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Genius Loci: Capturing the Distinctive Roman Spirit Through Pochoir

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Genius Loci: Capturing the Distinctive Roman Spirit Through Pochoir

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The University of Arkansas

Fay Jones School of Architecture + Design – Department of Interior Design

**This Capstone has been submitted in order to partially fulfill the requirements of an
Honors Bachelor of Interior Design.**

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Table of Contents:

Introduction	3-4
Literature Review	4-9
Abstract	9
Project Development Plan	10-13
Methods, Process, + Results	14-15
Discussion of Value	15-16
Conclusion	16
Works Cited	17

Introduction:

In this capstone, I have explored the meaning, implications, and philosophy of *genius loci*. In classic Roman religion, genius loci was thought of as a protective spirit presiding over a sacred place or space. The existence of differing spatial purposes results in a demand for “places with ... different character[s].” Consequently, churches, dwellings, and other intimate spaces were said to have a protective spirit or guardian that protected the essence of the place (Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*). In contemporary times, the idea of genius loci is more of a philosophy as opposed to a physical entity. Simultaneously, it has spread beyond religion and seeped into the world of design. Genius loci is hard to define in one way – it can be a juxtaposition of tangible and intangible factors. What actually defines genius loci in one place or culture can differ from another (as it can be a very experiential phenomenon). During my travels, I intuitively experienced each place I visited in a different way. Repetitive elements like shutters, streetlamps, and walls washed with color are distinct to Rome. I felt a difference in richness and experiential quality when in Rome than I did in Paris where slate-gray roofs, scrolled iron balconies, and protruding chimneys shape the character of the city. The change in architectural and cultural components from city to city encourages a different way of seeing and feeling the effect of place. Despite the metaphysical qualities of this concept and its reputation for being beyond description, this is also where the beauty of genius loci lies.

This research examined specific architects and interior designers, case studies, and places before deciding to study Rome, Italy after I spent an extensive amount of time there. Photographic analysis, color studies, artistic exploration, iteration, and a

personal love for the city of Rome – walking the streets, immersing myself into the culture, being constantly surrounded by history – unite for a comprehensive investigation into what defines the genius loci of Rome for me. A secondary goal of this process has been to explore a potential methodology for understanding cities and what makes each one unique. This understanding can be applied when making design decisions, thus allowing designers to consciously stray from ubiquitous design while reinstating the positive power of place.

Literature Review:

A deep knowledge of genius loci, the spirit of place, is crucial in order to understand cities and spaces and allows for more site-specific design. When a designer has a tight grasp on what makes a city unique, there can be a more conscious effort to create spaces that honor and respect the context of the place. This concept can be experienced through travel, reading, and even art. Through my own travels, research, and creative process, I have developed a method for how I understand genius loci, specifically in Rome, but this method can be applied to any place or space.

Ubiquitous design is an issue that architects, interior designers, and landscape architects in the 21st century must face. Sameness in architecture is not inherently bad, but when that sameness is not a reaction to the existing context, problems arise. It is entirely possible to travel from a city in Europe to a city in the Middle East and see almost identical building typologies that have been inserted into completely different urban fabrics. Not only are the urban conditions in contrast, but so are the cultural

environments. Individual cultures will react to design in accordance with their values, traditions, and influences. When this phenomenon is not carefully considered during the design process, people can experience destruction of cultural identity and will be obliged to interact with design that shows a departure from vernacular influence.

Designers have the ability to shape the aesthetic and experiential qualities of the places people inhabit. Whether it be a church, an office, a house, or a restaurant, tying all design decisions into a realization of the *genius loci* allows for deeper connection to place. When this happens, a decrease in homogenized design and a push for greater cultural influence will ensue. Contextualized design respectfully unites with the existing surroundings in tangible and intangible ways; this should be a priority for designers. In order to have a stronger dialogue with the built environment that differs from place to place, designers must consider the spirit of place no matter where they are. This can be achieved by spending time in the city, immersing oneself into the culture, spending time with the people who live there, heavily researching site and context, and consciously noting the experiential values exclusive to that place.

The research I have compiled ranges from photographic and material studies, artistic explorations, essays on phenomenology, digital studies of historic urban landscapes and sites, and scholarly writings. Much of the literature breaks down the schools of thought associated with *genius loci* and explains how the idea has shifted and been abstracted throughout the development of the modern world.

Research shows that *genius loci* functions as a meta-concept, meaning it is many different philosophical theories and phenomena that have combined under the umbrella term 'genius loci' (Vecco, *Genius Loci as a Meta-Concept*). I have come

across two projects that, through on-site and technology-based methods, have shown the importance of hands-on, extensive analysis of site and place. An architecture studio at Konya Technical University was tasked with design of a luxury boutique hotel in Sille, Turkey. The proposals carefully considered topographic conditions, local vegetation, climate and environmental data, site texture and scale, local architecture and material practices, as well as socio-cultural statistics. The final design solutions imitated the threshold conditions seen in vernacular buildings as a result of narrow access points, showed consideration of wall and floor structure and permeability of space in relation to the given site conditions, and utilized local materials. In-depth observation and exposure to culture, ideologies, lifestyles, and traditions within that city were used to approach the project in a purposeful way that created discourse between Sille and its new architectural addition (Yildiz, Emine, Elif, et. al., *The Concept of Genius Loci in Architectural Education*).

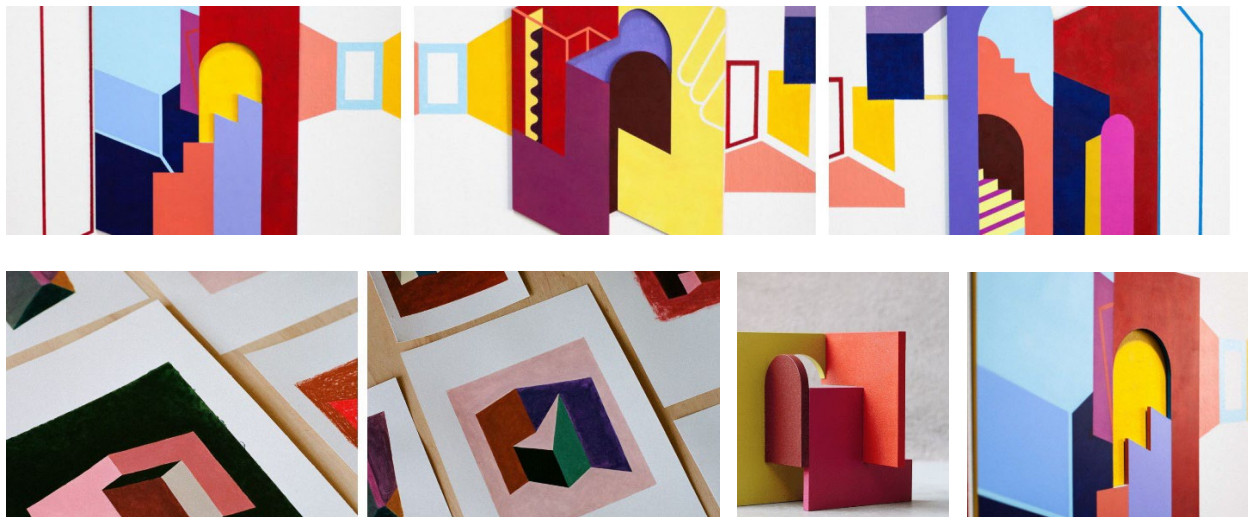
A second design group used digital renderings, collages, sketch analyses, and photographic montage to visualize genius loci and reiterate its inability to be scientifically defined and surveyed. This project, completed at Lodz University of Technology, “aims at presenting various methods and techniques in reconstructing and representing heritage buildings and areas” (Walczak, Bartosz & Kepczynska-Walczak, Anetta; *Visualising "Genius Loci" of Built Heritage*, 2013). This endeavor was a result of the desire to strengthen the visualization of the genius loci of historic, protected sites. To start, the group sketched and observed the town, met with local authorities, and curated an art exhibit based on their findings. The public was able to interact with the exhibit, and the designers received a very enthusiastic reaction to their work “in terms of

design quality, visual communication, and strengthening civic pride.” The results of this project “were considered as one of the best and most complete projects promoting traditional urbanism” and was used by local authorities as a precedent for future urban development (Walczak, Bartosz & Kepczynska-Walczak, Anetta; Visualising "Genius Loci" of Built Heritage, 2013). This undertaking aided in the movement towards forming a utilitarian methodology of understand genius loci and applying it to forthcoming design projects.

Other literary works I have analyzed, specifically *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* by Christian Norberg-Schulz, have broken genius loci down into its differing schools of thought with inclusions of perspectives from famous historical thinkers. Phenomenology is the study of the phenomena observed through the consciousness of human experience. This is precisely what I attempted to take part in while in Rome – I walked around the city with no specific destination, visited as many sites and spaces as I could, and I was as mindful as I could be of what elements, actions, and trends caught my eye. Throughout my time there, I analyzed my observations, but I purposefully did not ponder why I noticed what I did; I allowed the experiences to have their effect on me, and I accepted them and allowed them to shape my perspective of the city. Phenomenology is similar in that it aims to stray from any preconceptions or assumptions as to why such experiences occur, and this idea can be applied to how people grasp and interact with genius loci.

A significant source of inspiration throughout this entire process has been the artwork of Marina Esmeraldo. Esmeraldo is an artist who created an exhibit that shows her perception of genius loci as she has experienced it through travel. Utilizing color,

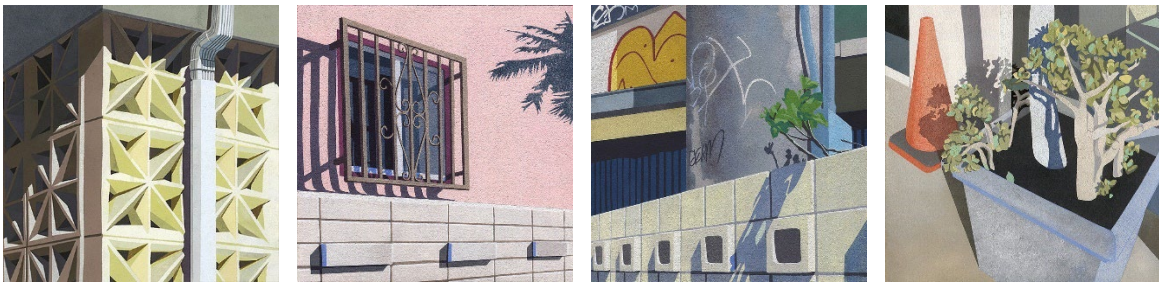
shape, form, construction, and craft, Esmeraldo combines patterns and motifs from her memories and used them to create relief prints, murals, and wooden sculptures. Materializing this topic has been of utmost importance to me, and Esmeraldo's art played a key part in how I developed my own creative pursuit. The craft and beauty of Esmeraldo's work, as well as the learning process I went through on my own creative journey was a constant reminder of why I should be inspired to create a physical representation of my research, memories, studies, and experiences.



Examples of selected works by Marina Esmeraldo.

Elizabeth Ferrill, a renowned master of pochoir printmaking, was also a reference I have used to guide my creative process. Pochoir, literally meaning 'stencil' in French, is a printmaking process used in the late 1800s through the 1930s, primarily in Paris, by architects and designers to make patterns, architectural prints, and fashion design mock-ups. This technique starts by creating a precise set of stencils to use for each print. With the help of the stencils, the addition of each subsequent layer starts to build up texture, color, and shape that come together to create the desired print. This

methodology is not only useful for the prints I wanted to make, but conceptually it applies well to the study of genius loci. Genius loci is a collection of tangible and intangible layers, experiences, and design aspects that combine to form the whole. Pochoir uses a similar method of layering of motifs, shapes, colors, and textures to form the final print. This process provided me with a new understanding of genius loci and changed the way I think about, visualize, break down, and experience space and place.



Examples of selected works by Elizabeth Ferrill.

Abstract:

This capstone explores the concept of genius loci through photographic and artistic exploration and does so through a lens of study set on Rome, Italy. The first major goal of the process has been to discover the elements, moments, physical textures, and other design elements that comprise the genius loci of a city or space. The second goal has been to partake in a process that can be used by myself and other designers in efforts to make more conscious design decisions — gaining a better understanding of ‘sense of place’ can assist designers in straying from globalized, placeless design.

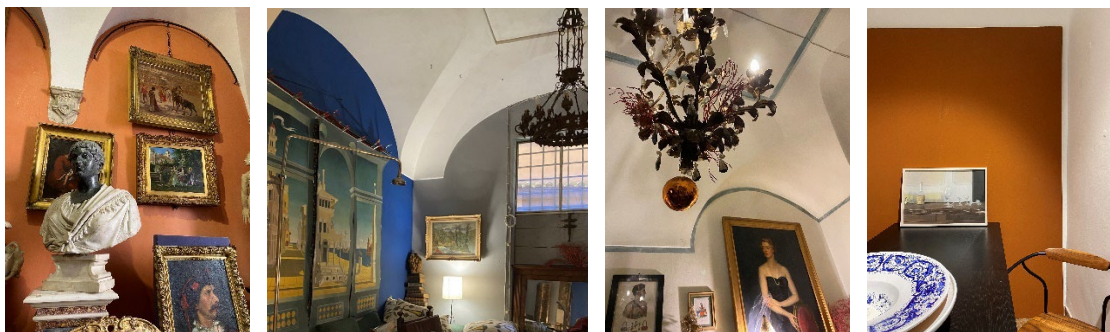
Project Development Plan:

The first phase of this process was research and reading. Finding as many useful sources as possible for inspiration, scholarly opinions, and historical applications of genius loci was the primary focus. After extensive time spent researching, I crafted a prospectus document explaining my intentions for the capstone. Since that time, however, the project has moved in many different directions and has taken a form I did not initially expect. After spending a semester in Rome, I began to form a stronger personal connection to my own view of genius loci and thus, I decided to centralize the capstone around Rome. At the start of the spring semester, I gathered a collection of over 640 photos I had taken in Rome. I selected the photos based on aesthetic, textural, and spatial conditions while also looking for photos that evoked a sense of nostalgia. Of course, some of this selection process was based on phenomenology, but there was a conscious effort to pay close attention to color, materiality, figure-ground relationships, photographic context, and other elements that show the uniqueness of Rome. After this, I classified the photos into six categories:

- 1. Interior Spaces + Details**
- 2. Exterior Spaces + Details**
- 3. Public Spaces**
- 4. Moments**
- 5. Textures**
- 6. Sky-Spaces**

Post-categorization, I curated a set of twenty-four photos, four from each category. These were the photos that I, after much deliberation, research, and personal experience, felt best represented the genius loci of Rome. While much of this process was intuitive, there was a process behind my categorization.

Interior spaces and the details that defined each space served as a more intimate view of the genius loci of Rome, and the photos I chose show very small areas within the spaces I inhabited.



Photos from the "Interior Spaces + Details" category.

Many of the exterior photos I took were of building facades; Rome's architectural style is unique in its treatment of the façade, and this deserved to be its own category.



Photos from the "Exterior Spaces + Details" category.

Experientially, public spaces such as piazzas and inner courtyards are essential to the urban fabric of Rome. I chose photos that showed these kinds of spaces with and without human interaction.



Photos from the "Public Spaces" category.

Much of my passion for this project, as I have stated, has grown from a love I found for Rome. I found that I included photos that evoked nostalgia, captured specific moments in time, and made memories come to mind. It has been important to me to emphasize this category in an effort to show a personal point of view.



Photos from the "Moments" category.

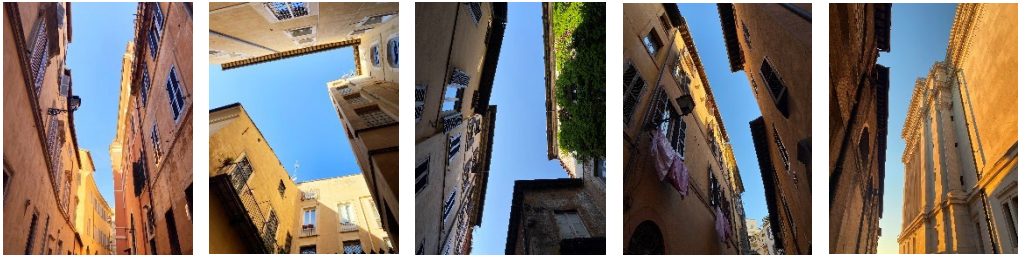
Textural qualities are abundant in Rome. Whether it be the frescoed ceilings, crumbling brick archways, graffitied walls, or light illuminating the façade of a building

highlighting its perfectly imperfect material characteristics, texture abounds. I chose photos that would show the impact texture holds on the way I perceived the aura of Rome.



Photos from the "Textures" category.

While walking through Rome, I could not help but look up. The sky continually broke through the buildings above me, acting as its own spatial figure. I chose photos that demonstrated the power of the sky serving as the figural subject.



Photos from the "Sky-Spaces" category.

Stemming from these twenty-four photos came an artistic exploration of figure-ground relationships, color studies, color palettes, color-blocking diagrams, and a final set of pochoir prints.

Methods, Process, + Results:

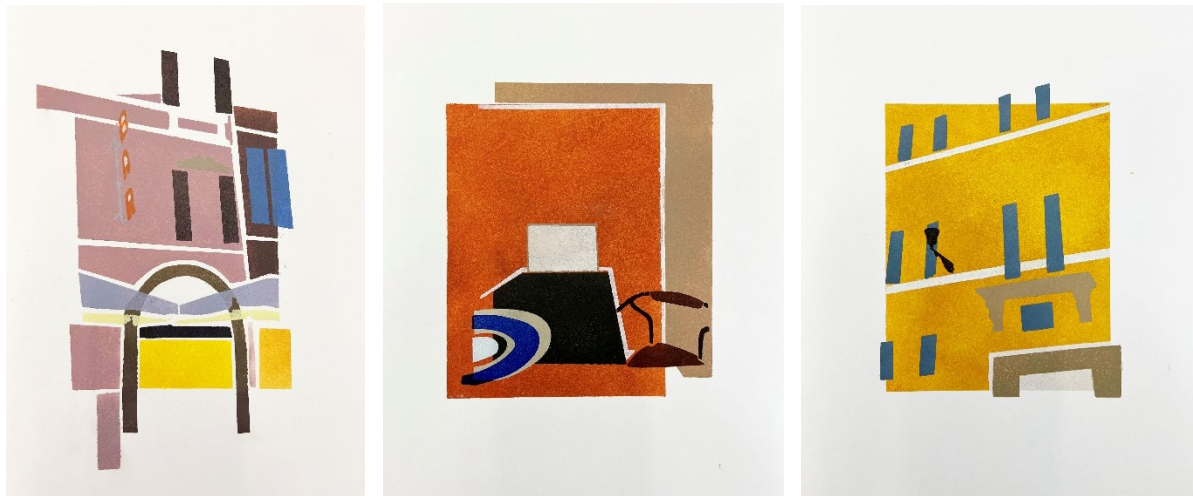
Creation was an integral part of this project, and I have discovered there is as much beauty and learning that takes place in the experimental portion as there is in the construction of the materials to present in the end phase of the project.

The color-blocking diagrams were the first major step in the creative process. Using Adobe color, I generated color palettes for each of the twenty-four photos. Next, I used those colors, as well as others extracted directly from the photos, to create the diagrams. Through reduction, I abstracted the forms, objects, and textures in each photo. The diagrammatic aspect of these allowed me to simplify the photographs into shapes and colors while also achieving a certain level of flatness. The two-dimensional aspect of the diagrams allowed me to discover what should be included (and what could be omitted) while still communicating the essence of the photo. This process abstracted a photographed moment in time into a set of colors, forms, and when combined with the other diagrams, a set of conditions that come together to create the genius loci of Rome.



Example of a color-blocking diagram.

The pochoir prints — my favorite portion of the capstone process — were a labor of love from which I learned a lot. These prints were made possible by the color-blocking diagrams; after I had the vector paths of the colored shapes from each diagram, I laser cut each shape, making stencils. I was then able to use this layering, iterative stencil process to make the finalized prints. I used slow-drying acrylic and dense, thick-bristled brushes for optimal texture and color quality.



Selected works from the final set of pochoir prints.

Discussion of Value:

This entire process – which has been underway for about two years – has taught me so much about how I inhabit and interact with the world around me and how others do this as well. While all people experience and know the world differently, genius loci serves as a common thread that weaves together separate experiences and qualities applicable to design into a singular, comprehensible meta-concept. When the understanding of genius loci is applied to the field of design, there is an opportunity to be more considerate in how we approach specific projects; this can be based on

geography, culture, lifestyle, context, and existing dialogues. The creative process I undertook, while not necessary to determine genius loci of a place, is a method other designers could use or interpret in their own way in order to make informed, place-based design decisions.

On a more personal level, the idea of genius loci has resonated with me for years now. I first learned of its significance as a first-year design student, and ever since that day, I have been fascinated with its abstractness and adaptability to personal experiences and ideas. I have always been infatuated with the world around me, and travel has been a priority in my life for some time. The intersections between interior design, the fashion industry, art, marketing, etc. and how they can be connected to genius loci are of great interest to me.

Conclusion:

Oftentimes, “when we visit a foreign city, we are ... struck by its particular character, which becomes an important part of the experience” (Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*). Simply put, I was struck by Rome. There is a sort of magic that can be felt when walking the streets and soaking up the unforgettable Roman sun, and I have used pochoir to document this feeling. The pochoir process, through a literal and metaphorical act of layering colors, elements, and forms, shows the essence of the moment being captured and serves as a singular solution of how to understand a place. The beauty of Rome’s genius loci, with its shimmer and charisma, pulled not only at my heartstrings but has caused me to evaluate the way I approach design thinking.

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