Building Character: An Historical Analysis of the “Genius Loci”
and its Contemporary Manifestations
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The first half of my summer research examined the idea of thegenius loci(spirit of place) and
how its usage has evolved over time. As an architectural and urb㙤إഀ堀tഀ̀le cvedhrce耀Эᐢഀᒀs epa퀄�䘀c�䘀ends�d ts兂⃐Ӏ
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modes of placemaking can activate the “spirit” of the built environment. Therefore, I began my research
by looking purely at the term’s etymology. I found several essays that traced the term to ancient Rome,
where it expressed the belief that gods inhabited spaces—hence the idea of a “spirit.” As I moved forward
with my reading, I started Christian Nortberg-Schulz’s seminal bookGenius Loci: Towards a
Phenomenology of Architecture, in which he analyzesthe term in the context of three distinct cities:
Rome, Prague, and Khartoum. For each of these places, he constructs his way up the ideological ladder,
beginning first withspace(the natural environment,lightness, etc.), followed bycharacter(architectural
detail, settlement grid, etc.), and then finally thegenius loci.One of the central themes that emergesfrom
his analysis is that thegenius lociis strongestwhen the site, spatial configuration, and architectural detail
of a place work in harmony to embody man’s existential meaning. That is, thegenius lociis strongest
when it gives a person a concrete foothold in the world by allowing them to identify with their
surroundings.
Other architectural authors, such as Juhani Pallasmaa and Lawrence Durell, were equally
important to my early weeks of research; however, I was unsatisfied with what I had found. I felt as
though the social, cultural, and humanistic components of a city were absent from their writings—it
seemed like the most fundamental cornerstone of vibrant cities, the people themselves, had been left out.
To be sure, I agree that architecture and nature are essential to the identity of a place. As an aspiring urban
designer, I believe in the importance of how our built environments are conceived, and that physical form
carries significant implications for the essence of a place—hence the title of my summer research
“Building Character.” But still, I felt as though their writings had become outdated. I ultimately decided to
pivot away from learning about the term's etymology, and focused instead on examining thegenius lociin
a specific context. Draw┍ t
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heights, and despite its recurring episodes of death and rebirth—most recently against gentrification and
high-rise developments—Greenwich Village continues to prevail as a model neighborhood of good
urbanism. Its enduring legacy has attracted millions of residents and tourists alike, but I found myself
confronted with the same question as before: what makes Greenwich Village such an appealing place? In
other words, how have the Village's many different facets—its history, culture, population, environment,
architecture, planning, politics, economy, etc.—contributed to its iconic
inYestigate how the
genius lociof Greenwich Village has
evolved into its current form today, and how its many episodes of death and rebirth speak to the triumphs
and pitfalls of its urban history. In doing so, I hope to illuminate what helps make meaningful, resilient
places—places that are both able to absorb change and preserve their essential character—and to shed
light on the ways in which various factors and actors engage in the cultivation of meaningful, healthy,
vibrant places.
Faculty Mentor: Professor Jill Pearlman
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