
PIERRE NORA'S "SITES OF MEMORY" AND THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF ISSUES IN BUILT HERITAGE CONSERVATION

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ABSTRACT: The following article addresses the usefulness of Nora's concept of a "site of memory" for the preservation and interpretation of those historic buildings and structures which already enjoy legal protection as monument. First, the denotations of Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* and Alois Riegl's concept of a *Denkmal* (or monument) are juxtaposed. Second, the paper presents the methodological problems involved in studying sites of memory, and offers guidelines inspired by Aleida and Jan Assman's works on cultural memory. Third, these theoretical notions are then related to practical experience gathered while completing a project devoted to "Church of Peace in Jawor as a site of memory"; insights from the project lead to conclusions regarding the possibility of studying the social aspects of built heritage conservation. The conclusion of the paper identifies the characteristics and features of *lieux de mémoire* which may assist in the identification of places of memory from the perspective of heritage protection.

KEY WORDS: monument, *Denkmal*, *lieux de mémoire*, *Erinnerungskultur*, heritage protection, history of reception, Church of Peace in Jawor

1. Introduction

“We are witnessing a world-wide upsurge on memory,” the French historian Pierre Nora stated at the beginning of this century¹. Pondering the genesis of this phenomenon, he noted the intense transformations at various levels of contemporary social life, as “Every country, every social, ethnic or family group has undergone a profound change in the relationship it traditionally enjoyed with the past”². In the case of France, Nora points, among others, to the irreversible repercussions of the social changes following the Second World War, when industrialization and urbanization “had mercilessly swept away an entire set of traditions, landscapes, jobs, customs and life styles”³. As the country's identity crisis mounted, France saw an increase in the significance of social practices heralding the coming of “the age of commemoration”. The notion of *lieux de mémoire* stressed the culture-making role of sites of memory, which take on a special significance in social practices aimed at maintaining continuity of cultural transmission and bonds between generations⁴.

Since then, it has become clear that, despite contextual differences, phenomena similar to those noticed by Nora in France also take place in other European countries, and even outside Western culture⁵. In the view of many scholars, the recently developing study of memory culture (*Erinnerungskultur*) has shed new light on the potential of Nora's concept of a site of memory for exploring cultural communication in various communities⁶.

The following paper aims to assess the usefulness of Nora's concept for the conservation, preservation and interpretation of built heritage which has achieved the status of a protected monument. It will also tentatively point to these features of *lieux de mémoire* which may prove useful in working toward a definition of a place of memory from the perspective of heritage protection. First, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* will be juxtaposed with the traditional view of monuments of architecture. Second, the paper will present how the output of Nora and his followers may inspire research methods and assist heritage specialists in identifying social aspects of built heritage conservation.

¹ Nora P., The Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory, *Transit* 22, 2002, <https://www.eurozine.com/reasons-for-the-current-upsurge-in-memory/>

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Nora P., *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, *Representations* 26, 1989, pp. 7-24.

⁵ Allier-Montano E., *Lugar de memoria: ¿un concepto para el análisis de las luchas memoriales? El caso de Uruguay y su pasado reciente*, *Guadernos del CLAEH*, 96-97 (1-2), 2008, pp. 87-109; Pomian K., *Historia, nauka wobec pamięci*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie Skłodowskiej, 2006.

⁶ Assmann A., *Speichergedächtnis und Funktionsgedächtnis in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, [in:] *Wir sind Erinnerung*, *Berner Universitätsschriften*, Bern: Haupt Verlag, 2003, pp. 181-196.

2. The denotation of *lieux de memoire* versus Riegl's *Denkmal*

Despite the intellectual value of Nora's output, it is difficult to adopt his terms for use in the theory of conservation, one of the chief reasons being the lack of a clear-cut definition of a site of memory. Initially, the French historian described *lieux de mémoire* as actual material places, where a given community deposits its memories⁷. Yet, in his later publications⁸ the term also refers to "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature", thus including metaphorical spaces, such as language, literary heritage, rites, festivals, dates, laws, slogans, real, legendary and mythical figures, as well as any other symbolic constructs around which "memory crystallizes and secretes itself"⁹. In this broader sense, the concept encompasses both tangible and intangible places. According to François and Schulze "sites of memory are tangible and intangible long-standing cardinal points, integral to many generations, where collective memory and identity crystallize themselves. As constitutive elements of social, cultural and political practices, they change along with their perception, assimilation, use and conversion"¹⁰. Such a broad understanding of a place of memory means the relationship between a site's material and non-material components seems less significant than the issues related to its social functions.

If Pierre Nora's views are to be discussed by conservators and restoration specialists, the question is, what new elements this approach can bring to our study of monuments understood by conservation scholars as carriers of memory. To demonstrate this, it seems worthwhile to compare two concepts: Nora's *lieux de mémoire* and Alois Riegl's notion of a monument, the *Denkmal*.

A scholar from Vienna, Riegl (1903) presented his views in the essay *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus (The Modern Cult of Monuments)*. According to the essay, the actions undertaken to preserve relics of the past are defined by the need to remember¹¹. Riegl believed that any artefact, regardless of whether or not it was created with the intention to commemorate any event or person, could come to be perceived as a monument: a sign of memory. Narrowing down his considerations to tangible and visible works, he stressed that the same material object may point at different pasts, and that the recollections it triggers are decided by the intention of its recipient, not its maker¹². Developing this notion, he distinguished two types of *Denkmals*: intended ones (their reception corresponding to that envisioned by their creators), and unintentional ones (*ungewollter Denkmale*). In the latter case, the recipient may treat a given artefact as a historical monument,

⁷ Nora P., *Mémoire collective*, [in:] *La nouvelle histoire*, Paris: Retz, 1978, p. 401.

⁸ Nora P., *From lieux de mémoire to realms of memory*, [in:] *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, (Vol. 1, XV-XXIV), New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996.

⁹ Nora P., *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, *Representations* 26, 1989, p. 7.

¹⁰ François E., Schulze H., *Einleitung*, [in:] *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, München: Beck, 2008, pp. 17-18.

¹¹ Jokilehto J., *The idea of conservation. An overview*, [in:] *Conservation and Preservation. Interactions between Theory and Practice. In memoriam Alois Riegl (1858-1905)*, Firenze: Polistampa, 2008.

¹² Krawczyk J., *Nazwać, żeby ocalić. Klasycy myśli konserwatorskiej wobec reliktyw przeszłości*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2020.

a source for studying the past, or as a monument to the passage of time itself, bearing witness to the conflict between the “creative rule of man” and nature's “destructive and disintegrative elements”¹³. A visual presentation of Riegl’s theory illustrates its main tenet: intended monuments commemorating people and events form a subset of historical monuments, which are in turn contained in the largest set, which included monuments prized for their age itself¹⁴.

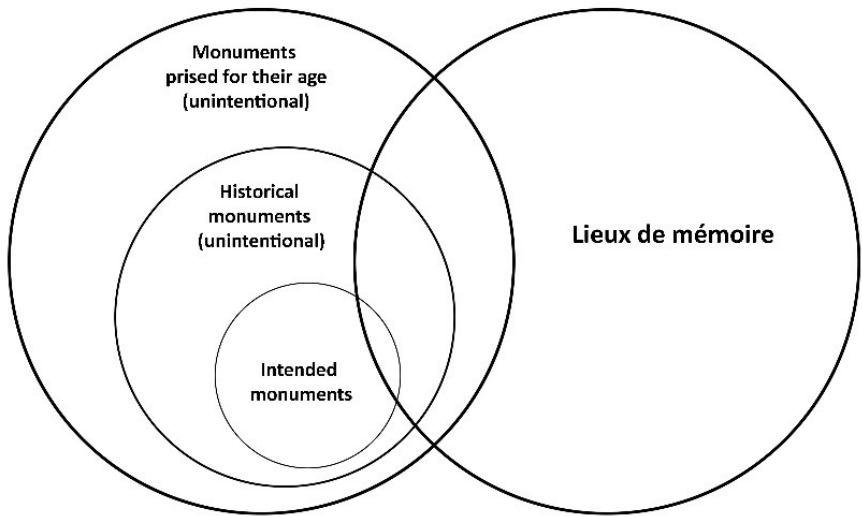


Fig. 1 Degree of semantic overlap between Alois Riegl’s terms for three types of monuments / signs of memory, and Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*

When the denotations covered by Nora’s sites of memory (as defined in his 1996 publication) are plotted on the same diagram as Riegl’s *Denkmals*, it becomes clear the two referential ranges overlap only partially. In brief, it may be concluded that to Nora those monuments of architecture which no longer fulfill identity-related functions, and which are no longer subject to any community’s “will to remember” their past, may no longer be categorized as sites of memory¹⁵. On the other hand, as Nora highlights the social functions of sites of memory and plainly disregards their ontological status, some of his sites of memory will not be encompassed by Riegl’s category of *Denkmals*. As mentioned above, intangible sites of memory include

¹³ Riegl A., *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung*, Vien, Leipzig: Braumüller, 1903, pp. 1-21.

¹⁴ Krawczyk J., Places of memory as a subject of theoretical reflection in heritage conservation. *Protection of Cultural Heritage*, (5), 2018, pp. 91-101; <https://doi.org/10.35784/odk.861>

¹⁵ Nora P., *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, *Representations* 26, 1989, pp. 19-22.

language, dates, mythological and folk figures, and as such are not covered by Riegl's traditional notion of monuments.

However, the fact that they fall outside Riegl's definition does not mean such intangible *lieux de mémoire* should necessarily remain outside the scope of interest of a preservation and restoration specialist and scholar. Intangible sites of memory emerge from memories and experiences which are in turn often triggered by the presence of material objects; thus, identifying intangible *lieux de mémoire* may facilitate the understanding of the meanings and values ascribed to monuments of architecture.

3. Studying sites of memory as history of the second degree

It is now necessary to return to Nora to consider what methods could be used for the study of *lieux de mémoire*. According to the French scholar, traditional methods, designed for the study of history of the first degree, are incompatible with such research. Explaining this claim, Nora abandons the notion of linear, factual, event-centered history, for the sake of history of the second degree (*histoire au second degré*), which does not study the causes of events and historical processes; instead, it is interested in the way they are constructed, endowed with significance and causative power¹⁶. This new research program does not aim to establish "what the past was really like, but rather how it has been used and what it has meant for particular, consecutive presents"¹⁷.

According to many scholars commenting on Nora's output, his remarks on second-degree history are not accompanied by specific solutions or research procedures and should be seen as merely constituting a proposal, with specific methodological issues to be undertaken by other scholars. Attempting to juxtapose the two types of history, Aleida Assmann notes that "when memory becomes the chief medium for transmitting the past and present, historiography becomes in essence history of reception"¹⁸.

From the point of view of conservation, what is of particular interest is any kind of methodology that could facilitate the analysis of contemporary commemorative practices and the role played by various means, including material objects, in the process of transmitting memory. An approach which may fulfill these needs was developed within cultural anthropology, by Jan and Aleida Assmann, German scholars who divide collective memory into communicative memory and cultural memory. The former encompasses views of the past transmitted orally from generation to generation, usually within family units. Hence, communicative memory may be estimated to cover no more than three to four generations, reaching about 80 - to - 100 years into the past.

¹⁶ Traba R., Hahn H.-H., Kończal K., Górny M. (Eds.), *Polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2012-2015, p. 20.

¹⁷ Nora P., *Comment écrire l'histoire de France*, [in:] *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1986, p. 2229.

¹⁸ Assmann A., *Im Zwischenraum zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis. Bemerkungen zu Pierre Noras "Lieux de mémoire"*, [in:] *Les lieux de mémoire/Erinnerungsorte. D'un modèle français à un projet allemande*, Berlin: Centre Marc Bloch, 1996, p. 25.

Over longer stretches of time, memory may only function if fixed by means of material objects or rituals, at which point it becomes cultural memory (*kulturelles Gedächtnis* in terms used by Jan Assmann)¹⁹. According to the German scholar, “memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level”. Stressing that “synthesis of time and identity is effectuated by memory,” Assmann distinguishes and considers three levels: neuromental, social and cultural one²⁰.

Level	Time	Identity	Memory
inner (neuro-mental)	inner, subjective time	inner self	individual memory
social	social time	social self, person as carrier of social roles	communicative memory
cultural	historical, mythical, cultural time	cultural identity	cultural memory

Tab. 1 Three levels of relationship between time, identity and memory, after Jan Assmann

Within this methodology, which echoes some of the concepts of the Toronto School, the ontological status of sites of memory regains its significance. In this context, if we accept Marshall McLuhan’s claim that the medium shapes the message, then cultural memory transmitted through monuments of architecture is largely impossible to reproduce by any other means, even with the use of cutting-edge methods of documentation and replication, such as 3D scanning and modeling.

4. The Church of Peace in Jawor as a site of memory

“The Church of Peace in Jawor as a site of memory” was a project that implemented insights from Pierre Nora and those who built on his thought. The research task was part of the 2011- to - 2014 project “Exploration, Evaluation and Preservation of the Church of Peace in Jawor as a World Heritage Site” by the UNESCO Chair in Heritage Studies of Cottbus University (Germany) and the Department for the Study and Protection of Cultural Heritage of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland)²¹.

¹⁹ Assmann J., *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, [in:] *Cultural Memory Studies. As International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin, New York, de Gruyter, 2008, p. 117.

²⁰ Assmann J., *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, [in:] *Cultural Memory Studies. As International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin, New York, de Gruyter, 2008, p. 109

²¹ Balcer M., *The Protestant Church of Peace ‘of the Holy Spirit’ in Jawor: A lieu de mémoire for Germans and Poles*, [in:] *The Luther Effect in Eastern Europe: History, Culture, Memory*, Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2017.



Fig. 2 Church of Peace in Jawor (1664-1666), since 2001 listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with Church of Peace in Świdnica (Schweidnitz) (photo: U. Schaaf)

The Church of Peace in Jawor is a masterwork of Protestant church architecture, erected in 1664-1666²². Its history is inextricably bound to that of various Christian denominations coexisting in this part of Central Europe, and to the post-World War II fate of Lower Silesia, featuring unprecedented migration and displacement. Due to these events, the project had to examine the collective memory of as many as three groups, all of them directly or indirectly associated with the Church of Peace. The first group encompasses the church's original parishioners, German nationals, now living in Germany. Modern-day parishioners, mostly Poles, form the second group. The third group is constituted by the current inhabitants of Jawor, mostly descendants of the Poles who migrated from Poland's eastern provinces lost to the Soviet Union after the Second World War, and who are not members of the parish.

²² Schaaf U., *Die Baugeschichte der Friedenskirche Jauer im Spiegel des bautechnischen Befundes sowie der schriftlichen und bildlichen Quellen: ein Beitrag zur Entwicklung einer arteigenen Methode der bauhistorischen Erforschung von Fachwerkbauten*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2019.



Fig. 3. Ecumenical caroling, Church of Peace in Jawor, January, 2020. Retrived March 10, 2021 from <http://kosciolpokojujawor.pl/blog/ekumeniczne-koledowanie-2/>

The research material included written records, iconography, as well as quantitative data (surveys and survey-based interviews) and qualitative data (open interviews) gathered specifically for the purpose. In terms of design and content, the research questionnaires followed and further developed the approach suggested by Jan and Aleida Assmann²³.

5. Conclusions

The conclusions which I now intend to present summarize both the theoretical themes I discussed in the first part of the paper, and the insights we gathered during the project on the Church of Peace in Jawor as a site of memory.

1. Firstly: The ideas of Pierre Nora and his followers expand the possibilities of studying built heritage as a carrier of individual and collective memory. Research into the collective memory of communities which take over the responsibility for preserving monuments as sites of memory may help researchers understand what meanings are attributed to these monuments, and what role they play in the process of shaping and consolidating the social and cultural identity.

23 Balcer M., The Protestant Church of Peace ‘of the Holy Spirit’ in Jawor: A lieu de mémoire for Germans and Poles, [in:] *The Luther Effect in Eastern Europe: History, Culture, Memory*, Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 208-302.

2. Secondly: The data acquired through a systematic analysis of sites of memory (second-degree history) may prove a valuable source of inspiration for projects aiming to protect, preserve and interpret these places. Nevertheless, the collective memory of a given community should not be treated as an absolute, especially when an image of the past cherished by a given community proves to be far from the facts established by history of the first degree.

3. Next: The significance of first-degree history grows rapidly whenever a given monument functions as a site of memory for different social groups. Confronting various collective memories with input from historians may prevent the formation of narrow, non-inclusive interpretations. As illustrated by the recent history of the Church of Peace in Jawor, such a site may serve the purpose of furthering dialogue between various communities.

4. If the notion of a site of memory is to be granted precedence over the traditional notion of a monument, conceived as a sign of memory, this might in effect lead to the marginalization of the significance of some monuments, if they no longer fulfill identity-building functions, or if they are viewed as "someone else's heritage".

5. Finally: The issues addressed in the present article may also prove relevant to discussions regarding the possibility to form a definition of a place of memory from the perspective of modern heritage protection. In this context, the following attributes emerge. Firstly, places of memory are usually confronted with flow of time. Secondly, in spite of their changeability, they retain the power to evoke and stimulate memories. Thirdly, their identity-related functions are only clarified by relating them to the whole sequence of the past - the present - the future. Fourthly, they exist in a dynamic relationship with memory communities. From this perspective, places of memory may be treated as a special subtype of heritage covered most thoroughly by the Faro Convention of 2005.

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