

## **Spirit: the essence of cultural meanings through times adapted to the contemporary needs of a place**

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**Abstract.** The concept of *spirit* and *place* are defined through a philosophical view. Upon a preliminary reference that considers cultural diversity, there are proposed categories with the objective to construct a conceptual framework: natural landscapes and human settlements; *significant nature* and sacred places; constructed structures with historical testimonies and living settlements; objects and itineraries. Taking the premise that through times some places have attractiveness that till now have been their hidden values, it is fundamental to identify this *spirit* that can give sustainability for their adequate development. Thus it is possible to create physical anchors for the lasting intangible values of a culture.

*Spirit* is the potentiality of thinking, when it accesses the truth and the universal (Compte-Sponville 2003). Through times, mankind has tried to give materiality to this volatile capacity and has made efforts to link it to tangible features. The consequence of this process has been to have it, at any form, registered and preserved for the times to come. So it can be considered that spirit, when linked to the tangible, is a certain relationship between men to its surrounding.

*Place* is a space in which it is given limits (Compte-Sponville 2003). *Genius loci*, the *spirit of place*, is a variable used since ancient times to deal with the reality of mankind creating its *habitat* in a meaningful way. And some of these places contain such special qualities that their *spirit* affects a great number of persons, so the inhabitants as also visitors. It can be said that these outstanding places incorporate universal values.

With the support of these concepts, borrowed from the philosophical thinking, some contributions can be made in order to

understand and consequently make interventions to deal with contemporary situations related to this approach. Spirit linked to place gives essence and identity to a culture (or cultural subject). The reflections upon these facts can lead to conclusions that give support to desirable transformations of places.

The objective of this reflection is to identify parameters that are lasting values through times. Their nature can be of geographical; functional; symbolic or cultural characteristics. The identification and maintenance of these values are hidden clues for the attractiveness and sustainability of a place and a culture.

### **1. Constructing a preliminary reference**

Nowadays, the humankind's relations with its creations are marked with the transitory, uncertain and risk. In this context, the physical testimonies of the past, when brought to conscience and correlated, function as anchors that relate past to present.

What are the characteristic elements of these special places that express in a relevant way its *spirit*?

One of the most important factors in perceiving the *spirit of a place* is its' capacity to surprise or produce a strong impact. In this context, the unusual, in special the unknown, is a strong element. The iconography of South America brings examples of the perceived *spirit* of the *New Land* in the imaginary of the European population of that time that is expressed in the decoration of some maps (Figure 1).

The view of the beauty of a place can be overwhelming. An other aspect is related to elements that were made sacred and in some way emanate a *spirit* that can be perceived even by outsiders of the culture that produced the monument (such as Macchu Picchu in Peru, the Mexican pyramids, Taj Mahal in India, the peregrine road of Santiago in Spain). Otherwise there are places known for being scenes of relevant facts that produce a strong impact due to its history (a contemporary reference would be the former World Trade Center Site Memorial in New York, USA).

Different cultural basis or the experiences of the subject can also produce diversity in the perception of this *spirit*. For instance, the

communities that are more related to natural surroundings develop a much more detailed and different approach to these natural elements.



*Figure 1.* The imaginary spirit of the place expressed in the Iconography of the XVI century: the American part of the Planisphere made by Descelliers (1546).

## 2. Proposed Categories

**Natural Landscapes** are important for themselves, and are also the support for the existence of human life on earth.

Independently of the importance of the preservation and adequate management, some natural ecosystems can also be of astonishing beauty (Figure 2).

Besides their physical form, natural landscapes incorporate also different expressions that can change their outlook, and deeply affect

our senses. As examples can be mentioned the different light conditions, movement of the waters, volume and color of the vegetation, sounds and smells...

The different geographical elements and ecosystems are fundamental for human activities. They are also the basis for the constructed structures that in consequence are required. So, territory, environment and natural landscape are basic conditioning elements to be considered to evaluate the spirit of a place. (Figure 3)



*Figure 2.* An impressive natural landscape: Iguazu Waterfalls, Paraná, Brazil.



*Figure 3.* The Island of Santa Catarina, Brazil, with its outstanding landscape, is an example of the necessity to adjust the natural substratum to the necessities of sustainable occupation.

### **Human Settlement**

**“Significant” Nature and Sacred Places** are cultural testimonies of a group that till now have been perceived through a mythic or sacred approach.

The exceptionality of a place often transformed them in sacred and symbolic meanings were attached to geographical elements. An interesting example is the Iauaretê Waterfall in Alto Rio Negro, Amazonas, Brazil, that is a fundamental reference for the Indian Nations that live in the region of the Uapés and Papuri rivers. Some geographical elements such as stones and islands of the waterfall symbolize wars, persecutions, deaths and alliances related to the creation myths of the origin of humanity and also to the historical narratives of these communities (IPHAN, 2006) (Figure 4)



*Figure 4. Iuaretê Waterfall in Alto Rio Negro (with representatives of the Tariano and Tukano people), Amazonas, is Brazilian intangible heritage, inscribed in the Book of the Register of Places, based on the studies of IPHAN, the Heritage Institute of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture.*

### **Constructed Structures**

**Historical Testimonies** are places that survive in collective memory for the remembrance of episodes or situations that marked a community. Generally they survive as memorials, ruins or reference centers.

The Jesuit Missions of the Guaranis, located in a region that covers Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, are an example of flourishing settlements in the XVII and XVIII centuries, whose activities suffered a halt without having a substitution or continuity. The place remained ruined and is a historical reference. It maintains a strong *spirit* related to the effort to construct a different society based on social, artistic and democratic values (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Ruins of the Jesuit missions of São Miguel das Missões, Brazil.

**Living Settlements** are places that through the times achieve to maintain attractiveness that justify their existence. These settlements are composed of different layers of occupation that correspond to social, political and economical dynamic of the historical context. The significance of each period together forms the totality of the *spirit of that place*.

The choice of a place could have a great variety of reasons, such as defensive, commercial, industrial, administrative, geopolitical or spiritual matters. The original functions often were substituted and the success of the continuity of the settlement depended on its capacity to deal with the greater transformations that it was submitted. In this context, the nowadays tourism activities are a great challenge for the places that deal with more intangible values.

There are towns that lost their former importance and their development allowed the maintenance of the architectonic structures of previous periods. Ouro Preto, the old capital of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, founded because of the gold mines at the end of the XVII century, is such a case (Figure 6).

There are planned cities. An outstanding example is Brasilia, idealized as an act of will of the Brazilian president Juscelino Kubitschek upon bare land with the objective to bring development to the central part of the country. It's a landmark in the history of town

planning, having as urban planner Lúcio Costa and as architect Oscar Niemeyer (Figure 7).

The places that are inserted in the contemporary trend have more difficulties to identify their *spirit*. Cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Buenos Aires, Argentina and also New York, Paris, London and Berlin are examples that succeeded to maintain their identity in a very clear way. That probably happened because the development of their economic dynamic occurred in parallel with other more subtle values, such as arts (Figure 8).



*Figure 6. The colonial town of Ouro Preto, was the center of Brazils' gold mining cycle in the XVII and XVIII centuries.*





Figure 7. Brasília, Brazil's capital since 1960 is an example of the application of the principles of the Athens Charter.



Figure 8. Rio de Janeiro was for a long time Brazil's capital and synthesized the spirit of the country.

## Objects and Itineraries

**Sacred Objects** are mobile components that give essence to the *spirit of a place*. That is, the object turns a space sacred *per se*, independently in which place it is inserted.

One example is the Kuarup, both a ritual and the name of a tree. This very complex ritual is related to life and death of human beings.

It is a long and expensive ceremony that celebrates one year of the death of a person. During the ceremony the trunk of the tree Kuarup is related to the honored person that for a short period even gets revived in the trunk.

Another example that could be referred, in the Jewish cultural context, is the Torah, the sacred scrolls with the Scriptures of the Pentateuch. This mobile element is historically a strong reference of its identity. The religious belief is that the presence of the scrolls turns a place sacred and able to shelter religious ceremonies.

**Conecting Paths** such as commercial routes, peregrine roads and other cultural itineraries have the capacity to aggregate and the common aspects, present in the individual elements, are emphasized and become part of the group.

A South American example in this context, which needs more profound studies, is the legendary road of Peabiru that connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The path would begin in Brazil, in the state of São Paulo, would cross the Paraguayan *chaco*, reach Bolivia, pass the Andes and get to the Pacific Ocean in the south of Peru. Among the existent theories this was an important cultural and commercial itinerary that linked a great extension of territory in Latin America.

Complementary it is also said that the connection was opened by the Guarani people searching the mythological “Land without evil”. This magical territory would be the house of the ancestors and was describe as a place where death wasn’t known. In this context the Peabiru would be a sacred road that passed by the lost paradise. And as it can be observed in other traditions, probably the process along the road would be more important than the final destiny itself. (Bueno, 1998)

### 3. Conclusion

*Spirit of a place.* Who, in presence of a special place didn’t feel its *spirit* and felt in some way touched?

The selection of these references can be based on perception, memory, affectivity and valuation. But these references need an observer. Therefore, the apprehension is individual, and might not be

perceived by others. Probably this special *spirit* has to be authentic and won't be found in places without some natural or cultural context.

But above all there is an important factor to be pursued: the identification of the reasons of the continuous attractiveness of a place that maintains its vitality through times.

The places bring within themselves essential aspects that give them identity. They are the support for their development. These are subtle aspects, emerged in the collective unconscious and have to be brought to conscience. However, these are powerful aspects, capable to cause profound changes. Bringing them to concreteness gives sense and significance to a place. If they are adapted to nowadays necessity they can induce attractiveness and development. So it is a challenge to insert these intangible values. Connecting the tangible with the intangible and transforming *esprit* into *espoir*, gives us hope in continuity, adapted to nowadays necessities.

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## ILLUSTRATION ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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