The idea of working consciously with places, buildings and landscape is not unique to Ruskin Mill Trust. The process of consciously entering a new locality with the Spirit of Place in mind is to be found in a considerable amount of literature. It can be compared, for example, with the notion of Zeitgeist or Spirit of the Time in the works of Robert Sheldrake (The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God, 1990).

Over the years a specific method has been developed and practiced by Ruskin Mill Trust when entering a new locality. This practice is known as the Genius Loci Audit and has been performed when a new site has been acquired. This audit supports the discovery of how the local ‘genius’ of the place and informs the Trust’s curriculum with living and skilful practice.

The Trust uses a ‘Goethean’ method of research in which the participant and the place develop a deep empathetic relationship. One phrase that Goethe used to describe his method was delicate empiricism (zarte Empirie)- the effort to understand a thing’s meaning through prolonged empathetic looking and seeing grounded in direct experience. He sought to use firsthand encounter directed in a kindly but rigorous way to know the thing in itself... Rather than remove himself from the thing, Goethe sought to encounter it intimately through the educable powers of human perception. (Seamon, 1998:2) In this way certain insights can arise which continue to build a dialogue, often for many years to come.

This paper explores a seven-stage process of The Genius Loci Audit. Not all stages require an equal amount of time, in fact, some stages can be done in hours, whilst others can take one on a personal journey over months or years. Explaining a Goethean process with a single phenomenon, for example, a rock or plant, is relatively straightforward. Although even here, once one begins to enquire - with delicate empiricism - into the nature of a plant a whole world starts to open up. A place is massively more complex. However, the Goethean process itself gives us a useful organising strategy: the four kingdoms. In fact, the four kingdoms are hidden within the Goethean process: when we work with a plant it is very different from working with an animal, although we move through the seven stages with any phenomenon the phenomenon itself will draw us into some stages more than others. A place is always multi-layered and complex, often with ambiguous boundaries, and the four kingdoms is the fitting way to approach it. Hence we have a seven stage process and, with place, an additional way of using the kingdoms as four aspects.
SUBMISSION OF PAPER TO THE CONFERENCE

THINKING THROUGH ACTION
Epistemological perspectives on action research

The application of Genius Loci Spirit of Place within Ruskin Mill Trust

Affordances of space

An important theoretical concept related to any inquiry of the practice of Ruskin Mill Trust is what we have called ‘the affordances of space’. An ‘affordance’ is a quality of an object, or an environment, which allows an individual to perform an action.1

“The theory of affordance is a radical departure of exiting theories of value and meaning. It begins with a new definition of what value and meaning are. The perceiving of an affordance is not a process of perceiving a value-free physical object to which meaning is somehow added in a way that no one has been able to agree upon; it is a process of perceiving a value-rich ecological object. Any substance, any surface, any layout has some affordance for benefit or injury to someone. Physics may be value-free, but ecology is not.” (Gibson, 1986, p. 138)

The idea of affordance is derived from valance, invitation and demand. However, affordance does not change as its observer changes (Gibson, 1986). The affordance of space is there whether perceived or not, availing itself to locality, environment and substances. Affordance thus points in two directions: to the environment and to the observer (Gibson, 1986).

The craft workshops offer a multidimensional world of experience. The workshop analysed in view of its affordances would offer a plethora of optical information (Gibson, 1986), a host of intriguing visual stimuli and the particular quality of a learning environment that reaches out to its perceiver through the presence of engendered craftmanship and developed skill. Equally, there are places, rooms, where there is a high level of what we may wish to call ‘natural environmental influences’.

Certain spaces in which elemental qualities interact (sunlight, birdsong, breeze, and shade) enable a participatory engagement to take place. We might describe such spaces as having ‘affordances for learning’. Spaces that have flexible membranes of division between inner and outer, offer additional levels of learning which is “[...] latent in the environment, objectively measureable and dependent on the individual’s ability to recognize them” (Gibson, 1986, p. 127)

At the heart of the aesthetics of Ruskin Mill Trust is what we would call a consciously created ‘value-rich ecology’. Embedded into the educational developmental approach is the idea that the perceiver adds to the richness of the perceived - the perceived mirrors itself in the perception of the perceiver. Gibson (1986) talks of the value added to the object by its perceiver when the perception is imbued with meaning, feeling or memory - or more potently, the experience of its creation.

Meeting the material with intention

The method of Practical Skills Therapeutic Education has grown out of the meeting between latent affordances of space and the conscious engagement with it. The most dense and impenetrable space has been met with the highest levels of aspiration for a potent integration. Met with the intention of shaping places for learning through the meeting with resistance, the workshops have been developed through an aesthetic and highly individualised approach. A space may be articulated by tools, semi darkness or radiant colour, the scent of flowers ready for dyeing, or the lanolin from the wool. The

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1 Authors’ free rendering from standard dictionary definition
Textures, the surfaces, the dimensions capture a synthesis of elementary qualities and invite the learner to participate in a multitudinal manner.

Spaces are intentionally created to contribute to the prized commodity of attention. Water running through the Ruskin Mill College valley offers reflections and rhythm. The affordance of the water has been encoded with the method and the learning strategies of the Trust. Water carries information; it speaks a language that over time can be recognised as a positive imprint in the student. By its very nature, water can change its expression from snow to steam. In its presence, the student learns in an informal and discrete way that one must learn to adapt to one’s environment – to the social temperature and its affordances. This learning, provided by conscious interaction with place, can be captured and embedded into the learning outcomes of the curriculum. The encoding of Practical Skills Therapeutic Education into the landscape speaks to the students as they journey through the Trust.

Aric Sigman (2008) has researched the following:

“Exposure to nature and the countryside is becoming a serious approach to preventing and treating both mental and physical illness. Medical journals are now reporting: “Evidence demonstrates that contact with nature enhances human health and well-being.”

And he draws the following conclusions:

“‘Contact with nature’ constitutes a health promotion strategy with potential application in prevention, early intervention, treatment and care.” (Pryor et al., 2006). “Nature plays a vital role in human health and well-being... contact with nature may provide an effective population-wide strategy in prevention of mental ill health” (Maller et al., 2006)” (Sigman, 2008)

Place-based learning in Ruskin Mill Trust entails what is intended to be a meaningful exposure to nature. Louv has coined the notion of “Nature Deficit Disorder” (Louv, 2005) and the work of Ruskin Mill Trust is to challenge this emerging and widespread phenomenon with alternative methods by which the land may educate us to take part and contribute to the ‘value-rich ecology’ that surrounds us.

**Genii Loci - Spirit of Place**

“Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality” (Lawrence, 1923)

The universality of Lawrence’s description of the Spirit of Place has resonance with a number of leading current thinkers. His definition could be reiterated to mean ‘field force’, which connects with Faraday’s field theory of magnetism and electricity (Sheldrake, 1990, p. 146). Like Lawrence, he was drawing on a presence that is not wholly differentiated but has its lineage in a certain quality and context. After all, a ‘field’ is a physical space “[t]he Old English ‘feld’ or ‘fold’, meaning earth or land” (Sheldrake, 1990, p. 146).

Building on the affordances of space, as described above, Ruskin Mill Trust has worked consciously from the outset to exercise a practice of finding and accessing tangible relationships with the qualities of place within which the students’ sensory and imaginative skills can be developed.

Over the years, a theoretical framework has been developed within Ruskin Mill Trust for facilitating an entry into different localities and places within which to actively engage what its known as the ‘Spirit of Place.’ This entry process is one of empathic participation with the aim of understanding and accessing the particular phenomena of the place. It is inspired by Goethe’s idea of Anschauen. Barfield quotes Cottrell in Seamon and Zajonc:

“The opposite of abstract thought is imagination, which deals not with identities but with resemblances. Not with side-by-sidedness but with inter-penetration. This is ability to gain an interpenetration of what is being observed into locality.” (Seamon & Zajonc, 1998, p. 261)

Cottrell states as follows, referring here to Goethe’s idea of ‘anschauen’:

“It is just this imaginative faculty of cognition, imaginative in the literal sense of the word, this ‘viewing’ (Anschauen) as thinking and vice-versa that rests at the core of Goethe’s understanding”. (Seamon & Zajonc, 1998, p. 261)
The process of consciously entering a new locality with the Spirit of Place in mind is to be found in a plethora of literature. It can be compared with the notion of Zeitgeist or the Spirit of the time in Sheldrake (Sheldrake, 1990, p. 144) and to Snyder’s recognition of a ‘force field’ or ‘Spirit of Place’ when he says: “[...] our place is part of what we are. Yet even a ‘place’ has a kind of fluidity: it passes through time and space” (Hay, 2002, p. 158)

The formal method of entering a new locality in this conscious way is in Ruskin Mill Trust referred to as a Genii Loci Audit. The audit has four main steps, which can be described as follows: The first step in the audit is a shared participatory experience with the teams who will be involved in the running of a new site or facility. An intimate relationship is built through the research into the four kingdoms of nature, starting with the very foundation of the site, the rocks (granite, limestone or sandstone) upon which all the activities will eventually unfold. One could say that this first step is the forming of a relationship with the affordances of the foundation. Later on, when the curriculum for the particular site is put together, rock carving may play a prominent role along with the clay available on the site. The intention of this first step in the audit is to restore and honour any new partnership with the place in a creative, interactive gesture.

The second step is the engagement with vegetation and its legacy of diversity since the withdrawal of the last ice age. The discovery of small leaf lime, a pioneer of the post-glacial habitat, may give rise to a deep and profound bonding to the place in respect for its longevity and sacredness. Seamon says, aptly:

“A phenomenological perspective enlarges the emotional range of feelings that attach to place to include care, sentiment, concern, warmth, love and sacredness” (Seamon & Zajonc, 1998) page number?

It is critical to engage with what could be called an agenda-less perspective. In fact, entering a domain blindfolded can open up extra sensory capacities in the exercise of engagement free of ‘emotional colonialism’. It is not uncommon that this activity through a collaborative effort yields insights based on inter-subjective verification. This again serves to develop the quality of sacredness that Seamon describes above.

The third step is to enter into dialogue with the animal kingdom. It is an investigation into the animal husbandry that has shaped and formed local agriculture and human culture. This step includes an identification of the types of animals that were predominant in different periods of our evolution. In Horsley Valley (Ruskin Mill College), as an example the presence of reptiles, herons, frogs and birds offered an understanding of the effect of water in the landscape. This activity goes hand in hand with building an understanding of the human presence and lineage of the site. This third stage is sometimes referred to as ‘the place of interior’ or the ‘soul-space’. The understanding of how plant, soil and forests may have co-created the animal and human community is by Relph referred to as ‘insideness’ and ‘outsideness’:

“For Relph, the acme of authentic place experience is ‘insideness’: ‘to be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place’” (Hay, 2002, p. 156)

It is in the third step of the audit that the connection between the animal and the human kingdom is discovered. The hunter-gatherer period is the pivotal point where the animal and the human realm become entwined. The fourth step is the accumulation of insights and data to form a joint understanding and picture of the ‘being’ of the place. This picture is there to inform and serve the curriculum design for the students and to inform the activities within the provision. It is important, therefore, that this fourth step is understood in terms of authenticity - one could make an interesting lateral observation of Heidegger’s central concept of ‘dwelling’ in this connection, he says “[...] to dwell authentically is to dwell in place” (Hay, 2002, p. 160).

This step is an investigation of early settlers, from hunter-gatherers to the agrarian culture, of how enculturation may have shaped a dialogue between human settlement, animal herding and economy. Drawings and other documentation may be a key to understanding the lineage of a hunter-gatherer period to Celtic or Roman culture; the development of a Medieval village and more recently, the presence of industry. It is fascinating to observe how humans have worked with the landscape, creating footprints of activity over time. The human identification in the landscape is expressed in the conscious placing of a stone or a stone circle, the building of a cathedral or a temple.

In this phase of the audit one may observe the presence of collective human effort or the phenomena of an individuals’ contribution. The presence of such contributions may be both positive and negative. The local myths or stories among the older generations in the locality will often serve to shed light on the
lineage of a particular building or site. Often, stories of coercion or pain may still live as embedded realities in certain contexts. Taking over an old factory in 2000 it was paramount to understand the history of the workers, their relationships and their stories. The after effects of the dynamic between worker and management may linger in a place and there may be an opportunity to work consciously in a redemptive and regenerative gesture.

It is in the fourth step that the other three steps are brought together to form the unique quality of the place and its community with the view to create a “holistic” experience for the student and the staff. The audit process is as much an investigation of external data as it is an exercise of imagination and the consciousness around impression and perception.

In the Ruskin Mill Trust Strategic Plan, the audit is expressed as follows:

“By developing consciousness of this being [of place], we are no longer surprised by outer events. Rather, we become able to understand them in the light of the greater whole. In this way we can use our consciousness to rise above the environmental forces and contribute to its recreation: ‘a permission’.” Strategic Plan in Appendix X

It is an attempt to raise beyond what Cottrel calls onlooker consciousness and engage with the duality of subject and object through the exercise of ‘beholding’ (Seamon & Zajonc, 1998, p. 261)

The final gesture in the audit process is concerned with legitimate intervention. It was a prerequisite for indigenous societies for any alteration of the living environment that permission had to be granted from the beings of the place - often seen as guardians. “In the West, this meaning is connected to both Greek and Roman ideas [...] the ‘sacred grove’ which is the home of a particular God or Goddess” (Brook, 2000, p. 141)

This mindful appreciation for the ‘being’ of the place is an honouring of ancient practices in different cultures where the notion of Spirit of Place has been fostered over time. It can be performed or enacted in different ways, from the contemplative inner gesture to an outward celebration or simply, a listening into what the place speaks back.

The four steps can be summarised as follows:

Step 1: Rocks to Physical
Physical land (geography, geology, mineralogy) what does the land look like? Geology of Land, Weather/Climate

Step 2: Plants to Bio Region
Plants, water influence of light and warmth

Step 3: Animal to Cultural
History, Early settlers, 13th Century, War years, a contemporary map

Step 4: Human Destiny to Biography of location
Young people of the millennium, the influences of obstruction
Bibliography


