Genius Loci (Spirit of Place)

What is the spirit of place (Latin: Genius loci, in Ancient Rome – the guardian spirit of a place)? It is conveyed by artists in their novels, poems and works of art, photography and cinematography, and it has been enjoying an increasingly wide coverage from the scientific community as well. However, everybody can feel the spirit of place – one just needs to rise above the daily whirl, to stop and look through open eyes at the environment surrounding us... Let us open up and the spirit of place will start telling us about past mysteries – the people who lived, created, suffered, fought and left a tiny part of themselves, about the turbulent events and the amazing human ability to create special places from pieces of nature and bricks, stone and wood, which allow to feel, at least for a minute, the existence of Earth and man – the air of eternity, the flow of history, and the life of past generations.

Such places do not necessarily have to be related to prominent architectural works. The spirit of place may settle in many different ways – in the ancient town, at the crossroad of small streets, in the churchyard, in a small square with the ancient tree, on the rural road or old hill... There were cultures that had perfectly mastered the art of place making. However, places are not created at once; they are patiently shaped from generation to generation even if they look as if they have been formed naturally.

One of the first genius loci minstrels – John Ruskin, a famous thinker, art critic and heritage theoretician of the XIX century, wrote in his book “Seven Lamps of Architecture” (1849): “For, indeed the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have been long washed by the passing waves of humanity. It is in their lasting witness against men, in their quiet contrast with the transitional character of all things, in the strength which, through the lapse of seasons and times, and the decline and birth of dynasties, and the changing of the face of the earth, and of the limits of the sea, maintains its sculptured shapeliness for a time insuperable, connects forgotten and following ages with each other, and half constitutes the identity, as it concentrates the sympathy, of nations: it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture; and it is not until a building has assumed this character, till it has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death, that its existence, more lasting as it is than that of the natural objects of the world around it, can be gifted with even so much as these possess, of language and of life.”

Such places are alive, have an unrepeatable character and tend to uniquely shape the people living there. This special relationship between people and heritage sites was described by a famous heritage theoretician Max Dvorak “Catechism of Monument Preservation” (1916): “Not everyone can travel far and look for works of ancient art; therefore, many people lose everything that ancient art could have given to them when the relicts of art in their homeland are destroyed. When the places where these people live are impoverished, their life is impoverished as well – thus, the closest links connecting the people with their native land are disrupted”.

This amazing relationship between man and his environment is wonderfully revealed in the novel Gyvenimas Po Klevu [Life under the Maple Tree] by Romualdas Granauskas.
It is *genius loci* that evokes love in people for the place and draws them to return and “*hurry to a date with the built-in piece as if it was a date with a live person*”, as poet Boris Pasternak wrote about Venice back then.

In Lithuania, most praises have been sung to the spirit of Vilnius, which attracted the attention of people who are sensitive to beauty, whether they are painters, poets, scientists, or simply city lovers, in the XIX century already. The special *Vilnius-like* interactions between the city and nature, internal spaces and architecture, the connections between elite and local architecture, and the scale and rhythm of the city were addressed... According to Jan Bulhak, one of the most poetic “*portraitists*” of Vilnius: “*In Vilnius, it is impossible to remain an indifferent observer for a longer time and coldly communicate with the city. Vilnius either attracts or repels. You either understand and fall in love with it unconditionally or withdraw, grumbling and complaining about everything* /.../. Vilnius speaks not to everyone because it speaks in a quiet voice and only about simple or great things. It is unable to shout as if in the crowd at the market /.../. Vilnius is, first of all, the symbol of soul and intuition, a subtle and dangerous mark, because it puts to the test the deepest layers of human entity and seems to be a disastrous trap under a spell for the unblessed /.../, it makes no mistakes in separating the wheat from the chaff in human beings/../” (Jan Bulhak *A Photographer’s Wanderings. Notebook VIII-IX. Landscape of Vilnius*. Vilnius, 1936).

A great number of such wonderful places suffused with *genius loci* have survived in the whole of Lithuania, namely, in the squares of old towns, in the streets of strip villages, in the churchyards and their environs, close to mounds, and in the locations where there used to be sacrificial sites and places of worship, or close to the ancient trees... They are particularly interconnected with the traditions of wood architecture and construction and the ability of local craftsmen to create not only buildings but also the whole environment of villages and towns. The pulse of the ancient spirit of a place is still felt in the old towns of Samogitia and Higher Lithuania, such as Beržoras, Alsėdžiai, Plateliai, Laukuva, Tvarai, Tabariškės, Palūšė, Stelmužė, and Imbradas... It is still alive in most of the Lithuanian ethnographic villages, namely, Dieveniškės, Poškonys, Žižmai, and Rimašiai... Life is spread by the material itself – wood warmed up by the dedication and love of ancient builders, as if it has absorbed the entire life of our ancestors, their joy and tears, their discoveries and despair. Buildings, nature and earth intermingles with the immaterial cultural heritage – songs, customs, beliefs and memories...

However, nowadays such places worldwide are threatened by new development related to technical possibilities to alter large areas rapidly and cheaply. The disappearance of ancient places prompted scientists to examine the phenomenon of the spirit of place thoroughly, particularly the impact it has on man and local communities. Moreover, it is sought to determine how such places, where the presence of the spirit is felt by many, are special, why *genius loci* appears and disappears, how to protect, maintain and create this immaterial feature of the material environment of mankind. Philosophers, culturologists, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists discuss this actively, global conferences are organised, multi-branch international research is carried out, and detailed monographs are published...

The protection of the spirit of place is becoming an increasingly greater concern in the field of monument protection. UNESCO, the Council of Europe and EU institutions adopt special legal regulations. In October 2008, the International Council on Monuments and Sites ICOMOS organised
a global scientific symposium “Finding the Spirit of Place – Between the Tangible and the Intangible” and adopted the Quebec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place.

The spirit of place is like an invaluable gift of the past, triggered off by time and the life of many generations. However, it will be preserved to the extent that it is necessary for people, local communities. It is impossible to create the spirit of place when one thinks of this or wishes this – it comes by itself. However, we can easily make it go away by changing the ancient environment without due care and love. And wooden heritage is one of the most fragile and vulnerable parts of the past culture. Therefore, let us look around, in the whole of Lithuania, find the locations of the spirit of place, both the outstanding and the modest ones, and foster them so that the places and locations suffused with genius loci would continue to give joy to us, our children and grandchildren.

Jūratė Markevičienė