

The Spirit of a Place

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9th Sem, RVCA

Abstract

Man began his livelihood, dropped out of his lonesome nomadic lifestyle and set down his roots, through his connection to land. Architecture itself grew from the idea of a dwelling or the need for a safe place within a vast expanse of space. The idea of Genius Loci, “‘instanced in architecture and gardening, all must be adapted to the genius of the place, and... beauties not forced into it, but resulting from it’”, sums it up. Genius Loci in Architecture is a plain understanding of what we see around us and the art of complimenting it. Genius Loci or spirit of a place, is the process of visualizing, complementing and symbolizing the place itself. To visualize, would be to understand what our landscape is offering us. This is a pure form of depiction of man's understanding of nature. To compliment, would be to add to the expanse around us, what we think it lacks. It refers to the addition of those elements that man thrives on, driven by necessity. To symbolize, is to reflect this landscape and its characteristic ideals in our built.

The spirit of place and the idea of what it truly holds, is a gift given to us by our context. Each experience and factor derived from this spirit, gives us an opportunity to create something brand new and unique. It helps us bring out new experiences in our built, by bringing the context into it.

Key words –

Genius Loci , Dwelling , Gestalt Principles ,Architecture, Phenomenology

Man began his livelihood, dropped out of his lonesome nomadic lifestyle and set down his roots, through his connection to land. This occurrence, as agrarian as it is, saw the formation of the first amalgamation of man and land. It grew from the simple production of sustenance to the creation of a safe place within it, that he could call his own. Now the question of whether this connection was a derivative of man's own imaginative mind or the Earth beneath and around us, has an answer that we as budding, future architects, must abide by.

Architecture itself grew from the idea of a dwelling or the need for a safe place within a vast expanse of space. A dwelling is the mere *relation of man to a location, by the creation of a space*. It is a pragmatic reflection of the place, born to fit or needs and to belong to the place; a protective shell, fitting into the place, like a missing puzzle piece, rather than a sore thumb tearing through its fabric.

As rightly put by Alexander Pope in Epistle IV while reiterating the idea of Genius Loci, “‘instanced in architecture and gardening, all must be adapted to the genius of the place, and... beauties not forced into it, but resulting from it’”. This phrase, dating back to 1731, sums it all up. Imprinting our footprint on a piece of land, by building on it, is a task that is almost meaningless, if not in tune with its context. Genius Loci in Architecture is a plain understanding of what we see around us and the art of complimenting it. Further clarified by Christopher Norberg Schulz, Genius Loci or *spirit of a place*, is the process of visualizing, complementing and symbolizing the place itself.

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It refers to the addition of those elements that man thrives on, driven by necessity. To symbolize, is to reflect this landscape and its characteristic ideals in our built. These three words hold the key to Architecture's chest of follies. It stops rather than fixes, the damage done by us to the Earth. It takes into consideration our host place and helps us treat it with kindness.

To even begin to understand this further, one must define the words Space and Character, while also understanding their connection to each other. Space to character, is what landscape is to a settlement. Space is the experience that a location gives you, brought into life and perception for the user, by Character. While landscape receives its being from location or space, character creates the settlement and gives the experience a real presence. These two words help imbibe the spirit of a place into our built. They are what create our experiences and perception, while paying an ode to the space.

The next step towards genius loci, would be the words Meaning and Essence. While meaning in all of its literal sense, would mean the functional understanding of a space, essence is what sets it apart. Essence combines the utilitarian aspect of our built with our own unique perception of the place, to create a structure that is truly authentic to its location. With greater relations in an experience, comes a greater meaning of the space. Thus, the idea of 'genius loci' is no different from a step towards truly meaningful architecture.

These concepts of Genius Loci, Space and Orientation, Character and its identification with the environment, were all put to test through Kevin Lynch and Christopher Alexanders, Imageability and Gestalt Principles and passed with flying colours. Through the presence of

factors such as path, node, landmark and edge, Kevin Lynch aids the process of orientation in space and connect with the environment. He uses the idea of shapes, geometry and arrangement to enhance Imageability and its contextual importance. These are further manifested in the form of rhythm, pattern and other Gestalt Principles, reiterating the need for familiarity and connect with both the built and the surrounding context.

The above-mentioned architectural factors, connect with the user on a psychological level. The comfort dealt to one, by a familiar space, is unparalleled. This familiarity in a vast untamed landscape can be brought to you, only with the built. In order for us to truly belong on this ground, to understand the passage of time and journey through it in a physical space, this connect with our dwelling and its host place, is the answer. Us beings, alien to this planet we tread on, can only make it more of our own by the act of weaving together a coherent picture of built, both in dialogue with its surroundings and our needs.

The spirit of place and the idea of what it truly holds, is a gift given to us by our context. Each experience and factor derived from this spirit, gives us an opportunity to create something brand new and unique. It helps us bring out new experiences in our built, by bringing the context into it. What else is architecture if not for the manifestation of a place? What else is dwelling if not for being one with a space? Genius Loci in all of its glory, is a tool for architects, a solution to make their built belong and a factor, sure to set it apart.

References

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