cultures, which had previously been marginalized from official, authorized memory regimes, have enjoyed greater recognition and developed organized efforts to preserve, construct and popularize their particular historical cultures (Smith, 2006). From the 1960s, the image of urbanity itself became increasingly contested with the discovery of new forms of heritage, including for example, industrial and working-class heritage, and by actions for the preservation of historic sites and traditional milieus against Fordist renewal measures and the neo-liberalization of urban space (see, e.g., Wicke, 2017). Material cultures of the past could subsequently be studied more critically in allowing formerly “voiceless” agents to enter what is presented as “heritage in action” (see, e.g., Silverman, Waterton and Watson, 2017). The city and its citizens are not only memory (cf. Ma, 2009); rather the citizens have become recognized as agents in a process of constructing their city as memory.

When we think of cities as objects of memory politics, however, we need to understand the world around them as important spheres that inform activists. As much as urban movements

(see, esp. Castells, 1977; 1983) are related to broader political agendas and social movements that go beyond the strictly urban, memory activists often pursue a more abstract, historical, ideological, and perhaps identity-political agenda, which they connect to urban objects that they seek to construct, deconstruct or reinterpret. For example, abovementioned controversies over the establishment of national museums or monuments in capital cities have usually been connected to wider and changing political ideologies, collective identities and opposing historical narratives (counter-memory) rather than over a site alone. Urban memory activism offers a lens to explore wider societal controversies over public memory. Urban memory activism, such as urban-movement action in general, thus, can also be studied as an extension of broader social and political movements.<sup>2</sup> As many cities are also home to different ethnic groups, memory activism may not only be an extension of national movements and ethnic politics, but also appear in times of peace as a force to counter sectarian urban memory, and to promote integration (see, e.g. Nagle, 2018). Indeed, studying urban memory activism offers a method to attain a more complex picture of the diverse agents in the (de)construction of historical cultures. Such agents may comprise not only political parties and official institutions at all levels from the neighborhood to the international but also diverse local activist groups, for example, including local dwellers, workers, artists and intellectuals of different gender and socioeconomic backgrounds, more comprehensive social movements, and religious groups. Cities are constituted by all of them.

### **Urban activism over postcolonial and postindustrial urban memory**

Urban memoryscapes have been shaped strongly by state and capital interests. Citizen groups of various social and professional backgrounds, however, have been able to counter this dominance by driving the construction, preservation, and transformation of urban memory. Memory activists have impacted material structures of memory, for example, by constructing or taking down monuments, (re)naming streets and public places, or in saving industrial heritage and working-class neighborhoods. In reality, the official, the economic, the public, and the private spheres overlap, as ideologies and interests in urban society are highly amorphous.

Social movements have engaged with urban memory activism in various ways. Cities contain memories shaped by them, and they contain memories of the movements themselves. A good example is Indigenous urban activism. Indigenous populations in many former colonies have become highly urbanized, but the image of this part of the postcolonial society remains predominantly associated with regions outside the city (cf. Museum of the City of New York, n.d.). Their claims to historical recognition can have long-lasting effects on urban scenes, even on planning. Australia's capital, Canberra, is home to fascinating case: the Aboriginal tent embassy, which was established in 1972 (see Figure 36.1) as part of Indigenous land-right struggles in front of the old Australian parliament (Foley, Schaap and Howell, 2014). Through this action, Indigenous rights activists shaped public memory in Australian cities, and they gained support by other social movements. In the early 1970s in Australia, settler colonialism was viewed increasingly critically with an Indigenous rights movement attracting support from other activist groups such as the famous Green Bans movement (Wicke, 2018).<sup>3</sup> To this day, the tent embassy remains an important site of critical memory and protest. It has established itself as part of the major tourist ensemble that includes a political landscape that spans from the new, via the old Parliament across Lake Burley Griffith to the ANZAC War Memorial and the Australian National Museum in the center of the Australian capital. Hardly any visitor to the politico-cultural center of the nation would be able to ignore it. The movement, thus, not only set a reminder that Australia has a history that goes beyond the white settlement, it also built a



Figure 36.1 First day of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, outside the Parliament House, Canberra, 27 January 1972. Left to right: Billy Craque, Bert Williams, Michael Anderson, and Tony Coorey. Photo: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and Courtesy SEARCH Foundation, ON 161/675

powerful monument to itself (Wicke, 2021). But it was not an easy battle in a culturally British and white settler society, which was in the process of reinventing itself as a multicultural society, as well as experiencing a building boom in the central business districts, while remaining the most suburbanized country in the world.

In Sydney's inner suburb of Redfern, one of the most visible areas for Indigenous urban activism in Australia, recent developments are more problematic than in the Canberra case. There, where the streams of tourists hardly flow by, murals have reminded the many daily pedestrians on the way to the train station or to Sydney University of the protest and presence of the Aboriginal community in the city and the nation. But the future of this area is uncertain. The neo-liberalization of urban spaces, often a result of alliances between wealthy citizens, urban planners, big investors, and state politicians in Australia has been threatening the existence of Aboriginal communities and memory in the city (Latimore, 2018; Porter, Johnson and Jackson, 2018). Urban and national memory is often difficult to disentangle, even if it is just the spontaneous result of marginalized groups seeking a voice – and place – in society. And like official state-sponsored memory, urban memory from below is neither static. It often requires ongoing protection, for example against capital interests. The iconic Aboriginal flag that was painted large opposite of Redfern station has already been demolished, while the 40,000 years mural next to it has been restored by the City Council “in the face of gentrification” and as the result of protests (Gorrey, 2019; Griffiths, 2018).

The legacies of colonialism have also led to political conflicts over public spaces in cities of formerly colonizing countries. The summer of 2020 has been especially intense for postcolonial memory activists, as statues around fell in the context of the Black Live Matter protests

following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May. Since the 1960s, sections in many societies have slowly sought to come to terms with the problematic legacies of their colonial heritage. The so-called 68ers in Western European cities aimed at comprehensive revolutionary processes, and in some of them this also comprised revisiting the material culture of the colonial past in their urban environment. From 1965, for example, the radical Provo movement in Amsterdam launched several attacks on the monument for the former Governor-General of the Dutch East-Indies, Jo Van Heutsz (Bijl, 2015, 189). The response in Dutch society, including among the Left, was mostly negative, and until today colonial memory remains strong in the major cities of the Netherlands. In recent years, however, we have seen memory activism over the naming of streets and places commemorating colonial heritage in a good number of Western cities. The Netherlands is witnessing a growing and controversial discourse over the celebration of the Dutch Empire during the so-called Golden Ages. This controversy divides politicians, intellectuals, workers in the cultural sector and civil society (Van der Molen, 2019). This debate has also been tapped into by local memory activists in a number of Dutch cities seeking to make visible the legacy of slavery in the streets, often by organizing walking tours for the general public.<sup>4</sup> Such urban memory activism, however, is not exclusively a movement from below but also supported by public institutions. Further, current urban memory activism can draw strongly on the repertoire offered by online media and the big companies offering the necessary infrastructure including digital maps. The Bitterzoete Route of colonial history, which is offered on the internet for a district of the student city of Utrecht, for example, is assisted by the local Council and the university. The route seeks to raise awareness of the problematic biographies of heroic figures from the colonial period after whom streets were named. The route can be accessed online for those who wish to explore more reflectively, and critically the central quarter of Lombok, one of many *Indische Buurten* across the country.<sup>5</sup>

While the colonial legacy is much more central to representations of national identity in The Netherlands than in the neighboring country, Germany, civil society there is becoming more sensitive to a dark heritage that goes beyond the history of Nazism, which has dominated the critical discourse over national history. Like in The Netherlands, earlier episodes of post-colonial, urban memory activism occurred in West Germany. For example, in the context of the student protests, in 1968 radicals attacked a statue of a German colonialist, Hermann von Wissmann, in the port city of Hamburg (Todzi, 2018). Yet, in the second half of the 20th century (West) Germany's colonial memory remained marginalized predominantly to the private sphere (Schilling, 2014), while banal memory has always been present in some German streetscapes. More memory activism was organized in the 2000s by residents of German cities from Freiburg to Berlin, trying to "decolonize" some of them. The example enjoying most public resonance today is Decolonize Mitte, in the center of the German capital, with protests from diverse sections of society including a good number of NGOs, seeking to rename streets in the Afrikanische Viertel in the former working-class district of Wedding and the more central Mohrenstrasse.<sup>6</sup> The example of Berlin, however, also demonstrates that such urban politics of history are hardly consensual also at the local level within the neighborhood: decisions to rename streets were viewed critically by locals, with some feeling this must be "a joke," and have caused debates across the party spectrum in the city council, with some politicians arguing that this is no more but symbolic politics (Pelz, 2018; Hofmann, 2019).

Changing conceptions of the past often follow changing structural developments, such as urban renewal measures or urban decline. "Deindustrialization" has had deep effects on urban society, especially in industrial cities. This is now thought of as an at times traumatic process that has profound repercussions on political cultures and election behavior across the world, as the election of populist leaders such as Trump, Johnson, and Bolsonaro suggest (Schindler, 2018).

It is therefore important to review the efforts of civil society in trying to manage the memory of the worlds of labor that no longer exist. This process, experienced by many Western industrial cities with the end of the postwar boom, and in Central and Eastern European countries directly after the end of the Soviet Union, has been orchestrated very differently from place to place. It has left many cities with the material and immaterial heritage of the industrial era, and their citizens have developed very different approaches to deal with this legacy, ranging from expensive celebrations and touristification to sanitation and silencing of memory (Wicke, Berger and Golombek, 2018, 2017). In the highly urbanized German Ruhr region, arguably the global beacon of industrial heritage, billions have been spent by the state to turn the former industrial heartland of the nation into an impressive industrial-heritage landscape across a great number of big cities. The industrial heritage movement in the Ruhr cities began in the late 1960s in the context of the many citizen initiatives and urban movements that mushroomed around the globe. In West Germany around that time, there were a good number of campaigns for the preservation of historic centers and against Fordist renewal, and it was the time of citizen initiatives seeking a voice in local politics. The industrial-heritage movement in many ways began as a larger urban movement where intellectuals and conservators joined forces with local workers to construct industrial monuments and protect historic quarters (Wicke, 2017). Heritage in the early 1970s was then discovered by the left, with Bologna as the shining example. Unlike the industrial archeology movement in Britain, which was driven by concerns over national identity, the following industrial heritage activism in West Germany (especially the Ruhr) was motivated by concerns about alternative esthetics and urban identities on the one hand but also about the livability of ordinary citizens. From the 1980s onwards, the movement in the Ruhr originally organized by conservationists, architects, artists, and intellectuals, sometimes with the support of particular neighborhood communities, became strongly institutionalized, supported by regional organizations and the state. Not everyone appreciates this development, with some seeing the dominant representation of industrial heritage in the Ruhr cities as “backward-looking” and preventing the relatively poor region from more progressive transformations (see, e.g., Hänig, 2014). To this day, there are grassroots movements campaigning for the preservation of further industrial landmarks that have been excluded from the official heritage landscape, such as, for example, the struggle for the preservation of the mining site of Zeche Holland in Bochum suggests. An important and ultimately successful instrument of the present movement was a Facebook site, which attracted thousands of supporters between 2013 and 2018.<sup>7</sup>

Industrial heritage remains controversial because its conservation can be very costly and requires political will and/or capital interest to make it possible. Some cities have seen extreme forms of commercialization, gentrification, and touristification of industrial heritage sites with the result that their working-class heritage has been dehistoricized. In other cases, wide sections of urban society have not seen any value at all in industrial heritage, or perceived it as “dark heritage” that is not in accordance with their brighter visions for the future, leading to an alienation of former workers from their past, as David Kideckel argued for the case of Romania, where few efforts have been made to change this (Kideckel, 2018). But even here, for example in the mining city of Petritla, industrial heritage activism has emerged in recent years, with artists and architects standing up against, and negotiating with the authorities to find alternatives to the demolition of industrial sites in order to produce creative spaces and commemorate working lives (Păun Constantinescu, Dascălu, and Sucală, 2017). Not only cities of relatively poor countries have been comparatively silent on their industrial heritage. Australia offers an anti-podean example. Erik Eklund writes: “the most important industrial site in New South Wales, the Broken Hill Propriety Ltd’s (BHP) iron and steel works in Newcastle, is now a barren and

featureless scar on a remnant cultural landscape, while a determined heritage group with limited recognition and resources attempts to preserve the tangible and intangible heritage of that workplace, which produced steel from 1915 to 1999” (Eklund, 2018, 168). While the BHP plant has been demolished, oral testimonies in film have sought to counter this silence. In 2000, “Steel City” was produced, a film giving voice to former workers, who were upset about the cleansing of their past and sought a place in the industrial history of their hometown.<sup>8</sup> And very recently, another documentary was produced, supported by the Newcastle Museum, that is available open access via a major online platform.<sup>9</sup> Such oral testimonies articulated through film and online media may be recognized as a form of urban memory activism seeking to compensate for, correct and perhaps warn of the failures in historical cultures of cities around the globe.



Figure 36.2 The Children’s Brass Band of Petrița, Romania, in front of the Petrița Coal Mine, shortly before its closure in 2015. Photo by Andrei Dăscălescu

## Conclusion

In this short essay, I have offered some reflections on memory activism, with particular attention to ideological and structural transformation in cities, and changes in the way historical consciousness has been practically articulated in contemporary urban society. Memory activism over cities has changed in accordance with the way the past has been constructed and deconstructed and is today able to mobilize people through online media. Memory studies in this context have centered predominantly on the role of the state in the construction of historical cultures and the cultural and political elites of nation-states supporting or countering official interpretations of the past; thus, there has been a great focus on urban sites significant to the identity of the state and nation, especially in capital cities. Yet, the politics of memory, as recent work suggested, takes place strongly also at levels below the state. We might therefore want to move towards studies, which, on the one hand, take into account the agency of civil-society groups in shaping urban memory, and on the other, allow for the recognition of objects in cities embodying memory of marginalized groups and political alternatives that operate in other spheres but the nation-state or social mainstream. Nevertheless, the binary between memory activism from below and memory politics from above is usually ideal-typical. In reality, these spheres overlap. Urban memory activism seems to be successful when gaining support from, for

example, middle-class intellectuals such as academics that are able to play a leading role in the public discourse or politicians in influential positions. And, like social movements in general, memory activism may become institutionalized and lose its pure civil-society status without, however, escaping the ongoing controversy over the meaning and future of the historic object. Last but not least, when it comes to urban memory studies, we should move further from the center to the periphery, that is, for example in broadening the focus from the political center of large capital cities also to neighborhoods in smaller towns at nations' peripheries.

### Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that recent scholarship argues that this has not only been the case in “Western” cities, but also in the Global South and Asia: Mozaffari and Jones (2018).
- 2 In the Japanese cities that were destroyed by nuclear bombs, for example, the role of the peace movement in processes of reconstruction and in memory activism has recently been studied in Diehl (2018).
- 3 The Green Ban movement was instrumental in protecting Australia's oldest city center in Sydney as well as natural heritage in the city. This urban movement, which gained international recognition, was directed by communist labor unions seeking to protect urban and natural heritage while forming cross-class and cross-movement alliances.
- 4 I am grateful to Britta Schilling for her suggestions and examples, which she discusses more extensively in Schilling (2020).
- 5 <https://bitterzoeteroute.nl/>
- 6 <http://decolonize-mitte.de/>
- 7 <https://business.facebook.com/ZecheHolland/>
- 8 The documentary Steel City can be accessed via the following link: [shop.nfsa.gov.au/steel-city](http://shop.nfsa.gov.au/steel-city)
- 9 The documentary supported by the Newcastle Museum can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Khun-ZY3Srw>

### Additional Resources

- Huyssen, A. (2003) *Present Pasts: Urban Pamphlets and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Senett, R. (2018) ‘The Public Realm’, in Hall, S. and Burdett, R. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of the 21st Century City*. London: Sage, pp. 585–601.
- Silverman, H., Waterton, E. and Watson, S. (eds.) (2017) *Heritage in Action: Making the Past in the Present*. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Wicke, C. (2021) ‘Memory “Within”, “Of” and “By” Urban Movements’, in Berger, S., Scalmer, S. and Wicke, C. (eds.) *Memory and Social Movements*. London: Routledge, pp. 133–155.