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GENIUS LOCI – The Spirit of Monuments and Sites

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Dear Colleagues,

I would like to use the honour to give a keynote speech at our symposium *The Spirit of Place / between the Intangible and Tangible* to evoke the authentic genius loci connected with the work of ICOMOS since its foundation more than four decades ago. For of course, hidden behind the topic of the 16th General Assembly – Spirit of Place / Esprit du Lieu – is nothing else than a literal translation from Latin of the good old GENIUS LOCI, which sometimes resists rational explanations, but nonetheless has to be taken seriously as a spirit inherent in all monuments and sites. This is the reason for the somewhat old-fashioned title of my speech *GENIUS LOCI – the Spirit of Monuments and Sites*, – even if neither this kind of guardian angel of the conservationists is mentioned in the call for papers for this conference nor the word “monument”, a term some colleagues seem to shun like the devil shuns the holy water. However, during my attempts to better grasp the GENIUS LOCI connected with millions of monuments and sites (“où se cache l’esprit du lieu”?) I discovered that this is still – or once again – a phenomenon of topical interest. Even the internet offers us, apart from a link to a music band by the name of GENIUS LOCI, an abundance of serious and not so serious literature, including popular esotericism.

Originally, our GENIUS LOCI was a Roman invention: As is well known, in Roman antiquity it was not only man that had his genius, a sort of guardian angel that accompanied him through life and determined his fate, but also certain places, be it the location of a temple or an entire city, had their GENIUS LOCI. In the Forum Romanum stood a statue of the genius of the Roman people and in connection with the imperial cult Augustus gave orders that in the chapels of the quarters of Rome his own genius be placed between the LARES (other protecting spirits, which I won’t go into any further). Aside from the popular genii related to a certain person (the word is derived from *gignere*, which means to engender or man’s power to engender) there were also countless genies related to a place, which, according to our understanding as conservationists and especially in their function as guardian spirits, are of particular importance, together with the LARES also to be found on the family altar. Aurelius Prudentius writes in late antiquity: “You also tend to give genii to the gates, to the houses, the thermae, the stables, and one has to assume that there are many thousands of genii for each place and all parts of a town so that no angle has to be without its own spirit.” Not only villages, towns and communities had their GENIUS LOCI (*genius vici, oppidi, municipi, genius urbis Roma*, etc); also the places of natural landscape were attributed to a genius, that is the genius of the valley, the spring, the river, the mountain (*genius valli, fontis, fluminis, montis*) or of a certain part of a mountain (*genius huius loci montis*). The genius was represented as a sacrificing man or personified as a snake, – in Roman houses also living snakes were kept, and their death was considered a bad omen.

The Greek *daimon*, which to some extent is also related to the GENIUS LOCI, was also depicted as a snake. Some of its attributes could be transferred to the Roman genius. Without wanting to go any further into the relationship between the Roman GENIUS LOCI and the *daimones* more closely linked to the underworld, or into the later connection between the genii and the Christian guardian angels shown as winged beings, I would only like emphasise that in many regions of the world and in different periods there have been ideas comparable to these genii. This starts with animistic or totemistic phenomena – for example, in connection with the mythical place of origin of a clan or the holy places of the ghost-ancestors of the Aborigines; sites marked by totem poles in our host country Canada; or

places in Iceland inhabited by elves and trolls, which sometimes obstruct road constructions. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that even in our globalised world the term GENIUS LOCI, normally only used metaphorically, plays a not so unimportant role, namely in the various scientific fields: in the study of religions, geography and in a kind of eco-psychology in combination with the auratic experience of certain ecological and also aesthetic and synaesthetic qualities of certain places. It also plays a role in modern architectural theory with regard to investigating the possibilities of landscape design and the influence of the individual landscape on architecture (“architecture compatible with landscape”), or of architecture on landscape (see the publication by the Norwegian architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York 1980). And finally, after our symposium in Quebec, perhaps there might also be an increasing influence on theory and practice in conservation?

Even in the metaphorical sense the term GENIUS LOCI is used today, namely as a secularised “spirit” responsible for so-called “places of significance”, it can help not only for future challenges, but also for the occasionally necessary return to the key tasks of ICOMOS, “the international organisation concerned with furthering the conservation, protection, rehabilitation and enhancement of monuments, groups of buildings (ensembles) and sites on the international level” (ICOMOS Statutes, art. 4). If in our principles and guidelines little was said about spirit of place this has to do with the fact that the message of the GENIUS LOCI has always been a phenomenon accepted as a matter of course. Already in the preamble of the foundation paper of ICOMOS, the Venice Charter, this message finds expression: “*Chargées d’un message spirituel du passé, les oeuvres monumentales des peuples demeurent dans la vie présente le témoignage vivant de leurs traditions séculaires*” (“Imbued with a [spiritual] message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions”). As is well known behind these words is a very broad concept of monuments: Monuments as an archive of authentic sources for cultural history, social history, industrial history, etc. are evidence created by man that, according to the definition in a late classical commentary on Cicero, “should evoke remembrance of something” (*omnia monumenta sunt, quae faciunt alicuius rei recordationem*). The material from which the monument as an object of remembrance is made can thus be just as variable as the degree of “materialization” of the spiritual message that the monument represents - from the traces of a prehistoric settlement detectable now only in the dark-colored negative form of potholes, to the immense stone blocks of an “immortal” pyramid created as it were for eternity. As an idea that took on shape, the monument is in any case more than an “object” consisting of a certain material. There are even monuments whose materials are so ephemeral that they are in need of renewal again and again; indeed even the mere replica of a monument that no longer exists materially could still “evoke remembrance of something.”

Our most important guideline for the topic of genius loci/spirit of place is certainly not the so-called Yamato Declaration of 2004, as one would perhaps assume from the subheading of our symposium: “Between the Intangible and the Tangible”. Instead, it is the in many respects fundamental Nara Document on Authenticity of 1994, which contains statements on authentic spirit and authentic location. Here for the first time spirit and place are explicitly included in the reform the old test of authenticity. Particularly important is article 13: « *Dépendant de la nature du monument ou du site et de son contexte culturel, le jugement sur l’authenticité est lié à une variété de sources d’information. Les dernières comprennent conception et forme, matériaux et substance, usage et fonction, tradition et techniques, situation et emplacement, esprit et expression, état original et devenir historique. Les sources sont internes à l’œuvre ou elles lui sont externes...* » (“Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context and its evolution through time authenticity judgments may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of these

sources may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors.“) An example which could illustrate the various authenticities of the Nara Document is one of the first references to the term “monument” in the Bible: Jacob’s dream is also a wonderful example for the birth of a GENIUS LOCI connecting heaven and earth. After his dream of the ladder to heaven, Jacob marks the place where the vision occurred with an enduring sign made of stone: *“Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel”* (Genesis 28:10 ff.). The authentic place here is “locus sacer”, a holy place that refers to something supra-human. Jacob’s stone, the authentic material, obtained from Jacob an intentional authentic form to differentiate it from other ordinary stones in that it was erected with the help of a particular (in this case rather simple, but anyway authentic) technique in order to make clear its authentic function. The function of this monument was for the stone to be a reminder of his dream, an authentic “matière à mémoire“, by miracle later identified with the “Stone of Destiny” in Westminster Abbey, which in the meantime has been returned to Edinburgh. In connection with the word “monument” the Bible also mentions individual burial places, burial tombs being a wide field closely linked to local spirits, from the Roman tombs in the Via Appia to the cemeteries of the 19th and 20th centuries where the ghosts of the dead and their genii also appear in person in countless statues.

Different examples of spiritual places could be taken from all over the world and from very different cultures, including “intended monuments” in the sense of an intentional creation of a monument from the very beginning, but above all a wealth of objects whose monument quality as an “object of remembrance” has first evolved over the course of centuries. With these monuments there would also be distinctions to be made between various authentic historical layers from the original up to the present state; consider for instance a historic town that has evolved over centuries as a testimony to history, or an old house in this town, whose spiritual message encompasses not only its architectural history but also the history and the traces of many generations who have lived there. A perfect example for the spirit of place in connection with monuments and sites would of course be houses connected with the genius of certain people. Here only two examples from good old Europe: in Goethe’s house in Weimar, the rooms are still as he had them arranged, including the large plaster head of Juno Ludovisi that had been transported from Italy to Weimar, the books that he collected and used, etc – reminders of a great poet whose genius seems present in the objects he left behind, tangible traces of his life concentrated here into an “aura” marked by his unique personality. The same is true, by the way, of the Goethe House in Frankfurt, destroyed in the war, rebuilt in situ over the old foundations and exhibiting the old inventory. Some of my colleagues, still obsessed with a blind fetishism for historic fabric, maintain that the house never should have been rebuilt – although in the meantime thousands of school children and other visitors have been able to experience the GENIUS LOCI that survived there despite war and destruction.

In any case, for a differentiated evaluation of the chances and possibilities of a strong GENIUS LOCI, indicated here so far with these few examples, the Nara Document on Authenticity and our traditional monument values are a sound basis; for instance the historic, aesthetic and scientific values in the World Heritage Convention of 1972 (values that occasionally have dropped from view during attempts to define “OUV”). There is also the still useful system of commemorative and present-day values developed a century ago in Alois Riegl’s *Modern Cult of Monuments* (1903) going far beyond the question of material/immaterial or tangible/intangible. But does the sub-heading of our symposium imply that we really want to launch once again into the debate “between the intangible and the tangible” that was already successfully led at our General Assembly in Victoria Falls? A decade after the Nara Paper on Authenticity came the *Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Heritage* (2004), drawn up at another

conference in Nara. This declaration tries to interpret the new *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), but in fact leads to misunderstandings, because in this paper focussing on “folk art”, traditional culture and folklore different areas overlap. The urgent concerns of the Convention of 2003, such as the conservation of languages threatened to be extinct or the protection of traditional craftsmanship, particularly important for our work as conservationists and disappearing fast worldwide, are included in an “integrated approach” and to a certain degree also comprise the wide field of conservation. However, not everything belongs to this – our – field of “heritage”; instead, according to the definition of the Convention of 1972 “heritage” is clearly defined as “monuments, ensembles (groups of buildings) and sites”, including the “work of man and nature (cultural landscapes)”. And in this field tangible and intangible values are not separate; they are rather – according to a very helpful definition by Mounir Bouchenaki – “two sides of one coin”. Quite likely, thanks to the appropriate GENIUS LOCI, they are a natural unity. This field of heritage immediately affecting ICOMOS is in many respects also integrated in the objectives of the Convention of 2002 that understand heritage as a general source of cultural identity, creativity and diversity. This comprises “customs and oral traditions, music, languages, poetry, dance, festivities, religious ceremonies as well as systems of healing, traditional knowledge systems and skills connected with the material aspects of culture, such as tools and the habitat.” All these elements, music and dance, and especially the mastering and passing on of handicraft skills were already presented at the International Colloquium organised by Suzanna Sampaio and our South American colleagues in Salvador de Bahia back in 2002. Nonetheless, despite our enthusiasm for music and folklore, for storytellers and snake charmers in the Jemaa-el-Fnâ market square in Marrakech, we are aware that in accordance with the Yamato Declaration there are “countless examples of intangible cultural heritage that do not depend for their existence or expression on specific places or objects” without agreeing with the following phrase “that the values associated with monuments and sites are not considered intangible cultural heritage ... when they belong to the past and not to the living heritage of present-day communities” (Yamato Declaration, art. 10). Such unclear phrases have unfortunately led to a situation where “living” intangible heritage is being played off against “dead” tangible heritage – a real insult to the very much alive GENIUS LOCI of our monuments and sites. In addition, the distinction occasionally made between a “more tangible monumental heritage” as in Europe and a “more intangible” and therefore “non-monumental” heritage, for instance in Africa, is absurd and comes from a misconceived understanding of what a monument is. Incidentally, we should stop doing as if we in the 21st century have finally discovered the “intangible” side of our work. After all, the spiritual and immaterial sides of the phenomena we as conservationists have been dealing with for decades have always been a self-evident axiom. I don’t wish to go into the wide philosophical field of phenomenology, which of course also includes the phenomenon of GENIUS LOCI. However, in anticipation of the usual tangible/intangible debates I would like to point out that the classification of the world into “tangible” and “intangible” phenomena should, in accordance with our Nara Document of 1994, be replaced by much more differentiated reflections: the sometimes rather banal differentiation between tangible as “capable of being touched” and intangible as “something that cannot be touched or grasped” – I am quoting from my Oxford Dictionary – is simply not enough.

In the following, I will therefore try to look into certain phenomena of the spirit of place (GENIUS LOCI) from the viewpoint of conservation theory and practice, hopefully without falling into the gap of our subheading “*between the Intangible and the Tangible*”. That’s why I would here like to refer or better defer all the dialectic processes of so-called “objectivation” developed since the early works of Roland Barthes. Under these circumstances, I’m afraid I can hardly follow the main thread of our call for papers concerning the general topic “Spirit of Place” if it simply equates “spirit” with “intangible”

and “place” with “tangible” (“we suggest examining the relationship between spirit and place, between the intangible and the tangible...” etc). For apart from the fact that place can also be an ideal or unreal, at any rate an intangible place – for example, Parsifal’s awe-inspiring, “unapproachable” Castle of the Holy Grail – for the time being, I would like to equate place with what is called *locus* in Latin or *topos* in Greek; a certain place in the sense of location or emplacement, if you like even definable by the corresponding GPS number. Such a place may be characterised by traces of human activity and by “objects of remembrance” in accordance with the Roman monument definition quoted earlier on; it is a built-up place, possibly changed time and again in the course of the centuries. And not without reservation, particularly as far as our GENIUS LOCI is concerned, I would like to connect such a place, to which of course a certain environment and “setting” belong, with the definition of “place” in article 1 of the Burra Charter: “*site, area, land, landscape, building or other work, contexts, spaces and views*” etc. This Australian definition may not be wrong, but nonetheless it is very general. It refers to anything and everything, and in our context I wish to regard place – in the sense of the Nara Document – as an authentic location and setting of authentic monuments and sites.

But before we talk about monuments and sites, let us think of nature untouched by man, where according to Roman perception rivers and mountains, trees and forests, caves and grottoes had their GENIUS LOCI; a friendly, sometimes also dangerous *numen* (divine being), which obviously had to do with the aura and the atmosphere (not only in the meteorological sense) of a place. Naturally, to this also belong the breathtaking “wonders of nature”, whose special GENIUS LOCI have again and again been discovered and rediscovered by man and which due to their specific form (nature as “architect”) have evoked comparable sensations and associations. Part of this context are, for example, holy trees and holy mountains and much that was already characterised as “monument of nature” in the conservation theory of around 1900, after the famous explorer Alexander von Humboldt had already coined the term “monument of nature” around 1800. But for the time being I shall refrain from going any further into this topic, which has only been given serious consideration once again since our conference in Manaus organised in connection with the International Day for Monuments and Sites 2007: “Cultural Landscapes and Monuments of Nature”. I would only like to mention that the individual “atmosphere” can also play an important role for built-up places and monuments and sites in the creation of a corresponding GENIUS LOCI. An action by Marcel Duchamps, one of the most important artists of the 20th century, may be interpreted accordingly: in 1919, he brought his collector Arensberg in New York the Paris atmosphere in a small apothecary’s phial – Duchamps’ ready-made “Air de Paris” transfers the GENIUS LOCI of a metropolis in a slightly ironic form. Besides, for obvious reasons the GENIUS LOCI will on principle refuse to be transferred. Although transferral is a practice also occasionally applied in conservation, at best it can only be justified by special circumstances, for example the imminent inundation of monuments in the area of a dam. Otherwise it contradicts our principle of preserving buildings and objects “in situ”.

Among the strongest appearances of the GENIUS LOCI is its obvious presence at holy places. These exist also in the open country, where celestial beings, for instance in connection with holy mountains or holy trees, have enough space to reveal themselves. In any case, the term of the “atmosphere” noticeable only “in situ”, at the authentic location, is by all means useful for the characterisation of a GENIUS LOCI. It can also be easily combined with the term “aura” defined by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). This aura linked to a place and embedded in history does not only characterise works of art but also monuments and sites, even when the monument is hardly comprehensible as “historic fabric” or is already badly damaged. For example, the empty niches of the Bamiyan Buddhas as *locus sacer* possess – despite their destruction – the aura of an incredibly strong GENIUS LOCI. This may also apply to many GENIUS LOCI of

archaeological sites which may have existed unnoticed for centuries, below ground or under water, or overgrown by the jungle, like many Maya sites or the Khmer temples in Cambodia, probably not exactly waiting to be disturbed by any excavations. Actually, the ghosts of the dead don't want to be excavated, either, and also the skeletons of the castle ghosts prefer to be left in peace. An example is the ghost of Canterville, which according to the story by Oscar Wilde (1887) desperately tried to renew the blood spot in the library that had several times been removed by the family of the American ambassador. The family had reacted completely insensitively to the atmosphere of the castle. At any rate, the phrase "the spirit of place is transmitted by living people in their every-day experience and therefore depends entirely on them for its survival" (see call for papers) is only valid to a certain extent; for instance, with regard to the so-called "present-day global villages... characterised by major trans-national population movements, increased inter-cultural contacts and the emergence of pluralistic societies" (see call for papers), – places that would be an ordeal to every true GENIUS LOCI. By the way, hopefully we as conservationists agree that there are monuments and sites which should remain "inapproachable" or "intangible" in the original sense of the word. Among these are historic traces that should not be renewed, but rather preserved in their old-age value; archaeological sites that should not be excavated, because to a certain degree the subterranean historic archive would be destroyed. The secret of the GENIUS LOCI is definitely better preserved if not everything is "accessible" and overly managed.

Such reflections also apply to the world of indigenous people mortally threatened in the course of the globalisation. With their spirits and places these indigenous people justly play an important role in our symposium. In this regard I want to refer to the round table on *Development with Culture and Identity in light of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*, organised by UNESCO a few days ago (see also the Secretary General's message of 9 September 2008). However, if we talk about "spirit of place" the holy places – churches and monasteries, mosques, temples, synagogues, chapels representing the majority of conservation tasks in most countries – should play a key role, even if "Religious Heritage and Sacred Places" were not the topic of the International Day for Monuments and Sites 2008. Although in the concept of our symposium "beliefs, rituals and festivals" are mentioned in passing as "intangible things", the major relevance of religion, of all world religions, in connection with a differently defined spirit of place, should not be ignored in view of the so-called "dialectics between spirit and place, the intangible and tangible". First and foremost, it is a matter of belief, adoration and worship, of the holy place, *locus sacer* as house of God. If we look, for instance, at such an exemplary spiritual space as the interior of one of the famous French cathedrals still in authentic use, which alone can preserve the authentic spirit: for some colleagues who mostly think in materialistic categories it might be a classic example of "tangible heritage", – in reality, it is a holy place created as an image of heaven, a place of worship used for centuries, besides a place of important historic events. And to this day the GENIUS LOCI of such a monument speaks to everyone, not only to the believer, but even to the tourist who, during his sort of pilgrimage, feels the breath of history and the spirit of craftsmen and artists who created this work.

Under these circumstances, the aura of a place or an object embodied by the GENIUS LOCI is also an important criterion as far as the questions how to conserve, restore, renovate or, under certain conditions, to reconstruct are concerned. We have to ask: can our planned measure and our conservation concept do justice to the individual GENIUS LOCI? Are we preserving the spiritual message of a monument which, compared with a long history, has only been entrusted to us for a short time? Such questions need to be raised by all who are involved in a restoration measure, starting with the engineer who is in charge of the structural consolidation concept to the restorer who takes care of the conservation of artistically important surfaces, individual furnishings or works of art. The first aim will always have to be to interfere as little as possible with the existing "matière à mémoire" and to do only what is

necessary for the conservation of the historic structure. For despite the impressive wealth of possible investigations and documentations and the whole range of consolidation techniques as well as conservation and restoration methods which are available today, even a thoroughly prepared conservation measure can lead to a dead end. This happens if the spirit of the monument and the corresponding monument values are not understood, or, using the conservationist's jargon so readily borrowed from the field of medicine, if the profound "diagnosis" and "anamnesis" concentrate, as it were, on the tangible material substance lying on the dissecting table, while the soul is being ignored.

Once again I would like to go back to the authentic spirit of monuments and sites determined by the GENIUS LOCI and to the emotional basis of our work (the authentic "feeling" in the sense of art. 13 of the Nara Document). As an old-fashioned conservationist, in this context I will stick to the above-quoted Roman definition of monument as "matière à mémoire", an object "that should evoke remembrance of something". Added to this of course is time as a historical dimension: time that has passed at this place, a process that has left many traces since the creation of an object, which has perhaps become an object of remembrance only in the course of centuries, a monument in the sense of the Roman definition quoted above; time that is also present in the form of the "Zeitgeist" that the monument embodies, a hard-to-translate German word suggesting the spirit of the times in which the way of life and the "style" of a particular period or epoch are reflected. Space and time can even become one in the spiritual message of the monument -- the apparently paradoxical but quite tangible presence of the past. Thanks to the GENIUS LOCI in the still extant "matière à mémoire", for example the decaying remnants of a castle ruin evoke generations of knights that lived and fought there, or the stones on the floor of a cloister, worn down over the centuries from footsteps, recall the monument's function as a place of prayer by monks. Finally, the spirit of monuments and sites that is conceivable in space and time, and as evidence of the "Zeitgeist", is considerably determined by another essential factor, the already mentioned authentic use. The function that in some circumstances may have continued in its original or modified form into the present also has a special social dimension; for example the old house that is still occupied, in which generations of inhabitants have already left their traces. These traces contribute not only to the historic value but also to the "feeling value".

Therefore, finally a brief comment on the emotional basis of conservation practice or, if you like, "monument feeling"; an aspect that is hardly ever taken into account in our professional discussions but which should not be underrated in our context of "spirit of place", since this emotional basis can often help achieve a lot in public disputes over the fate of certain monuments. An example was my rather successful struggle to prevent the building of a large hotel near Neuschwanstein Castle. To show the harm that would be done to one of the most beautiful cultural landscapes in Bavaria I did not confine myself to the usual arguments but instead evoked the spirit of dream king Ludwig II as GENIUS LOCI looking down on to the hotel project and being particularly worried about his sleigh rides at night, which would have ended for ever at the golf course planned together with the hotel. Not only in this case the emotional values can be of great importance for our conservation policy. For these values have not only to do with the aesthetic dimension, in the sense of enthusiasm for a work of art; with the historical dimension of a monument (the "breath of history"), but also with a monument's spirit, its "trace", "aura" and "atmosphere". Monument feeling finds expression in the love of a monument, for example an old house that makes one "feel at home", or in the emotion generated by a historic site that serves as a memorial. Georg Dehio, a famous German conservationist from around 1900, emphasized national feeling above all as a motive for preservation, whereas the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl refers to a general human awareness of life, "an irresistibly compelling feeling, not an avocation for aesthetics and history, that drives us to the cult of monuments". In his "modern cult of monuments" he

links this monument feeling to the central concept of age-value expressed in traces of transience. If Riegl's age-value is connected with a certain longing for death – the idea of the fin de siècle of “letting things pass away in beauty” – in contrast at the beginning of the 21st century a kind of longing for survival can be presumed as an essential motive in view of the general environment catastrophe. It is an attempt to preserve memory in a world that is changing as never before, and thus to ensure a continuity, for which our GENIUS LOCI could be considered its guardian angel.

If indeed we take the spirit of monuments and sites seriously, the idea of a GENIUS LOCI as a guarantor of a certain diversity and continuity in a globalised world could perhaps help us in these difficult times dominated by rather profane spirits of total change.

Occasionally, in reports of major international conferences a good GENIUS LOCI is mentioned whose atmosphere contributed considerably to the success of the negotiations. I am sure the special atmosphere of the city of Quebec celebrating its 400th anniversary will contribute to the success of our General Assembly.

Thank you for your attention.