CAN 'SPIRIT OF PLACE' BE A GUIDE TO ETHICAL BUILDING?

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INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses some issues that arise from a nexus of ideas that is sometimes
called *Genius Loci*, sometimes spirit of place and sometimes sense of place. This is a
very old notion that has resurfaced and is undergoing a reformulation. The
importance of this notion for the ethics of building rests in particular interpretations
that see spirit of place as something about a place that demands we respect it and
work alongside it in terms of architectural design, building practice and appropriate
daily use. However, this notion is ambiguous and variously expressed by writers in
many fields of enquiry. This proliferation of interpretations and uses does nothing to
help the development of a robust idea that could inform ethical building, though it
may point to a necessary ambiguity.

THE PROLIFERATION OF DEFINITIONS

Spirit of place and sense of place are used in humanistic geography, architecture,
landscape design, planning, conservation, tourism, travel writing and other fields.
Throughout this paper I am going to use the term 'spirit of place' for the whole nexus
of ideas associated with these terms, although this will slant the discussion strongly
in the direction of the place itself as opposed to meanings imposed on a setting.
Sense of place is sometimes used in exactly the same way, but can also be used
when the focus is shifted to human meanings and perhaps impositions. Sense of
place is also used for what I would term 'sensing' place – to denote an effort to
sensitively come to know the nature of a place.

The different ways in which the term spirit of place is used and the lack of clear

definitions given by writers suggests that the idea is ambiguous. The ambiguity does not seem to arise from the number of disciplines involved: it is not the case that architects mean one thing and geographers mean something else by the term. It is not even the case that, for example, one school of geographers mean one thing and another school mean something else. The term seems to shift its meaning even within one person's writing.

Rather than just stipulate a clear definition, I want to spend some time laying out the kind of interpretations that exist in the literature. These interpretations are used by people working in the areas outlined above, they have years of experience and may be presenting distinctive insights into this phenomenon. Alternatively, some interpretations may be inadequate and need to be cleared out of the way.

I will first clarify some major problems and then move on to what could be called the shades of meaning of spirit of place. These are aspects of interpretation that any of the views may include. They could be seen as the conceptual collection from which writers on spirit of place seem to be drawing.

Major questions to ask of any definitions

One quite testing question that could be asked of a particular interpretation of spirit of place is whether it means that every place has one. Very often the literature picks out a particular city square, neighbourhood, woodland glade etc. and proclaims it to have a spirit of place. This, it is claimed, is something not tangible in the way that the place's physical components are, but is nevertheless apparent to all but the most insensitive of observers. The implication would seem to be that only some places have this, and others are therefore deficient. The alternatives are, presumably, either that every place has a spirit of place, but in most places it is being ignored, hidden, driven underground, or that everywhere has a spirit, but in some places this quality is neutral or even bad.

A related question would be to enquire of the interpretation where the boundaries of the special place are. Is there a clear border, a thinning of the spirit of place's influence until it is too dilute to perceive? Or do the borders overlap and generate an intermingling of the spirits of place. How does the spirit of place of a city square or

district relate to the spirit of place of the whole city?   And are there regional spirits of place that influence the possible emergence of the smaller scale spirits of place?

A crucial area of questioning is around the role of human beings in all of this. One way of getting at this would be to take the example of a place that has never been manipulated by humans and that seems to be widely recognised as having a spirit of place and ask, 'does it still have this quality without its human observers?'   This would seem to get at one layer of distinction between whether a spirit of place is integral to the place and revealed to observers or whether it is a projection onto a place of human values. The question becomes more complex in the built environment where human patterns of use are seen as part of the spirit of place. However, populated places do not automatically fall into a different category of having to be interpreted from a human standpoint. Indeed, there is within the literature a strong strand of cutting through divisions between humans and environment. One thing that a spirit of place can be interpreted as doing is shaping the people who live in a place (Durrell 1988). So a place being populated does not automatically mean that a 'locicentric' view cannot be taken.

SHADES OF MEANING

Just as the spirit of place seems to be something in or about a place that is not easily defined, so the conceptual collection below seems to be haunted by the meanings of this term rather than expressing it clearly. Each of these definitional components is presented as a synthesis of its appearance in the literature, but some of the names ascribed are my own short hand. The purpose of setting these out is to lay bare the complexity of this nexus of ideas and to show the net of associations that its use can carry if its intended meaning is not clarified.

Abode of special beings

The reason that some places are felt to be special is that they are considered to be inhabited by gods/goddesses, spirits, fairies etc. and that these are beings who live in this place and not elsewhere.   In the West this meaning is connected to both Greek and Roman ideas and is seen most clearly in the idea of a sacred grove that is the home of a particular god or goddess.   Perhaps this idea is universal as there seem

to be similar beliefs in other cultures. Although the term spirit of place might suggest such an interpretation this is rarely used explicitly although it is used analogously and its antiquity makes it a strong underpinning theme.

Energy fields

On this view a place is not inhabited, but is a point of intense energy. Such places have a powerful effect on us due to the particular configuration of the land or due to their location within wider patterns of energy. These patterns may be determined by the land form or more abstract systems of interpretation. This is quite a difficult conceptual component to pin down, it tends to operate as a catch-all phrase to express something otherwise undefined or indefinable. The problem here is that, if it is saying anything, we should be able to press the idea and find out more. However, it seems to break down into one of two positions: either you 'get it' and see why nothing more could be said, or you need to understand and apply a complex system of meanings abstracted, often from another culture, and applied to this particular place. The former seems philosophically unrewarding and the latter to move in exactly the wrong direction if you want to understand a particular place for the place it is.

Authenticity

Some places have come about through unconscious processes of habitation. They have grown in a place and have developed naturally to reflect that place. In general authenticity applauds the undesigned and seemingly chance development of places. In one sense this is the idea of wilderness applied to built environments. The human inhabitants of, for example, the Tuscan hilltop village grew their environment as it grew them and thus their architecture has a fittingness because it is in accord with the spirit of the place. Living authentically 'in place' is said to be emotionally satisfying, but it is unclear if this state can be consciously regained (Wasserman 1998:192). Can the 'designedly' undesigned be authentic? One would assume not, so any 'inauthentic' places are now beyond redemption. However, I am also unclear how we should interpret the notion of unconscious processes here. I am not sure that one can, or ever could, unconsciously build. Perhaps the Tuscan hilltop village dweller was engaged in as much conscious decision making in choosing where and

what to build as a 1960s modernist architect, it is just that today we applaud the Tuscan's decisions. We can applaud those decisions and see them as sensitive to and contributing to the spirit of place without de-humanising their designers.

Narrative

A place that tells its story, where the layers of past history are evident, and preferably not consciously preserved, is one that expresses a spirit of place. The present configuration of land, houses, ruins, and so on is still working, and connected to its past in a meaningful way. There is a diachronic integrity (Holland & O'Neill 1996) about the place: what is here now makes sense given what was here; it has a coherent narrative that connects its past to its present and could guide its future. Of course, just having a past would not count; everywhere has a past simply by virtue of being in space through time. If this notion is to elucidate spirit of place and consolidate its meaning there must be significance placed on the coherence of the story and its working connection to the present. Themed street furniture displaying motifs of a town's now defunct cotton industry presumably do not count. But what about new office buildings whose windows repeat the staccato rhythm of the mill windows and the action of the machinery in the buildings they replace, the new industrial heart thus resonating with the old? Can the coherence of the narrative be dependent on the difference between blatantly naff and subtler design features? If even the latter is ruled out then we seem to be back in the realms of unplanned authenticity. A final disquieting thought on narrative is that one could imagine a place that is characterised by disruption and arbitrary change such that its spirit is that of exciting and pleasing discontinuity.

Local distinctiveness

A key feature of the idea of local distinctiveness is that of scale. Identifying with a specific place needs attention to detail, to what makes it distinctive: not in terms of important events or revered buildings, but the style of the ordinary in this specific place. This idea has informed much of the campaigning work of the pressure group Common Ground (Clifford and King 1993). Like narrative, this concept treads a fine, possibly unworkable, line between preserving the old and relishing the everyday along with its inevitable change. Local distinctiveness is placed in opposition to

national or international homogeneity. It is *for* local democracy and empowerment of ordinary people and *against* faceless government and multi-national companies. The smallness of scale is crucial: thus local distinctiveness can affirm the family run Indian restaurants in English towns as part of positive cultural change, but condemn the ubiquitous McDonalds.

Local distinctiveness does have the advantage of working with present circumstances, and it has something to say about every place, not just those that have missed unfashionable periods of development. This seems to escape some of the preciousness of ideas around authenticity and narrative. Also local distinctiveness affirms the spirit of place notion that every place needs to be sensitively examined – or, better still, lived in - as an individual place in order to discover and work within its distinctiveness. This means that generalisations or standard planning solutions, beyond the injunction to work with what is there, cannot be applied.

When laying out these conceptual categories, and the ones that follow, it is clear that there are overlaps, parallel paths, and sharp disjunctions. As a way of uncovering exactly what spirit of place could mean this process, though bewildering, does have the virtue of being true to the richness and paradoxical nature of the idea. The next two (essence and character) are even closer together, but making distinctions between them does elucidate some crucial aspects.

Essence

I am grouping a number of things under essence and using it to get across the notion of interiority. The spirit of place, the 'something about this place', can be explained by it having an interior. Obviously, interior in this sense does not mean, for example, the interior of a mountain range that would be revealed by mining. It is attempting to get at something about that mountain range and using images of depth, indwelling, the soul etc. to express it. Some uses of essence or entelechy or inscape may prompt a dualistic notion; there is rude matter and the soul that dwells within it. This could be viewed as moving back to the idea of the abode of special beings except that what is being expressed is more intimately connected with the material substance of the place even if it is of a different order. However, essence could also

be a way of expressing something about the nature of the physical substance and the coming together of physical substances in characteristic ways. The problem of dualistic notions for spirit of place is that whilst generating spiritual entities they also reduce physical substance to dead matter. The predominance of dualism makes it hard to think outside of those categories. Two interpretations of essence that step outside both dualism and its inherent diminishing of matter are Aristotle's idea of the form and Goethe's archetype. The Aristotelian essence, correctly understood (Pratt 1982: 207), creates the thing as the thing it is from within. The problem with this is that it could only account for the individual living things in a place, not for the spirit of a place. For this one would need to extend the idea beyond the boundaries of organisms. Goethe's archetype is a more flexible idea (Pratt and Brook 1996) that could possibly be developed to understand place.

Character

Character is a notion that combines both depth and surface. Whereas essence can suggest an indwelling nature that is hinted at by the appearance of a place or one that is expressed in the appearance of the place, character tends to be used in a more forthright way. The character is not a persona. The term is not used to express a hidden nature behind an unpromising façade but the place as it both appears and is: As Norberg-Schultz says: 'A place is a space which has a distinct character' (1984:5). Thus a place is not just a village green or a market square or an expanse of heath, but *this* one. They may or may not be typical of that type of place. For example, each of the places above may contain an eccentricity for their type that nevertheless does not detract from and may enhance their character. We can say that a particular thing - tree, building, signpost etc – is 'out of character', precisely because we can see that there is a character with which to be out. However, character is not used as another term for harmonious or balanced, it is not a marker of success in an aesthetic theory, it is more like an emergent property of places which work (whatever 'work' might mean in their particular context).

Character does add dynamism to the idea of place. Just as a person's character is distinguished by their traits, so a place is distinguished not as a static tableau but by what it is through what it does. When we think of the meaning of the word character

as the unique combination of traits that inform a person's actions and make what they do a coherent whole we are perhaps close to what people mean when they say that a place has a distinctive character. Indeed Casey describes the *genius loci* as 'the unique gestalt of traits that make a place <u>this</u> place'(1993:303).

Whilst it might seem that the term character is well placed as a central concept for spirit of place there are, I believe, two dangers to be avoided: over use and anthropomorphism. Examples of over use of the term are when it no longer expresses a unique configuration of traits, but merely something quaint. Alternatively it is used so broadly that it can even describe the now discredited idea of zones so that, for example, housing and industry are separated because the housing zone has a residential character. However, when we restrict the use to one more closely aligned with human character we are in danger of thinking of places as people. The problem with anthropomophising place is that it short circuits the moral argument that it may be possible to respect places. It tends in the direction of saying that places are like people and since people have moral standing, places should also have moral standing. It only requires the observation that places are not like people, that this is a metaphor, to undermine the attribution of moral standing or respect for a place.

Moreover, anthropomorphism also prevents us from seeing a place as the thing it is. We can see similar confusion at play when we anthropomorphise animals. Consider a similar example. When my brother was a small child he killed a spider and my mother, hoping to instil in him some compassion and a dislike of needless killing, said 'now what will his wife and children do?'. My brother promptly burst into tears and was thenceforth always kind to animals. As a way of getting a small child to think about the effect of their actions it was a good response. Being moved to think about things from the spider's perspective might even prompt an interest in finding out exactly what that perspective really is. However, stopping at the anthropomorphised sympathy does not allow us to treat spiders in the way most appropriate to their welfare. By thinking of the spider as a quasi human we actually fail to think of it as the thing it is. Indeed in this example, from the 1960s, we can even see outdated cultural norms: if it is a spider out in the world, in danger of encountering a small

child, it must be male. Rather than trap the being in a misinformed, albeit friendly, conceptual category we need to find out more about it including its otherness, its difference from us.

There is no doubt that thinking of places as like people can have pedagogical uses: it can be a way of getting us thinking about places as other than a resource or a grid reference or an example of habitat type X or townscape type Y. However, we need to be alert to its metaphorical nature: it is a technique to help us along the way to experiencing place, not a description of the reality of any particular place.

With this tendency to error highlighted we can perhaps just revisit the potential strengths of the notion of place having a character. These are the dynamism of traits, the sense of a place as unique, and the coherence of the inner dynamic with its outer appearance. Character does seem a useful conceptual component of spirit of place and, clearly defined, could be a complete replacement. It does seem to express the way a place can be experienced as more than the sum of its parts; that the place has an overarching character that we can identify and describe.

However, do we need this extra thing?   Perhaps the parts of a place could be understood as doing all the necessary work, because of the way they form a whole.

Ecosystem

On this view a thorough understanding of the place means its parts (e.g., geology, flora, fauna, weather, human patterns of use etc.) and, significantly, the way they work together. Things fit together in an ecosystem such that the dynamics of the system is seen as the cohering force. Whether we view the ecosystem as a quasi organism or a future directed system this gives us a something beyond its parts that could be used to argue for its moral standing and to explain the experience of meeting something other than a mere collection of rocks and plants. One strength of the ecosystem conceptual component would seem to rest on its apparent scientific respectability. However, ecology has moved on and has abandoned the 'organismic' view of ecosystems (Worster 1985:332-3). To maintain scientific respectability we need to view ecosystems as made up of individually goal directed organisms with no interest in even the stability of the system. The now outdated organism or holistic

process view of an ecosystem may have been trying to identify the same entity as spirit of place has always attempted to express. That is, the unique holding together in a characteristic way that we experience in some places.

Pantheism

Various positions and interpretations on the nature of the relationship between God and the world could be examined as playing into ideas about spirit of place. The abodes of special beings section, above, dealt with understandings about local deities or metaphysical beings. Under pantheism I wish to signal another range of ideas that see the world, particularly the natural world, as infused with a single deity. Thus, on this view, the world houses, is part of, or is the same thing as God. The world might be seen as a 'holy manifestation' (Wood 1985: 157) or the body of God. This could be seen as a stronger claim for care and respect than the theist's view that the earth is God's creation. To a culture used to revering God and excelling in buildings to honour God it seems reasonable to suppose that the wonder of the natural world, when noticed, is tied up with these beliefs. Whether viewed as God's creation or God's body, we read into this an injunction to respect the earth, but it seems that a similar short circuit could be happening here. God has respect, the world is an expression of God's nature, therefore, the world has respect. It might be that the awe and wonder that we feel about the world, often triggered by special places, could prompt the appropriate respect without a mediating belief structure.

Pantheism can add to ideas of spirit of place an impressive heritage and links with nature mysticism. For many it is possible to see some places as clear expressions of God and thereby enhance the feeling for their sacredness. However, a major problem with Pantheism is that the placeless hinterlands that spirit of place ideas are used to criticise have to be seen as desecrated (they rather than rugged wilderness are now seen as 'fallen') though still, paradoxically, part of God.

Panpsychism

Panpsychism is the idea that all things, including inanimate things, have their own form of consciousness or, alternatively, that all things share in a world consciousness or infinite consciousness. Again this is an ancient idea that has seen occasional

resurgences, most recently in environmental ethics. Here mind-like qualities are attributed as a means of extending the kinds of things that can have moral standing. (For a critique see Andrews 1998.) As with ecosystems, one problem to get around, if this idea is to be applied to place, is the relationship between the mind-like qualities of the individual rocks, streams, plants, and so on and attributing a mind-like quality to their amalgamation in a specific place. If the world consciousness view is taken the problem becomes one of making distinctions, as with pantheism, between places one wants to claim have a spirit of place and the experience of some spaces as placeless. One possibility is that every entity, be it a tree or a paving slab, has its own mind-like qualities and in some places these qualities create something together, a kind of place-mind, and in other places this does not happen; they just do not gel in the same way. Perhaps we can experience the difference in a way analogous to the way that groups of students sometimes build a new group entity and others remain separate individuals. There is a tangible difference, but it is one that is hard to predict or explain.

The role of the architect would then include identifying the place-mind and thinking through the implications of, for example, adding a particular structure. Presumably this would involve knowing the particular mind-like qualities of the different building materials as well as their adaptation when in particular spatial configurations. Then thinking through how that will gel with and modify the place-mind in the proposed place. Moreover, the extraction of materials would also have implications for their place of origin or current location and this would also need to be taken into account. As a way of prompting responsibility and thoughtfulness panpsychism seems a useful component of spirit of place, but there could be problems over and above creating a fear of any action at all.

The inclusive nature of the idea is driven by the rejection of an anthropocentric hierarchy of valuing and yet it seems to fall directly into this by attributing mind-like qualities (something we have no doubt about humans having) to entities where the possession of mind like qualities is extremely speculative. Playing with such ideas might open up possibilities of changing unhelpful worldviews, but it is not clear that it will help us to understand the real nature of mountains or streams or cobbled

paving. As with the potential anthropomorphism in the notion of character it seems to misapply an attribute to things in order that we should respect them. This could be at the expense of giving us a better understanding of the things as the things they are. The way forward for architects and builders is surely, as it always has been, to develop a sensitive respect for the materials as they occur and when they have been well used and combined in a fitting context.

And many more

Atmosphere is sometimes treated as almost a synonym for spirit of place. There is said to be a special atmosphere or mood about a place. This is partly due to a quasi-metaphorical link to the weather. Thus we associate a particular stretch of coastline with biting winds.   However, on a still summer's day it is as if we see another side to the place.   This other side can be part of the same character even though the atmosphere has changed. Likewise the atmosphere of a street is transformed on market day and yet having a market on Wednesdays might be part of the street's character. Atmosphere does have the virtue of mirroring the vagueness of the notion spirit of place, but if we are seeking a more durable definition it seems that other components, such as character, need to be added.

Spirit of place is sometimes used as a way of expressing the health of a place, of capturing the sense of the very 'flourishingness' of a healthy ecosystem or the vibrancy of good community feeling in a place. Perhaps health here is operating as a metaphor for the emergent property, discussed under 'character', that we experience about places that work.

Occasionally the role of spirit of place seems to be to express something that is not quantifiable in scientific terms. This 'scientifically intangible something' is not investigated further as the point seems to be to criticise science rather than understand the phenomenon itself.

The term also gets used when claiming that it is possible to create a spirit of place: if you just use the correct design principles or natural materials or have the right attitude to daily use. This, of course, contradicts aspects of authenticity and narrative and undermines the role of spirit of place as claiming irreplaceability. If we

can create such places on a blank canvas then the idea fails to provide sound reasons for nurturing and respecting particular places. However, it does hold out hope for the seemingly irredeemable placeless locations.

POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

The shades of meaning above may be taken to reflect a complex, multifaceted nexus of ideas, but in the end we also have to ask: does the notion 'spirit of place' have a sound foundation or is it just a hopeless confusion? I want to outline three possible ways forward.

One response to the confusion that the notion of spirit of place seems capable of generating is to say that there is no such thing. The confusion and contradictions involved are a sure sign of a missing referent (Rapaport 1993). If any such things exist there would be a greater clarity already about what they are.

The second possible way through the confusion is to take an instrumental strategy. We could ask what we want the idea for – what purposes is it meant to serve. Spirit of place is used to protect places from development or to create sensitive changes. It can inform architectural style and prevent 'placeless homogenisation' (Relph 1976). It is used to explain and to promote successful community life. We should think twice before ridding ourselves of a notion that has proved to be rhetorically effective in encouraging sensitive development. What is necessary along this line of thought - if the value is to give weight to the case for one building rather than another or preferring route A for a road over route B - is for the most rhetorically effective definition to be sponsored and the rest disowned.

The third way forward, which I believe will eventually provide a robustness and in fact the foundation of which the instrumental strategy despairs, is to say that spirit of place indeed describes something that is unambiguously real. When we try to describe some places it is simply necessary to include something that is *not* covered by an inventory of their contents or a description of our feelings about them. To discover exactly what this is and to find the best ways of speaking about it means that we need to become sensitive investigators of places - of places that it is claimed have a strong spirit of place and of those that seem the very antithesis of the idea.

How we do that is a complex issue. But an approach would be to try to step outside our cultural presuppositions, our personal likes and dislikes, or the nostrums of current design philosophy in order to meet places (Brook 1998). It is only by doing this that we can discover if this nexus of ideas has real purchase on the place itself.

Even if a place possessed a discoverable spirit, there need be no implication that the place should not be changed. We could use our insight into the spirit of a place as a foundation then add the best of current environmental understanding and, where appropriate, aesthetic sensitivity, political theory, historical perception, and so on. In this way we can lend a place, without violation to its spirit, the best of our cultural discernment.

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