
Inside the White Elephant: a Visual Analysis of Cultural Monuments of Power in Poland

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Abstract

The presentation is based on the results of four visual ethnography case studies conducted in Poland in 2016. We investigated new cultural institutions in Poland which were supported by the EU funds in the hope for the Bilbao effect, and asked about their potential as activators of social, cultural and economic life.

Using ethnographic approach and visual analysis (photography) we discovered that the new institutions of culture do not work as expected and are used as symbolic representation of power and success of local authorities. In reality, they are the monuments of power analogous to cargo cults' artifacts. They can be compared to famous white elephants as they are so expensive in maintenance that sometimes they cannot fulfill their primary function. In our study we analyzed both their exterior (visually spectacular architects' projects) and interior (micro-regulations which stonewall agency). Relations of power should not be decoded by reading architecture only so we also investigate engagement of local governments by means of in-depth interviews with key figures and desk research studies. In addition to architecture we observed functioning of the institutions and its users "in action". We were interested in various degree of transparency in these cultural monuments and iconic traces of authority/cultural dominance.

Reading images is helpful in determining institutions' actual function and prominence but it is also a very efficient way of detecting their deficiencies in promoting participation and co-governance.

Keywords: the Bilbao effect, visual analysis of architecture, monuments of power, white elephant

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