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Research Project Design

Chapter 2: Literature Review



Genius Loci:

Preserving the Spirit of Place during Adaptive Reuse within Local
Irish Communities

2.0 Introduction

Through careful consideration, the literature review provides a critically evaluated view on a collection of published seminal and supporting works relating to a specific research topic. In this chapter, the relevant information in relation to the concept of genius loci is critically explored. This information is divided into four sections. Section one examines the to-date information available on the historical background of the theory of genius loci. Section two assesses the research on the philosophical connotations of genius loci, the fundamentals of the concept including its tangible and intangible values. Section three appraises the resulting principles and strategies of genius loci and its role within adaptive reuse. Lastly, section four outlines the conclusions drawn from the critique of the aforementioned information.

2.1 Genius Loci: Historical Emergence and Philosophical Connotations

Through contributions from various seminal philosophers and authors, the concept of genius loci has evolved and developed into its modern meaning. To gain an understanding of the history and philosophical connotations of genius loci, it is essential to review the opinions and standpoints of the field's core contributors and of the supporting opinions.

Seminal Authors

Norwegian architect and writer, Norberg-Schulz, offers the first in-depth exploration into the field of genius loci in 'Genius Loci Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture' by examining "the psychic implications of architecture". Within his work, Norberg-Schulz delves into the concept of 'existential space', such as genius loci, stating that it is "divided into complimentary terms, 'space' and 'character'" while criticizing the generic functionality of modern architecture that ignores the character of place. Preceding Norberg-Schulz's philosophical investigation into genius loci, Edward Relph, offers insight into the sense of 'space' and 'character'. Reviewing 'space' in relation to 'place' or 'character' according to Norberg-Schulz, Relph identifies modes of spatial experience that collectively play a role in everyday "human spatial experience" (Seamon, Sowers, 2008).

Supporting Authors

From the host contributions to genius loci and spirit of place within a multitude of fields of inquiry, naturally a proliferation of varying interpretations of the concept arises. Isis Brook, in her essay 'Can Spirit of Place be a guide to Ethical Building?' (2001), identifies the ideas and issues associated with the confusion surrounding the concept, questioning if all places have a spirit of place and if the spirit of place is truly apparent or is what we are simply sensing a projection of humanistic values onto places. Similarly, Gunila Jive' N and Peter J. Larkham during their discussion of genius loci in their journal, 'Sense of Place, Authenticity and Character: A Commentary', arrive at the same suggestion, that the concept of genius loci, through its various iterations has become confused.

2.2 Genius Loci: Experiencing the Spirit of Place

To understand the spirit of place, it is necessary to understand the fundamentals of the theory of 'place'. From examining the literary works that define and explore the concepts in how they are perceived, we can accurately recognise and respect the spirit of place, creating a key starting point for the adaptive reuse of historical buildings.

Seminal Authors

In Edward Relph's 'Place and Placelessness', he explores the field of "the phenomenology of place" (Relph, 1976). Phenomenology meaning the interpretive study of human experience (Seamon, Sowers, 2008). Although Relph divides the identity of place into three components, he expresses that this division is not sufficient in communicating its existential connotations. He describes place's most essential defining feature, "significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world" (Relph, 1979). His discussion continues, iterating that place, although formed by tangible characteristics, is also comprised of an abstract reality formed by one's emotional connections to space and the meaningful experiences one has there. Yi-Fu Tuan shares similar views of 'space' and 'place' to Relph, outlining the difference between the two terms and how they relate to one another, "space is freedom, place is security" (Tuan, 1977).

Supporting Authors

Further offering insight into how we experience a 'sense of place', Jurate Markeviciene states that "a spirit of the place primarily refers to human perception and sensation". Her research explains that the spirit of place is something that can be sensed perceiving it physically and spiritually. In addition to this notion, in their article 'Toward a Phenomenology of Place and Place-Making: Interpreting Landscape, Lifeworld and Aesthetics', Gary J. Coates and David Seamon describes a need humans have for existing in a place of meaning that can be sensed. As their essay continues, they discuss the themes associated with place and place-making.

2.3 Genius Loci: A Study of Procedure during Adaptive Reuse

In recent times, more emphasis has been placed on safeguarding the spirit of place during adaptive reuse. In examining the guidance offered by professional sources in protecting genius loci, and the supporting literature detailing how this guidance has been implemented, we can achieve a clear understanding of how adaptive reuse projects to date have respected the spirit of place.

Seminal Authors

In UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, a clear set of provisions is outlined. These provisions aim to educate the public on safeguarding "the intangible cultural heritage" of a place and to promote international cooperation during the adaptive reuse process and any other processes that involve historical settings, evidently, these principles have been taken onboard by authors during their research into genius loci and adaptive reuse.

Complimenting the UNESCO Convention, another key source of adaptive reuse guidelines can be sourced from the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, or the Venice Charter. This charter created a pivotal turning point for the protection of historic buildings and sites. The charter outlines the importance of safeguarding ancient architecture and provides a series of articles approved by the ICOMOS in 1965, that include principles involved to promote the protection of historic buildings. Expanding on the Venice Charter, the Granada Convention (1985), the Burra Charter (1979-2013) and European Conventions on the Protection of Architectural and Archaeological Heritage (1997) have since developed the guiding principles to "protect individual monuments and buildings, to the cultural significance of entire places such as cities and cultural landscapes" by promoting minimal intervention (Dublin Civic Trust).

Supporting Authors

Referring to ICOMOS and the Venice Charter, Sara Wilkinson and Shabnam Yazdani Mehr investigate the inter-relationship between genius loci and authenticity in their journal, 'The importance of place and authenticity in adaptive reuse of heritage buildings' (Wilkinson, Yazdani Mehr, 2020).

Acknowledging the ongoing issue in published research of the separation of genius loci and authenticity, and thereafter overlooking both, Wilkinson and Yazdani Mehr provide a holistic approach to the combination of both terms, their complications and incorporation during adaptive reuse. Subsequently providing a checklist to aid professionals in preserving genius loci during adaptive reuse.

Likewise, 'Developing a Model for Relation between Heritage and Place Identity' by A. Arjomand Kermani, N,Charbgoos and M. Alalhesabi, makes use of the UNESCO convention in 2003, utilising the recommendation "safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage and historic urban landscape" (A. Arjomand Kermani, N,Charbgoos and M. Alalhesabi, 2016). By using the principles by UNESCO, Kermani, Charbgoos and Alalhesabi create a simplified outline of the principles for professional use.

2.4 Conclusion

The most apparent learning from the literature was the wealth of knowledge available. Particularly in relation to the historical emergence, philosophy and 'the spirit of place', various sources of information and studies relating to these topics have been written over the years. I also noticed a gap of information based on the implementation of genius loci, particularly recent examples how genius loci is currently being protected.

Another learning from the research available was the bias in relation to the origin of studies. The studies are spread out over American, Canadian and central European authors. While investigating research, I found there were no examples of genius loci during adaptive reuse in an Irish setting providing a notable gap in the research.

Each of the articles, journals and books were clearly written and concise, ultimately creating a great strength to their research. 'Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture' by Christian Norberg-Schulz particularly provided a perceptive investigation backed by convincing and accurate experimental or experiential evidence.

Overall, the research works on the topics of genius loci and adaptive reuse are readily available from online data bases and libraries. The styles of writing varied from text to text, with some providing a clear and concise persuasive argument for example, Juarte Markeviciene's 'Genius Loci and Homo Faber: A Heritage-Making Dilemma', and others supplying a more abstract and metaphorical view, although that can largely be a result of the writer's background. Moreover, the language in each text is legible, making them readable for both general audiences, including students and professional audiences, including researchers.

2.5 Bibliography

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