



UNESCO Chair  
on Visual Anticipation  
and Futures Literacy  
towards Visual Literacy



## THE VISUAL STIMULUS

This tool helps to unpack tacit narratives embedded in our public spaces. At the same time, it makes tangible abstract concepts we share and use, such as power, identity etc. When discussing ideologies, collective values, or intended collective notions and behaviors, facilitators can use images to support learners to gain insights into how urban spaces narrate powerful stories and communicate on a daily basis with their inhabitants (that is, all of us).

The tool **aims** to:

- Deconstruct the visual grammar and the messages familiar iconic buildings, monuments, memorials, memory places etc. convey in the public space.
- Enhance perception and enable learners to recognize how values, ideologies, and intended collective notions and behaviors disseminate through a multitude of media under our radar of attention.
- Support learners to comprehend the psychological impact of volumes, shapes, compositions, and urban associations.
- Shed light on how we all assume both the role of the receiver/audience as well as of the carrier/narrator in our daily lives, as well as on the consequences of this interaction.
- Sharpen critical thinking and foster cultural literacy as learners question how power, identity, and social values, diverse beliefs and aspirations are expressed and reinforced.

### How to apply it

A discussion, e.g. on power, can start by presenting and discussing images where volume, or the vertical axis, prevail. Examples abound throughout human history, from the pyramids to the Empire State Building.



Memorials that depict human figures, usually on high pedestals, or situated on elevated constructs, can relate to the concept of power as well (i.e. the power of collective memory, ideology, role models etc.).

Facilitators can present the images and prompt discussion by asking simple questions.

An ideal starting point to explore the importance of concepts such as discipline, law, order or discuss why and how law-abiding citizens and orderly societies are respected as role models, is to use photographs that depict symmetries in urban planning or the symmetrical design of iconic public buildings – usually involving repetition of architectural components, as well.

As in the previous example, facilitators can prompt discussion by asking simple questions.

During a discussion around respect and veneration, commemoration and memory, images of public squares are very compatible. Usually public buildings are placed on their perimeter, while a monument, a memorial, or some kind of an iconic construct, are situated in the center.

Facilitators can associate the void of a square to the pause of a musical composition, or to the bold and underline formatting options while writing, discuss its function, and draw attention to what is situated there, how are the forms and the aesthetics etc. Simple questions prompt valuable insights here, as well.

A juxtaposition with modern architecture across all examples works very well. Learners easily spot the different emotional reactions and thoughts that modern forms bring about.

#### Guiding questions can include:

- What do you see in these images and how would you relate them to the topic under examination?
- What are the similarities / differences when comparing X and Z images?
- Imagine standing in front of this building, monument, memorial, etc., what is the spontaneous posture of your body? What do you think it might mean? In what other cases did you react in the same manner? How do the dots connect?
- Had an observer from a radically different culture come across the X or Z image, what would they understand in relation to the people and society that constructed them? What is the prevailing features?
- What kind of buildings surround the square? Can you imagine why they are there?
- What occupies the center of the square? Can you describe it? What are the materials? Why does it have these particular features? What do they serve? Who might have decided the erection and why?

#### **Suggested combination with other Visual Literacy tools**

“The Visual Stimulus” tool combines effectively with the “Identity Triangle”, the “Visuality Iceberg”, the “Sensing instead of Making Sense”, and can yield very effective results for transformation when combined with the “Reframing Concepts” tool.

