

GENIUS LOCI

The Latin term, literally meaning "the spirit of the place"; in Roman mythology, a minor deity looking after a particular place; in the context of the landscape, this term is used to describe the unique character of the place and the atmosphere that accompanies it.

The term *genius loci* in reference to landscape architecture (garden art) was first used by the 18th century English poet Alexander Pope (*genius of the place*). In his opinion, the garden designer should adapt his design to the spirit of the place resulting from the natural conditions prevailing in the area in which he intends to establish the garden.

However, the spirit of the place does not need to be understood only in a naturalistic way. It can be the result of the cultural history of a given place, which consists of various events that took place there and their traces. In this sense, the idea of *genius loci* can be linked to the idea of landscape-palimpsest. The spirit of a place is therefore closely related to the identity of a given place, determining its temporal and spatial separation from other places (Gutowski). It is also a factor that distinguishes a place as a point or an area with specific meanings and values from a homogeneous space.

Understood objectively as a set of tangible and intangible properties of a given place, *genius loci* is perceived as an important factor which should be taken into account by landscape architects in their designs, as a lack of respect for the specificity of a given place may result in a mismatch between the design and its location.

In contemporary literature there is a semantic shift, as a result of which *genius loci* is now often understood as a *sense of place*, i.e. the ability of people to grasp the characteristics of a given place, to react emotionally and intellectually to specific places. In such an approach, the spirit/feeling of the place "lies" on the side of the person experiencing his or her environment and is an important issue within the humanistic geography (Relph). A sensitive reading of the spirit of the place is a prerequisite for ethical action on the part of both the landscape architects and the users of the place.

An objective and subjective understanding of *genius loci* does not contradict each other. This is because when we describe places, we inevitably contain in our descriptions something that is neither a set of attributes of these places, nor our feelings (Brook). For this reason, the idea of the spirit of the place can be associated with the concept of atmosphere, subjective and objective features of places (Böhme).

[M. S.]

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