

## T 3.2: Industrial town semiotics: case study town of Velenje, Slovenia

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## Introduction

Velenje is a relatively young town; it developed largely after World War II. The central driving force of the rapid growth were extensive lignite reserves in the nearby mining site, which remain one of the most important energy source for Slovenia. To answer the question of what is the dominant narrative in this industrial town in Slovenia we headed there and observed the physical 'landscape', cultural exhibitions, places of tourist and cultural consumption. Furthermore, we observed two auxiliary semiotic elements: official symbols of the Municipality and geographical names (street names, names of institutions ...). Our findings are based on observations, inventory of symbols and interactions with local people while visiting the town. Interactions were made spontaneously with workers at cultural institutions (museums), souvenir shops, and tourism offices where we wanted to find out the dominant narratives involving industry, and how is the industrial past being (re)presented in present-day activities. In a way we managed to shell-out present and past narratives that officials want to sustain. There were also some indications of hidden narratives developed mainly by non-institutional stakeholders. At the end we made a synthesis: past and present dominant narratives seen through the specific semiotics of Velenje town.

## The built environment (townscape)

The symbols of the industrial and coal mining heritage are found in the built environment. We found sculptures, residential buildings, public buildings, industrial sites, public open spaces (children's playground, park, and square), a wall mural, garden settlement, railroad track and anthropogenous lakes. These symbols have varying close ties to industry and coal mining: the connection is evident with the sculptures and industrial sites, while the significance of other symbols is broader and the connection more indirect. The construction of the town and the town centre, especially in the 1950–1959 period, reflects a predominant tendency of building the "ideal" socialist town and ensuring a better residential quality for miners as a contrast to the dark mining shafts and former worker colonies. In that time, the town builders consistently followed the principles of modernism and functionalism, with the two prevailing paradigms in architecture and urban planning at the time. They wanted to prove that it was possible to design a modern industrial town in a socialist rule.

Most of the symbols were created in the first few decades after World War II and are well-placed, preserved or restored. Some are recent: one of the roundabouts at the town entrance boasts a sculpture, erected in honour of coal mining and the town's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the tallest of its kind in Slovenia. Another special feature is the coal mine-themed children's playground Miner's Village, which was built in 2014 and is designed around the story of energy efficiency and the meaning of the local energy source. This points to a sustained, expressly positive, partly idealized image of the industrial past and present. Symbols in the built environment reflect the collective awareness that the town is inextricably linked to coal mining, industry and shock work<sup>1</sup>. The monuments to coal mining are somewhat idealized, especially those that depict continuity and the town's growth.

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<sup>1</sup> Shock work (*»udarniki«*) is a specific kind of communist-era type of work where (younger) workers influenced by heavy propaganda went above and beyond the call of duty. So-called shock brigades were formed where people worked enthusiastically and 'voluntarily' usually in big infrastructural projects (roads, towns ...) and were granted certain benefits.

Fig.1: Monument dedicated to miners in the main town square.



It is interesting to notice how the industrial architecture is being changed: One such example are the coal miners' colonies and "*provizoriji*" (buildings of a temporary nature with substandard living conditions). Some of them have been torn down due to the sinking ground that followed coal excavation and have been replaced by modern more spacious apartments. Some buildings that had been directly linked to mining (e.g. coal mine's administrative building, tower block for mining school students, industrial-mining high school) serve a different purpose now, but the memory of its original use has been well preserved with informative signs.

The coal mining history is also symbolized by three anthropogenous lakes that were formed after the ground sank due to coal excavation. Today, numerous sporting and leisure activities are centred on the lakes and the memory of the darker side of the coal mining history had attempted to be preserved by the temporary exhibition about sunken villages in the Coal Mining Museum in 2012.

From the built environment point of view, industrial past is well visible and is being conveyed to visitors. It is obvious that the dominant narrative is closely connected with the 'socialist' past, which is in turn inevitably associated with mining and industry. In the town we can thus find recurring symbols of monuments dedicated to Tito (Yugoslav leader) and miners. Most of the buildings and monuments are well-preserved, many have been renovated.

Fig.2: Antropogenic lakes<sup>2</sup> are for some the most visible symbol of the mining past.



### Heritage institutions

Despite the prevailing trends of the post-industrial era, Velenje remains firmly rooted in industrial flows, which is manifested also by cultural heritage institutions. The town's industrial tradition is intensely present in museums in the number of collections, materials, individual exhibitions and events. However, there seems to be a constant imbalance between the contents, as they favour coal mining over power production and other industry sectors, presently existing in the town. For example: the company Gorenje is a global market player and headquarters to a number of cutting-edge technologies, but its industrial heritage has received significantly less attention in terms of museum programs and exhibitions than coal mining.

The coal mining and industrial heritage are most represented in the Coal Mining Museum of Slovenia and in individual exhibitions in the Velenje Museum. It tries to excite visitors with its descend into the darkness with the oldest mining elevator in the world, visiting the original mine shafts and eating a coal miner's lunch in the deepest dining room in Slovenia.

Occasionally, exhibitions feature industrial heritage. One of the nine permanent exhibitions is dedicated to the history of Velenje and of the 150 temporary exhibitions put on from 2001 to 2014, a handful have been dedicated to coal mining and industry. The Coal Mining Museum of Slovenia in Velenje primarily focuses on presenting the history of coal mining; of the 40 temporary exhibitions in the museum from 2010 to 2017, every fourth exhibition has been dedicated to coal mining.

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<sup>2</sup> Three different lakes were formed and all of them were named after nearby settlement: *Velenje Lake* after Velenje town, *Škale Lake* after Škale, and *Družmirje Lake* after Družmirje. The later was later renamed after nearby town of Šoštanj to Šoštanj Lake.

Fig.3: The Velenje town museum is based at old Velenje Castle.



The most extensive and renowned institutions in terms of museums, cultural and exhibition symbols are Velenje Museum and Velenje Culture Hall, both public institutions. Industrial heritage is only indirectly reflected in the Culture Hall and other non-museum public spaces; in the museums, it is expressed through individual exhibitions. The condition and recognisability of the symbols are abundant. Since they are an important part of the territorial identity, not only of heritage, the past industrial symbols are going strong. They are a point of pride for most citizens and many visitors from elsewhere study individual aspects as examples of good practice. The dominant opinion is that the most common reasons for visiting Velenje are the Coal Mining Museum (museum, significance for the town) and the socialist era heritage (monuments, architecture).

Fig.4: The coal mining Museum of Slovenia provides its visitors with a unique experience of coalminers.





In general, the attitude of the citizens of Velenje is very positive towards the town's industrial and 'socialist' symbols and a sense of pride is noticeable. The use, purpose and meaning of these symbols, however, have changed slightly throughout the decades, which is most apparent among the younger generation due to the lessened ideological stance in them. The residents' attitude is extremely positive to the coal mining tradition, mostly positive to socialist heritage and somewhat negative reactions can be detected about certain environmental and political topics.

## Tourism

One of the slogans used to promote the Slovenian town is "The Socialist Wonder". Velenje has two main tourist attractions: the tallest statue of Tito in the world and the deepest dining room in Slovenia. Above-mentioned cultural heritage institutions are also important, with Velenje Museum having 22,000 and Coal Mining Museum having 18,000 visitors yearly. It is interesting to note that two major tourism companies have their roots in industry: one being Gorenje Gostinstvo that manages all the major catering facilities (subsidiary of Gorenje factory producing household appliances) and Premogovnik Velenje that manages the coal museum (subsidiary of the Velenje Coal mines company).

Dominant narratives are well-seen even through the lens of tourist packages. The names of those for example are: *Socialist Experience in Velenje*, *A Retro Walk in Velenje*, *In the Miners' Footsteps*, *Stories of Lost Villages*, and the "Walk Through a Town of Modernism" architectural route. The most purchased souvenir in TIC Velenje is a T-shirt bearing the sign "Tito's Velenje" and a red star. Other socialist mementos include a shirt with a socialist-era limerick "It's Nice to be Young in our Homeland<sup>3</sup>", postcards with a commemorative image of Tito and Tito's monument in Velenje, along with a magnet of Tito Square in Velenje. The most popular mining souvenirs include: a candle holder made of coal, a mining lamp atop a lump of coal, a mining lamp atop a lump of coal in a box and a piece of coal in a box. The kids' game "Nine Times Velenje" introduces also coal mining heritage and urban development in Velenje.

Fig.5: The most sold memorabilia for tourists is connected to the socialist era.



Socialist 'nostalgia' is the main theme with which the city is trying to attract visitors, closely followed by topics from the mining and industrial past. The Municipality of Velenje is going to enable access to Tito's monument and visitors will be able to take their photo next to the monument. For some visitors,

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<sup>3</sup> A slogan of the popular socialist youth anthem.

Tito's statue is namely the main reason for visiting Velenje. Even in gastronomy the dominant socialist industrial narrative is visible: visitors are served "the miner's skewer" and in restaurants, decorated with Yugoslav iconography, one can get the "Lignite Burger" (named by a type of coal) or the "Marshal Burger" (named by Marshal Josip Broz Tito). For desert one can indulge in "Tito's ice cream", which has become the best-selling flavour by far.

Fig.6: The statue of Tito in the park near to the town's main square.



### Creative (re)use of industry and the arts

Citizens of Velenje are known to be nostalgic toward socialist era which is related to city's industrial past. What is even more surprising is that the generation of millennials (who are too young to have concrete memories of state socialism) practice socialist-era nostalgia. Several aspects of the cultural practice related to city's industrial heritage have been identified.

**Creative reuse of abandoned industrial buildings:** many abandoned old industrial buildings around Velenje have been repurposed and subject to creative placemaking. *Stara pekarna*, former bakery, situated in the old town of Velenje, was transformed into an arts space in 2012 when Velenje was included in the project of European Capital of Culture. The space has since become a gallery for visual arts and a regular arts venue during The Kunigunda Festival of Young Cultures. *Klasirnica*, former coal separation plant is a huge building, which was abandoned after coal separation was not needed any more. In 2012 during The Kunigunda Festival of Young Cultures the group of artist draw probably largest mural on its façade. The artists drew their self-portraits whereas one of them is represented as a proud coal miner.

Fig.7: Mural drawn on the old coal separation plant.



Fig.8: Statue of Tito 'dressed' by artists in the scope of artist festival.



**Public art:** Industrial past in Velenje is inevitably related to its socialist era. Besides Tito's monument there are testaments related to socialist past or Velenje's coal mining (the statue of Yugoslav politicians, the statue of Velenje city planner and coal mine director and the statue of the miners). Some local musicians have promoted Velenje's industrial heritage in their work, most notably rap musician 6Pack Čukur. In Velenje, socialist-era nostalgia is also practiced through exhibiting of everyday life of the socialist class. For example, city officials plan to make an exhibition of Velenje's socialist-era housing.

**Consumption and popular culture:** an aura of "pastness" can be found in retro names of coffee shops and diners. Such example is the popular socialist-era-themed burger restaurant called Nostalgija (Nostalgia) where Yugoslav semiology is used. This type of symbols are widely used across Velenje's consumption places: red stars, flags, names such as 'The youth' referencing Tito's slogans.

**Solidarity and communal work as a heritage of industrial past:** as Velenje was mainly built by shock workers (Udarniki) their legacy is promoted and reflected in voluntary work of the youth. Udarnik MC Velenje is a group of volunteers who help disadvantaged families and individuals with household chores. There are also numerous other organisations in Velenje with highly enthusiastic and engaged members (biggest Scout Association in Slovenia, brass bands, etc.). Solidarity is a common narrative among the local population. Another example is open-air cinema built in 1950s next to the lake that was abandoned and overgrown by weeds and covered in dirt. In 2009 a group of volunteers with the financial help of local firms restored the cinema's amphitheatre and since then - apart from open-air cinema - the place is used for sports activities (running competitions, ice-skating).

### Official town symbols & names

The town's official name between 1981 and 1990 was Titovo Velenje (Tito's Velenje). This was an honorary title awarded to one town out of each of eight Yugoslavia's republics and autonomous regions that most consistently realized the ideas of self-management and the development of socialist society. After Slovenia's independence, it changed its name back to Velenje.

Surprisingly, there is only a small amount of **geographical names**, directly connected to industrial and mining tradition in the town of Velenje and surroundings. Oppositely, prevailing proletarian and



revolutionary ideology of towns in this (Šalek) valley can be unveiled through street names, named predominantly after national liberation movement in WW2. There is almost no toponyms connected with industry and mining except for some references to mills and smelters. In Velenje one can find *Miners Road* (Rudarska cesta) and *Mine Road* (Rudniška cesta), and in nearby Šoštanj *Factory Path* (Tovarniška pot). Topographical names connected with industry and mining are those of present-day industry and mining corporations, such as Velenje Coalmine or Gorenje.

From industrial viewpoint institutional names have to be mentioned, particularly those connected to sports, education and culture. Among 66 registered sports organizations within Velenje municipality six of them wear names refer to mining and industrial enterprises: the Football Club Miner (*Rudar*), playing in First Slovenian division, Miner Heavy Athletics Club, Gorenje Velenje Handball Club, Coalmine Group Sport Society, Velenje Mine Boules Sport Society, and Elektra Basketball Club from nearby Šoštanj. In education we can find Faculty for Energetics and Environmental Protection on tertiary level, and on secondary level Secondary Vocational and Technical Electro and Computer Science School and Secondary Vocational and Technical School for Mechanical Engineering. It is obvious that education follows the employment needs in most important economic branches.

**Coast of arms** (CoA) traditionally came into use in the 12th Century. The meaning of coats of arms may be understood by their history, by the political contests to which they are enlisted, and by their impacts within particular social settings<sup>4</sup>. We can consider the CoAs as an institutionalized visual symbol with which dominant local story and history (dominant narrative) is being conveyed and portrayed.

CoA of Velenje was picked at an open tender in 1992 out of 300 proposals and was slightly modified again in 2009 (Fig. 9). At first sight it is a complete departure from the old CoA in the socialist Yugoslavia (Fig. 10), which had ideological connotations (workers hands shaping the letter “V” and a socialist Yugoslav red star at the top). The semiology of the new CoA is less obvious but still very modernistic. The white tower raising above the old castle wall (depicted in green) symbolising the modernistic history of Velenje and reaffirming the notion of newly built industrial town, rising over the old feudal historical remnants. In 2009 officials made some changes to colours of the CoA and the flag, which could also be explained by efforts of the Municipality to ‘soften-up’ the image of Velenje. They decided to ‘soften’ the colours to ‘make them more optimistic’ and to add ‘a feeling of light’<sup>5</sup>.

Fig.9: Official Coat of arms of the Velenje municipality and the official flag

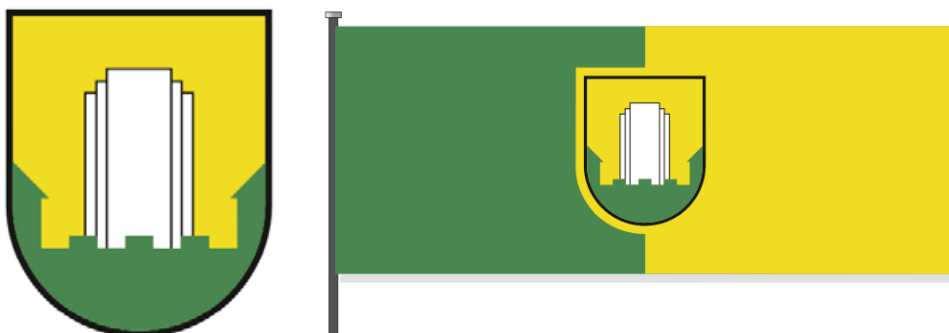


Fig.10: The old Coat of arms (before 1992) of (Titovo) Velenje.

<sup>4</sup>Mohr, R. 2005: Enduring Signs and Obscure Meanings: Contested Coats of Arms in Australian Jurisdictions. In Wagner, A., Summerfield, T., Benevides, F. (eds) Contemporary Issues of the Semiotics of Law, Oxford, 180-195.

<sup>5</sup> Decree on official Coat of Arms and flag of Velenje Municipality [Odlok o grbu in zastavi občine Velenje]. Internet: <http://www.velenje.si/files/default/cgp/Odlok%20o%20grbu%20in%20zastavi%202009.pdf> (16. 1. 2018)



Presently, the CoA and the choice of colours in the flag are further explained in a more post-industrial fashion. On the official municipality web page we can read: *'yellow symbolizes the youth and optimism of the town and green the good quality of environment and responsible attitude towards nature'*. We can clearly see how the change in dominant narrative – transformation of an industrial socialist town to a 'healthy', 'green' and 'youthful' town – reflected in the change of official interpretations of the town's main symbols.

Velenje is one of very few towns in Slovenia that adopted an **official anthem** in 2011. The anthem originates from 1959 where the efforts of building 'a socialist industrial miracle' were at its highest. Title of the anthem translates: *To the builders of Velenje* and is full of expressions reiterating the dominant political goals of the time such as: 'constructing the new heaven', 'the city is ours and built for us' and similar statements reinforcing the project and the socialist context. It is interesting that city officials decided to reinstitute the anthem in 2011, possibly trying to revive the feeling of community and solidarity in the times of economic crisis or perhaps to reinforce their-own political primacy as main left-wing choice at the regional level.

### Local strategies

The municipality's general development guidelines are stated in the Strategic Development Document of the City Municipality of Velenje (2008) and the subsequent Sustainable Urban Strategy for a Smart, Enterprising and Friendly Velenje 2025. Both documents highlight the municipality's vision and dominant narrative they wish to convey: *"...Velenje will be distinguished by a well-developed economy that is based on innovation by highly qualified experts, especially in research, design and environmentally friendly and energy efficient technologies. The appealing residential quality in terms of the citizens' friendliness and tolerance and the environmental viability, the high quality of life in terms of the variety of cultural and sports activities ..."*

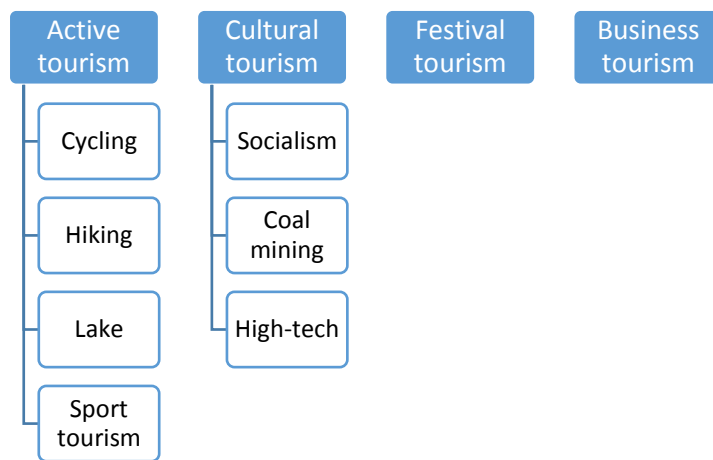
Even though the documents start their introductions by emphasizing terms such as "socialist wonder" or "pioneering spirit", the town's industrial past, present or future rarely appear with a positive connotation. In fact, it is quite hard to deduce the industrial character of the town from the texts at all (there is no occurrence of the term industrial heritage). Individual industry-based development guidelines appear inconsistently and in fragments and can be narrowed down to: tourist activities (lakeside of degraded mining areas); environmental research and education; re-using industrial heritage for creative & youth activities.

From among the rest of the strategic documents and them expressing the industrial character and heritage of the town, the Tourism Marketing Strategy stands out. It differs greatly in its "mission" from the overall vision of the town: *"We are responsibly preserving the values of solidarity and comradery that have become a rarity today and are often forgotten; we protect the memory of a period that*

*heavily influenced the contemporary image of Velenje and Slovenia, as well as protect and interpret the heritage that stems from a time before us."*

The document also adds that Velenje's greatest draw to attract the attention of domestic and foreign tourists is the town itself: the story of its formation, the recent history and development combined with the coal mining heritage, the well-preserved modernist architecture, monuments and the technological heritage that is reflected in the successful local companies today. In contrast to most of the other documents, the authors of this Strategy are external experts who do not originate from Velenje, which was probably the decisive factor for this kind of interpretation of the future opportunities for tourist development in the municipality.

Fig.11: Emphasizing socialism, coal mining and high-tech companies as part of future tourism development in Velenje (taken from the Tourism strategy).



Industrial tradition is poorly represented in official documents, where the prevailing tendency is towards post-industrial development and a tertiary society. However, documents do indicate an intense focus on social programs, social inclusion of vulnerable groups and solidarity. This could be the result of the shaping of a collective awareness in the period of the industrial society, but it could also be a consequence of a socially-oriented state as a whole and/or the structure of the Slovenian space (predominantly countryside with small towns), where personal ties between inhabitants and employees are stronger than in large cities.

### Synthesis

Velenje is an industrial town, a fact conveyed to visitors and inhabitants through material and immaterial symbols. We can distinguish between two main types of narratives. Firstly, the main one is connected with the time of its construction and can be called the 'socialist nostalgia'. The modern town was built on ideological basis, as a socialist utopia in a typical modernist form. Townscape is full of well-preserved architectural modernistic buildings and monuments. This 'nostalgia' is conveyed to younger generations with popular cultural symbols (in cafes, restaurants, clubs ...), through slogans and glorification of signs of the socialist past. Even at the immaterial level there are signs that the ideals originating from the socialist past such as solidarity, volunteer (shock) work and community-building are being put in the forefront. This narrative is also displayed to visitors and tourists.

Second narrative is the industrial one, but in reality it is inseparable from the first one. The foundation of this 'socialist wonder' is rooted in creating the ideal industrial (proletariat) society. Industrial past is heavily represented by monuments, architecture and pop-culture, moderately in museums and exhibitions, and partly in geographical names as-well. But again, it is tightly connected with the socialist era, when the modern town was constructed. Former industrial sites are being used mostly for creative industries and art activities (former bakery) or tourist activities (old coal mine or lakes), so the community is not ashamed of their industrial past and wishes to convey this to outsiders.

But lately there are signs that Municipality officials are trying to adopt new narrative. Although the narratives of 'socialist nostalgia' and 'industrial past' come handy for local politicians for strengthening their position on the political left, it seems that institutions want to convey a more 'modern' narrative. Strategies, official documents and emblems are increasingly orientated towards emphasising the innovative and technological aspects of this community and the high quality of local environment. Although all of the mentioned aspects have roots in industrial production (environmental research for instance stems from former mining and energy sector), industry is being omitted from official documents. We speculate that this narrative is adopted from the 'outside' under the influence of prevailing post-industrial strategies, which favour the provision of services over production of goods such as creative and cultural industries.

It is also worth mentioning that we have come across certain hidden narratives, which will be explored further in the project. Although the official narrative tells of a green and environmentally friendly town, there are voices of discontent regarding the environmental effects of past and present industrial production. Secondly, inhabitants that used to live in this area before 1950-ies when the modern town was built, resent the dominant narratives. There are many families that had to leave their farms and villages in order to make space for building the 'socialist wonder' and their stories are not heard. We see those as a starting point for Task 3.3.