# Workshop report

## Urban Politics of Memory and Heritage:

## Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the City as an Agent in Historical Culture

Universiteit Utrecht

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Written by Laura van Voorden

**Workshop report: Urban Politics of Memory and Heritage: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the City as an Agent in Historical Culture**

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**Location: Utrecht University, Drift 21, room 005**

The one-day workshop titled "Urban Politics of Memory and Heritage: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the City as an Agent in Historical Culture" brought together participants from various disciplines from the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University. The event was jointly organized by three groups within the faculty: the Utrecht Forum for Memory Studies, the Heritage and Public History Lab at the Department for History and Art History, and the newly established PoP Group at the Political History section, which focuses on the politics of the past. The main aim of this workshop was to get to know each other and to kickstart and facilitate cooperation across the departments, fostering a conversation on the theme of "The City as an Agent in Historical Culture."

The introductory remarks were made by Julie Deschepper, Susanne Knittel, and Christian Wicke, who briefly introduced the respective groups they represent. Then, Wicke provided insights into why the focus on cities was chosen as a guiding theme for the workshop. Besides the fact that that urban areas are increasingly becoming the dominant human habitat, he stressed that cities are not simply stages but also agents in historical culture, and at the same time offer an alternative to methodological nationalism and state-sponsored history. On this note, seven participants were invited to 'pitch' their research ideas related to urban memory and heritage politics

**Research pitches**

**Pieter Huistra** (Cultural History) discussed the move away from classical MA theses towards non-traditional formats. Such "Thesis Plus", currently developed in the cultural history section, are conceived together with organizations, and the final product can be an exhibition, podcast, or report, for instance. He highlighted a student project exploring the city of Gouda's connection to the history of slavery and the challenges associated with the research, including the question of the situatedness of the students doing the research.

**Monica Jansen** (Modern and Contemporary Literature, Italian), analysed the recent occupation of the GKN factory near Florence (Italy), which can be seen as an attempt from below to halt and reverse the neoliberal process of deindustrialisation over the last three decades. Jansen explored how the city acted as an agent in structuring the counterattack against the siege. Her research focused on various aspects of the occupation, including slogans, convergence strategies, and re-industrialization plans.

**Martijn Lak** (Political History) presented his research on "Hero cities in the Soviet Union". He examined how these cities served as examples for the nation in the Soviet Union's fight against the Nazis, before he explored their transformation from the 1990s. He also raised questions about the relevance of heroes in Dutch cities.

**Marijke Huisman** (Cultural History), presented her research on the vital role of cities in queer lives and their efforts to memorialize queer histories in the Netherlands. She stressed the importance of bridging the gap between symbolic and more concrete representations of queer lives in urban spaces.

**Roel Frakking** (Political History) delved into the inscription of the revolutionary "*proklamasi kemerdekaan*" in urban spaces of Indonesia. He specifically highlighted the text inscribed on the General Van Heutsz monument. And also asked: what could such inscriptions tell us about dominant narratives and the "losers" of the revolution? He also emphasised the multifaceted nature of the memory of the revolution and the regional differences within Indonesia.

**Laura Almagor** (Political History) pitched her research on the question of Jewish territorialism, relating it to political narratives and discourses related to migration and colonialism. She also emphasized how the city remains intricately tied to antisemitism and discussed examples like the Galveston scheme and post-WW2 Jewish DP's.

**Geraldien von Frijtag Drabbe Künzel** (Political History) presented, also on behalf of her two Ph.D. students, Catherine Aretakis and Lola van der Made, on the local dynamics of the Holocaust that are relatively absent in the historiography of the Netherlands. She argued for a shift away from large cities like Amsterdam and national-level narratives to exploring the interaction between small towns and the Holocaust.

**Forums**

After the research pitches, the event transitioned into five distinct forums, each centred around a theme. These were chaired by two colleagues who initiated the debates sharing their work and perspectives on these themes. This open, interactive and discussion-driven approach provided a platform for participants to delve deeper into the workshop's themes and foster productive exchanges of ideas.

Forum 1: Urban Institutions and the Politics of the Past

The first forum, moderated by **Ann Rigney** (Modern and Contemporary Literature) and **Ido de Haan** (Political History), explored the significance of cities as urban institutions. De Haan opened the session with the February strike of 1941 in Amsterdam, a remarkable moment when the city's non-Jews stood up against the arrest of Jews. He used this as an example of Amsterdam's identity as an 'unruly' city. The materiality of memory, embodied in the enduring stones of the city, was also discussed, specifically its role in keeping urban memories alive. Rigney enriched the discussion by exploring how collective memory operates through the dynamic interplay between memory carriers, including texts, images and monuments, and the actors involved, ranging from individuals to institutions. Notably, the Glasgow Monument of the Duke of Wellington, adorned with a traffic cone, also symbolized the idea of an "unruly city" and became a platform for public statements, from referendums to the Black Lives Matter movement. She introduced the concept of "invisible cities" referring to the silent voids and concealed memories within urban landscapes, ultimately prompting the question of the role of institutions and cultural symbols in the ever-evolving cityscape. The subsequent discussion opened potentially avenues for future research: it delved into the changing narratives of city branding and the struggle to reconcile Amsterdam's identity as an "unruly city" with the policy-driven vision of tidying up and commercializing the urban space. This raised questions about the "distributed agency" within cities, ownership of memory, and the intricate relationship between materiality, personal memories, and the larger urban narrative.

Forum 2: Cities as Stages and Spaces in the Politics of the Past

The second forum, chaired by **Enno Maessen** and **Frank Sterkenburgh** (both Political History) delved into the complex role of cities as spaces in the politics of the past. Sterkenburgh illustrated the transformation of cities into microcosms for

political action through historical examples, such as Kaiser Wilhelm's strategic placement of monuments in Berlin, particularly opposite the Reichstag, as a symbolic act to reshape the city into a political arena. This discussion further emphasized the significance of spatial theory, an emerging concept within the humanities that recognizes space as an active agent rather than a mere backdrop. Maessen eloquently stressed that places are not just spaces but are infused with meaning through human agency. The following discussion ventured into the realm of archaeology's engagement with the spatial turn and the interplay between top-down and bottom-up perspectives in constructing the landscape. The forum also contemplated the potentially fading importance of the 'where' due to the omnipresence of placeless places, like highways and luggage belts, emphasizing the role of human interaction in imbuing these spaces with meaning. This dialectic agency of urban space in changing historical cultures is food for further thought.

Forum 3: Memory Politics and the Urban Environment in the Anthropocene

Under the guidance of **Susanne Knittel** (Modern and Contemporary Literature, Comparative Literature) and **Thijs Weststeijn** (Art History), the next forum revolved around the profound impacts of climate change on cultural heritage. Weststeijn identified various physical risks posed by climate change, including floods, peat subsidence, fires, and hurricanes, but he also emphasized that climate change could disturb intangible elements, such as cultural identities, as evidenced by, for example, the inaccessibility of traditional burial sites. The conversation delved into the challenges of the Anthropocene for memory and heritage studies, emphasizing the need to shift focus from events-based memory to slow-moving, gradual processes, characterized by "slow memory" and "slow violence." The discussion probed questions of guilt and responsibility in climate change and their implications for city spaces and commemoration practices. Examples like Maya Lin's Ghost Forest in NYC and Olafur Eliasson's Ice Watch illustrated how such temporary memorials (or countermonuments) in the urban space can become a site to reflect on both victims and agents of environmental harm, raising uncomfortable questions about implication. The moral obligation to preserve the non-human world was discussed, connected to the responsibility of caring for the natural environment for the sake of present and future generations. Knittel called for a Perpetrator Studies perspective on the environmental crisis, which should be recognized as a form of violence rather than

a natural process, prompting the need for memorials to convey this message. Overall, the conversation highlighted the importance of acknowledging the responsibilities for ecological violence in the urban historical cultures of future generations.

Forum 4: Cities and Post-Colonial Memory Politics in the Age of Apology

**René Koekkoek** (Political History) and **Britta Schilling** (Cultural History) led the following forum to explore the complexities of decolonizing the city in the Age of Apology. Schilling emphasized how colonial relics, such as statues, street names, and music, still permeate urban spaces, which have experienced different approaches to confronting colonial legacies. Notable cases of memory activism have included the toppling of the Hermann von Wissmann Monument in 1967 by students in Hamburg, recent protests against colonialist street names in Bremen, and the Bitterzoete Route of Utrecht's Lombok quarter today. These initiatives aimed at bringing hidden histories into public discourse, and to challenge established historical cultures. Koekkoek raised the topic of the new Slavery History Museum planned for Amsterdam. The idea that the museum should be housed in a completely new building in Amsterdam has been controversial: some suggested that a historic building with colonial associations could be repurposed, allowing for a more nuanced engagement with the past, while others argued in favour of a fresh start to avoid perpetuating colonial mentalities. The conversation underscored the complexity of addressing colonial legacies in urban spaces, which requires further engagement of scholars with their changing cities.

Forum 5: Remembering Structural Transformations in Urban Areas

Chaired by **Gertjan Plets** (Cultural History) **and Christian Wicke** (Political History), engaged with urban memory and heritage politics over transformative, comprehensive, and uneven processes of social and economic change. The "Slow Memory" approach was introduced to study processes of deindustrialization and energy transitions, urban decline and renewal, and post-disaster reconstruction. Wicke's presentation explored diverse agents involved in constructing industrial heritage, uncovering evolving narratives that often influence representations of collective identities at the local and regional levels. Examples from the Ruhr region highlighted dominant industrial narratives alongside alternative voices. Additionally, he addressed activism and urban renewal, drawing attention to the authorization of

urban memory, such as the 1975 riots in Amsterdam, and reflecting anti-authoritarian stances to combat gentrification. Plets presented the theme of remembering disaster and resettlement, illustrating how heritage is employed to mediate structural transformation and initiate social change. He considered the remembrance of anthropogenic violence, notably examining Groningen's response to earthquakes and the crumbling of historical houses. The forum pointed to the great diversity of urban agents engaged in urban memory, including local museums, city archives, regional heritage workers, municipal governments, companies, and civil society groups were highlighted. Questions were raised regarding the emotional dimensions of these memory politics beyond nostalgia and mourning, particularly in cases like Groningen, where the end of the gas industry transforms historical culture. The complexities of representing the emotions and desires of affected communities through heritage were considered, as well as the potential of heritage as a soft power tool for understanding and navigating the challenges experienced by these communities. Engaging with these communities and studying the distributed agency in the construction of their histories and identities requires further research.

Final discussion: Future Avenues for Collaboration and Community-Engaged Learning

The closing remarks by **Julie Deschepper** (Cultural History) and **James Kennedy** (Political History) expressed gratitude for the valuable contributions made to the discussion, highlighting the numerous avenues for further research and the ways to continue the interdisciplinary conversation. The importance of creating opportunities for continued dialogue through seminars, workshops, team environments, and reading each other's work was stressed, reflecting both the pleasure and necessity of engaging in such interdisciplinary conversations. Deschepper recapped some of the core themes explored during the workshop, including the various forms and ways in which cities are remembered and memorialized, their interactions on different scales from local to international, and the materiality, visuality, and spatiality of memory. Activism within cities, the potential for urban environments to be agents of change, and the recognition of participants' own positionality were crucial topics. Additionally, the importance of public outreach and its measurable impact was discussed by James Kennedy, emphasizing especially reciprocity in public engagement, and learning from

external perspectives, which could lead to a deeper awareness of one's own positionality as a scholar of historical culture and memory politics.

Approximately 35 colleagues were present on this day, as Utrecht is witnessing the growth of a vibrant community researching the changing politics of heritage, memory, and history. Overall, the workshop was deemed a great success by the participants, who look forward to further interdisciplinary discussions across the university as well as transdisciplinary discussions going even beyond the university in the near future.