





PROBLEMS OF COMMEMORATIVE NAMING IN URBAN AREAS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of a major problem-field of urban naming, i.e., commemorative naming, based on case studies in Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America as well as on the elaboration of recommendations in which the author was involved. In contrast to descriptive and “neutral” geographical names, commemorative names are reminiscent of people, institutions, or events. Although it cannot be denied that commemorative names also have an orientation function so important for names of urban features, they are often unrelated or certainly less related to the place than descriptive names. The article aims to address and discuss this and other problems of commemorative naming, such as the risk of frequent renaming due to the necessity of a correlation between the rank of the honoured and the rank of the urban feature named after them – with the consequence that names for the same feature are used in parallel. Other problems addressed are gender asymmetry, the inadequate relation between name and place, naming after persons still alive or only recently deceased, the prevailing perception of urban names as labels, the tension between the practical aspect of short names easily handled for addresses and oral communication, and the commemorative function best served by full and explicit names. The article departs from a survey of urban naming in Austrian cities and public discussions on urban naming in Austria and other countries, draws



from the global range of studies on this topic, and takes advantage of the author's engagement in national, regional, and global fora on place-name standardisation.

Keywords: Commemorative names, place names, urban names (urbanonyms)

1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses a major problem-field of urban naming, i.e., commemorative naming, based on case studies in Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America¹ as well as on the elaboration of recommendations by the place-name boards of Austria (see AKO 2017) and Germany (see UNGEGN 2024a) and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN, see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix), in which the author was involved.

It deserves to be mentioned that urban names or urbanonyms – i.e., place names typical of urban features such as names of streets, squares, promenades, parks, buildings, transportation infrastructure, and particularly commemorative urban names – are a major topic, if not the main focus of critical toponomastics (also called critical toponymy²), which is the study of place names as political and societal constructs (see, i.e., Berg & Volteenaho 2009; Jordan 2020).

In contrast to descriptive, intentional names (e.g., *Peace Square*, *Bridge of Brotherhood*), and “neutral” geographical names (after plants, animals, planets, etc.) – the latter often being used today for the “thematic naming” of urban features and identity building of new urban developments (“planetary district”, “birds district”) – commemorative names are reminiscent of people, institutions, ideas, or events.

1 See Alderman 2000, 2002, 2003; Alderman & Inwood 2013, 2017; Autengruber 2012, 2013; Azaryahu 1996, 1997, 2012; Azaryahu & Golan 2001; Gill 2005; González Faraco & Murphy 1997; Janas 2014; Jordan 2016; Jordan & Woodman 2016; Kang 2016; Light 2004; Light & Young 2014a, 2014b; Myers 1996; Nyström 2009, 2016; Palonen 2008; Rose-Redwood 2008; Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2010; Shoval 2013; Svensson-Jajko 2018; Yeoh 1996.

2 The author prefers the term *toponomastics* to *toponymy* to exhaust the possibilities of language in discerning between the toponyms, place names or geographical names of a certain region, i.e. the ‘namespace’, and the study of these toponyms – also in analogy to *onyms* and *onomastics*.

Commemorative naming gained ground only in the late 19th century, when urban features like streets, squares, promenades, parks, etc. received such names (see, e.g., Autengruber 2013). In some countries, and more recently, this practice has also been expanding into small towns and villages. It is, however, also true that, especially in the Global South, urban naming is practised only in central urban areas while informal naming prevails in suburbs and informal settlements (see Ben Arrous & Bigon 2022; Wanjiru-Mwita 2022).

Although it cannot be denied that commemorative names also have an orientation function so important for names of urban features and geographical names in general, they are often unrelated, or certainly less related, to the place than descriptive names, which may point in a certain direction or describe the location within the place.

This article aims to highlight this and other problems of commemorative naming by elaborating on two earlier attempts of the author's in this field (see Jordan 2021, 2022). It departs from a survey of urban naming in Austrian cities by Marlene Krapf (2015) and public discussions on urban naming in Austria and other countries, draws from the global range of studies on this topic, and takes advantage of the author's engagement in national, regional, and global fora of place-name standardisation, where commemorative naming is one of the focus themes.

2. THE IDEA OF COMMEMORATIVE NAMING

Although, as already mentioned, commemorative naming quantitatively gained ground only in the late 19th century through the spread of official street naming, it is not a new idea. It was practised in the Roman Empire, where, e.g., Nova Roma [İstanbul] was renamed *Constantinopolis* after the Roman emperor Constantine, and even earlier, when in the 4th century CE modern Plovdiv in Bulgaria was named *Philippopolis* after Philip II, king of Macedonia, or several places became *Alexandria* after Alexander the Great.

Today, at least in the Global North, official street naming is common practice and many of these names commemorate persons, institutions, ideas, or events (see Figures 1-3).



Figure 1: *A square in Paris named after the French singer and actress Juliette Greco (Source: Author, 2022)*



Figure 2: *A street in Windhoek, Namibia, the former German colony Southwest Africa, named after Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor (1871–1890) of the German Reich (Source: Author, 2019)*



Figure 3: *A main business street in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, named after the president of former Yugoslavia, Josip Broz, commonly known as Tito. The name was not replaced despite a basic political regime change. (Source: Author, 2014)*

It is also true that commemorative names have an orientational function (they appear on the mental map just like descriptive and neutral names), but certainly less so than descriptive names, which may point in a certain direction, describe the location within the place (e.g., *Main Square*), establish a temporal (*New Market*) or size relation (*Broadway*), or indicate the historical (*Baker Street*) or current (*Airport Drive*) function of a traffic area.

The naming of public urban features like streets and squares, but not of features in private hands like stores, stadiums, and stations, is usually done by municipal administrations, although standardisation regulations differ especially between democratic and autocratic political systems, a top-down approach tending to prevail in autocratic systems. It is interesting to see, however, that even in otherwise well-regulated societies, detailed and authoritative guidelines for the naming of urban features, e.g., don't name after living persons or wait a certain period after death, are frequently missing. They are exceptional at the country level, and at the sub-national administrative levels usually only larger cities have more detailed regulations, which are then consulted by other cities and municipalities, should problems arise (see Krapf 2015). The UNGEGN resolution in this field is only a recommendation, not binding, and has a very general content (see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix).

3. MAJOR PROBLEMS OF COMMEMORATIVE NAMING

3.1 The risk of renaming

The risk of renaming makes commemorative names a major problem. Every new dominant political and societal force tries to leave an imprint on the linguistic landscape (in the sense of all linguistic manifestations in public space). Although it is mostly only significant regime changes and political upheavals, such as decolonisation or the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe, that leads to a wave of renaming, accidental name changes also occur in politically calmer times, e.g., because of new historical findings, new societal directions, spiritual currents, and ideas.

Thus, a section of the Ring in Vienna (Wien), the city's most representative boulevard, has recently been renamed from *Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Ring* to *Universitätsring* ("University Ring"), the descriptive name hinting at the main building of the university being located there. Dr Karl Lueger, an innovative mayor of Vienna between 1897 and 1910 with many merits, was found undeserving of being honoured in this way because he was also known for his distinct antisemitism. This dark side of his personality was always well-known but received more attention only in more recent times.

It is inherent in the principle of commemorative naming after persons that the rank of the honoured must roughly correspond to the rank of the urban feature named after them. To name a small alley or a street in a suburb after an extraordinary personality would be not an appreciation but a degradation. Renaming, therefore, preferably and repeatedly affects prominent traffic areas (see Figure 4) and may result in names used in parallel – the older and now informal being used beside the new and now official (see, e.g., Janas 2014). Older people will tend to preserve the former name, younger will use the new one; insiders well-acquainted with the place will perhaps even recognise each other by using the old name (by speaking the local dialect), while newcomers and tourists will use the name they find on the street-name plate, on the map, or in their navigation tool. Name use may also differ by political affiliation if the earlier name honoured a person of one political direction and the new one a person of the other. Not using the official name for a feature, however, is a problem for orientation, especially in emergency situations, when, e.g., ambulance or firefighters are called by older people to a street that cannot be found in official documents.



Figure 4: *The name of the main business street of Brașov/Brassó/Kronstadt in Romania has undergone three changes since 1920, with the former names still being listed on the name plate as a kind of historical lesson (Source: Author, 2016)*

Sometimes squares, parks, and streets are even divided into sub-units to find an appropriate place for a prominent name. In any case, commemorative names lead city administrations from one dilemma to another, and many certainly wish that Pandora's box had never been opened. Surviving relatives of the deceased, associations, and other lobbies to which the deceased was affiliated, also political parties, present their demands and exert pressure on administrators.

Some years ago in the Austrian city of Salzburg, for example, the widow of the head of a cultural association with many merits asked the city administration to rename a street in the historical centre after her husband immediately after his death. This caused resistance among historically conscious people because this street had a traditional name with strong reference to the place that they felt should not be erased. After a heated debate, also in the regional media, the city council decided to rename a pedestrian bridge across the Salzach, the river crossing the city centre, a small but central and prominent feature, after him. The existing name of this bridge, however, was descriptive and hinted at a popular square nearby. In consequence, the (very practical) descriptive name is still used by many people, if not the majority, while the new, official, commemorative name is

seldom heard and can mainly be found on a plate. Obviously, it was found inappropriate to assign the prominent name to a new, less prominent urban feature and a renaming is regarded as inevitable.

In the context of urban features named after persons, institutions, and events conceived as problematic and ambivalent from the perspective of later and modern historiography – for example, after the above-mentioned renaming of the *Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Ring* to *Universitätsring*, which resulted in some public discussion not only on the specific case but also on the principle of renaming in general – Austrian cities abandoned the idea of renaming features named after problematic and ambivalent persons and moved to the practice of not changing the name but rather outlining, in addition to the merits of the honoured, his/her dark side through some short sentences below the name on the name plate. This works as a popular history lesson and has the effect of commemorating, not only the glorious parts of a country's or city's history, but also its dark sides, which may have some educative value. This is of course only applicable with ambivalent figures, who have also their merits, not with persons like Hitler or Stalin.

To take new societal directions, spiritual currents, and ideas into account means (at least in democratic societies) to honour through urban names, not only members, institutions, and events of the majority society, but also those of minorities of all kinds. This can again result in renaming.

3.2 Gender asymmetry

A dominant trend of our time strives to compensate for the mostly blatant asymmetry between urban features named after men and women. This asymmetry can be explained historically by the fact that until not so long ago women very rarely held public positions. But if women were exceptionally prominent public figures such as the Austrian regent Maria Theresia or the English Queen Victoria, there was (and still is) no shortage of squares, streets, parks, bridges, train stations, and railway lines named after them.

This trend also reveals the usual commemorative naming dilemma: If only new urban features or features on the outskirts of a city are named after women, many of whom hold high office today, and not also prominent features in the centre of a city, the cause would be of little use. Another gender gap would arise; the only difference would be that the quantitative difference would be replaced by a qualitative one.

3.3 Predominance of the label over the commemorative function

As important, meaningful, and functional for commemoration as they are, in the moment of their allocation and in the event of political upheavals, over time commemorative names seem to become mere labels, and their meaning fades in everyday use. This is especially true of names after less prominent persons, institutions, or events (see, e.g., Light & Young 2014b) and probably due to the primarily practical importance of names of urban features as orientation aids and addresses. The value of commemorative names for the culture of remembrance therefore needs to be questioned. It is envisaged that this function would be better served by monuments and commemorative plaques.

3.4 Inadequate spatial relation between name and place

Another problem with commemorative names is the frequently inadequate spatial relation between the person honoured and the urban feature named after him/her. Ideally, the urban feature named after a person should be close to his/her place of birth, place of residence, or place of work. However, it is often the case, especially for merely local or regional celebrities, that a so-far unnamed traffic area is found that has little or nothing to do with them.

Of course, this desideratum of the most precise local reference possible does not apply equally to nation-wide or international celebrities. A deserving minister, prime minister, or president can certainly be honoured by an urban name anywhere in the country, and universal greats like Mozart or Michelangelo anywhere in the world.

3.5 Naming after persons still alive or only recently deceased

Events such as birthdays and handovers sometimes occasion the naming of urban features after people who are still alive. Public sentiment around the death of a notable person often leads to the commemorative name being given immediately after death. City administrations usually find it difficult to resist the pressure of the deceased's family, associations, or groups.

But precisely this can lead to premature renaming, because every new event of this kind puts the old one in the shade; or it turns out after some time that the honoured person also had dark sides. It is therefore stated in many guidelines and supported by UN Resolution VIII/2 "Commemorative naming practices for geographical features" (see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix) that a person who is still alive should not be honoured with a commemorative name, and that a waiting period should be observed as a 'cooling-

off phase' in the case of deceased persons. However, city administrations often do not adhere to this, and the prescribed waiting periods are very different in length (ranging from one to five years).

3.6 Practical aspects

There is also a tension between the shortness of a street name, which is desirable for practical reasons, and the clear recognisability of the person honoured by it, which is required by the commemorative purpose. Names of streets, squares, and other urban features are part of addresses and are often used to provide information, arrange meeting points, etc. For these purposes, long names that consist of first and family names (and may be supplemented by a title or a function) are obstructive and therefore mostly abbreviated in practical and oral use (to the family name).

However, this contrasts with the purpose of a commemorative name, which is to pay tribute to a specific person who can often only be identified by their first name and family name. *Baker Street*, e.g., does not necessarily remind one of Josephine Baker, even if the latter was intended.

4. ALTERNATIVES

A way to avoid street naming after persons, in new developments at the fringes of larger cities or in smaller towns in rural areas, is to use the names of former houses, farmsteads, or fields that previously characterised the area. This prevents the former cultural landscape and its geographical features and names from falling into oblivion.

Based on Resolution VIII/2, 'Commemorative naming practices for geographical features', of the 8th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names 2002 in Berlin (see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix), the following proposal was made by the Austrian Board on Geographical Names in its 'Recommendations for the naming of urban traffic areas' (see the original in AKO 2017) and later (2018), which also include similar recommendations of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names [Ständiger Ausschuss für Geographische Namen] for Germany (see UNGEGN 2024a). In English translation the Austrian recommendations have the following wording:

- 1) Names of traffic areas should in the first line comply with the function of orientation.
- 2) Well-established names are not to be changed without good reason.
- 3) With renamings, the after-effects of the former name in practical use should be taken into account.
- 4) Similar names or names easily mixed up with existing names should be avoided within a municipality.
- 5) With new namings, field names and/or other names in local use should be applied.
- 6) If, nevertheless, commemorative names, i.e., names reminding of persons and events, are applied, this is to be done with caution and restraint.
 - a) Commercial names, i.e., names of companies and their products, should be avoided.
 - b) Namings after persons still alive should be avoided. A break of at least five years after the passing of the person is recommended.
 - c) The person commemorated should have had a relation or (also) importance for the place (e.g., place of birth, work location).
 - d) Taking into account the name length, names after persons should comprise first name and surname (e.g., *Karl-Schweighofer-Gasse*) to enable an unambiguous identification of the person. Titles (*Ing., Dr., Prof.* etc.) should be avoided.
 - e) Taking into account the historically explicable asymmetry of namings after males and females, it is recommended that females should be considered for new namings.

5. CONCLUSION

Commemorative names that are applied mainly (but not only) to urban features offer an opportunity to honour people and institutions. They reflect political power and societal hierarchies but have the essential disadvantage, compared with descriptive names, of being less useful for geographical orientation, a major function of place names. Furthermore, urban features are at risk of being renamed when political power changes and new societal directions gain ground, because the rank of the named feature needs to correspond to the rank of the honoured. Renaming frequently results in parallel name use for the same feature and ambiguity in orientation. Commemorative names also reflect the historical gender asymmetry in prominent public positions, which is – due to the problems of renaming and the rank-order principle mentioned above – difficult to modify and to adapt to our modern, much more balanced gender situation.

It is a deficiency of commemorative names in respect of their commemorative function that, except for names that honour very prominent persons, institutions, and events, they are handled as labels in daily use and hardly anybody is reminded of whom or what they honour. Furthermore, due to the fact that new urban features need names, while already-named features should not, if possible, be renamed, there is rarely a spatial correspondence between the feature named and the person, institution, or event honoured. Strong pressure exerted by the family or interest groups results in naming after persons still alive or only recently deceased, which may in the long run result in further renaming.

The commemorative function of commemorative names competes with the practical need for short names, since urban names are part of addresses.

These are several reasons why UNGEGN as well as national geographical name boards discourage the use of commemorative names in favour of descriptive names with their significantly higher orientation function. Indeed, there are much more practicable and well-established modes of commemorating people, institutions, and events such as monuments and memorial plaques that do not, much in contrast to commemorative urban naming, compete with other functions such as orientation and addresses.

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The presence of minority and indigenous languages in urban naming

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APPENDIX

UN Resolution VIII/2 Commemorative naming practices for geographical features
(passed by the 8th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Berlin, 27 August – 5 September 2002, UNGEGN 2024b)

The Conference,

- Noting that the use of names of persons or events to designate features for commemorative purposes or as geographical reminders constitutes an active practice,
- Recognizing that the attribution of a personal name to a geographical feature during the lifetime or shortly after the death of a person is a widespread practice,
- Recalling that, during a meeting of 1960, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names acknowledged that naming or renaming of a geographical feature to include the name of a living person could be a source of problems,
- Recognizing that this practice is generally disadvantageous, as this type of designation is subject to subsequent changes not recommended by the Conference,
- Noting that little guidance exists on the practice of adopting a personal name during the lifetime or shortly after the death of a person,
 - 1) Recommends that the appropriate national authorities discourage the use of personal names to designate a geographical feature during the lifetime of the person in question;
 - 2) Also recommends that the appropriate national authorities include in their guidelines clear statements on the length of the waiting period they wish to establish before using a commemorative name.

