



Genius Loci – Spirit of Place *Practical application of an ancient knowledge*

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Introduction

I wrote this article on the occasion of the 5th Alpe Adria Forum in Zagreb titled “INVESTments in hotel industry; Development and beyond”. However, as you will be aware on reading this article, the concepts expressed here can be applied to various contexts and geographical areas.

Many are the questions I have asked myself in order to submit an article with practical and innovative significance on this topic. The first of all was the following: “Is tourism which respects the place possible?”

At the centre of this treatise I have placed the concept of “core” as the key to successful development. In this case it concerns regional and territorial development but in fact the discovery of one’s own aim in life (core) is also the key to personal development. It should be emphasised that these two aspects – personal and territorial development; awareness of the essence of a place and the aim of one’s own life, are intimately correlated and capable of mutually influencing each other.

In my method of working I harness ancient knowledge to practical application. This means that I am, above all, engaged in discovering the original information of a place. This fact alone allows me to understand what its aim is, or rather its mission. Then I can define its destined use. And only then can I identify and outline the ways and forms of practical intervention on the territory.

From personal experience I have learned that only when we understand the essence of a place is it possible to activate a process of sustainable, authentic and successful development. This is maieutic work: we introduce no external elements, but concern ourselves with rediscovering the original information of the place itself, its fundamental characteristics, its intrinsic qualities or that which the ancients called *Genius Loci*. Only once the original information has been discovered can we understand the aim and the mission of that place and as a consequence its destined use. The latter will determine the ways and forms of the practical intervention on the territory.

It should be pointed out that a place which has been reactivated in its essence is capable of awakening the same essence in the people who stay in this territory. Clearly this fact works both ways: people who are already in contact with themselves and with their own essence can help make the original information re-emerge from a place.

Spirit of Place - What the Genius Loci is

Every place on Earth is endowed with its own characteristics, to which each one of us reacts in a subjective manner. It could be said that each place has its own personality with which we can harmonise, or not, just like a person in flesh and blood. There are places where we immediately feel at home, and others where we are overcome by an apparently unjustified desire to get away. Obviously there are mental reactions which owe their existence to our own personal history, to our preferences, and to our sense of the aesthetic: some people prefer the mountains, others the coast, some like modern buildings of large dimensions, others more compact ones with sober features. Nevertheless our reaction to places is not only mental.

The point, in fact, is not to ask ourselves why we react as we do to a certain building. The fundamental question is why the building, with these characteristics, was constructed on this particular spot; why the place was destined for one particular use and not another. Or even: if everything is exactly as it should be according to our aesthetic canons, why don't we feel at ease?

This is the moment we start to perceive the existence of that 'something more', which confers on a place a specific "identity".

Historical Aspects

In classical tradition, the ancients had a personal relationship with the places which they considered endowed with a soul, and as such they were venerated, respected, and loved. From paintings it can be inferred that our ancestors found it necessary to personify – and sometimes confer divinity on – places and the elements of nature. This not only occurred in the classical epoch: it is a need that we find throughout different epochs and locations of the planet. Take, for example, the symbol of the dragon. In iconographic symbolism, the dragon was originally the personification of the subterranean forces of nature present in volcanic areas. In the Christian era representations of St. George killing the dragon are well-known. Christianity interprets the dragon as Evil, Darkness, Ego, Temptation and Satan, thus concealing the original significance. In Italy, for example, around Lake Bolsena there are numerous churches, chapels and place names dedicated to the saint. Originally this lake was the crater of a volcano, which, after becoming extinct, in the course of millennia filled up with water. In pagan times many cult places were constructed around Lake Bolsena to propitiate the dragon, or rather the volcano, so that life in that area would continue to be possible. Cults around places such as these were so rooted in local tradition that the Church could not simply eradicate them, so it kept them but radically modified the significance.

However, there is more: For the ancients it was a certainty that "nullus locus sine genio" (there is no place without spirit). Thus wrote the Latin philologist Servius between the IV and V century in a

comment about the Aeneid of Virgil. With this affirmation he referred to something that his contemporaries knew well - that every natural place, such as a mountain, river, wood – or built-up environment – such as a city, possessed a guardian spirit which was called the *genius loci*. Actually the *genius loci* was much more than just a guardian spirit; it was that which the Greeks called *daimon* [δαίμων]. Its assonance with the word ‘demon’, however, should not mislead us. The *daimon* was a spirit present in all beings endowed with a soul – thus also in places – which had the aim of helping them to fulfil their destiny. For this reason it should be remembered that according to Platonic philosophy everyone comes into the world because they have a precise task to perform. The same applies to places: every place has a destiny to fulfil.

So the *genius loci* not only helps the place to manifest its intrinsic qualities but also makes sure that the people who live in that place are influenced by the character of the place itself.

This point is very important because it connects us to the present time given that it is one of the cardinal elements of contemporary anthropology: with the passing of time a person who lives in a certain place will assume its characteristics and become similar to it.

Original meaning of tourism

It is precisely the above point that leads us to the original meaning of tourism. During the Renaissance the countryside was rediscovered both for its fascination and for the idea – as we have seen, rooted in the millennia - that every place is endowed with decisive characteristics which must necessarily be discovered and appreciated to fully harmonise with it. This is the historical phase in which the Grand Tour was born. It coined the word tourism, that is, the custom for young European aristocrats to set out on a long journey, above all long in terms of time, at the end of their studies. Take for example Johann Wolfgang von Goethe whose travels through his “Arcadia”, lasted from 1786 to 1788.

The objective of this experience was for the young people to get to know and recognise places in all their essence, to be ‘infected’ by new elements, to throw off a static and sometimes proud identity acquired by always living in the same place, to open up to new possibilities, new ways of viewing the world and reality, to see themselves in a different light, to rediscover and so improve themselves: a real experience of personal growth. In fact every place is capable of activating specific aspects existing in us in the form of pure possibility, but only experience can make that possible.

This is the original meaning of *tourism*.

Tourism today

Today, tourism proposes mainly standardised itineraries, geared towards satisfying the presumed requirements of the ideal traveller. I deliberately use the words ‘presumed’ and ‘ideal’ because nowadays the tourist is taught by the tourism industry to have certain requirements – and not others: you have to find a hotel with certain characteristics such as air conditioning, a spa area, slippers and bathrobe in 4-star hotels and superior, also Michelin-starred cuisine, even if not regional. In fact there is always - and everywhere - the continental option so that Italians can have pasta as if they were at home and the Germans their national beer. But this is not a traveller, this is the tourist as today's tourism industry wants them to be - these are not their real needs. They are externally generated needs effected in such a specific way as to make people believe that they are their own.

Generalising we could say that the aim of today's tourist industry seems to be that of educating the tourist to idle comforts which lead not only to physical laziness; to educate them to small

stagnant puddles of existence far from real life, paraphrasing the discussion on impermanence in “The Search for Happiness” by Jiddu Krishnamurti.

A puddle is comfortable, the water calm and warmer than that of a wild river. However, if we observe carefully we will note that while the latter flows incessantly, broad and deep, the puddle is turbid and devoid of life. Its waters are immobile whereas the river which flows swiftly beside it, is full of vitality and movement. Sooner or later standing water putrefies and begins to stink. That which before was comfort becomes discomfort and in some cases disease. In other words, we all desire a state of permanence; we would like certain things to last forever – a fixed salary, a permanent job contract, a relationship that lasts “till death us do part”, we would like our pleasures to be infinite. We dig a small burrow and barricade ourselves inside with our families, ambitions, cultures, fears, divinity, cult forms, and there we die, letting life flow on beside us – that life which is temporary, in everlasting transformation and which possesses – precisely for this reason – unfathomable depths and immeasurable beauty. Every place on Earth contains within itself the information that life is not permanent. Tourism which grows FROM the place gives the tourist the opportunity to experience this important aspect of existence.

Tourist facilities

But often tourist facilities do not grow FROM the location but develop ON it, like a silicone implantation in a female breast. Even if the first visual effect may satisfy some mental needs, contact with that part of the body, cold and impersonal, will afford real pleasure neither to the one who possesses it, nor the one who touches it.

And the same occurs in today's tourism industry: it brings true pleasure to neither the tourist nor the place on which the facility has arisen because **it has, in fact, simply arisen and is not a part of the place**. The American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, wrote that when a house is being built, it should not be built **ON** a hill but be **PART OF** the hill (Fallingwater).

Some tourist facilities develop on Earth like cancer. Cancer grows in the body when some cells stop communicating with each other and the rest of the organism which is the body. In this way they lose the information on how to function properly and start to work independently of the rest of the body, which, sooner or later, will set about eliminating them.

A tourist facility which grows on a place without being connected to it, is indeed a cancer cell which remains alive only because it absorbs huge quantities of energy from the surrounding cells impoverishing them. In other words, a tourist facility of this type exists only at the extreme expense of the surrounding environment.

We have said that places are capable of modifying the people who enter their range of influence, or that whoever stays in the area will be influenced by the character of the place itself. What kind of experience will a tourist have in such a facility as this? A separation of self from the surrounding environment. And if, as we know, the micro cosmos reflects the macro cosmos it will be an experience of separation in his or her own self.

It may be that the income of this facility is extremely favourable: money is generally the parameter with which to measure if a facility is working or not, if it is successful or otherwise.

But not for me.

For me success belongs to a scale of values which goes way beyond mere money. In general a positive economic figure can also be generated by an effective speculative strategy geared towards mere individual enrichment or that of a few interested people. In this case we can speak of exploitation. On the other hand that which occurs when one works with the core is that the positive

economic figure is not the focus of the action as much as an evident consequence at the moment the core is reached.

New scale of values: the place

If we wish to renew tourism in a holistic way inspired by authenticity, respect for the territory and the people who may live there, it is my conviction that the scale of values must be reviewed.

At the top of this scale I put the place.

I have said that every place has its character and identity.

The factors which define this identity are of varying nature: physical and geographical, but also historical and cultural. The energy of a place is given by the characteristics of the subsoil, its morphology, the presence of water etc. In addition to these characteristics the history of the people who live there is superimposed. At this level two destinies meet – that of the place and that of the people. Sometimes they are in harmony with each other since in their similarity they tend to reciprocally attract each other. Even so it may also happen that wars or other unpleasant events take place in a harmonious location. Then this new information will be added to the original information of the place.

All these aspects need to be taken into account if one wants to build a tourist facility in harmony with the environment.

Place information, destined use, architecture

First of all the fundamental information of the place must be understood. For example, there are locations with strong terrestrial energy, such as volcanic and thermal regions etc. In this case it would be of little use to construct a building for meditation and spiritual practices there because the energy would be too strong to sustain the type of activity desired. If we planned to construct a house on a cemetery, the remains of which are invisible today, we would have little or no success because the place specialises in decomposing matter. It would be more appropriate to construct a compost plant on it. All these elements are visible and recognisable to anyone who finds themselves living in a certain place. Naturally each one of us will be able to recognise such elements, in a more or less conscious manner, and integrate them according to our own particular sensitivity and capacity.

From these examples and considerations it can be understood that once the information or *spirit of place* is understood, its destined use can also be deduced.

Once the destined use is understood, forms, dimensions and the most suitable materials for building can be chosen. In 1979 the Norwegian architect, Christian Norberg-Schulz, published *Genius Loci : Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. For him the *genius loci* was the quintessence of a place, its environmental characteristics which the architect, the project manager, the engineer or whoever, had to know and respect in order to build in a harmonious way without distorting the characteristics of the place.

If, as already stated, each place has its own soul or specific characteristics which need to be known and respected before planning any kind of intervention, and each place by virtue of its intrinsic characteristics is capable of influencing the people who live there, then if I know that a place has certain specific qualities of which I now feel the need, it will be my concern to go to that place and stay there for a while so that the place can make possible the practical experience that will awaken in me that same quality.

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Roberta Rio

Austrian historian and dancer. She has a doctorate in History (PhD) and a Degree in Palaeography, Archiving and Diplomatics. She is member of the German Federation of Historians.

Visiting Professor at various universities (Berlin, Vienna, Klagenfurt, Linz, Innsbruck, Glasgow, Athens, Oldenburg, Milan, Bologna etc) and European institutions.

She has been studying the functioning of thought together with the Italian engineer Francesco Alessandrini since 2012. She carries out comparative and interdisciplinary studies, combining science and art, history and dance, theoretical research and practical application, which have allowed her to reach a new level of experiential knowledge, full of rich discoveries and revaluations.

As a historian she proposes a radical renewal of the historical method to keep pace with the times and the present evolutionary phase of the human race. It is that which she calls the *Historical Method of the Third Millennium* or the *New Historical Method* – www.newhistoricalmethod.science

With this in view she has elaborated, among other things, a new way of historical inquiry called *historical-intuitive method*, presented at the University of Glasgow in 2011, in which the use of objective traditional historical method is combined with intuition gained in a state of superconsciousness. With this an interpretation of artefacts and events is accomplished, which is out of reach using classical historical methods.

As a dancer she has developed *Sacred Dance by Roberta Rio®*, a method in which she applies information from the New Physics / Third Millennium Physics to dance.

She is the author of numerous articles and books in English, German, Italian and also in Greek.

With reference to the subjects discussed in this article and the central topic of the Forum, mention must be made of her following specific experiences:

- Director of Sales and Marketing at the Congress Center Villach and Holiday Inn (HI-CCV), Villach / A
- Lecturer for “Spatial Turn” at the Johannes Kepler University, Linz / A
- Lecturer for Tourism at the Slovenski Deželni Zavod za Poklicno Izobraževanje, Trieste / I

She has also held a series of conferences titled: “In the traveller’s saddlebag: The journey as an opportunity of intercultural growth”, Valvasone / I

Some recent publications

- 2018: “A Not-Newtonian Approach to the Processes of Healing. The Role of Thought” University of Vienna / A
“Third Millennium Physics. Science and Spirituality reunited”, Bautz, Nordhausen / G
“Convention Proceedings: Ettore Majorana: Has the Mystery been Solved?”, Ilmiolibro / I [Co-author: Francesco Alessandrini]
“The Science of History of the Third Millennium. The historian’s craft in the age of climate change” in *Rassegna storiografica del decennale* (curated by Pozzoni), Limina Mentis Editore / I
- 2017: “The Machine. The Bridge between Science and the Beyond”, Ilmiolibro / I [Co-author: Francesco Alessandrini]
“III Millennium physics is thoughts-driven” – presented at the congress *The Science of Consciousness*, TSC 2017, San Diego, CA – published by Academia.edu [Co-author: Francesco Alessandrini]
“The Doctrine of Ideas and the process of thought formation” in *Philosophy Study* – Vol. 7, No. 7, July 2017 / Valley Cottage, NY, USA [Co-author: Francesco Alessandrini]
- 2016: “The process of thought formation and the mechanism of intuition”, presented at the congress *LIFE and MIND – Scientific Challenges*, SSE EUROPE 2016 – Society for Scientific Exploration, Sigtuna (Sweden) – published by Academia.edu [Co-author: Francesco Alessandrini]

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