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Social (Re)Construction of Place in Columbia, South Carolina

By Colby King

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The ongoing debate about the confederate flag on the grounds of the South Carolina State House reminds us of the power of the symbols we put in our places, and the way we talk about those symbols and those places.

The flag's current position on the northern end of the state house grounds means that it flies in front of one of the busiest intersections in downtown Columbia, that of Main and Gervais Streets. This position lends the flag visibility and prominence.



When I first moved to Columbia in August of 2007, that flag became a feature of many of the initial conversations I had when meeting locals. Referring to the flag functioned as shorthand for saying "I am proud of this place because it is great despite its difficult history," or alternately, "I am ashamed of this place because it struggles to deal honestly with its difficult history." And, being a white Yankee, I approached such discussions from a privileged position of neither having a racial identity that has been systematically discriminated against, nor identifying with relatives who fought on the losing side of the civil war.

Having lived there for six years, I can tell you that Columbia is a fantastic small city with [quality](#) higher education, a beautiful riverfront [park](#), a [revitalized](#) Main Street, and a [vibrant](#) arts and cultural scene. But it is also a place mired in ongoing problems including neighborhood [inequality](#) and de facto [racial segregation](#) that emerge from its difficult history. All of these characteristics are wrapped up in the debate about the flag.

In a reflective and graceful essay, [Barbara Kingsolver outlined](#) the complex and wrenching historical and personal tensions that stir so much debate. As she explained:

Some feel their ancestors are as nobly and tragically dead as any soldiers under any flag, and would honour them independently of the worth of the war that consumed them – a distinction we've accepted since the moral quandary of Vietnam. If the Confederate flag only flew over cemeteries, the discussion would be over.For some folks who incorporate the battle flag into their wardrobe or body art, familiarity may have made it seem innocuous. But it isn't. A flag is a potent symbol, purporting to be the standard of a concordant nation. By carrying one into hate crimes, racists try to elevate their evil by suggesting a nation of racists stands behind them.

The debate about the flag, thus, reminds us of how the symbols we put into our places shape our lives in those places.

Why do symbols matter?

Symbols matter because they serve as markers for our social life. A [symbolic interactionist](#) would tell you that symbols matter because the meanings we attach to them in our social interactions shape our lives. A [conflict theorist](#) would tell you that symbols matter because groups of people struggle to attach meanings that work in their favor to public symbols. Symbols are guides for our shared norms and expectations. When we debate about what a symbol means, we are really debating our values and beliefs.

When we examine the role of symbols in places, we are exploring [urban semiotics](#). Urban semiotics is the study of symbols and their social connotations in places. This is a complex and rich field, emanating from the work of [Henri Lefebvre](#), among others. Public symbols are particularly meaningful (and fraught) because they are vested with the support of our government and represent the institutionalized norms of our culture and society. So, when there is debate about symbols and one side wins, those symbols (and their associated meanings) carry more influence.

Just as we build the physical infrastructure of our cities, we can say that we "produce" or "construct" the meanings we associate with our places. We [form emotional bonds](#) with the places we live and work and we use symbols to help us share those feelings. We embed important social meanings into our places, whether it is with [tents at an agricultural fair](#), or a flag at the top of a pole on government property.

Symbols are social constructs, which means that they have meaning because of how we think, talk, and interact about them. When we talk about places, we often summarize their characteristics. This is the process of socially constructing place character. [Krista Paulsen developed](#) the concept of place character as a "conceptual tool for understanding how qualities of place combine and influence local patterns in meaning and action." As her research recognizes, "both material and symbolic aspects of place work together" to shape social life in the places in which we live.

If you watch *Portlandia*, you know that the dream of the 1990s is alive in Portland, Oregon. When we hear Las Vegas described as "Sin City" or Pittsburgh described as the "Steel City," we understand that these phrases are references to identifiable economic characteristics of the cities. As the documentary *World's Largest* shows, many towns erect large sculptures celebrating (and symbolizing) some aspect of their community in [hopes of attracting tourists and business](#).

Brentin Mock, [writing for City Lab](#) about efforts to place historical markers at sites where African Americans were lynched, responded to a question asking if bringing down Confederate flags and monuments would change anything by noting:

'Yes,' even if it is only a change to design and landscape, and how that affects quality of living. If Jefferson Davis's name was stripped from the highway and it was cleared of all Confederate markers, that wouldn't solve racism. Then again, the people who live and drive along that stretch wouldn't be reminded daily of the efforts of an army militarized primarily for the cause of enslaving African Americans.

Indeed, these efforts alone do not solve racism, but each attempt to confront racism when it is socially constructed into our places is one important means of discouraging racism. Ed Madden, the city of Columbia's Poet Laureate, wrote [a poem](#) responding to the shootings in Charleston and the debate about the confederate flag in Columbia. In part, he wrote:

*his motivation is not beyond our understanding
no he didn't get those ideas from nowhere (emphasis in original).*

A point to be taken from these lines is that we live in this world together, and we get our ideas from each other. It is through conversations about symbols, it is through our processes of socially constructing place character, that we share our values and identify our places.

Back in February, Historic Columbia, along with dozens of other local organizations, commemorated the [150th anniversary of the Burning of Columbia](#) at the end the Civil War. People who attended the dozens of events which were part of this commemoration participated in conversations that explored the complex history of the war, reconstruction, and related social dilemmas that continue in Columbia. Those events, as well as the current debate about that flag, demonstrate how working to memorialize history accurately and fairly is important, because it is through such conversations about such symbols that we construct (or reconstruct) the meanings that shape how we think and feel and interact in the places in which we live.