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# Introduction to *Semiotic Approaches to Urban Space*

**Federico Bellentani, Mario Panico and Lia Yoka**

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Let us begin by stating what this book is not. It is not a handbook of urban semiotics. It does not intend to fill in the gaps of some neatly circumscribed debate, nor to comprehensively define every aspect of urban semiotic theory and methodology and their applications. Over the last few years, several introductory texts have been produced on urban and city semiotics, taking up the important task to enlighten the neophyte reader and provide the expert with a handy overview of concepts and arguments. Rather than introducing the reader to the field, this volume aspires to capture the echo of the current polyphony, the ongoing dialogue amongst leading voices in semiotics addressing a set of key topics: spatiality and its *dispositif*, the role of technologies and nature(s), the textualisations of the city and the changing discourses in culture–user interactions. In this way, the reader can get a sense of semiotic perspectives and heuristic categories that frame and question the space around us.

This book considers a certain strand of contemporary debates on a topic that has inspired post-war semioticians almost as much as language: the space of the city. The early, fundamental insights on topological semiotics by Algirdas J. Greimas, as well as Juri Lotman's conceptualisation of space as a secondary modelling system, established the city as a concrete language in itself. This *language of the urban* makes political hierarchies and cultural values legible and comprehensible, so that the formation of material space *at first sight* becomes inscribed with its more complex and stratified meaning, that speaks of the desires, preferences and requirements of those who design, but also of those who live in and pass through the city.

To study the city from a semiotic point of view therefore entails confronting space as a *syncretic text*, in which multiple languages interact. It is of course naive to think that this syncretic text of the urban ultimately produces, or reflects, a single correct signification. That would mean denying the obvious: that all people, when becoming aware of their surroundings, each have a different, embodied and pathemic, sensory perception and cultural experience, depending on their background, tastes and needs, as well as on layered aspects

of the moment and the situation – what is often easily dismissed through the seemingly self-explanatory notion of *context*, but in fact is, most fortunately for semiotics, not a *datum* but an *exigendum*.

So the pressing questions are still there: How to account for the plurality of perspectives on the city, both on the functionality and the aesthetics of its buildings and monuments, but also on the passions and gazes of its everyday users, without sacrificing the specific confrontation of intentions with effects? How to brush through the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in the city through media representations, often stereotyping and branding it; or through the consumption practices of those who only use it as a space for entertainment, gaming, learning, without underestimating its necessary extra-textual fabric?

This book rests on the assumption that there is a difficult and indirect connection between the engineering hardware and the symbolic software of architecture (and pervades all its levels, from improvised street art to city planning). The links between nature and culture – we might correct: between nature/technology and culture/history – can be sought in the ‘betrayals’ of the dictates of town planners and architects by its users (from tourists to financial speculators and from homeless teenagers to building societies). This perspective also stresses the notion that city space is a particularly privileged sphere for the investigation of the arbitrariness of signs and their continuous mutation through grand strategies as much as everyday tactics.

The chapters in this book contribute to an ‘extended’ toolbox for the theoretical study of the city as a semiotic object, as well as to an open interrogation of representations that configure this object of study and finally to a set of effective suggestions. Hence our tripartite articulation of the contents into *concepts*, *models* and *activations*, an articulation that corresponds to each text’s primary emphasis on semiotic theory, methodology or application techniques.

This scaled and structured *convergence of reading practices* hints at current and emerging epistemic topologies. The conception of space as energy and resources of life, its geopolitics from the bird’s eye view of our planet in the Anthropocene emerges in the distant background of Part I on *concepts*, leaving the inquiry open to the anthropological and the evolutionary-cognitive and macrobiological underpinnings of urban semiosis. Behavioural geography employs spatio-temporal reasoning to show up the city as the model for any complex cognitive map. Part II on *models* nods in this direction, pointing to the borders and intersections of urban and cognitive semiotics, psychosociology and social psychology. Media archaeology provides us with a method to further understand how deeply our uses and appreciation of the city (from functional amenities like parking spaces and potable water to its general aura as ‘dirty’, ‘chaotic’, ‘stylish’, ‘welcoming’ or ‘historically charged’) depend on the material apparatus of communication – and on how this apparatus affects

and produces banking and real-estate values (and their deconstruction). Part III on *activations* offers a path towards this functional-communicative approach.

## 1 STATE OF THE ART: HOW SEMIOTICS CAME TO STUDY THE CITY

Between the 1960s and the 1970s, and after absorbing insights in linguistics, philosophy, cultural history and anthropology (from Lévi-Strauss to Bakhtin, from Hjelmslev to Barthes), semiotics established itself beyond its traditional research objects to include other cultural products: objects of everyday use, advertisements, newspapers, television broadcasts, architecture, design and music were nominated worthy of semiotic analysis. In this context, branches in the field of semiotics such as the semiotics of space, the semiotics of architecture and urban semiotics began to include topics such as space, place, landscape, the city and its built environment (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986; Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou 2014; Pellegrino 2010, 2020). Such approaches have generally focused on the interpretation and the meaning-making of urban space, integrating and realigning its historical, architectural and socioeconomic aspects.

In the late 1960s, the semiotics of architecture introduced a semiotic conceptualisation of the built environment, investigating the processes through which architecture can convey meanings (Barthes 1970; Eco 1986; Lotman 1987). Umberto Eco (1997) suggested a conceptualisation of architecture as a system of signs made of spatial signifiers on the one hand, and denotative and connotative signifiers on the other. He argued that architectural objects are not designed primarily to communicate, but to function. At the same time, they do communicate through their form and function. Scholarship followed up on the inquiry of the field of architecture as semiosis that is both functional and textual at once.

Gianfranco Marrone (2001, p. 293) moved towards a semiotic theory of space, where the environment (both built and natural) is considered a set of physical entities, differently articulated, that speak of themselves as well as of the societies that produce its meaning, its values, practices and emotions. Marrone primarily focuses on the *resemantisation* of space by its users: paraphrasing Eco, Marrone – in the text that appears in this book in English for the first time – calls *model users* those individuals that conform to the designers' intentions and develop patterns of behaviour that are consistent with the envisioned function of spaces. But while designers strive to entice users along interpretations that conform to their intentions, users can interpret and use spaces in ways that are different or even contrary to the designers' intentions. To the category of space *as* text, we should add the category of space *in* the

text, e.g. ‘the semiotic study of the geographical spaces constructed by literary texts’ (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou 2014, p. 435).

Alexandros Lagopoulos (2020, pp. 26–27) revised Eco’s semiotic theory of architecture by proposing an urban *social semiotics* that will study the collective process of the city planning that leads to a somewhat coherent model for the future city. Already since the second half of the 1980s, Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986) had set out to investigate urban space creating a specific field called *urban semiotics*, that described the essential criteria defining a given space as urban in precapitalist and contemporary societies. To achieve this aim, urban semiotics undertook analyses of existing urban spaces and their representations. In the wake of this research programme, many semiotic analyses have appeared providing a range of approaches to the semiotic aspects of the city (Giannitrapani 2013, 2017, 2021; Marrone 2013; Marrone and Pezzini 2006, 2008; Pellegrino 2007; Pilshchikov 2015; Volli 2009). Moreover, scholars in semiotics have analysed specific urban areas, such as urban peripheries (Cervelli 2005) and urban districts (Montanari 2008). Other studies have theorised the sensory turn in architecture (Pallasmaa 2007) or, more recently, the ‘gamification’ of urban semiotics (Thibault 2019), while many empirical studies have focused on the broader politics of the urban, such as the post-socialist city (Czeczczynski 2009) and the post-war city (Mazzucchelli 2010). To this terrain one could add the study of conflict and identity in the city (Pezzini and de Oliveira 2016).

There are many more that we are regrettably omitting in this introduction, either because we ignore their existence or because we lack knowledge of the language in which they were written and discussed. We do feel, however, that the studies we have mentioned have helped to shape what can be called the semiotics of the city, without of course producing any single or final method. Revisiting and reconstructing moments of the development of the field is an operation requiring constant updates and epistemic calibration. With this ‘reality check’ in mind, we hope that this plurivocal dialogue can contribute to precisely this kind of operation. A tentative taxonomy of the research premises of this dialogue so far could include five main paradigms, either fully established or dynamically emerging.

First, the semiological paradigm based on de Saussure has described urban spaces and built forms as sign systems, systems of values and, more generally, as essential instruments through which meanings are articulated. It aims to identify the principles governing the signification of urban space, using text and language as metaphors for explaining social relations within urban life (see Chapter 2 by Marrone and Chapter 4 by Lavrenova in this book).

A second set of principles governs the generative model developed by Algirdas J. Greimas and the so-called Paris School (Greimas 1970, 1983). According to generative semiotics, texts are produced on three levels of signi-

fication, each level representing a step further into a process that moves from the abstract to the concrete. The generative paradigm, tried out in the register of urban space, investigates the configuration of these layers both within and outside the text of the urban, to include from precapitalist space to global cities (Hammad 2010; Lagopoulos 1993; Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou 1992, 2014) and architectural space (Hammad 2003; Juodinytė-Kuznetsova 2011; Levy 2008; Muntañola 1999; Pellegrino 2007; Pellegrino and Jeanneret 2006). More recently, semiotic theories have been proposed to go beyond the semiological and the generative paradigms and thus to overcome the arbitrary relations between spatial expressions and spatial meanings (Lindström et al. 2014, pp. 119–121). A subcategory within this trend involves the parallel and comparative study of representations, power relations, social structures and memory in urban landscapes (Lindström et al. 2014). Delving into the relationship between culture and space, Lavrenova (2019) has examined the power of cultural landscapes in the context of cultural-philosophical research.

The third paradigm can be traced back to the Tartu-Moscow School. Research in the semiotic aspects of urban space has revised the textual paradigm to provide a more pragmatic understanding of the city, extending the discussion to urban planning. Concepts from the semiotics of culture have been used to map the interpretive and social communicative practices of urban space and planning (Remm 2016, p. 35).

Drawing on Charles Peirce's model of semiosis, a fourth paradigm suggests a deep interpretative approach to the habitus of individuals and groups (Arnesen 2011). Scholarship in this vein has extended semiotic analysis to the domain of the physical environment and living systems. Guerri et al. (2016) have proposed an operating model, the Semiotic Nonagon, that retrieves theoretical categories from Peirce to carry out the analysis of different conceptual objects, including architecture and the built environment.

Fifth, for biosemiotics, an expanding pluridisciplinary field and biological and physical processes can be seen as sign systems and should thus be analysed in semiotic terms (see e.g. Copley 2001; Kull 2005). A recent semiotic articulation (Pelkey 2017) of the 'embodied turn' (also called the 'somatic turn') in the humanities, an articulation that incorporates neuroscience, linguistic anthropology and cultural semiotics, can be seen as the cognitive-epistemic bridge between the third paradigm, i.e. the Tartu School revision of the textual model, and the Peircean one, encompassing ecosemiotic and biosemiotic approaches. A biosemiotic approach to urban space and the built environment is now being developed through recent publications (e.g. Bellentani and Arkhipova 2022; Ireland and Copley 2022; see Chapter 10 by Magnus et al. in this book).

In addition to these paradigms, several semiotics analyses have appeared exploring the relationship between space, memory and identity, focusing on

specific components of the urban space such as museums (Pezzini 2011; Violi 2017), monuments and memorials (Abousnougua and Machin 2013; Auster 1997; Bellentani 2021; Bellentani and Panico 2016; Elsner 2003; Huebner and Phoocharoensil 2017; Krzyżanowska 2016; Mazzucchelli 2010; Panico 2018, 2019; Pezzini 2006; Torop 2017; Yoka 2016).

## 2 CONCEPTS

Invoking Saussure's statement that 'langue is a product of social forces' and understanding *langue* as extending to all semiotic systems, Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, in the opening chapter entitled 'The semiotics of settlement space', presents his social semiotics of space, developed over many years and tested against several examples in his research. His aim is to delineate the study of place (as opposed to space that is mainly produced by the socioeconomic system) through the examination and theorisation of the settlement. Providing a rigorous framework of the history of ideas leading to sociosemiotics and to linguistic semiotic approaches, Lagopoulos establishes a social semiotics that accounts for the isotopies producing the meanings of space from the settlement through to the urban phenomenon.

Gianfranco Marrone's contribution to this volume is the translation for the first time in English of a 2009 article originally published in the international semiotic journal *Versus. Quaderni di studi semiotici*. The chapter, entitled 'Ten theses for a semiotic study of the city: notes, observations, proposals', can be considered as a theoretical and methodological manifesto of the semiotics of the city. One of the values of this contribution is its capacity to place semiotics centre-stage within a broader discussion on the city, transcending the functionalist perspective, resting on an ontology of the city that allows us to examine more closely the system of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations that develop within (and outside) it. Through his ten theses – which, as the author himself declares are actually 11, considering also the 'zero' thesis, i.e. the epistemological premise – Marrone suggests and defines the 'city-effect'. He achieves this by gradually proceeding to the element that not only characterises the structure of city space, its articulation and physical conformation, but also the social and discursive dynamics that define and 'betray' it. Marrone poses the epistemological issue of how to define the textual dimension of the city, how it can be considered an 'exemplary' text, capable of defining itself as an image of the world and in what sense it not only 'contains' relations but also manages to configure them – hence how its parts can adopt different actantial roles. The chapter also problematises the question of practices, a widely debated topic for urban semioticians (e.g. the works of Marsciani's Bolognese school of ethnosemiotics) – a point that intersects productively with Chapter 11 of this volume by Pierluigi Cervelli. Particularly important is the point of

the methodological problem of the represented space and the experienced space, demonstrating the semiotic interconnection between the two and how both can affect our perception and experience of the city.

In ‘Devices for the representation and the spectacularisation of urban space: views, landscapes and logo-monuments’, Isabella Pezzini proposes an updated version of an article that has strongly influenced the theoretical debate on urban semiotics, originally published in the 2006 volume *Senso e Metropoli. Per una semiotica posturbana*, edited by the author herself and Gianfranco Marrone. The revised chapter proposes a theoretical and analytical reflection on the ‘scopic regime’ of the city: its visual representation, the various gazes that can be adopted by different subjects and the fruition of its spaces by visitors or citizens. Pezzini proposes a theoretical and epistemological reflection on how the cartographic enunciation has contributed in the past to the construction of a ‘portrait’ of the city that is never neutral, but always conditioned by political and economic reasons. She moves towards those elements that, more than others, stand out in these zenithal representations of the city: the logo-monuments. These are monuments, cathedrals, towers that encapsulate the visual identity of the city and at the same time represent it in a self-reflective manner. Through case studies such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the London Eye, she deals with logo-monuments from the point of view of visual semiotics but also of the semiotics of culture and tourism, recognising how the great visibility that these urban objects are granted can affect the meaning of the city that hosts them.

In ‘Urban landscape as text’, Olga Lavrenova addresses a textual understanding of urban landscapes from a semiotic perspective. The author explores the metaphor of landscape as text to look at the intersection between humans and their environment. She argues that urban texts always attract multiple meanings, being non-linear and allowing for various strategies of use and interpretation. To embrace this multiplicity of meaning, Lavrenova uses the concept of intertext, seen as a continuous process of meaning-making to whom both global and local cultures contribute.

Francesco Mazzucchelli, in his chapter entitled ‘The complexity of cities and the semiotic gaze: keeping the “thickness” of urban spaces’, proposes a genealogical reflection on the concept of urban space from a semiotic perspective. After considering how the idea of ‘urban space’ has been considered by semiotics as one of its main theoretical and practical objects, Mazzucchelli considers the work conducted by what he calls ‘second-generation semioticians’, proposing a polyphonic interaction between two important Greimasian approaches – the sociosemiotics perspective by Gianfranco Marrone and the ethnosemiotics one by Francesco Marsciani – and discussing the possibility of an interrelated approach to the investigation of the city space.

### 3 MODELS

The second contribution by Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos follows and elaborates on his first. In 'Semiotic models of settlement space', he offers a deep reading and general outline of cosmic images of India, of the mythic structure of village settlements amongst the Dogon in southern Mali, of cognitive arrangements in ancient Greek cosmologies, and proceeds to map out precapitalist models and modernist models of settlement space, showing up their merits and shortcomings. He then focuses on the postmodernist model and criticises its dependency on cultural determinism, and ultimately its arbitrariness and superficiality when it lacks the social semiotic perspective.

The chapter by Manar Hammad, entitled 'Dynamics of *Madrasa* learning institutions in the Ayyubid and Mamluk capital cities', proposes a theoretical and methodological reflection on the semiotics of space considering the *Madrasa*, a type of Islamic building and institution for the training of jurists, the *Ulamā*. Through this case, and moreover demonstrating clearly how prolific the dialogue between history and semiotics can be, Hammad shows precisely how the meanings of these spaces have been affected by economic, military and political impulses. In particular, the semiotician and architect deals with the logical relationship that links what he calls the 'declared' and 'non-declared' functions of *Madrasa*, which depend, in the first case, on the discourse of architecture and, in the second, on the urban discourse. Starting from a precise observation regarding the high number of *Madrasa* in the territories of Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo, Hammad conducts a timely semiotic analysis, combined with numerous historical references, in which he deals with the significance of these places not only from the perspective of their apparent significance, but also in relation to wider symbolic and semantic issues. The author guides his reader through a semantic analysis (which also takes the form of an investigation in the semiotics of culture) of the epithets *Waqf*, *Haram* and *Mulk*, demonstrating how these terms represent different ways of managing heritage in Islamic culture and thus consequently reflecting on the forms of access, sale and the ways in which these spaces are inherited and how their 'memory' is constructed.

The chapter 'Mental models of urban space and their semiotic means' by Leonid Tchertov analyses the mental levels of space modelling, their connections with the corresponding codes and their use in the representation of the urban space. He argues that mental space modelling occurs at various levels of cognition and planning. The author describes how spatial codes set their own norms of space semiotisation and are used to interpret the urban space interacting with verbal language and other semiotic systems within the semiosphere.

As if to illustrate Tchertov's point about the generative power of space semi-otisation, Charikleia Pantelidou brings into focus the question of the boundary and the limit in urban space, both as material realities and as asymmetric conceptual dualities: individual/collective, social/human, reality/truth, data/ideals, dualities that belong to ethical, political and cognitive semiotic registers. In the chapter 'Reworking boundaries: from gates to the architecture of openness' Pantelidou dwells on boundaries and limits between inside and outside in reference to the question of conscious and active urban coexistence and asks how architectural theory could ultimately establish a complex and dynamic approach to limits and boundaries that avoids both dogmatism and relativism.

The contribution 'Semiotic space for native biota in the city' by Riin Magnus, Tiit Remm and Kalevi Kull employs ecosemiotic and biosemiotic concepts to establish what we might call the interface between cultural and biological domains. Using a working model that integrates ecological inquiry, theoretical biology and cultural policy, they demonstrate how the use of native plants in urban landscaping can be reconciled with cultural ideals expressed in the city. The authors take us through the restoration of native biota in four towns in Estonia, employing a combination of an ecosemiotic and sociosemiotic approach. There are fruitful consequences: semiotic space within the city emerges for and by humans and non-humans alike.

#### 4 ACTIVATIONS

In the chapter 'Envisaging the city: roadmap for an interdisciplinary study of urban "facescapes"', Massimo Leone devises a roadmap for studying the impact of digital technology on the presence and meaning of human faces in contemporary cities. The long-term relationship between cities and faces is explored with the aim to cast new light on how it is modified after the advent of digital representation technology. The term 'facescapes' is used to refer to 'ways in which human faces are turned into support for technological exchange and communicative capital in present-day cities, with specific attention to global urban hubs'. Four aspects of the facial presence in urban contexts are identified: 'Faces in the city' refers to the presentation and representation of faces in the urban space; 'Faces around the city' looks at the assemblages created by face technology devices; 'Faces on the city' includes the practice of face inscription on urban space; and 'Faces of the city' refers to the metaphor of the city as an organism endowed with individual faces.

In 'Spatial practices: convergences and dialogues between semiotics and urban planning', Pierluigi Cervelli proposes an original approach to urban space while exploring the connections between semiotics and lived urban space. His practical suggestions to research communities, professionals and activists deal with empirical research procedures, ethnography and action

research aiming at social transformation. Cervelli also calls for an ethnosemiotic approach to urban space which starts from the assumption that human practices are not self-transparent but are rather the result of ‘incorporated knowledge’ whose meaning can be reconstructed only *a posteriori*.

Following up with an eloquent example of this idea of incorporated knowledge, Mariusz Czepczyński provides an analysis of the mechanisms of desemiatisation and resemiatisation in urban space. In ‘Resemiatisation of urban landscapes: relational geographies and signification processes in post-socialist cities’, he demonstrates how these two mechanisms are the results of complex relations that structure the city itself. The concept of ‘relational spaces’ proposed by the author points to the fact that the interconnection between various subjectivities, ideas and ideologies does not just ‘happen in space’, it produces and defines it. The author concentrates on the post-socialist cities, which he sees as emblematic examples since, after the fall of the communist regime, many buildings, monuments and neighbourhoods that had previously referred to an imposed political meaning were now ‘emptied’ of it, and received new practices of political and memorial resignifications. Czepczyński proposes a typology of actions that can condition the change in the significance of urban space. In particular, the author discusses the strategies of ‘removing’, ‘reversing’, ‘realising’ and ‘reincorporating’. The repeated prefix ‘re-’ invites us to reflect on the key role that resemantisation has in affecting the meaning of the city, adding new layers and suggesting new possible uses of the space itself.

A deeper aspect of the political is indeed the educational perspective on the production of space. Kyriaki Tsoukala, in the chapter ‘When schools intersect the everyday world of the city: educational space as a dialogical-transformative quality of the urban’, attempts a combination of experiential and *praxial* approaches to school education with dialogical design principles within a framework relational ontology. Dialogicality is understood here as articulating functions of socialisation, learning, knowledge and identity, where the ‘other’ is a component factor of the ‘self’. She activates the space of the school building and suggests its new coordination with its context, the social-spatial exotopy of the city, through design pathways that stimulate transformative learning and social contact.

‘Urban activated public spaces in the contemporary city’ by Nikolaos-Ion Terzoglou continues the inquiry on the conceptual, semiotic and architectural dimensions of socially responsible design. He suggests two attributes of activated space: it is both material-corporeal and psychological-conceptual, it is experienced as a whole, it is familiar and has a social meaning. In other words, he suggests, it is *lifeworld* in itself. Bringing in insights from Gestalt psychology and phenomenology, he proposes a programme for the design of public, free, outdoor and urban public spaces for youth that will respond to pressing social needs arising today on a global scale.

The chapter ‘*Metropoesis: semiotics, fictional cities and speculative urban design*’ by Mattia Thibault, Vincenzo Idone Cassone and Gabriele Ferri investigates the semiotics related to speculation and to depictions of urban futures. The authors explain that urban representations contain and display a series of assumptions about both how the future is conceived and what role cities will have in it. Instrumentalising three case studies of fictional cities, they suggest semiotic techniques for systematising and analysing fictional, imaginary and speculative cities, and propose a typology of fictional cities based on the production media of the images and on the effects they evoke in readers.

We hope this book scratches the surface of what urban studies should tend to encompass today. The semiotic angle is particularly crucial here, since it spells out the cognitive scaffolding of each methodological approach to the city, as well as smoothens disciplinary border crossings through seeking concepts and methods that can make sense in several fields.

First, the contributions to the volume encourage us to imagine the deepening of social semiotic and Greimasian readings of the city, coupling theories of space with cultural history, anthropology and linguistics at large, and recognising the insights of critical and multilingual geographies. Second, they further theorise the digital politics of globalisation, which are expanding tremendously as we speak. A third plea echoed in the book involves the firm incorporation of the urban within the ecosemiotic and biosemiotic trajectory. Finally, a research direction urban studies cannot ignore, whether its emphasis is on history, design or planning, is that of analysing the emerging landscapes of memory, and of the processes of resemiotisation under way in today’s post-post-Cold War symbolic cultures.

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