

**Masks of the *Genius Loci*:
Towards a Phenotechnics of Place**



MICHAEL R. DOYLE

The Position from which Architecture Starts

When asked in an interview in September 2021 about his position on architecture, the architect Ricardo E. Bofill of the Barcelona-based firm RTBA replied, “Place should be the position from which architecture starts ... place should be the beginning of the story.”¹ Many architects today would probably agree with that statement and would also nod when Bofill pays homage to Norwegian architect and historian Christian Norberg-Schulz’s introduction of the term *genius loci* or “spirit of place” into common parlance in architecture.

1 Ricardo E. Bofill, “What is Architecture?” 2021: <https://www.whatisarchitecture.cc/ricardo-e-bofill> (accessed December 9, 2021).



In his 1980 publication, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Norberg-Schulz reacts with a kind of horror to the rapid post-war transformation of the European and North American landscapes: “The qualities which traditionally distinguished human settlements,” he writes, “have been corrupted or have got irreparably lost.”² He saw in the built environment an increasing monotony and lack of character. Without geometric variety that stimulates the senses, he claimed, cities are no longer imageable, no longer have, as Kevin Lynch had observed in *The Image of the City* (1960), “a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer.”³ He does not fault Modern Architecture for this loss—he credits the Modernist movement in architecture for having called for a return to things, to the individual, to nature, to daily life, and to freedom from dogma and authority.

The problem for Norberg-Schulz was that the openness of the Modern dwelling was projected onto the urban scale. The international style offered a series of principles to be followed everywhere, one of them being Mies van der Rohe’s dictum of “less is more.” In *Complexity and Contradiction*, published in 1966, architect Robert Venturi accused Mies of justifying “exclusion for expressive purposes,” going on further to argue that such an architecture can “exclude important considerations only at the risk of separating architecture from the experience of life and the needs of society.”⁴ This “architecture of

2 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 189.

3 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960), 9.

4 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), 17.

exclusion,” Norberg-Schulz writes, “mainly told us that the modern world is open; a statement which in a certain sense is anti-urban. Openness cannot be gathered. Openness means departure, gathering means return.”⁵

“Gathering” is a term Norberg-Schulz borrows from Martin Heidegger’s 1954 text *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. For Heidegger, the alarming aspect of the post-war transformation of cities—the “real plight of dwelling”⁶—was not a question of a lack of housing but rather of the human condition’s innate homelessness. The act of *building* is, at the same time, one of *learning to dwell*. Building is dwelling and is, therefore, not simply construction. Dwelling preserves what Heidegger calls *the fourfold* [*das Geviert*]—the earth, the sky, the divine, and the mortal—in *things*, that which is “kept” in building. This keeping is both an active process of “gathering” as well as the place where it is kept—the “thing.”⁷

Heidegger’s thinking provides Norberg-Schulz with a conceptual language for addressing both tangible and intangible aspects of place: “A place,” he writes, “is a space which has a distinct character. Since ancient times the *genius loci*, or ‘spirit of place,’ has been recognized as the concrete reality man [*sic*] has to face and come to terms with in his daily life. Architecture means to visualize the *genius loci*, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man [*sic*] to dwell.”⁸ The “spirit” of which Norberg-Schulz speaks is of Ro-

5 Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 195.

6 Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 156.

7 Heidegger points out the shared etymology of the words “gather” and “thing.” Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 141–60.

8 Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 5.

man origin, the idea that every place has its guardian spirit (*genius loci*), which in antiquity was considered to “own a place, look after it, and imbue it with sense and meaning.”⁹ The role of architecture is not to describe analytically and to fix the qualities of a place, but rather to evoke its character poetically and symbolically: “to protect and conserve the *genius loci* in fact means to concretize its essence in ever new historical contexts.”¹⁰

Architecture preserves the *genius loci* in a way similar to how building and dwelling preserve the fourfold by anchoring it in a location that is not an abstract space but a concrete place. For Norberg-Schulz, “gathering implies that natural meanings are brought together in a *new* way, in relation to human purposes.”¹¹ He does not propose an empirical method to do this, aligning himself more with Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach, by which one’s ability to dwell poetically is the ability to “read” the “revealing of the things which make up our environment.”¹² In fact, Norberg-Schulz sees scientific reasoning as part of the problem: “Everything else [other than that which we receive through the senses], such as atoms and molecules, numbers and so kinds of data, are abstractions or tools which are constructed to serve other purposes than those of everyday life.”¹³ His starting point is that of “being-in-the-world,” which in the phenomenological approach he proposes for architecture implies a pre-reflective state in which one’s sensory experiences are

9 Norman Crowe, *Nature and the Idea of a Man-Made World: An Investigation into the Evolutionary Roots of Form and Order in the Built Environment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 75.

10 Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 18.

11 *Ibid.*, 169.

12 *Ibid.*, 169.

13 *Ibid.*, 6.

closer to the real than theoretical or abstract reasoning. Learning to dwell, for Norberg-Schulz, involves a return to the way in which the world is revealed to the individual in an intuitive (rather than reasoned) sense. One must be able to identify with the *genius loci*—“become friends with a particular environment”—in order to develop a sense of belonging to a place, which is the source of “true freedom.”¹⁴ Architects need to understand “the ‘vocation’ of the place”¹⁵ in order to find out (to propose a variation on Louis Kahn’s famous statement) what it *wants* to be.

Norberg-Schulz’s phenomenological theory of place is poetic but could appear obscurantist in its existential anti-scientific position, more interested in evocation than in description or explanation. It could appear that the “spirit of place” cannot be reasoned—that it is too complex to be addressed mathematically or scientifically. This conclusion is easy to draw but not so easy to defend. There is an overarching context in which the ideas of the *genius loci* in architecture and its Heideggerian roots were evolving during the 20th century.

Appropriation: Identifying with the Spirit of Place

The scapegoat of Norberg-Schulz’s theory of place is scientific abstraction, that which deals with what cannot be experienced by the senses and which is meaningless for everyday life. He appears to be picking up an old prejudice against forms of mediation that sees symbolic forms such as writing or mathematics as obstructions to the subject’s access to the “real.” In *Ces préjugés qui nous encombrant*, the mathematician and philosopher Gilles Dowek argues that the roots of this prejudice lie

14 Ibid., 21.

15 Ibid., 23.

in a historical rejection of technics and writing.¹⁶ He draws from the French philologist Georges Dumézil's functional division of Indo-European cultures into the religious (the clergy), the militaristic (the aristocracy), and the productive (commoners) functions. Writing, Dowek reminds us, did not originate in the religious function, but rather in the productive function, among scribes and accountants. Demonstrating its relevancy for today, Dowek observes that those who occupy the religious and military functions try to elevate themselves above those perceived as commoners whose arts (*technè*) are considered inferior to rational scientific knowledge (*épistémè*) because technics are thought to be blindly executed without thought.

Those who occupy the religious function try to separate themselves from the productive function (and its association with practical applications) by claiming to deal with something whose value cannot be calculated. The religious function surrounds itself in an aura of the sacred. Dowek provides the example of the arts, which during the Renaissance, began to dissociate artistic objects from utility. This is one of the origins of the myth of artistic genius, which elevates artistic practice above mere utility. It corresponds with what sociologist Max Weber called the charismatic form of authority, by which political leaders or groups legitimate their power as having been divinely accorded (being "chosen" to lead).¹⁷

The militaristic function separates itself from the productive one on the grounds that it does not blindly accumulate riches through labor but is oriented towards action and results. Dowek observes this prejudice at

16 Gilles Dowek, *Ces préjugés qui nous encombrant* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

17 Max Weber, *Les catégories de la sociologie*, trans. Julien Freund et al. (Paris: Plon, 1995).

work in the pragmatism of capitalism, by which money is made on capital accumulation and on the work of those who occupy the productive function (factory laborers, for instance). How things work is not important, provided they perform well and produce results that maintain competitiveness in the market. Technics and the abstraction of writing are acceptable, provided they contribute to but do not hinder action.

Dowek argues that the religious and military functions tend to appeal to a conception of knowledge of the world that is unmediated, that is “directly” lived and experienced, and not theoretical or abstract. The impacts can be observed in the philosophy of science when Heidegger and his contemporaries were writing from the mid-19th to the middle of the 20th century. If the Enlightenment was a time when the prejudice towards writing and abstraction significantly waned (with the birth of modern science), it reappeared, Dowek notes, with German Romanticism. Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* or of “being-in-the-world” follows the romantic philosophy of existentialism’s suspicion of abstract theorizing, giving prevalence instead to the immediacy of bodily experience and embodied (pre-reflective) forms of knowing.¹⁸ A similar orientation appears in the work of the logical positivists in the Vienna Circle, who tried to minimize, if not completely remove, appeals to abstract concepts that could not be verified by experience. As Vladimir Tasić points out in *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought*, “the fictional constructs of mathematics — points, space and the infinity of arithmetic, to mention only the milder ones — stub-

18 Charles Guignon, “Existentialism,” ed. by Edward Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, Routledge: 1998), 2643–52.

bornly resist being brought down to experience.”¹⁹ The history of mathematics tells us that this project failed,²⁰ but logical positivism’s offshoot, logical utilitarianism (also called “pragmatism”), accepts fictional constructs or theoretical abstractions provided they have practical utility in the construction of knowledge.²¹

We find these prejudices reiterated in Norberg-Schulz’s theory of place when he opposes “abstract scientific theory” and the “deeper roots” of Heidegger’s phenomenology. He places immediate and embodied forms of knowing as original and more authentic than mediated and disembodied ones. At first, this alienation story seems to contrast with his previous work. In *Intentions in Architecture*, published first in 1962, Norberg-Schulz sought to develop an empirical and analytical theory of architecture that could harness insight from psychology and sociology. Architecture’s “purpose” lies beyond simply responding economically and efficiently to the needs of the client: It can influence the behavior of human beings.²² His analytical method seeks to elucidate this influence in establishing architecture’s purpose. However, it turns away from abstract reasoning towards the behaviouralist emphasis on that which can be empirically observed and measured.

19 Vladimir Tasić, *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27.

20 Eric Temple Bell, *The Development of Mathematics* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1945); Robert Blanché, *L’Axiomatique* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

21 Émile Durkheim, *Pragmatism and Sociology*, ed. by John B. Allcock, trans. by J. C. Whitehouse (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

22 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

The objective is not to dismiss the thinking of Norberg-Schulz (nor of Heidegger) because of these prejudices²³ but rather to see what trying to dispel them might reveal for understanding the “spirit of place.” The *genius loci* is, on the one hand, something that can be experienced, and yet our understanding of such a “spirit” cannot be entirely reduced to our ways of experiencing it in a mere bodily fashion. We are “drawn” towards places in an empathic fashion while also reasoning our experience through abstract symbols. Where Romanticist paradigms generally saw the move from experience to abstraction as a source of alienation, art historian Wilhelm Worringer argued already well over a century ago that abstraction formed part of a general and naturally human artistic volition. His dissertation, *Abstraction and Empathy*, published in German in 1911, was a reaction to 19th-century art history’s tendency to see abstraction in art forms as limited to more advanced societies (“a history of ability”²⁴) and to reduce aesthetic expression to a subjective one of empathy. The drive towards abstraction, his research showed, was not absent in premodern societies. Where the urge to empathize is the projection of the “contemplating self” into the contingent object, the urge to abstraction is the drive to purify the object of its contingency and elevate it to the realm of law and necessity. Artistic volition is predicated, for Worringer, upon an individual or society’s relationship to the world: Empathy emerges from a “happy pantheistic relation-

23 In fact, one cannot live without prejudices, “not only because no human being’s intelligence or insight would suffice to form an individual judgment about everything ... but also because such a total lack of prejudice would require a superhuman alertness.” Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 99.

24 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 9.

ship of confidence” while abstraction is the “outcome of a great inner unrest.” Abstraction is not limited to the rational or scientific but also translates in a religious sense to “a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions.”²⁵

Forms of abstraction move the object or phenomena to a state of objectivity by removing it from its contingent and mutable state as perceived by the individual or group. In Heidegger’s philosophy, the pre-reflective state of poetic existence is the more authentic form of existence than that of rationalism, where a priori intuitions are distrusted in favor of reasoned understanding. Romanticism and existentialism give precedence to empathy in its proximity to the intuitive and pre-reflective pole of aesthetic experience. Ernst Cassirer, also a German philosopher and contemporary of Heidegger, challenged the argument that the nature of things can best be understood by how they appear to our intuition. In his analysis of a famous debate between the two German philosophers in Davos in 1929, Gordon notes that Cassirer saw the “subjective-pragmatic (‘ready-to-hand’) modes of spatiotemporal understanding” as provisional and as only a starting point for human knowledge. Cassirer sought to understand the symbolic forms that constituted the “higher sphere of objectivity,”²⁶ one that was “beyond the existentiality of ‘being-there.’”²⁷ Symbolic forms, he maintained, stabilize meanings that exist in the world rather than create them ex nihilo. Meaning is not applied to inert objects. The sensory does not

25 Ibid., 15.

26 Peter Eli Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 158.

27 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 169; cited in Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 158.

precede the cognitive, but rather there is a revealing of a “knowing” in the “sensory material itself.”²⁸ Language and mathematics are not antithetical but are different symbolic forms that both stabilize meanings that are invisible to perception and yet improve the richness of our understanding. The complexity or unpredictability of a phenomenon does not mean that it is impervious to mathematical formalism²⁹ but rather the opposite. Symbolic forms have yet to be worked out that could place a “particular body in an extraordinarily rich and finely articulated complex of relations.”³⁰

The *genius loci*, as formulated by Norberg-Schulz, celebrates an empathic relation of the individual to place. Its abstraction relies on a symbolic form that tends more toward myth than scientific reason. His “spirit of place” is refractory to analysis. This is a sharp contrast to *Intentions*, in which he enthusiastically promotes a “new synthesis of logic and empiricism.”³¹ However, he remains committed to this project when he turns in *Genius Loci* to a psychological explanation and justification of the importance of the “spirit of place” for individual and collective existence.³² It may be helpful to recall that psychology historically sought to distinguish itself from psychoanalysis (which deals with the subconscious) by adopting the logical positivist credo of formulating

28 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 110.

29 Doweck in *Ces préjugés qui nous encombrant* raises this issue with regard to a commonplace in the social sciences by which “wicked problems” are too complex for mathematical thinking; see especially Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” in *Policy Sciences* 4, no.2 (1973): 155–69.

30 Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms I*, 109.

31 Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, 82.

32 Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*.

the objects of scientific research in terms accessible to empirical methods, notably in terms of observable behaviors and verbalized explanations of action.³³ The “spirit of place” became expressed as “place identity” and then was described as a property of personal or cultural identity.³⁴ In environmental psychology, it is thought of as “an overlap between one’s sense of self and place”³⁵ — the recognition that places are integral to one’s “personal and communal identity and self-worth.”³⁶

This bond is at the core of the concept of place attachment. As evidenced by a review by Scannell and Gifford, the concept tends to be employed by researchers seeking to understand a dynamic system of person and place with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes.³⁷ The interest of architects and urbanists in these studies is to understand what supports or affords (to borrow a word from psychologist J. J. Gibson³⁸) a feeling of attachment or belonging to places in order to create places for which people will feel a sense of ownership

33 Alexander Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2012).

34 Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian and Robert Kaminoff, “Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self,” in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3, no.1 (1983): 57–83.

35 Robert Gifford, “Environmental Psychology Matters,” in *Annual Review of Psychology* 6, no.5/1 (2014): 560.

36 David Seamon, “Place Attachment and Phenomenology,” in *Place Attachment: Advances in Theory, Methods, and Applications*, ed. by Lynne Manzo and Patrick Devine-Wright (New York: Routledge, 2014), 17.

37 Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford, “Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework,” in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30, no.1 (2010): 1–10.

38 James J. Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances,” in *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, ed. by Robert Shaw and John Bransford (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977), 67–82.

and for which they will take responsibility. Addressing the *genius loci* primarily in psychological and psychometric terms seeks less to understand the transcendental and timelessness of the “spirit of place” than to learn to operate the dynamics of an organism–environment mechanism. The way in which place identity is understood through a psychological and anthropocentric encoding and the way in which statistical correlations are instrumentalized for decision-making resembles the militaristic function that rejects the existentialist (but conceptually rich) approach of Heidegger for one that is oriented towards utility and to tangible results. It shifts from one preconception (symbolic abstraction as ineffective for understanding complex phenomena) to another (symbolic abstraction as ineffective for meaningful action), skipping over the *genius loci* as a symbolic form and (impersonal) subject along the way.

Communicating with an Impersonal Subject: From Attachment to Detachment

The *genius loci*, as a “spirit” or “sense” of place, was explored by human geographers as relative to a particular geographical location in space.³⁹ Norberg-Schulz similarly associates the spirit with a unique settlement unit, a particular place where people live or that they experience regularly. The degradation of the environment that he observed was on a local scale, where planning ideologies did not correspond with nor care for the local character. His interest in the *genius loci* was fas-

39 David Manuel-Navarrette and Michael Redclift, “The Role of Place in the Margins of Space,” in *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, ed. by Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate, 2nd ed (Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2010), 334–48.

cination—through his reading of Heidegger—with a noncausal power of place,⁴⁰ but one which could evoke an emotional and aesthetic experience for people.

French philosopher Michel Serres observes with a similar horror the impact of human actions on the world. For him, however, the degradation that Norberg-Schulz observed is not on any one place in particular but on the scale of the planet. Humanity, he observes in *Le contrat naturel*, published in 1990, has become a natural force able to destroy the very conditions of possibility for life on earth.⁴¹ The violence that is discharged over local territorial disputes tends to be directed toward the planet itself. As Serres's intellectual companion René Girard observed, the mass production and consumption of goods whose lifecycle ends only as waste in the ecosystem may be able to temporarily calm the desire for each to have his or her own place just like everyone else, but it comes at great cost.⁴²

In contrast to Norberg-Schulz, Serres neither blames scientific reason nor does he call for a return to nature or pre-technological or pre-modern ways of living. In fact, the tendency to personify Nature—to oppose what is *biologique* (organic) and the scientific practices of *biologie* (biology), to fear chemistry or biotechnology—is symptomatic of the freneticism of times of crisis by which the terms that are used collectively to make sense of the world begin to lose all distinction. This loss leads to a speechlessness that has become usurped by the media, which have adopted the religious function of sorting

40 Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

41 Michel Serres, *Le contrat naturel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).

42 René Girard, *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, (Paris: Grasset, 2001), see the chapter "Le triomphe de la croix."

good from evil and engaging in evangelistic publicity of paths to salvation, even if it comes in secular terms such as saving the planet, saving our cities, or saving the spirit of particular places.⁴³

As Serres argues in *Le contrat naturel*, “if our rational could wed the real, the real our rational, our reasoned undertakings would leave no residue; so if garbage proliferates in the gap between them, it’s because that gap produces pollution, which fills in the distance between the rational and the real.”⁴⁴ The problem is one of equipollence—equality in power and degree—of the rational and the real. Our collective relationship with the planet is mediated by objects whose scale is equal to that of the planet: ballistic missiles for space, satellites for their rotational speed, nuclear residue on par with geological time, and the atomic bomb for energy and heat. For Serres, the fact that with these world-objects we communicate on the scale of the planet is the major paradigm shift that no previous era knew.⁴⁵ This communication is, for Serres, an externalization of our reason, not a by-product. It is not a prosthesis: It is the way in which human reason meets the artificial intelligence of the world.⁴⁶

Serres’s thinking is thereby closer to that of Ernst Cassirer than to Heidegger. Although he sees a danger-

43 Serres’s focus is on the deification of Nature and of the religious gesture of “ecology,” see Michel Serres, “Le concept de Nature,” in *Études* 400, no.1 (2004): 67–74.

44 Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 24–25.

45 Michel Serres, “Trahison: la thanatocratie,” in *La traduction, Hermès* 3 (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1968), 73–103.

46 This is where Serres’s understanding of technology differs from that of Gilbert Simondon, see Michel Serres, Martin Legros and Sven Ortoli, *Pantopie: de Hermès à petite poucette* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2014).

ous power in science, it is through the scientific enterprise's attempts to bridge the singular and the universal that humanity can collectively defuse the internecine violence that characterized pre-modern societies. Mathematics provides a language that can, in principle, be learned by anyone. No vernacular language can claim ownership over the technics by which the world is reasoned. The symbolic forms that Cassirer observed in his philosophy of human culture are part of the way in which the world is experienced. He insists that "the illusion of an original division between the intelligible [*idealism*] and the sensuous [*empiricism*], between idea and 'phenomenon' vanishes."⁴⁷ Unlike Enlightenment thinkers, who thought that nature was written in the language of mathematics like an *open book*, mathematics is, for Serres, a *cipher* by which one tries to approximate both the code and the key (ordering mechanism) of a world written in cipher text.⁴⁸ This double articulation is situated between the rational and the real that calls for a finesse by which human intelligence learns through both experience (by being plunged into the contingent world of objects) and reason (by abstracting such contingency into law-like necessities, however provisional and open to critique and testing).

Unlike Cassirer, however, Serres does not situate the locus of cognition solely with the human subject. Humans are not alone in thinking: "Because information circulates universally within and between the totality of all existing things," Serres writes, "we really cannot say that we are as exceptional as we think we are. What is thinking, if not at least carrying out these four oper-

47 Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms I*, 111.

48 Michel Serres, *La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce: fleuves et turbulences*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977).

ations: receiving, emitting, storing, and processing information like all existing things?”⁴⁹ Cassirer’s neo-Kantianism means that the invariance of the experienced object lies in the human subject, which is the subjective transcendental that characterizes the Kantian tradition of subject philosophy. Our scientific understanding of the world, for Serres, allows us to understand how “the formal characteristics of objects determine the formal conditions of possibility of experience and knowledge.”⁵⁰ For Serres, “There is meaning [*sens*] in space before the meaning [*sens*] that signifies.”⁵¹ The transcendental of Serres is an objective one. It is akin to saying “It thinks” like one would say “It rains”: It is an impersonal subject.

The *genius loci* could be thought of, in a secular sense, as an impersonal subject. It becomes, like the planet, a symbiont—not our adversary to be mastered and possessed. In *Le parasite*, Serres ponders the tendency in the animal world to take without giving anything in return. The parasitic gesture is one in which what is “One’s own [*le propre*] is what is clean [*le propre*],” and it is directly rooted in the idea of property [*la propriété*] that claims ownership by making something proper only for oneself or for the members of one’s community and improper (dirty [*impropre*]) for everyone else.⁵² To mark one’s ter-

49 Michel Serres, “Information and Thinking,” in *Philosophy After Nature*, ed. Rosi Braidotti (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 13–20.

50 Anne Crahay, *Michel Serres: La mutation du cogito: genèse du transcendantal objectif* (Bruxelles: De Boeck, 1988), 27.

51 Michel Serres, *Rome: le livre des fondations* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983), 22–23, author’s translation.

52 Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 144.

ritory through forms of appropriation means literally to “take as one’s own” from *ad-* and *propriare*.⁵³

The word “property” is also used to assign attributes to things in analysis and classification, which can lead to confusion in the description of what something “is” with the enumeration of what something “has.” Defining being in terms of properties, Serres maintains, reduces a thing’s identity to an abstract class by which it can be associated with other things having the same properties. This confusion is one between “belonging” (*appartenance*) and “identity,” where one confuses properties, which form the classes to which a thing belongs, with the identity of the thing itself. Speaking to the reader, Serres writes, “But who are you then? ... Let’s say your identity. The only true response: you and only you.”⁵⁴ Identity, he reminds us, is represented by the mathematical symbol \equiv that defines a thing tautologically ($A \equiv A$). It is not an equality sign. Equality implies an identity relation that is worked out through equation.⁵⁵ Belonging is represented by the symbol \in and means “element of.” It implies an inclusionary relationship in a set, the set to which one belongs based on the properties one has. When the separation between belonging and identity is not maintained, identification becomes a form of appropriation. However, if we follow Serres, to identify with something is not to posit a relationship of stability or of property but rather to establish a relationship of alterity that can-

53 Douglas Harper, “Appropriate,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2021 http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=appropriate (accessed December 17, 2021).

54 Michel Serres, *L’incandescent* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2003), 144.

55 See Vera Bühlmann, “Equation (Mathematical Thinking),” in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 133–38.

not leave the self [*le moi*] unchanged as it becomes the host of actively invited alterity.⁵⁶

Following this line of reasoning, place identity is *not* synonymous with the attachment by any one individual or group of individuals to a place. The identity of a place is the tautology of its being itself and only itself—or, inversely, of being not every other place. If the *genius loci* is an impersonal subject, then it is perhaps the Other with which one can identify. But it is not about claiming ownership nor guardianship over this subject. Even if there could be potential positive or negative psychological effects of a sense of belonging in the identification with places, it is mediated through symbolic forms. In thinking the relation of equipollence between the real and the rational, perhaps it is more appropriate to talk about the way in which place attachment can emerge from one's ability to *detach* from the *genius loci*—to withhold the tendency to confuse one's own identity with a particular place.

Masks of the *Genius Loci*: Embracing a World in Which Things Do Not Fit

To summarize, we began with Bofill's statement about place being the position from which architecture should start. For Norberg-Schulz, this starting point is the *genius loci*, the character or atmosphere of that place. When humanity knows how to dwell in such a place, it will know how to build as to preserve the *genius loci*, how to gather, following Heidegger, the temporary (the mortals), the eternal (the immortals), the celestial (the sky), and the terrestrial (the earth). From there, we encounter two di-

56 See especially the section "La vie et le moi comme œuvre," in Serres, *L'incandescent*, 123–25.

rections that the “spirit of place” or “identity of place” has taken: the romantic existentialist one for which a return to place is a return to the pre-reflective—a relationship to place that is semi-religious, in a kind of poetic, bodily communion—and the other, positivist or psychological, for which a return to place is the embracing of a mechanism in which one’s “identity” is inseparable from the “identity” of place. Both approaches address the *genius loci* from the standpoint of the human subject whose perception of place is clouded by abstractions that are either scientific or mythical in nature. They implicitly adopt the thesis that the empathic and empirical relationships by which one is plunged into the sensible world are the authentic ones to which our relationship to place ought to return. However, as we saw with Woringer and Cassirer, we should not be too quick to accept such a claim dogmatically. Abstraction is an opposite but complementary pole of artistic volition and a way that humanity comes to terms with an incomprehensible world. This relationship to the world is mediated by symbolic forms of which language and mathematics are different types of abstraction. These symbolic forms are not applied to the world but arise from it. Technological objects encapsulate and externalize the nexus at which a subjective form of cognition meets an objective form of cognition. The destructive power of human reason is no longer limited to the scale of a single settlement and single “rationalist” planning body but has extended to the planetary scale—it challenges us to establish relationships of equipollence between the rational and the real. To presume a “direct,” unmediated link between the two would be to repeat an anti-intellectual misconception about abstract forms (in Dowek’s account) and to risk, for Serres, in not accounting for the *immondices*

(“filth” or pollution) that such a transparentist ideology releases into the world.

To follow this line, learning to dwell would mean learning to live with the impersonal subject that is the *genius loci*. It would mean learning to articulate a relation of equipollence between the rational and the real. The symbolic forms that mediate between the two are not the sole property of subjects nor of objects but emerge in the finesse of their mutual communication. They are both *persons* embarked upon a *milieu* that holds them together at the same time they are held apart. The word *person* carries in its etymology the Roman (Latin) sense of the mask by which one articulates their voice in public—that through which (*per-*) one’s voice propagates (“sounds,” *sonare*).⁵⁷ As such, the subject that is the *genius loci* “sounds through” in the character (*personnage*) of place. Place becomes a kind of mask of the *genius loci*. It is, in this sense, both technical and physical. However, it is by no means meaningless: The masks are symbolic forms that stabilize meanings that are already in the world, even if they appear at first indecipherable by the human intellect. The human subject also learns to stabilize meanings via masks, which are also technical and physical, even as he or she enrolls the body as perhaps a first symbolic form. There is no form of existence in which all masks can be removed.

The *milieu*, which is a between place (*mi-lieu*), would be the realm in which these soundings propagate. This does not mean that the human world is reduced to one of pure signals: Humanity has learned to modulate this communicational milieu in ways that certainly surpass

57 Douglas Harper, “Person,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2021 http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=person (accessed December 17, 2021).

most organisms of the biosphere. Perhaps learning to dwell is learning to tune the masks by which we sound into the *milieu* with those of the way the *genius loci* sounds into this same *milieu*. If there is something like an ability to “attach” to place, it would not resemble possession or belonging but the instrumentation that allows a ship to orientate and propel itself on the open sea. In the ethical stance, one can glean from Serres’s writing that attachment is, at the same time, detachment.⁵⁸

In lieu of a conclusion that might arrive somewhere where everything fits, this article will end with the precise opposite—embracing a necessary lack of fitting. In *The Sympathy of Things*, published in 2011, architect Lars Spuybroek offers *sympathy* as a third “pole” (perhaps an equator) in Worringer’s dual polarity of abstraction and empathy. It concerns “the resonance of two things and the synchronization of two activities.”⁵⁹ To pick up the naval metaphor, where empathy would lead to love or hate of the sea and abstraction would lead to a translation of oceanic phenomena into abstract forms or terms, sympathy is the sailing of the ship by which wind, waves, the positions of the land or the color of the sky are brought into a delicate harmony with the ship itself by its captain and crew. Two behaviors are synchronized, like “two people dancing, or two stars orbiting around each other.”⁶⁰

In *Grace and Gravity*, published in 2020, Spuybroek offers an account of the *milieu* in which things resonate, which he brings from the sonic metaphor from *The Sympathy of Things* into the domain of light and radiance.

58 Michel Serres, *Détachement: apologue* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983).

59 Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 108.

60 Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, 121.

Rather than thinking, with Heidegger's phenomenology, in terms of appearances that register only with the mind, Spuybroek proposes to conceive of appearances as a shining forth. He, therefore, does not abandon the masks of appearances but does not try to get behind them as Heidegger does. He, instead, takes them as the things they give themselves, for instance, as halos: "a thing does not have a halo, it is a halo ... things shed as much light on us as we on them."⁶¹ He proposes to call this phenotechnics and to contrast it with phenomenology. Whereas for Heidegger's phenomenology, the fourfold emphasizes vertical stability in a place (*topos*), Spuybroek's phenotechnology operates and emphasizes the figurative dance, a turning or *tropos* that "operates both on the vertical and the horizontal."⁶²

The "turn" accounts for the fact that "we and things do not—and should not—fit, for it is in the gap between habit and inhabitation that the figure appears."⁶³ Habit and inhabitation, the vertical and the horizontal, like the rational and the real, are held together by being held apart. To eliminate the gap between them would be to reduce one to zero (its death) and the other, unchecked, to potential infinity: Norberg-Schulz witnessed disfigured settlements; Serres witnessed a wounded planet. Learning to dwell is perhaps learning to preserve this gap, to reduce neither the real to the rational nor the rational to the real. It is learning to dance with the *genius loci*, knowing neither the steps nor even the body whose limbs we are to set into motion.

61 Lars Spuybroek, *Grace and Gravity: Architectures of the Figure* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 72.

62 *Ibid.*, 99.

63 *Ibid.*, 23.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005.
- Bell, Eric Temple. *The Development of Mathematics*. 2nd Edition. London: McGraw-Hill, 1945.
- Blanché, Robert. *L'axiometique*. Paris: Vrin, 2009.
- Bofill, Ricardo E. "What is Architecture?" 2021. <https://www.whatisarchitecture.cc/ricardo-e-bofill> (accessed December 9, 2021).
- Bühlmann, Vera. "Equation (Mathematical Thinking)." In *Posthuman Glossary*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, 133–38. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Casey, Edward S. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms I*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms III*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.
- Crahay, Anne. *Michel Serres: la mutation du cogito: genèse du transcendantal objectif*. Bruxelles: De Boeck, 1988.
- Crowe, Norman. *Nature and the Idea of a Man-Made World: An Investigation into the Evolutionary Roots of Form and Order in the Built Environment*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995.
- Dowek, Gilles. *Ces préjugés qui nous encombre*. Paris: Seuil, 2009.
- Durkheim, Emile. *Pragmatism and Sociology*, edited by John B. Allcock. Translated by J. C. Whitehouse. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Gibson, James J. "The Theory of Affordances." In *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, edited by Robert Shaw and John Bransford, 67–82. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977.
- Gifford, Robert. "Environmental Psychology Matters." *Annual Review of Psychology* 65, nr. 1 (2014): 541–79.
- Girard, René. *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*. Paris: Grasset, 2001.
- Gordon, Peter Eli. *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Guignon, Charles. "Existentialism." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig, 2643–2652. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Harper, Douglas. "Appropriate." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2021. http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=appropriate (accessed December 17, 2021).

Harper, Douglas. "Person." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2021. http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=person (accessed December 17, 2021).

Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, 141–60. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960.

Manuel-Navarrette, David, and Michael Redclift. "The Role of Place in the Margins of Space." In *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, edited by Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate, 334–48. Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2010.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Intentions in Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992.

Proshansky, Harold M., Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff. "Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self." In *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3, nr. 1 (1983): 57–83.

Rittel, Horst W. J., and Melvin M. Webber. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." In *Policy Sciences* 4, nr. 2 (1973): 155–69.

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Rosenberg, Alexander. *Philosophy of Social Science*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012.

Scannell, Leila, Robert Gifford. "Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30, nr. 1 (2010): 1–10.

Seamon, David. "Place Attachment and Phenomenology." In *Place Attachment: Advances in Theory, Methods, and Applications*, edited by Lynne Manzo and Patrick Devine-Wright, 11–20. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Serres, Michel. *Détachement: apologue*. Paris: Flammarion, 1983.

Serres, Michel. "Information and Thinking." In *Philosophy after Nature*, edited by Rosi Braidotti, 13–20. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

- Serres, Michel. *La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce: fleuves et turbulences*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977.
- Serres, Michel. "Le concept de Nature." In *Études* 400, nr. 1 (2004): 67–74.
- Serres, Michel. *Le contrat naturel*. Paris: Flammarion, 2009.
- Serres, Michel. *L'incandescent*. Paris: Le Pommier, 2003.
- Serres, Michel. *Rome: le livre des fondations*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983.
- Serres, Michel. *The Natural Contract*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Serres, Michel. *The Parasite*. Translated by Lawrence R. Schehr. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Serres, Michel. "Trahison: la thanatocratie." In *La traduction, Hermès* 3. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1968, 73–103.
- Serres, Michel, Martin Legros, and Sven Ortoli. *Pantopie: de Hermès à petite poucette*. Paris: Le Pommier, 2014.
- Spuybroek, Lars. *Grace and Gravity: Architectures of the Figure*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020.
- Spuybroek, Lars. *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*. Revised and expanded edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Tasić, Vladimir. *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Venturi, Robert. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977.
- Weber, Max. *Les catégories de la sociologie*. Translated by Julien Freund, Pierre Kamnitzer, Pierre Bertrand, Éric de Dampierre, Jean Maillard, and Jacques Chavy. Paris: Plon, 1995.
- Worringer, Wilhelm. *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.



for patina, the love of the old, and because of that they hammer out modern 'wrought iron' and soil the new wainscoting of their apartments with bistro.

— Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals were White* (1937)

Here we might recall someone else who sympathized with and defended dirty children: Fourier, whose 'phalanstery' was not only a socialist utopia but a pedagogical one as well. Fourier divided the children in the phalanstery into two main groups: the *petites bandes* and the *petites hordes*. The *petites bandes* were assigned to gardening and other pleasant duties. The *petites hordes* had to perform the unwholesome tasks. Each child was free to choose between the two groups. Those who chose to join the *petites hordes* were more highly honored. No work was undertaken in the phalanstery until they had begun it; cases of cruelty to animals were under their jurisdiction; they

had miniature ponies on which they tore through the phalanstery at an impetuous gallop; and when they assembled for work, the gathering was marked by a deafening cacophony of trumpet blasts, steam whistles, bell ringing, and drums. In the members of the *petites hordes*, Fourier saw four great passions at work: pride, shamelessness, insubordination, and—most important of all — *le gout de la salete*, the joy in filth.

— Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (trans. 1998)

Evil is equivalent to life, which we don't know how and don't want to define so as not to admit that life is equivalent to this violence that kills, in the long term, by mutation, selection and adaptation, that kills, daily, for dietary survival, that kills, lastly, in order not to die by being eaten, that kills, additionally, for pleasure sometimes. How, consequently, can we free ourselves from evil without