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No More Heidegger, No More Genius Loci: a Poststructuralist View of Place

郭建慧*

Abstract

This paper develops a critique of Christian Norberg-Schulz's idea of *genius loci*, particularly its reliance on the philosophy of phenomenology that searches for the ontological essence of a given place. It argues that the phenomenological tradition in which the ontological view of a given place is to be inscribed in architectural forms adequately disentangles architecture and its changing context, and actually formulates a normative guideline, imposing uniformity on architecture without taking evolutionary historical conditions into account.

By drawing on poststructuralism, this paper rails against any conception of “naturalness” to reveal the constitutive mechanism of power/knowledge networks that have an effect on our perception of things as natural or ontological, and to approve the inability to grasp an unchangeable totality or ontological essence of a thing. Moving from the phenomenological conception of place to a constructive one, I mainly take Doreen Massey's various thoughts concerning “nature,” “space” and “place” as the guiding threads for my argument here. Massey's argument disputes Heideggerian views of place in relation to “being” and suggests that the sense of place is a social product and that therefore there is no static ontological nature of a given place. In application, I shall point out the problems of the phenomenological perspective of viewing place as natural, permanent, and therefore prior to other mechanisms those also construct cultural identity and dominate architectural form.

Key words: Heidegger , Genius Loci , Poststructuralism, Place, Massey

*郭建慧：南華大學環境與藝術研究所助理教授

一、The Heideggerian Myth

How does a place come to make its claims on itself?

There is certainly enough credibility in Christian Norberg-Schulz's idea of *genius loci*, which is largely indebted to Heidegger's idea of "being" and "dwelling." Through his works such as *Genius Loci: Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture* and *The Concept of Dwelling*, Norberg-Schulz resorts to phenomenological implications, emphasizes the importance of the ontological essence of a place, and portrays the meaning of human existence that is necessarily integrated with places. Derived from Heidegger, he suggests that "[t]o dwell means to belong to a given space," and claims that "[w]hen we identify with a place, we dedicate ourselves to a way of being in the world (Norberg-Schulz, 1985:12)." Norberg-Schulz refers to these terms – "spirit of place," "sense of place," "genius of place" or *genius loci* – to celebrate the very individuality and uniqueness of every places. These phrases signify that places are unique and significant, as if places have their own single essential identities that vary from place to place and that autonomously "naturalize" the foundations of personal feelings (Rose, 1995:88).

Norberg-Schulz indicates that "to dwell implies the establishment of a meaningful relationship between man and a given environment (Norberg-Schulz, 1985:13)." In a Heideggerian sense, David Harvey interprets, "[d]welling is the capacity to achieve a spiritual unity between humans and things (Harvey, 1993:11)." To understand the "phenomenological" aspects of places, in terms of thingness of things, is how a place can be meaningful to us and how our dwelling can belong to a given place. Therefore, the study of place becomes involved with the study of things, geographical facts and visual properties, which are meant to give rise to the meaning of dwelling and the identities of places. Many have taken up natural objects, trees, waterfalls, and mountains etc. as natural referents to the identity of a place. However, according to Norberg-Schulz, capturing this thingness, or establishing a meaningful relationship between a human and his/her environment, does not consist in a logical or scientific sense, but rather in a sentimental and contemplative one. Scientific method takes its model "from the taxonomic dream of the natural sciences and is resolutely turned towards description (Rose, 1993:361),"¹ as if the identity of a place is merely marked by a distinct collection of measurable, visible and tangible attributes of geographical or natural patterns. Norberg-Schulz argues that this "relativistic atomism" "leads to a dangerous abstraction from concrete reality, and leaves us with a meaningless, relativistic world (Norberg-Schulz, 1985:16)." Yi-Fu Tuan indicates that

[a] large body of experiential data is consigned to oblivion because we cannot fit the data to concepts that are taken over uncritically from the physical sciences (Tuan, 1977:201).

¹ This is written to describe Vidalian geography.

In other words, the study of place is never only a matter of things identified by sensual perception. At the beginning of the book, *Genius Loci*, Norberg-Schulz argues that “man cannot gain a foothold through scientific understanding alone (Norberg-Schulz, 1980:5).” The study of place is more than the differentiation of geographical elements. It is to understand the “thingness” of things. A similar notion can also be found in what Edward Relph terms “empathetic insideness.” He explains:

emphatic insideness demands some deliberate effort of perception (...). Emphatic insideness demands a willingness to be open to significances of a place, to feel it, to know and respect its symbols (...). This involves not merely looking at a place, but *seeing* into and appreciating the essential elements of its identity (...). To be inside a place empathetically is to understand that place as rich in meaning, and hence to identify with it, for these meanings are not only linked to the experiences and symbols of those whose place it is, but also stem from one’s own experiences (Relph, 1976:54-55).

According to phenomenological followers, we tend to reduce the ontological contents of things into a formal and objective aspect amenable to scientific analysis. Consequently, we deny and forget what we cannot capture or describe without using scientific method or language. Owing to this forgetfulness, our being is separated from Being, according to Heidegger, and from dwelling. On this account, Norberg-Schulz suggests that phenomenological philosophy is the answer to overcoming the insufficiency of the scientific approach in a quantitative or material term. Other theorists or geographers also suggest turning to phenomenology to answer the questions of the complex relation between person and world.² These Heideggerian followers believe phenomenology allows “thingness” of things to be revealed, presented and understood without any reduction that so often is taken up by scientific method or systematic analysis like structuralism.

A place cannot be simply revealed by objective or tangible configuration. More importantly, the identity of places lies in what one experiences and believes about these places. As Lukermann asserts, “[k]nowledge of place is a simple fact of experience (Lukermann, 1964:168).” What we call facts about a place are what we see, observe, contemplate and experience. Norberg-Schulz considers this personal experience as “an objective truth” which is “accessible to everybody, if only the mind is open. When that is the case existence becomes what it ‘is’ (Norberg-Schulz, 1985:9).” Here one may find that the phenomenological evidence or fact of a place is a rather empirical one. Harvey points out, “this experience is so authentic as to tempt us permanently to regard it as all there is and so ground our sense of being (...) (Harvey, 1993:13).” Empiricism, that develops an epistemology of knowing and feeling a place, is essential to the phenomenological view of our relation to a place. A place can be meaningful to us, in other words, through empirical sense or contemplative sentiment.

² see Seamon, David and Robert Mugerauer, eds. *Dwelling, Place and Environment: towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989

二、The Poststructuralist Critique

Experience has become such a cover-all term in phenomenological views of place that it neglects and refuses to deal with the social or political milieu. As stated above, phenomenological philosophy views the identity of a place as stemming from one's own experience and contemplation that triggers our apprehension of the ontological essence of a place in relation to the meaning of our existence. In a phenomenological sense approaching the ontological essence of a place, place is not determined by socio-political conditions. Norberg-Schulz asserts that "[t]he socio-economical conditions are like a picture-frame; they offer a certain 'space' for life to take place, but do not determine its existential meanings (Norberg-Schulz, 1980:6)."

Nevertheless, an empirical feeling of "placeness" in some sense becomes the undiscussed, and is taken for granted as "true," "authentic" or "natural." Harvey comments that Heidegger "totally rejects any sense of moral responsibility beyond the world of immediate sensuous and contemplative experience (Harvey, 1993:13)." He indicates that

He (Heidegger) contracts his field of vision to a much narrower, experiential world to ask questions about the innate and immanent qualities of experience of things. He insists upon the irreducibility of the experience of dwelling and specificities of place and environment. In so doing, he evokes a sense of loss of community, of roots and of dwelling in modern life which evidently strikes a potent chord with many people. (...) Heidegger refuses to see mediated social relationships (via the market or any other medium) with others (things or people) as in any way expressive of any kind of authenticity. Indeed, mediated relationships of this sort are felt as threatening to identity and any true sense of self, while anything that contributes to or smacks of rootlessness is rejected outright. Experience, furthermore, becomes incommunicable beyond certain bounds precisely because authentic art and genuine aesthetic sense can spring only out of strong rootedness in place (Harvey, 1993:14).

Heideggerian romanticism sees the identity of places as a natural phenomenon rather than a product of a set of social practices and constructions. It is the insufficiency of phenomenological empiricism to assume that one can escape the social discourses and practices, and see the place directly through experiencing. Instead of abstracting the identity of place to a natural, experiential, innate and immanent vision, some theorists have argued places are "social" – the concept and form of the place as modified by the human. Doreen Massey has criticized that Heideggerian view of a place is the "essentialist and internalist" ways of thinking about a place because it overlooks the power of social practices and discourses that have effects on designating our subject positions. She argues that the complex of identity is reduced to an *inner* essence in terms of the thingness of things, of

which the identity of a place is then no more than a phenomenological form of the place itself. This is the deficiency of phenomenological accounts of identity, for they take the identity of place as a fixed feeling rather than seeing it as the outcome of a number of social contingencies, which emerge in a specific historical moment.

Moreover, our views of place are products of the society in which we live. The legitimacy of the ontological way of perceiving something natural has been disputed by poststructuralist theories. Judith Butler's works contain a profound critique of the ontological nature. Her argument of "performativity" against naturalness attempts to *denaturalize*, but not to oppose, any ontological scheme by which identity is defined. She indicates the normative nature of ontology and demonstrates how power/knowledge works through the operation of ontology as a universal of locating identity. Butler argues that it is the error of ontology to conceive something natural. She argues that any ontology is politically manipulative and naturalizes what identity is.

The outcome of conceptualizing a place is affected by our mediated subjectivity. Perceptions of a given place may appear differently through different experiences and observations by different people having different cultural backgrounds, traditions, or social milieus. Massey indicates, "the identities of places are a product of social actions and of the ways in which people construct their own representations of particular places (Massey and Jess, 1995:134)." Gillian Rose points out:

although senses of place may be very personal, they are not entirely the result of one individual's feelings and meanings; rather, such feelings and meanings are shaped in larger part by the social, cultural and economic circumstances in which individuals find themselves (Rose, 1995:89).

Following these poststructuralist stances against the assertion of the ontological nature of identity, I would like to suggest that the phenomenological views, that lead to the search for the ontological essence of a place that is defined by experience, fail to conceive the meaning of a place as a product of cultural signification in which certain implicit norms are involved. On the other hand, the ideas of *genius loci* ignore the force of regulatory systems that have always constructed our subjectivity and affected our ways of perceiving and apprehending things.

Massey argues that place "is absolutely not static and in no way relates to the Heideggerian view of Space/Place as Being (Massey, 1993:66)." "It is people themselves who make places. Instead of considering places as the science of landscape, this kind of constructivist view claims that place is nothing but a "social product," as "producer and produced, determinative and determined – something that cannot be explained without recourse to the study of the functioning of society (Rose, 1993:368)." A place is socially constructed and therefore cannot be reduced to one dimension in terms of "naturalness" or "thingness." According to Massey, the issue of understanding a place is always more than the capture of topographical patterns. There is a constant interconnection of economics, culture, ecology etc., in the ways in which places are conceptualized and in which the uniqueness of a

place is conceived, generated and sustained. "If place can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not static. They are processes (Massey, 1993:66)." The identity of place is amorphous. The identity of places is not a reified form, but rather it must actively be involved in social practices and discourses. "[I]t may be useful to think of places, not as areas on maps, but as constantly shifting articulations of social relations through time; and to think of particular attempts to characterise them as attempts to define, and claim coherence and a particular meaning for, specific envelopes of space-time (Massey, 1995:188)." The identity of a place varies over time. The specificity of a place is continuously reproduced. It is not a specificity which merely results from inner quality or internalised history of that place (Massey, 1993:68). Our sense of a given place is generated, maintained and reproduced by historical course and social status, rather than given for all time in one mode of natural factors and ontological essence. Nevertheless, this is not to deny the natural forces of reifying the identity of place. Rather, each place is a product of social complex as well as natural richness.

三、Place as a Convergence of the Natural and the Social

As Massey argues, "[t]here are a number of distinct ways in which the notion of place which is derived from Heidegger is problematical (Massey, 1993:64)." It is Heidegger's myth that he thinks about a transcendence beyond change as if the attributes of place can be perceived not from a particular time, but from all times in spite of undergoing adventitious changes, and as if they are no longer part of signifying and regulating processes. The legitimacy of the ontological way of perceiving something natural has been disputed by those poststructuralist thinkers. They allege that the sense of place is much more complex and that it is no longer enough to theorise place as essentialist and internalist. On the one hand, it is the idiosyncrasy of the Heideggerian perspective that considers places have single essential identities. Tuan claims that the identity of place should be considered as a static concept. As he argues, "[i]f we see the world as process, constantly changing, we should not be able to develop any sense of place." (Tuan, 1977:179) However, place bears the mark of social practices and discourses. Massey argues that place is not an immutable thing. Rather, place is a social product and that therefore there is no static ontological nature of a place. It is people themselves who make places. "It is made, it is remade every day; at each instant, it is modified by men's actions (quoted by Ross, 1993:367)." On the other hand, a sense of place is more than one's feelings about a particular place. Our sense of place is in fact not natural but *naturalised*. Feelings are subjective things and are not only personal but also social. Senses of place are inevitably constructed through the processes of interconnection and interdependence of social discourses and practices. How the world is imagined and how the idea of place is represented is dependent on how our perception is constructed.

The search for ontological nature always matters in the Heideggerian view and it compels the

multiplicity of the conceptualisation of place to be subject to a singular specificity. The identities of places do not exist as separate realms, which are either natural or social. Rather, a place is a synthetic unit that “is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, (...) (Massey, 1993:66).” It is of especial importance to consider the conceptualisation of place at the level of social complexities. The phenomenological view of place denies that place is also a bearer of social structures and relations. It does not consider social networks, which have an effect on our perception, shape the form of the place and give meaning to dwelling, to our existence. The drawback of the phenomenological view of place is its own closure of any dealing with social reality.

Poststructuralists’ comprehension of places allows social relations and systems to penetrate the configuration of places and our sense of them. Place is seen as a social space, not a natural landscape, and therefore is constantly changing. Massey indicates that we have forgotten to think about places because they are so “natural” and “habitual (Massey, 1999:8).” It is necessary to understand a place not as some closed system that premises on natural facts. Rather, the identity of place is constructed through a multi-dimensional convergence: the natural, the social, the empirical and the cultural. The identity of a place consists in large part “precisely from the specificity of its interactions with ‘the outside.’”(Massey, 1992:13) Places lend themselves not only to objective analysis or empiricist contemplation, but are in fact inextricably bound up with all different social projects and practices. It is vital to keep in mind that the identity of place is continuously reproduced and changed by the conflation of the social, the cultural and the natural.

Furthermore, as I have argued, the kind of view that asserts the stasis of a place and seeks the ontological nature of the place with no possibility of politics is in fact manipulative. As Butler argues, it is problematic of ontology to assert something natural or self-evident as if it can escape from regulatory forces and events. Ontology is operated by and within a certain regulatory system that designates “facticity” or “naturalness” to things. The phenomenological perspectives of places, emphasising “ontological referents” are falsely objective, regarding them as simply evident, unchangeable and permanent. They overlook socio-political networks, which have intervened in the way in which our subjective perception is constructed, and in which theories are articulated and place is conceptualised. There is no such thing purely experienced as the spirit of place without the involvement of social practices and discourses. Social practices via the deployment of various media mediate the ways in which we experience and perceive a place and the ways in which we link our identity to a particular place.

So far, one may think that the debates raised here highlight the separation or even antinomy between place as a phenomenon of nature and place as a social product. The argument here seems to take the form of a dogged impasse between social constructivism, in which place is treated as a product of social practice, versus natural realism, in which place consists an ontological nature and objective forces in substantive entities. This kind of dualistic division must be broken down. Places should be constructed and conceived dialectically rather than dualistically. “[N]either ‘the social’ nor

‘the natural’ can be conceptualised in isolation from the other (Massey, 1994:8).” Place cannot be reduced to one dimension. Places are not purely products of a society in opposition to the empirical and natural. Nor are they purely natural. There is the relationship between the social and the natural, between society and environment. Although the nature of identity of a place is often related to natural features, it is nonetheless clear that identity is not a product of such features alone, but is socially structured. As I argued earlier, places cannot be experienced independently as if there is self-evident nature in entities. It has also to be accepted that social content is construed on the ground of place. The identity of place does not merely lie in “environmental determinism” that decides the ways in which the identity of place is determined through topographical features, nor in social constructivism arguing that the natural has to be seen as subjected to social practices and discourses. We have to recognise this interactively multi-way process: “[t]he society derives meaning from place, the place is defined in terms of social relationships, and the individuals in the society are not alienated from the land (Sack, 1994:40).” Such a disagreement between those who insisted on a strictly phenomenological definition and those who refer to socially constructive processes might lead to an entirely uninformative suggestion of the identity of places. Instead, the identity of places, as a plane of convergence, has to be considered in the context of a broader conflation of nature and culture. It is a product of dialectic convergence of the natural, the social, the cultural, the political, etc. Place interweaves all types of spatiality and temporality.

Following Heidegger, Norberg-Schulz suggests, architecture is a concretisation of topographical images of a place, which form a necessary part of man’s general orientation of “being in the world (Norberg-Schulz, 1971:7).” Architecture must carry a very genuine sense of the relationship between man, the earth, the sky and all of that. In saving the earth and in receiving the sky, the act of building demands recognition of the uniqueness of the place, the *genius loci*, out of which buildings grow. However, I argue that the phenomenological claim of the ontological essence of a place involves a suppression of its changes. It sees a place as natural and permanent, simultaneously serving as a determining cause, and limiting in advance the very possibilities of conceiving new architectural forms that express new cultural identities. In other words, the view of architecture in relation to phenomenological perception, premised on the ontological nature of a given place, is a function of discourses that seek to regulate the discipline and development of architecture. Indeed, to a certain extent, the elements of place-form, the *Genius Loci*, articulate the ground of architecture. Nevertheless, any ontological proclamation is in fact already political. Architecture is effectively performed within a constructed context.

I do not mean to reject fully the validity of phenomenological approaches that intend to integrate the extracted elements of a given place into architectural composition. After all, topographical features do not become useless referents to architectural design. Rather, I dispute the uncritical application of ontology by which the textual form of a building is divorced from its contextual dynamics in order to conceive and maintain architecture in a pure state. My account is to express a much more promising ambivalence towards the idea of *Genius Loci* by suggesting that the sense of place is a product of the

convergence of the natural, the political, the economic, the social, etc. It is my purpose here to call phenomenological presuppositions into question and to encourage a loss of phenomenologist epistemological certainty in order to move beyond the conventional in thinking and reading place and architecture.

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