

Genius Fluxus: The Spirit of Change  
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### Visiting the Spirit of the Place

Over the past fifteen years I have several times spent three months in Koto-ku, which is one of the less affluent sections of Tokyo. That area was first a fishing village on the coast; later a large Buddhist temple was built there, and a large Shinto shrine, which now includes special memorials for famous Sumo wrestlers. As the crowds came, the area soon housed the licensed entertainment districts where popular culture flourished around the society of the brothels. It also developed as a center for the timber industry that stored huge logs in the area's canals and lagoons. When Japan began to modernize the area developed heavy industry. In the last decades the industries and the timber business relocated, and the area received more and more low income housing. Most recently, mixed use buildings have begun to appear, and nicer apartments along the canals, and new parks.

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I cite this example rather than a fast moving suburb, to make the point that even in a less respected area without big money, change has always occurred and never stops. The pace may have increased lately, but change has always been happening.

I lived there in a tiny apartment. On my way to the subway I would pass a small neighborhood Shinto shrine tucked in between two houses, in a space maybe four meters by ten, containing the shrine itself and a few trees. Over the years that I visited there, the context changed. Gentrification came to the neighborhood, and one of the houses next to the shrine was torn down and replaced by an apartment building. The little shrine endured.

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I never saw anyone at the shrine, but people took care of it; there were fresh flowers and offerings. Some children used it as a place to park bicycles. I enjoyed stopping by to visit the spirit of the place. It felt good, not that I was being Japanese, but that I was celebrating the locality, and urging it on against creeping oversimplification.

The small shopkeepers I met in Koto-ku were tough, resilient and a little off the pace of fast-moving Tokyo. They considered themselves rather than the power brokers across the river to be the real Tokyoites. That little shrine carried some of those meanings for me, as well as a hint of natural powers even in its stunted trees and tiny offerings of rice and fruit.

### Kinds of Change

Neither that shrine nor its neighborhood was unchanging. Change never stops. We should think of places not as solid things or as enduring substances but rather as processes, as events (*Geschehen, händelser*).

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I would like to suggest a model that distinguishes three kinds of change. Using the analogy of a plant, we can say that there is immanent growth, as when a plant grows following its own laws, and there is outside impact, as when the plant is stressed by

changes in its environment, and there is mutation and genetic change that alters the laws by which the plant works.

The first kind of change is immanent growth: these changes *follow* the laws of the place or system. The plant grows according to its natural tendencies. The place grows in an expected way: the population increases, new stores come to a downtown, a park is landscaped, a new residential quarter is built.

The second kind of change is outside impact: these *stress* the laws of the system. The plant faces new competitors or a colder climate. The place faces new money, big real estate developments, new kinds of immigrants, terrorism, plagues.

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The third kind of change *alters* the laws of the system. The plant mutates or we modify its genes. The place faces new laws or new social relations. There is modern individuality and civil society, effective women's liberation, the globalized economy, or perhaps new arts, radically new building technology, new communication media. The laws of the system change, and its borders are redefined.

We tend to think about the third kind of change, mutation, as if it were the second, outside impact. But while in a mutation change may be caused by an outside force, in that change the inside-outside division alters. We also tend to think of the first kind of change, immanent growth, as easy and benign, but that growth can lead to mutation. Steady growth can lead to a sudden change of phase, when some critical size or critical distance is passed. Suddenly the addition of one more new quarter alters the interactions all over the city. Often these abrupt transitions relate to fundamental units, such as how far people are willing to walk, or how many people they can know well.

These kinds of change come about through many different and contingent processes. There is no overall process, but rather a confluence of influences and rhythms. We should not assume there is some overall teleology or unity at work. Change intersects with our places, but it is not necessarily aimed at our places.

Nor is change a total flux. There are relatively stable regularities, both social and natural. The mountains and rivers are events, too, but mostly unhurried. The rivers and mountains may change their meanings much more rapidly, as they fit into our networks of interpretation, which are also processes and events. For we are active receivers who respond with narratives and rethinkings and rebuildings.

Change has so accelerated that it has now become a commodity. It is presumed that your organizations will change or be left behind, and many people are eager to sell you guidance through the change. You buy advice on how to deal with change, or how to cause change. No one can sell you an absence of change.

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## **Responses to Change**

Faced with all this, what should we do? Can we resist in the name of some fixed essence of a place?:Even Norberg-Schulz was cautious about this.

To protect and conserve the genius loci in fact means to concretize its essence in ever new historical contexts. What was there as possibilities at the outset, is uncovered through human action, illuminated and 'kept' in

works of architecture which are simultaneously 'old and new'. A place therefore comprises properties having a varying degree of invariance.<sup>i</sup>

Still, we should be wary of such claims about essences. Place mutations alter laws and essences. Of course there are slow long-term stabilities, and long accepted ways of acting, that must all be taken into account. They too are unavoidable. But they do not add up to a permanent essence, and their meanings change.

Can we try to stop the flux? We can't, and if we could, we would damage the place. When we try to freeze a place, its lived thickness will disappear because the place will become isolated from the contexts and processes that give it life, though they also cause change. A place, frozen, becomes a museum, or a themed reservation. Its inhabitants may become actors or they may live with an odd ironic distance that is hardly a traditional life. And then what about their children? The next generation's re-reading and re-learning the place will change it. Also, no matter how isolated, the place will need supplements: trade, sewers and water treatment, medical care. Such outside systems cannot be kept away, and they bring change, too.

Strategies of resisting and freezing presuppose that it is possible to control meaning. But this is not possible. Meaning comes by contrasts; contrasts are unavoidable; so other changes outside our control will alter the contrasts that bring meaning inside what we are trying to control.

On the other hand, the flux of place doesn't totally dissolve form. It puts the form in play. It produces, not chaos, but other kinds of order and unity. They may not be permanently stable, but some of them can last a very long time.

We cannot build a wall strong enough to resist the processes and the pressures of change. Rather than trying to make the walls stronger, we should find or create ways for those walls themselves to be in the play, so separations can become links, so we can be in the movement.

Norberg-Schulz raises what I take to be the central issue:

The essence of settlement consists of gathering, and gathering means that different meanings are brought together. . . . The modern world is 'open'; a [situation] which in a certain sense is anti-urban. Openness cannot be gathered. Openness means departure, gathering means return.<sup>ii</sup>

Can openness be gathered?. Must openness mean departure without arrival? What if it meant linkage? And so arrival, though not at a permanence. The key is time, accepting time. Being in and with the motion. What if we had another way to ride time and be with flux and change?

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Could there be a gathering that accepted place as event and as process? That gathered the process, but not by trying to freeze it? A gathering that was not a grasping for substance or eternity, but also was not a repudiation of what stable rhythms and endurance there were. Neither grasping nor rejecting -- this is a Buddhist theme.

We need to accept the temporary character of places, while still working to improve them. Could we live with a self-conscious temporariness, without grasping and without rejecting? Imagine seeing even the hated mall or chain store not as just one more example of some great substantial enemy, but as itself a passing event, sooner

or later to be replaced, existing in tension with the drive for profit, with local pressures, and so on. The store is an event, perhaps long lasting on our yearly scale, perhaps not, but whatever its scale it is inhabited by beings who want and need wider life. So we make design interventions, or political and social interventions, to encourage that life. We let the process happen, while intervening to bend and enrich it. We don't try to hold it back, but we keep it from becoming oversimplified. This might be a way of "gathering" -- different meanings would be gathered, but not by being located within a larger fixed structure.

Yet we may worry that any embrace of the process will destroy places: it will lead to thinness, commodification, hyper-reality. I think, though, that we too easily presuppose that the opposition between being permanent and being in process is the same as the opposition between being authentic and being thin and commodified. The crucial issue is not stability versus flux, or natural versus themed, but complexity and thickness versus oversimplification. Avoiding simplification, avoiding thinning, is more important than keeping stability. Too often these days stability means simplification.

Here is a criterion: we should preserve and increase the salience of possibilities. We need to be concerned that our places embody wide and complex rather than repetitive and thin possibilities. This means not architecturally enforcing local self-definitions that restrict possibilities. But it also means not letting the rush of the network obliterate local saliences.

When I was in Japan I studied a martial art called Aikido. This is a defensive art, which teaches you to use your attacker's own force against him. If he is punching straight at you, for instance, you move to the side, and grasp his wrist, and encourage it to continue moving in the direction that it is already moving. Then you bend that movement in such a way that the attacker is thrown. You never meet the attack head on, but move with the attack, then divert it in directions beyond what it expected. We might apply this to places: don't try to resist change head on, rather, look for the direction of its movement and bend its energy toward new alternatives not envisioned by the original impetus.

### **Ideas for Building and Planning**

What might all this mean for building and planning?

A standard suggestion is that we should emphasize 'our' customs and building style as fixed points in change. Frampton and Norberg-Schulz speak about tectonic character and design themes. Such ideas are quite applicable, and often debates and planning will center on them. But change reaches even here. Communities are not so homogeneous, so it's not so clear should count as 'our' way of building or dwelling. Our identities, too, mutate.

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We need to give up single visions that are supposed to embrace social and place totalities. We live in overlapping nets rather than single places. We cannot plan unlimited geometrical vistas a la Versailles; but that was always an illusion, and today it would be an oppression. Can we still plan like Sixtus at Rome? Only if we also encourage other modes of organization at the same time. The whole may often end up more like Tokyo, with corners of design and beauty that do not make an overall plan.

We should not pretend to be alone, but build openness to the network. We should emphasize connections that break the spell of the commodity focus. We should also not be alone in time. A great enemy of richer inhabitation is a sequence that drops its past as it goes, whether that past is the last TV program, or last week, or last century. Keeping the past does not mean freezing it on display; its meaning will change, but we preserve complexity.

So we should celebrate *links* instead of classical and modernist self-sufficiency. Could we create an architecture and planning that shows that how we are involved with other places and processes elsewhere? Could we, for instance, do something architectural with antennas, loading docks, wires, all those signs of connection and interdependence that are usually looked away from?

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But if there are to be links, there also have to be local places that are *nodes*. So just as much as being open to links and networks we have to fight for local control of choice and encounter. That demands, along with links, *filters*. Too much stimulation and too rapid a flow of information leads to oversimplification. "The way to become attuned to more information is to attend to it less."<sup>iii</sup> Not walls, but filters. Not as a way to avoid but as a way to see better, at a pace we can manage, which will mean seeing more in the long run.

### Having Tea Together

If places are events and processes, we need a better awareness of their mortality. They die, and they are reborn. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said when we hold a jug, we should say to ourselves that it is a clay jug, and we will not be overly sad when it breaks. But how can we recognize this mortality without dulling our concerns and losing intensity in our lives?

In the Japanese tea ceremony, a sequence of highly ritualized actions slows down the encounter and focuses attention on the details. There is a saying in the tea schools: *Ichigo Ichie*. This translates as "one meeting, one life." This tea ceremony we are attending is passing, but it is also unique; it is your whole life now. You should be more aware of every motion and every element of the encounter, for it will never come again. This *you* will never come again. Be fully.

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Living in place more aware of the process of doing so can make us live the contingency of place without demanding that we build an absolute place and without declaring an end to places. We can try to be really be there, attentive and compassionate, neither clinging to the present as it passes nor rejecting it because of that passing. Rather we are involved, protecting and favoring and improving, taking sides as appropriate.

That little shrine in Tokyo means a lot to me. Not as a rooted place; I'm a visitor there. But as a spirit of a place and time. It is a sign that there is no pure flux. That there is something worth preserving, for a time, maybe for a long time. Something that can be remembered and honored even if it does not repeat or last forever. Just because mortality is inevitable, there is no need to hurry it. A light grasp is not a hands off.

A fish seller in that neighborhood told me he was the sixth generation of his family to run the fish shop. It was hard work, getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning to go to

the big central fish market and bring back the stock for the day. His wife worked in the shop with him; the shop was maybe two meters by three. His sons, he said, weren't interested in the fish business; they were off to work for big corporations.

We are all more like the fish seller's sons, now. Maybe we will be so on the move that any place will only be a tourist spot, and any shrine only a spectacle. Or maybe we will settle for less physical mobility, our movement all telecommuting and virtual presence, living attached to a bio-region and a piece of land, with its own spirits. I would like that; it would be different from the old rural life but more attached than today's mobility. Or maybe we will move and move, and visit places only briefly defined, and yet learn to find the sacred trees and spirits even if they, and we, visit the place only briefly. No matter what kind of dwelling we find, we can have tea together, this one time.

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<sup>i</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 18.

<sup>ii</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 195.

<sup>iii</sup> Mark Weiser and John Seely Brown, "The Coming Age of Calm Technology," in *Beyond Calculation: The Next Fifty Years of Computing*, edited by Peter J. Denning and Robert M. Metcalfe (New York: Copernicus, Springer Verlag, 1997), 85.