

Building Character: An Historical Analysis of the “Genius Loci” and its Contemporary Manifestations

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The first half of my summer research examined the idea of the *genius loci* (spirit of place) and how its usage has evolved over time. As an architectural and urban design term, the *genius loci* is somewhat ambiguous—it invokes discussions about light, time, order, space, and environment—but its understanding is essential not only in terms of how a place’s character is formed, but how the *physical* modes of placemaking can activate the “spirit” of the built environment. Therefore, I began my research by looking purely at the term’s etymology. I found several essays that traced the term to ancient Rome, where it expressed the belief that gods inhabited spaces—hence the idea of a “spirit.” As I moved forward with my reading, I started Christian Norberg-Schulz’s seminal book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, in which he analyzes the term in the context of three distinct cities: Rome, Prague, and Khartoum. For each of these places, he constructs his way up the ideological ladder, beginning first with **space** (the natural environment, lightness, etc.), followed by **character** (architectural detail, settlement grid, etc.), and then finally the *genius loci*. One of the central themes that emerges from his analysis is that the *genius loci* is strongest when the site, spatial configuration, and architectural detail of a place work in harmony to embody man’s existential meaning. That is, the *genius loci* is strongest when it gives a person a concrete foothold in the world by allowing them to identify with their surroundings.

Other architectural authors, such as Juhani Pallasmaa and Lawrence Durrell, were equally important to my early weeks of research; however, I was unsatisfied with what I had found. I felt as though the social, cultural, and humanistic components of a city were absent from their writings—it seemed like the most fundamental cornerstone of vibrant cities, the people themselves, had been left out. To be sure, I agree that architecture and nature are essential to the identity of a place. As an aspiring urban designer, I believe in the importance of how our built environments are conceived, and that physical form carries significant implications for the essence of a place—hence the title of my summer research “Building Character.” But still, I felt as though their writings had become outdated. I ultimately decided to pivot away from learning about the term’s etymology, and focused instead on examining the *genius loci* in a specific context. Drawn to places of distinct character, I chose Greenwich Village in New York City.

From its rich bohemian culture to its unencumbered commercial growth, Greenwich Village spans the extremes of urban life. The neighborhood’s reputation for radical lifestyles has grown to mythical heights, and despite its recurring episodes of death and rebirth—most recently against gentrification and high-rise developments—Greenwich Village continues to prevail as a model neighborhood of good urbanism. Its enduring legacy has attracted millions of residents and tourists alike, but I found myself confronted with the same question as before: what makes

Greenwich Village such an appealing place? In other words, how have the Village's many different facets—its history, culture, population, environment, architecture, planning, politics, economy, etc.—contributed to its iconic *spirit*? And what might this answer tell us about successful (or unsuccessful) places?

Taking these questions as my point of departure, I began to learn about the colorful history of Greenwich Village. As I read various accounts over the last few centuries, I quickly realized that the complexity of the Village translates to an equally complex *genius loci*. This realization was the stopping point of my summer research, but it has since become the foundation of my senior honor's project. With the semester underway, I've continued to investigate how the *genius loci* of Greenwich Village has evolved into its current form today, and how its many episodes of death and rebirth speak to the triumphs and pitfalls of its urban history. In doing so, I hope to illuminate what helps make meaningful, resilient places—places that are both able to absorb change and preserve their essential character—and to shed light on the ways in which various factors and actors engage in the cultivation of meaningful, healthy, vibrant places.

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