

## **GENIUS LOCI AND HOMO FABER: A HERITAGE-MAKING DILEMMA**

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**Abstract.** The paper analyses possibilities to create or re-create a spirit of the place, defining a human habitat as a socio-cultural rhizome, and a genius loci – as an intangible quality of a material site, perceived both physically and spiritually. It identifies such sites as mediators and media of societal interactions. Integrity, complementarity, continuity, a touch of eternity, nonevidence, and being both a reality and an entity are identified as their basic qualities. In this context heritage conservation is analyzed *vs* continuity as arborescent *vs* rhizomatic approach, by comparing their attributes and qualities. As regards a heritage-making dilemma, it states that due to on-going cultural shift in interactions with history, reconstructions gain in popularity, but genius loci sites cannot be created or re-created intentionally, because they are happenings, and not creations. The final conclusion is that heritage conservation cannot substitute sustenance of traditional habitats, but it plays a crucial role in safeguarding tangible heritage and this way becomes a cradle for emerging future traditions.

### ***Introduction***

*A Genius Loci phenomenon* is attributable to natural and anthropogenic sites. Its perception, understanding and appreciation are rather similar. However, there are differences in interactional activities, related to usage, protection, care, and sustenance, as well as sites' abilities to remain unchanged under changing conditions. The paper analyses habitats; thus some statements regarding preservation and/or revival may be not fully relevant to natural sites. For purposes of this paper a term *the place (the site)* refers mainly to human habitats, such as historic settlements, sacred areas, though does not exclude smaller units, like streets, households, gardens, etc.

### ***1. Sensing and Defining a Genius Loci***

A *spirit of the place* primarily refers to human perception and sensation. No doubt that we *sense* it. However, does it exist besides us or is a “pure imagination”? Poets, artists, and cultural anthropologists give us various evidences of this phenomenon, and almost everybody knows it from a personal experience as well.

We perceive it both physically and spiritually. Thus recognizing this duality would help in understanding and consequent preservation of genius loci sites:

1. Such places are as real as some other things in the world, which exist whether we believe in them or not, and have a spirit, whether we sense it or not.

However, this is a specific existence. According to Xavier Zubiri (1980), there is an essential difference between *reality* and *being*, however they are often confused. He defines this confusion as the *entification of reality* (i.e., action of giving objective existence to something), explaining that *reality is not formally entity*, because *from the standpoint of a sentient intelligence* reality is not existence, but rather being as itself, a formality, and *only by being real does the real have an ulterior actuality in the world*.

2. Genius loci sites are specific mediators, letting us break out of the day-to-day routine and just listen to the Breath of Nature, the Speech of the Universe, get a glimpse into Deeds of History, or to feel an eternal human longing for happiness... However, a genius locus is not necessarily a permanent “resident” of the site. It might appear for a while at sunrise or sunset, in autumn either in winter... And it may leave the site forever, driven by its changes.

***However, what our sensing is rooted in?***

There are some notions:

1. There is a rather common consent that human perception of the surrounding world is not a *pure sensing*, but is rooted in our physical and emotional experiences, aesthetic or other reflection, preconceived knowledge (in the Gadamerian sense of the term), patterns of living, mutual interactions with the environment, etc.

No aspect of the human habitat is unaffected by our presence, and people are embedded in their world, implicated in a constant process of action and response, as Arnold Berleant (2002) states continuing Edward T. Hall and Yi-Fu Tuan: *a physical interaction of body and setting, a psychological interconnection of consciousness and culture, a dynamic harmony of sensory awareness all make a person inseparable from his or her environment. Traditional dualisms, such as those separating the idea and the object, self and the others, inner consciousness and external world,*

*dissolve in the integration of person and place.* A human being is an experiential node that is both the product and the generator of environmental forces: physical objects and conditions, altogether with psychological, historical, and cultural conditions. Environment is the matrix of all such forces, and people both shape and are formed by the experiential qualities of the universe.

2. Our sensing largely depends on our *participation on a spiritual level*, as well as on our benign view and respect toward human environment, taking it an independent entity, a partner for dialog, but not a mere economic resource, useful only for exploitation and open to any instrumental manipulations (Berleant 2002).

3. *A Genius Locus* is usually described as an intangible manifestation, a character of the material site. Since we perceive this spirit through sensing and reflexing, are we able to identify its constituents precisely?

For preservation purposes sites are typically identified as physical-morphological structures, consisting of frameworks and elements. The found site-specific characteristics are then applied as spatial planning guidelines for “compatible development”. Unfortunately, this type of data is not fully adequate to spiritual qualities of genius loci “residential” sites.

**Some basic qualities could be attributed to these sites:**

- *Being both reality and entity*
- *A touch of eternity* – feeling, related to a long time span of emergence and existence of the site.
- *Integrity.* In general terms we may apply a formula of integrity, given by Eric L. Edroma (2001) in relation to environments of traditional African societies that *take God, the Creator, the traditional rural people and the natural and cultural resources as its integral components.*
- *Complementarity.* If a site is the entity, we must focus on interlinks between the whole and its constituents, keeping in mind that *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and any ‘part’ of the whole is more than a part.*

Arne Naess (2005) gives an analogy of a known melody: *If we listen to a part of an unknown melody the experience is different from listening to that part when the melody is known. Moving from the consideration of gestalt perception of gestalt apperception or thinking, the characteristic part/whole relation is even more clearly that of parts ‘being more than parts.’* Another Naess’ example of perception is about “being in a known forest”. While walking, *a tiny part visually present, provides an experience, determined, by the apperception of the forest as a whole.* If a part of the forest is changed, *the forest as a gestalt may remain the same, change, or vanish.* Altogether

*there is an experience of a specific kind that is destroyed: It is usually said that the forest remains really the same except for a, perhaps tiny, part. This is misleading in so far as the spatial arrangement is taken to be the real forest, whereas the forest as a gestalt is taken to be subjective. For gestalt thinking or ontology, there exists no such spatial reality which can be isolated from the reality of the gestalt. 'Parts' being easily thought of as spatial, it may be misleading to speak of parts of a gestalt, better to speak of subordinate gestalts.*

- *Continuity.* It is a key for intact natural places and anthropogenic environments. Otherwise we face a reverse situation, described by Italo Calvino (1974): *Sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves. At times even the name of the inhabitants remain the same, and their voices' accent, and also the features of the faces: but the gods who live beneath names and above places have gone off without a word and outsiders have settled in their place. It is pointless to ask whether the new ones are better or worse than the old, since there is no connection between them, just as the old postcards do not depict Maurilia as it was, but a different city which, by chance, was called Maurilia, like this one.* As a paradox, heritage conservation often leads to the latter type of situation.

- *Nonevidence.* Genius loci sites often lack characteristics of heritage sites, such as an evident visual uniqueness. They may be of great importance to local communities, seeming “nothing special” to the others at the same time.

5. In this light, a concept of *the rhizome* might help in understanding habitat-related issues.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) introduced this botanical term into human sciences by identifying a similar social development model, and describing rhizomes as *networks*, which *cut across boundaries imposed by vertical lines of hierarchies and order and build links between pre-existing gaps between nodes that are separated by categories and order of segmented thinking <...>, ceaselessly establish connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.* It may be broken at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old or new lines.

Sites are “nodes” of a major “socio-cultural rhizome”, and at the same time – autonomous rhizomes, having their own constituents. They are nourished by tradition-based interactions. When isolated from its rhizome a “node” might be preserved as a representation, but gradually stops being

habitat. Therefore heritage conservation not necessarily coincides with sustenance of continual living sites.

## ***2. Conservation of Heritage and Care of Continual Places – controversies***

Care for habitats is perhaps as ancient as the humankind, while conservation of sites is a product of the Modernity (Markeviciene 2006). Now both activities are intertwined, mutually sustaining, and dealing with the same realities. However, by virtue of their intrinsic specifics the approaches are different.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) describe two opposite models or thought – *arborescent* and *rhizomatic*. ***Arbolic thought*** is linear, hierarchic, sedentary, full of segmentation and striation, vertical and stiff. It is represented by the tree-like structure with branches that continue to subdivide into smaller and lesser categories. ***Rhizomatic thought*** is non-linear, multiplicitous, moving in many directions and connected to many other lines of thinking, acting, and being. Rhizomatic thinking deterritorializes arbolic striated spaces and ways of being, and reinterprets reality as dynamic, heterogeneous, and non-dichotomous (Best and Kellner 1991).

***Heritage conservation is an arbolic activity.*** In many aspects it is based on museological and educational approach, is selective and aiming towards the Unique, preserved for “outstanding cultural values”:

1. Conservation neither aims in sustaining continuity, nor is able for a comprehensive engagement in general domains of human interactions. It is a highly specialized activity, attempting to prolong duration of material elements of the physical world.

2. It is based on rational reasoning of *why* and *what* should be preserved. It covers *conservation-restoration strictu senso* that preserves material and visual authenticity, and on *presentation* that “reveals and explains heritage values”. As a result, these activities tend to separate a reality from an entity, and factually catch the former as *evidences of the Past*.

3. This *manipulative* and *instrumental* approach is based on scientific *rationales*. However, these formulations often refer back to “zones of uncertainty”, such as imprecised *intrinsic values / memories* of the local people or *identity values* (as defined by Jukka Jokilehto). But the declared respect for “local cultures and communities” (Nara 1994; Draft Charter 2008), happens to turn into a *dominant* and *paternalistic* attitude, even when declaring “partnership”, “empowerment”, and “devolution”.

4. Conservation is based on a broadest democratic doctrine of all-inclusive equity, openness and accessibility of cultural heritage. However,

when summed with mass tourism, this sometimes unwillingly restrains interactions between sites and their dwellers, turning the habitats to “sites (and life) for show”. Some changes are irreversible.

By no accident from the 19th century conservation activities are compared to medical treatment, which nowadays covers some socio-cultural problems as well.

***Preservation of continual sites is a rhizomatic activity.*** It aims in sustaining the Continuous for living, self-identity, and self-continuity, and is based on a socio-cultural and a socio-petal approach. Sustaining techniques partially remind child nurturing, because they are based on intuition, sensitivity, respect, and love no less than on scientific knowledge and skills. The mentioned qualities of genius loci sites are in fact ***basic conditions*** for sustaining such places. Though contemporary sustenance is usually based on conservation, it differs in its attitudes towards sites, and heritage.

***There is dichotomy between the two approaches.*** It was clarified by Sven Arntzen (2002): *The preservation of works of art and of cultural monuments is typically an attempt to “arrest” them in some past or present state. This approach has been also applied to the preservation of cultural landscapes <...>. When preserved along these lines, a cultural landscape is made to be a museum piece, a mere object of observation, as opposed to being a living and lived landscape <...>. This kind of preservation fails to preserve that dimension of a cultural landscape which makes it valuable and worthy of preservation in the first place: the dynamic relationship of mutual influence that humans engage in with the land. From the point of view of ecophilosophy, preservation of the complex cultural landscapes involves maintaining the inside perspective of the dweller and doer as opposed to the outside perspective of the visitor or mere spectator.*

***Tendencies of both the activities*** are compared in the following table. However, in practice the activities are intertwined, thus they may differ in intensity, scale and vectors of these “extremes” from case to case:

TABLE 1. A comparison of tendencies of conservation and continuity

CONSERVATION		CONTINUITY	
<i>Attributes</i>			
Arbolic		Rhizomatic	
Reality		Entity	
Anti-habitat		Habitat	
Authentic		Genuine	

Objects		Things	
Traces and signs		Myths and symbols	
Outstanding universal value		Eco- and filotopic value	
For spectators		For dwellers	
Others as “visitors”		Others as “quests” or “intruders”	
<b><i>Qualities</i></b>			
Outer		Inner	
Unknown, unexpected		Known, predictable	
Impersonal		Personal	
Literal		Loose	
Linear		Non-linear	
Homogeneous		Heterogeneous	
Distant perspective		Proximity	
Open		Homeostatic	
Physical		Metaphysical	
Interpretative		Given, preconceived	
<b>CONSERVATION</b>		<b>CONTINUITY</b>	
<b><i>Qualities (cont.)</i></b>			
Evidentiary, manifestative		Existential	
Equity, egalitarianity		Group self-identification and self-protection	
Wonder, excitement		Empathy, trust, security	
Curiosity, desire, pleasure		Belief, love	
<b><i>Objectives</i></b>			
Pride, memory, admiration		Day-to-day societal life	
Leisure-time, education		Living	
<b><i>Activities</i></b>			
Curing		Healing	
Fixing		Sustaining and adapting	
Selective		Given based	
Possessive		Reflexive	
Manipulative		Self-identifying	

Pre-established rules for conservation	Given higher order for interactions
Dominative, paternalistic, authoritative, protective	Coexistentive, empathic, companionate, respectful
<b>Outcomes</b>	
Presentation	Being
Spectation	Co-creation
Socio-cultural alienation or exclusion	Nativeness, socio-cultural inclusion
Interpretative information	Social self-awareness
Meta-expression	Direct expression
Cradle for emerging traditions	Framework for continuity of traditions

### 3. A Heritage-making Dilemma

Individuals and communities often are calling the things that do not or no longer exist as though they did, and are longing for them. Therefore, reconstruction of dear, but lost *was*, *is* and, perhaps, *will be* taking place. Interest in heritage is permanently increasing through decades. It goes hand by hand with a shift in interactions with history:

1. Aesthetic and cognitive spectating starts being compromised by “tourist floods”; due to this it gradually turns into a disappointing activity, since popular heritage sites are hardly available for aesthetic reflection and contemplation, offering just a glimpse instead.

2. Usual visiting and gazing (Urri 2002) tends to be replaced by *participatory* leisure time activities, such as “living history events” (reenactments, moths-lasting reality-shows, etc.), which are gaining more and more popularity. “Reality” or “aliveness” often makes no difference in this case.

3. Another shift is an emergence of *heritage communities*, which recently have been even defined as legal entities (Faro Convention 2005). They tend sustaining historic sites for dwellers, and not spectators. In addition, a genius locus is gaining in value as an attribute of a day-to-day life environment.

A growing **popularity of reconstruction** is triggered by these shifts. But is it possible to re-create or create such places intentionally? Though continuous debates give no unambiguous answer, multiple unsuccessful practical attempts are rather doubtful. It may be for this reason, also, that



present reconstructions aim rather in “approximate” presentations (“alike” or even simulacric) than in a “revival of the old spirit”.

By virtue of nature genius loci sites are no “ready-mades”. They just *happen*, gradually shaped by mutual feedback relationships of nature, human creativity and interactions, and the passing time. They are *happy accidents* – unpredictable integral entities that are difficult to define and to plan. Therefore these sites are like *dear gifts*; loosing them we loose spiritual ties with the surrounding world, and not a mere “old street” or “picturesque group of trees”... They altogether exist and continue as both entities and realities. Assurance of continuity is the best way for preserving them. However, globalization does not give a good chance for continuity of habitats as genius loci sites.

#### ***4. Conclusion: a Cultural Dead-end or a Crucial Necessity?***

While preservation of natural environments means protecting against threads and letting nature be and live as it lives, protection of genius loci sites means letting people continue as well. In our rapidly globalizing world sustenance means more than preservation of traditions, and traditional way of life. Sustaining integrity means continuing a state of symbiosis of its constituents by subtle balancing between homeostasis and innovative change (Markeviciene 2002). Thus non-invasive sophisticated technologies, social engineering, etc., may really help. Radical changes should not be allowed, but minor compatible ones are acceptable (INTBAU 2007).

Unfortunately, this is not enough. The sense we make of external things is based in what we see outside and on the patterns located in our minds. Future generations may revive patterns, which we have put aside or forgotten.

Heritage conservation acts as an irreplaceable mediator under these circumstances. Through its museological instrumentalism it collects and safeguards “*The Treasury of the Past in the full richness of its authenticity*”. It makes a cradle for potential traditions – that may revive or emerge on the basis of preserved frameworks, returning integrity to a fragmented and deconstructed contemporary life. If these unique possibilities are lost, the resources for some potential futures are lost altogether.

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