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The genius loci *As a Pathic Atmosphere*

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Abstract
This essay reinterprets the concept of genius loci through the lens of atmospherology. Criticizing both constructivist and purely descriptive accounts of place identity, it argues that the spirit of a place consists in a prototypical atmosphere that resonates within the felt body and shapes lived experience. The genius loci is therefore understood not as something arbitrarily created, but as an affective quality primarily discovered through pathic engagement with place.

Keywords
Genius loci; Atmosphere; Place Identity; Felt Body; Phenomenology

Atmospheres are spatialised (and spatialising) feelings: the specific emotional quality that belongs to a given *lived space* and, at the same time, helps shape it through its own distinctive sense of volume. In both senses, we are referring to the space we experience in the lifeworld – a kind of space that plane geometry is completely blind to, such as the spaciousness of a Sunday silence or the sense of constriction one can feel in a room that is, metrically speaking, quite large. While physical-isotropic Euclidean space, made of places and reversible measurable distances – where the path from A to B is equivalent to that from B to A – enjoys an abstract uniformity, lived space, by contrast, asserts the absolute and irreversible character of its directions (above/below, right/left, up/down) and depends on how it resonates within the felt body. In pointing this out, however, atmospherology (Griffero 2014a; 2014b, pp. 36-47) simply elaborates reflections already present in phenomenological-psychopathological thought as well as in anthropological-existential approaches (Heidegger, Binswanger, Minkowski, Straus, Dürckheim, Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, Bollnow, Schmitz).

If our everyday experience did not constantly presuppose a lived space, one could not meaningfully claim to need more space,

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to be unable to find it, or to be the one who produces it where none existed before. Although a physicalist ontology is loath to acknowledge this, we are not first and foremost *in* space understood as an invariant, vast container in which everything is exhaustively defined by position and distance. On the contrary, we are always intercorporeally related to a pre-dimensional lived space characterized by that affective quality which makes it an atmosphere and that is experienced through the way it resonate in our physical – yet above all felt – body, that is, through an oscillation within the anisotropic narrowness/vastness polarity that, although largely unconscious, permeates our entire life and not only its exceptional moments. It is therefore only because we experience a lived space that it makes sense to attribute to a certain portion of physical space a *genius loci*.

Yet Augustine's paradoxical remark about time – "if no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks, I do not know" – fits the *genius loci* perfectly as well, for it is existentially certain even while remaining theoretically elusive.

1. *Inexplicability of the* genius loci*?*

According to a famous example by Norberg-Schulz (1980, p. 188), a certain suburban area of Oslo is a "visual chaos" devoid of *genius loci*. But things can change (Führ 1998) as soon as the same place is viewed from a different perspective – topological, climatic, temporal, or affective, etc. – as well as experienced not only in a visual way. This example already shows how theoretically unsatisfying and only metaphorical both scientific and popular discourses on the *genius loci* can be (not to mention that what appears as visual chaos might simply be considered as the specific "spirit" of that place, that is, a messy urban periphery). Therefore, although even the coldest rationalist *feels* that certain places possess an identity-based or physiognomic *character* that ought to be protected from the threat of placelessness (Relph 1976, p. 6), this identity is unfortunately conceived as a vague *quid* that transforms (no one knows precisely when or how) an anonymous space into an expressive place.

Typically, the discussion within the so-called *spatial turn* in the humanities (Neddens 1986; Casey 1993, p. 110; Tuan 1977, p. 3; Malpas 2004, p. 31f.; Cresswell 2014; Günzel 2014) goes no further than legitimately emphasizing the need for a *resonance* between an individual's state of mind and a meaningful, expressive environ-

ment. Hence the flood of vague expressions – character, quality, liveability, taste, feeling, environment, essence, resonance, presence, aura, harmony, grace, charm, decorum, and so on (Hiss 1990, p. 15) – which are mistakenly treated as self-evident. And yet, despite their limitations, these expressions have the merit of defending, as far as they can, the place identity against post-Enlightenment topological, cartographic, and touristic reductionism. This can be summed up, on the one hand, in the apparently irreversible trend of relegating the *genius loci* to a mere residue of a mythical-archaic mentality (childish, prelogical, anthropomorphic, euhemeristic), and of conceptualizing space as an asemantic *tabula* onto which human beings arbitrarily project or construct meaning (Kozljanic 2004; 2025). On the other hand, it claims to explain the *genius loci* of the landscape in evolutionary terms, as an unconscious reactivation of the savannah as humanity's original habitat. In doing so, however, it fails entirely to account for why *genius loci* is so often attributed to places that are utterly different, such as mountain peaks, islands, deserts, and so on.

The contemporary vagueness of the notion is merely the latest stage in a long process of abstraction and secularization that transformed the Greek *daimōn* – responsible for triggering ecstatic raptures – into the Roman *genius*, so stripped of numinosity that it came to protect (at least according to the hardly impartial proto-Christian accounts) potentially every person and every place.

When an architect claims to follow the pre-planning intuition of a certain spirit of place in order to resist a reductively geometric approach, and even a real-estate agent invokes the special spirit of a given area to make it more appealing, both are – though in very different ways – radicalizing, respectively in functionalist and commercial form, the much older Roman inflationism.

No more promising is the illusion that one can generate or preserve the spirit of a place (Alexander et al. 1977, p. 253) simply by identifying different topological patterns – "high places," "sacred sites," "access to water," "accessible green," and the like – or by reducing it to a list of requirements that are indispensable yet largely unspecific: architectural style, climate, natural setting, memorial or metaphorical value, materials produced through local craftsmanship, constructive sensitivity, and cultural-historical specificity, etc. (Garnham 1981, p. 99; Steele 1981). Nor does it help to invoke a quasi-personal, identity-bearing (even geomantic) ensouled entity awakened by human intervention (Müller 2009) and by the crossing of a certain symbolic threshold, or to ground the *genius loci* entirely in a mythical or historical collective identity (in which case

perception would be wholly subordinated to cognitive penetrability). Despite correctly referring the situation designated by *genius loci* to a "coalescence" of constitutive elements (Thibaud 2015, pp. 229-230), what we witness here is an inflationism that deludes itself into thinking it can thus compensate for the underlying theoretical vagueness.

2. *The best (failed) attempt to explain it*

Even in his influential study on the phenomenology of places, Norberg-Schulz ultimately confines himself to treating the *genius loci* as something with which every authentic life must necessarily engage in order to *feel at home*. But he says almost nothing about how the "variable invariability" of the spirit of the place – clearly a reprise of the old *topos* of "variations on a theme" – might withstand transformations over time, whether these take the form of misrepresentations or necessary adaptations, nor why some places would lack it altogether (Norberg-Schulz 1980, pp. 18, 21-22, 72). This phenomenology is also weakened by its exclusive focus on aerial views, wide shots, and, above all, the building façade – a scenographic and ocularcentric frontality famously criticized by Pallasmaa (2005; 2014), which leads it to underestimate both the genius of non-urban places and the fundamental role of the body in motion (Shirazi 2008, pp. 6-10) – especially the felt body (*Leib*) in the neo-phenomenological sense.

Even his examples are unconvincing. The physiognomic qualities he attributes to Prague, Khartoum, and Rome, in fact, seem neither sufficiently specific nor able to withstand physical and/or historical transformations; they become salient only after having been, circularly, selected in advance as the parameters of the investigation. The properties he ascribes to Rome, for instance – both the feeling of being at home even when outdoors ("an idyllic urban interior") and the synthesis of "all the basic categories of existential meanings" (ibid., p. 164), exemplified in Piazza Navona between the "Olympic" humanization of nature (influenced by the Colli Albani) and the "archaic chthonic forces" (influenced by Etruria) – could just as easily apply to many other Mediterranean cities. Furthermore, the latter aspect may depend far more on cognitive knowledge (geography, history, archaeology) than on phenomenal perception.

An equal degree of vagueness and (geographical) partiality characterizes Norberg-Schulz's classification of the *genius loci* into ideal-typical forms. By restricting himself to the Nordic-Romantic type,

grounded in the search for a protective refuge; the human-classical type, structured around the interplay between human interiority and natural exteriority; and the cosmic-desert type, whose abstraction supposedly predisposes it to monotheism, he fails to acknowledge the genius of "mixed" places. Moreover, he does not consider at all those landscapes – such as jungles, tropical islands, and others – that have appeared salient to non-European scholars who, like Watsuji (1961), have proposed a significantly different (if equally limited) taxonomy, including monsoon, desert, and pasture climates.

3. *The atmospherologic approach*

The (admittedly high-level) dissatisfaction with Norberg-Schulz's analysis clearly shows how approximate any attempt to explain what *genius loci* consists in can become, and, consequently, how uncertain it is to determine how to design it – or even how to implement it. Attempting to identify it (Valena 2009) by referring to a place's topography, its physical – climatic (and thus also emotional) specificity, the characteristics of its inhabitants (human and non-human), its soundscape and smellscape, and so forth, is of course not mistaken. However, its concrete "imageability" (to use Lynch's 1960 term) presupposes that the place is experienced pathically and through the felt body – perhaps also depending, as Klages suggests (1929-1932, p. 1132), on a person sufficiently receptive to the subtle affective tonality we call "atmosphere" (Griffero 2014b; 2017; 2019; 2020; 2021) or *ambiance* (Augoyard 2016). Accordingly, the hypothesis proposed here is that the *genius* of a place consists precisely in the atmospheric feeling that finds a specific resonance in the perceiver's felt body (Griffero 2024).

We will obviously set aside here the foundations of pathic-atmospheric aesthetics, which are grounded in an anti-psychologistic externalization of feelings (Böhme 2017a; 2017b; Schmitz 2023). It will suffice to say that if an atmosphere is *something more* that we sense *in the air*, so to speak – something that holistically pervades and co-creates a space, resonates in the experiencer's felt body (while being subjectively filtered), and remains largely inaccessible to any epistemic-analytical perspective – then not every kind of atmosphere fully expresses the spirit of a place. Neither the derivative-relational atmosphere, which emerges from the interaction between perceiver and environment, nor – still less – the spurious-idiosyncratic one, stemming from wholly subjective projection, can do so. Only the "prototypical" atmosphere (for the latest

version of this taxonomy, see Arbib, Griffero 2023, pp. 65-73) can properly characterize the *genius loci*: a relation anterior to its relata which, through its affordances, shapes the perceiver's situation while resisting any conscious attempt at projective adaptation or epistemic correction. As for the taxonomy of possible atmospheric encounters (Griffero 2021, pp. 37-66), an atmosphere contributes to shaping the *genius loci* when it overwhelms the perceiver or when the perceiver finds themselves in tune with it – not when, for various reasons, it is merely acknowledged without being personally felt, elicits resistance, generates an inverted feeling, or fades during the very process of perception.

The perspective that conceives feelings as affordance-based atmospheres (Griffero 2022) implies asking how they segment experienced space into places, but above all how they can single out a place so affectively and physiognomically pregnant that it appears animated by a "spirit" affording not actions (as Gibson 1986 famously clarifies) but feelings. That the *genius loci* is the most emblematic example of an ingressive encounter with an overwhelming prototypical atmosphere refutes the theory – proposed polemically by early Christianity in opposition to polytheists – according to which *nullus enim locus sine genio*. This spirit, however, does not hover over every lived space, is not universally transportable, and cannot be interchanged at will. Nor does its uncanny-numinous quality – identified, not by chance, by a long tradition from Seneca to Rudolf Otto in thick woods, solitary places, and dense shadows – stem from mere cultural projection (Kozljanič 2004, I, p. 76; 2010-2011, p. 160). This also implies the need to curb the otherwise unrestrained *genialogical* arbitrariness according to which there would be as many *genii locorum* as atmospheric experiences. A telling example is Ludwig Klages's attribution to Munich of a *genius loci* symbolised by the rusty exhalations of its breweries and by the (Marian) blue of the sky as well as other features of the city (rail tracks, mailboxes) (Klages 1940, p. 18 f.) – an approach that is, clearly, as poetically evocative as it is theoretically useless.

4. *Is it created or found?*

The mandatory question – both for scholars and for designers and architects – is whether the *genius loci* is pathically *found* (in accordance with archaic numinosity) or whether it is *created* by an architectural-urban artificial design (Kuhlmann 1998, pp. 8, 14). It is highly significant that the numerous architects inspired by the

Heideggerian idea that dwelling should respond to Being's appeal and preserve its *Fourfold* (Heidegger 2001, pp. 141-159) tend to overlook his insistence on the preliminary necessity of letting oneself be surrendered to the phenomena. Not that a dialogue with the place entirely excludes intervening in it through ideal-material superstructures (as in the Christian re-functionalization of pagan sacred sites) or even flattening a space so as to make it perfectly suitable for new urban-architectural projects foreign to the identity of the preceding place. Yet only when this dialogue consists in pathically abandoning oneself to the place's atmosphere can one properly speak of *genius loci* (Kozljanič 2004, I, pp. 387 ff.; II, p. 117). Even re-functionalization, on closer inspection, often succeeds only insofar as it exploits the allure of an older spirit of place, whereas the idea that such a *genius* can be generated out of the blue is nothing but the constructionist illusion of inhabiting spaces so semantically indifferent as to allow for unlimited reinterpretation.

To state legitimately that the perception of an atmospheric place should not be conceived as static contemplation but as a circulation between the given (felt) phenomenon and the configured (enacted) one (Thibaud 2015, pp. 28, 50, 57-58, 227) does not necessarily imply that such perception arises from an intentional project, nor that it necessarily entails a sensorimotor action that is explicitly willed or thematically activated rather than only virtually experienced in the felt body. Rather, the motor suggestions and synesthetic qualities (Schmitz 2011, pp. 33 ff.) of the place set in motion a mode of intercorporeality over which neither the perceiver nor the designer has any real control. Under the influence of these affordance-based bridge-qualities, one finds oneself pathically guided to feel affectively attached to this place rather than another, and – only subsequently, if at all – to envision or configure something within it.

By virtue of a "pervasive quality" (Dewey 1931) whose authority is felt with particular intensity in the course of an involuntary vital experience, the *genius loci* – as a special atmosphere – so thoroughly permeates a place that it allows, or indeed almost demands, certain modes of designing and dwelling (which therefore cannot be arbitrarily programmed). Despite its noble and millennia-long history, the projectivist-constructivist conception of *genius loci* – from the Homeric embodiment of divine figures in landscapes far removed from their original ones to the Christian exorcization of spirits of place, with the consequent demonization of the originally protective *daimon* and the stigmatization of pilgrimage (later accepted only insofar as it was regarded as an occasional setting for miracles or an allegorical figure of the heavenly Jerusalem) – is

largely responsible for specifically Western topophobia. Only partially restrained during the Renaissance and Romantic periods by the idea that the *genius loci* at least provides aesthetic inspiration (Grassi 1979, pp. 187 ff.), this tendency ultimately culminates in the conception of place as a blank canvas, so devoid of its own affective qualities as to receive any anthropic projection – whether technological (architectural, urbanistic, even real-estate) or aesthetic (exemplarily in situationist psychogeography).

5. *Conclusion*

To conclude, the hypothesis suggested here is that a place possesses its own *genius* only insofar as it radiates an intense and authoritative (prototypical) atmosphere upon individuals who are adequately receptive to it. Whether it arises from the felt atmosphere of an entire region or from specific landscapes (a mountain, a valley, a bay, a city, etc.) that are at least intersubjectively salient, it should be regarded as something essentially found and only within certain limits also produced (at most implemented). The only acceptable sense of Alexander Pope's invitation to consult the "Genius of the Place in all" therefore lies in immersing oneself in the quasi-thingly nature (Griffero 2017) of a place's atmospheric qualities – thus radically opposing the post-Enlightenment reductionist conception of spatial homogeneity, yet without falling back into the obscurantist and chauvinistic localism into which excessive topophilia sometimes degenerates.

One must never confuse acts of preserving or amplifying the spirit of a place (altars, temples, nymphaea, gardens, monuments, iconification, edification, and so on) with its arbitrary projective fabrication: the *genius loci* concentrates an atmosphere that is involuntarily found in lived space and possesses such authority that it cannot be seriously doubted. Now, if this is certainly not a "clear and distinct idea" of *genius loci*, it is at least one of those merely sketched "clear and confused ideas" (Baumgarten) on which aesthetics has nourished itself since its very origins.

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