

Once Upon a Time a Genius Loci Conceived a Place

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1 ABSTRACT

Amongst the concepts employed in urbanism perhaps the most magical is genius loci. This paper, initially, will briefly recall some basic postulates of the old Roman concept, calling the published works of one of its more enthusiastic authors, Norberg-Schulz. Next, it will focus on the Real Corps 2021 call for papers statement that ‘more than 6 billion people will live in cities in 2050’, together with ‘how quality of life can be maintained and improved’ in this situation. On perusing about creating habitats for the Third Millennium, the paper observes two of the actions most typically employed in the changing cities realm. These practices usually comprise two remarkably simple actions: inventing and reinventing places – preferably in locations blessed with a touch of genius loci. Place is certainly my most challenging subject in contemporary urbanism, and recent literature in the topic is prodigal in presenting practical examples of the two circumstances, examining them as ‘placemaking’, in the case of inventing new places; and ‘resilience’ of disused spaces, in the case of reinventing them. In my personal writings I have observed both thoughts, trying to appraise them under two of the consequential configurational patterns they will tend to assume: punctuated creations and punctuated re-creations. As for their morphological results it will be enough to recall the insertion of newly invented places, so typical of postmodernist interventions; and to the reuse of existing structures such as old brownfields, also typical in postmodern environments. Sustainability and resilience are clearly implicated in both circumstances, surely encompassing beneficial accomplishments in terms of enhancing the environment, such as to refrain urban growth from land sealing and to control urban sprawl. Finally, the paper will also address trendy planning strategies studied in contemporary literature through ground-breaking strategies known as: ‘Loose space’ (FRANCK; STEVENS, 2007), ‘Tactical urbanism’ (LYDON; GARCIA, 2015), some new phenomena I personally call ‘placeLeaks’ (THWAITES et al., 2013), and innovative reflections about urban transformations in global cities (such as London) (ALLIES; HAIGH, 2014) and on the global south (such as Porto Alegre, south Brazil, exploring a recent project under the guidance of Jaime Lerner’s team).

Keywords: sustainability, placemaking, genius loci, place, resilience

2 A MAGICAL CONCEPT

2.1 To make practical towns and buildings is not enough

When we truly realise that one of architecture’s most important basis is to understand the vocation of the place where it will happen, as says Norberg-Schulz (1980) when investigates the concept of genius loci, we have no alternative but to align our minds with it. Genius loci can be considered a magical concept, once it makes this happen. In an unprecedented pandemic situation as lived today, we come to this exact feeling: we have to change our minds, we have to reconsider the way we plan and build. If we do not recognize that we are an integral part of the environment, as we did the last decades if not centuries, we will not get out of this human alienation and consequently environmental disruption. Therefore our daily lives will hopefully bring us back to a natural balance, once our surroundings get balanced. When we regain the consciousness of the spirit that inhabits us and the spirit that vibrates in a place, this balance should prevail. For this to happen, a deeper perception is needed and an holistic view of our existence is necessary, in order to achieve the quality of living we are in need of, to really reach the level of correspondence between man and environment that is necessary. One major point is that we have to learn to live well right now, with the conditions we have at the present moment– and this comes up from two main thoughts: only when we are able to think positively about today we can imagine and plan even better conditions now and in the future. And to feel good today it is a sine qua non condition to be aware of who and where we are, to experience the important belonging feeling, to know the spirit of the place we live in or we want to work with, to recognise the genius loci that will enable a coherent place to be then conceived. That is why it is a magical concept – it can change everything, starting with the way we observe and open up our minds to relate with the world in a sensitive way. In an holistic and not only analytical mode of consciousness. It is a different way of observing, characterized by active seeing instead of passive reception of visual impressions – according to Bortoft (1996) in Goethe’s

Scientific Consciousness. To build practical towns is not enough, they must allow for a healthy way of living, that means caring about each item that composes our well being as, for example, social interaction and climate comfort.

2.2 Troubles with the Anthropocene

The problems and difficulties we are living in the Anthropocene are directly related to the perception crisis we find ourselves now, shown through our disconnection with the natural world. Starting with what we eat (packaged, frozen, fake food), passing by to where we look at the whole day (artificially illuminated rooms, computer and cell phone screens), ending at the alienation we experience in our daily lives, with no identification to the place we experience. This makes us insecure, fragile and depressive. In sum, this brings our lives to a very poor quality as a whole. The big question is how this quality can be improved and maintained? It seems clear that changing the points above mentioned is a considerable good start. We need options for healthier and local eating, for more nature in our everyday activities and for more connections and relations to what really composes our world – other people, animals, plants, sunlight – in short, recognizing the spirit that runs through everything in a place – its genius loci. The interesting fact is that it is not fixed. It changes according to the seasons, to the time of the day, to the alterations man-made presence imposes and to the situation we are now immersed. When we have this in mind we can see how the two most typical actions practiced in order to change the cities realm can happen: by inventing and reinventing places. This is where our different ways of perception come to scene, when we are able to again perceive the subtle characteristics of a place, and be touched by it. We are consequently moved from a lethargic survival situation to a conscious proactive action on our own behalf.

2.3 The Third Millenium

It is the view of many that places are the salt and pepper of a city, pleading for the production of cities well seasoned with places morphed through experiences motivated by perceptual stimuli – as we run into the third millenium, this is fundamental. That is why ‘places’ is one of the most challenging subjects in contemporary urbanism. Inventing new places within the existing city and also bringing new meanings when re-inventing places in desuse are the most interesting ways of increasing the quality of life in cities in a relative shorter period of time. They are also relevant solutions when we face the problem of disorganized growth and problematic cities’ sprawls – which implicate in lower quality of living because of unexisting infrastructures, the need of more transport possibilities and for sure the insane destruction of the nature we see occuring in many urban peripheral areas nowadays. Sustainability and resilience surely encompass beneficial accomplishments in terms of enhancing the environment, in new created places and in the reuse of existing structures such as old brownfields, which are also frequent in postmodern environments. The reuse of old structures not only for living and working but also for pleasure, as well as letting the genius loci of a place revive in a natural way (filling in the lack of greenery for example) are very interesting ways of achieving the purpose of sustainability – besides the fact of bringing creative new spots in densified cities. Resilience then comes up when blue-green infrastrucutres replace gray, fixed, high maintenance ones, with the introduction of vegetation, uncovering water courses and depaving areas that do let natural flows run and even decreasing heat islands within the cities. To protect and conserve the genius loci of a place in fact means to concretize its essence in every new historical contexts. And to concretize it can mean not only to build but also to turn visible to our senses what that place has and brings from its interior.

3 TRENDY PLANNING STRATEGIES

To be successful in this new era, planning strategies must call for actions that bring together resilience, sustainability and vivid experiences. Contemporary literature contribute with innovative concepts that are obtaining good results: the concepts of loose spaces, tactical urbanism and placeLeaks. These kind of hints for new projects and experiments are now more common and show promising effects. The concept of loose spaces is exposed in a book edited by Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens (2007), bring new possibilities for public living, where the notion of looseness considered relative and sometimes ephemeral is a big contrast to regulated and under pressure organised places. Its social environmental psychological approach shows how life can take place in most varied places and most different moments, when it meets the possibility. This is an example of how to live better, happier, with what we have now. The concept of Tactical Urbanism embraces the idea of short term action, long term changes, brings at the same time a different way of

seeing/using/living places as well as revises the idea that something quick and easy can not be effective, confirming that small scale actions can serve to larger purposes (LYDON;GARCIA, 2015). When the purpose is to increase life quality in big cities, it is for sure a fertile field for creative ideas and flexible responses to problems that pop up every minute in urban agglomerations. It is possible to find a different method for developing local resilience, when citizens and government simply talk and match their priorities, releasing the tension normally existing between bottom-up and top-down initiatives. It is about the process, about learning, testing, improving and expanding limits of design. One of its major qualities can be mentioned as being responsive – the need is there and the right observation of the context (or the place itself, or its genius loci!) can bring the response to it in a very clear and objective way. Lastly, bringing into light the topic of placeLeaks (THWAITES et al., 2013) it has to do with a phenomenon recently observed in modern metropolises which refers to the spreading of environmental stimuli emitted by the energy of a place that somehow leak into its adjacent spaces, thus opening opportunities for the creation of a new place.

These three new approaches are important because they build up new connections to existing and to new places, solving old deadlocks with new ideas. Making citizens to identify themselves with the environment offers a remarkable gain and an essential feeling for a stronger existential foothold in our uncertain world of today.

4 REFLECTIONS ABOUT URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS IN GLOBAL CITIES

Yes, it seems there are newer and friendly ways to face the urban troubles of the Anthropocene. It also seems that some of the approaches are already advancing in global cities. This is not difficult to recognize when watching new phenomena that go along with urban transformations occurring in some of these cities. Whilst most of them deal with important changes in urban planning and in urbanism principles, they usually do not require more than just an strategic head start, typical of a simple urbanism without effort move to a more radical, though spontaneous, corollary of a placeLeak. It seems relevant to highlight that notwithstanding the differences, most of the changes display a certain allusion to the mystical manifestation of an innate genius loci.

The more we become conscious about the importance of our settlements being organically related to the environment, the more successful and pleasant the results of our planning and our architecture can become. The dynamic development of our living spaces brings challenges that can be taken as opportunities, since we face them in a creative and positive manner. Knowing that a place is more than a location – that it holds an environmental character, that it sometimes expresses something not touchable but just perceptual – signifies for spaces that they hold an innate adherence to the old concept of genius loci to produce thriving metamorphoses. Our knowledge, materialized in man-made elements, transforms nature into a cultural landscape, that can enhance or dismiss the connection and the sense of belonging of someone to a determined place. If we worry about our creations being a connector, what is built can even ‘explain’ the environment and make its character evident, as Norberg-Schulz (1980) essayed to teach us. Global cities are a fruitful field for such interventions, since they hold also the biggest problems. Cities are frequently taken as the opposite of natural environment – but this can be a false assumption, specially if we consider the built environment as a process, where new and more complex relations occur between culture and nature. Even more importantly, we humans are the creators as well as the users of these relations taking place in our cities. Simone Prochnow, the co-author of this paper, got her PhD defending a thesis discoursing about the concept of Fourth Nature. This concept has been recently studied (2020) and argues about the future relation about man and nature, consequently about human perceptions and reactions facing or recognising the presence of subjective essentials in each place, in each environmental fragment, specially in big cities. How we can reconnect to it and the importance of this relation for our survival in the planet. It enhances the way we influence the scenery as well as the way it influences us, bringing up the idea that this mutual perception exists, always, we just have to open up our senses to live it. The importance of such studies is that simple actions, or better, simple changes in our actions can immediately bring quality to our lives and to our cities. The way our consciousness lead to our thoughts and the manner our thoughts create what we see is amazing. We inhabit a world of meanings, which are brought to surface by ourselves. So, if we want to live in ‘better’ cities, we must start perceiving what we already have, and knowing what we want to have next. This is where the genius loci contributes for the creation of places. It is not only about huge performances of immense characteristics – it is about everyday life, from the tree we pass by in our walkways to the park –

sometimes not even caring that they exist. It is about the famous holistic view of the world, where everything is connected and makes sense only if we expand our minds and really notice how we participate in the world we live. The supposed polarity between subjective and objective happens simultaneously since we are in the scene (KAPLAN; DAVIDOFF, 2014) and therefore we can be responsible for the genius loci outcropping. Here resides the magical touch of the concepts: the mere observation turns the ordinary into magic. Only by the fact that if we are not present to perceive it and to make it real, it has no meaning. It is an honest conversation with our own world and with ourselves, it is about reciprocity. This is where all changing begins. The place where the problems exist is the same place from where the solutions come, as a new manifestation of who is now perceiving and using it. We could say that the Fourth Nature concept comes before the three other new concepts described previously, since they are ‘actions’ and the Fourth Nature is about consciousness.

If we are able to be conscious about ourselves, to find reasons and values within our existence, we will be able to find value and reasons in everything else, for example, our cities. Global cities are a reality, there is no doubt about it, but even if in diverse contexts and circumstances, their problems have a common denominator: health. Human health as well as environmental health, are profoundly and totally interconnected.

Porto Alegre, as well as London, experienced a rapid urban growth in the last years. “But is now attempting to resist outward expansion in favour of regeneration from within” (Allies and Haigh, 2014, p. 10). This is typical of a resilience process, either in iconic buildings or in sites and contributes to the sustainability process.

To illustrate we can take two groups of examples, one in Europe and one in South America. In London, in an urban scale, the Tate Modern building shows a clear example of an old power station in disuse adapted into a new museum, through a light conversion. Similarly, in Porto Alegre, the old building of the Usina do Gasometro, with its iconic chimney, was preserved. In both cases, formerly isolated and derelict areas became new places of vitality and urbanity. (Figures 1 and 2). Relating to the concepts mentioned before, it is possible to observe that in both examples there are clearly manifested placeLeaks, revamped loose spaces, and also features that remind of tactical urbanism operations.



Fig.1 and Fig.2: Tate Modern in London. Usina do Gasometro in Porto Alegre.

The big lake called Guaíba, in Porto Alegre, has been neglected and disconsidered for a long time, specially in its interface with the historic center, what was really regrettable. A project recently being implemented has changed completely the area as well as its surroundings. In the so called ‘Orla do Guaíba’ (Guaíba Shores), it is possible to identify the three strategies mentioned above, even simultaneously. Likewise in London, the King’s Cross Central is “...one of Europe’s largest regeneration projects. The 24 hectare site is bordered by the new Eurostar line from France and bisected by the Regent’s Canal.” (Allies and Haigh, 2014, p. 13).

For a tentative illustration of this matter simply try to add a suitable caption to the photographs in Figures 3 and 4, using the following terms, for example:



Fig.3 and Fig.4: At London's Kings Cross Central (left) and Porto Alegre's Orla (right) a piece of tactical urbanism without effort situated on a loose space blessed with genius loci.

People were craving for the possibility of reaching the amazing visual of the waters as well as the unique sunset show that happens because of the west orientation – something rare in Brazil (Figure 5). It was a huge loose space, in which the gatherings happened spontaneously just because of the great atmosphere that empty space already offered, despite all setbacks. Under the design of Jaime Lerner's team, the water shore was divided in three different phases for constructing. The first one is complete and the second one is almost ready too. Different pathways as well as sitting facilities are some of the new features that transformed it in a beloved place in the city. The landscape was treated in some points only, leaving the main role for the water itself and the sun. Tactical urbanism details such as expositions, allowing food trucks to be in the area, bikelanes available, brought life in a tremendously short time to the project. Obviously, a considerable leak of this place atmosphere invaded the whole downtown neighbourhood, starting with the small business close to the shore, as well as heating up the real estate development – for so many years stagnant. In this year of 2021 a new enterprise recovered part of the adjacent area (close to an also revitalised coal power station) bringing new leisure possibilities in open air places – something very substantial in this pandemic times. Unfortunately, the brownfield composed by old warehouses has not yet been revitalised, which will imply in additional area for private and public actions, activating the desire of new experiences of the majority of the city inhabitants. By now, the 19.000 square meters recently opened already created an enjoyable asset for the city to enjoy its genius loci, which became meaningful again – conceived as a real place of urbanity for the city as a whole. Many different acts and happenings take place in this new scenario, where the beautiful sunset finally recovered its value.



Fig.5: The sunset at water edge in the city of Porto Alegre recovers its value in a new scenario.

5 CONCLUSION

It is not easy to be optimistic in pandemic times. Notwithstanding, in our field of urbanism one must keep confident as far as the future of cities is involved. This article registered some possibilities opened to the field even in difficult times. The text discussed possibilities in terms of urban planning strategies that might offer advances in urban-architectural endeavours: the management of loose space; the rise of placeLeaks; and some practices of tactical urbanism (LYDON; GARCIA, 2015). Ultimately, all three schemes involve procedures that share managerial strategies as their common determinant. In addition, contemporary times contribute with other beneficial prospects, the most precious of them obviously the one concerned with the field of social networks and its valuable contributions to the area which we call “Architecture of Places” in our research program (PROPAR).

Hannah Arendt, the German American philosopher, attributed to the public space the condition of being the specific place where people (in all its immense diversity – rich, poor, white, black, etc.) could (and should) be seen and heard. It is quite stimulating to consider that today, in the reasoning of Arendt, one can envisage that this public space would not necessarily need to be a space at all. Indeed, the public sphere (AVERMAETE et al, 2009) can take many forms. It can even take the form of a medium, it can even be a written media, a newspaper, it does not need to involve space. It can create small public spaces where citizens can think together about themes of a joint nature, of a collective nature, common, public things, their thoughts in resonance, bringing up identification and mainly, connections. This leads us to another important reflection, that a fundamental vehicle for this public sphere is located within the mass media (newspapers, TV, books), informing about ideas, demands, protests. It has the strength to bring together a lot of people, to enable people to discuss matters of public interest, to express considerations that, altogether, end up bringing a new type of place: the Internet. It is the WWW that provides conditions similar to those of the mass media and allows the generation of a public sphere predominantly a-spatial.

Today, more than ever, the space of a square or the editorial of a newspaper do not need to have a fixed spatial location. A multitude of people can be mobilized in a noticeably short period of time, capable to potentially make a huge contribution to local culture, to motivate actions, to convey information, to promote consciousness, and therefore change perceptions, minds and lives.

This is also a remarkable predicate of the contemporary city, its unique a-spatial genius.

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