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Title:
The Critical Reception of Christian Norberg-Schulz’s Writings on Heidegger and Place

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Abstract:
This article draws from reception theory in its examination of the reception over time by architectural theorists and historians of Christian Norberg-Schulz’s work, and specifically his treatment of Heidegger and place as developed in Genius Loci (1980) and other publications. Norberg-Schulz’s writings, and this book in particular, have attracted consistently high levels of critical attention over more than three decades. Having detailed this reception – which at times borders on hostile – my focus shifts to exploring which it is that this work has attracted such a consistent level of persistent yet critical interest? Why is it that critics keep returning to Norberg-Schulz’s work, and what might be revealed through this concern for and criticism of his work?

Keywords:
reception theory; Christian Norberg-Schulz; place; genius loci; Heidegger

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The Critical Reception of Christian Norberg-Schulz's Writings on Heidegger and Place

So reception theory, it seems to me, opens up the political discussion. It raises important questions about text, reading, meaning, and understanding...

Introduction

Influential Norwegian theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz trained as an architect at the Eidgenoessiche Technische Hochschule in Zurich, graduating in 1949. He then went on to study under Sigfried Giedion, Walter Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe, before returning to Norway, “where he worked with the Modernist Arne Korsmo and where he remained [...] until his death” in 2000. He rose to international prominence with the publication of Intentions to Architecture (1963). Other major publications followed, including Existence, Space and Architecture (1971), Genius Loci (1980), and The Concept of Dwelling (1985).

In this article, I draw from reception theory to examine the reception of Norberg-Schulz's work by architectural theorists and historians, and specifically his treatment of Heidegger and place as developed in Genius Loci (1980) and other publications. His writings, and this book in particular, have attracted consistently high levels of critical attention over more than three decades. In addition to detailing this reception, my interest is also with asking why there is a consistent level of persistent interest? Why is it that critics keep returning to Norberg-Schulz's work, and what might be revealed through this critical concern for his work?

Reception Theory and Architectural History

Reception theory has its roots in literary theory and criticism, and is most commonly associated with the work of Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Hans Robert Jauss. According to Terry Eagleton’s rough periodization of modern literary theory, reception theory constitutes the third of three phases. This progression runs in chronological order as follows:

a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years.

“The reader,” Eagleton asserts, “has always been the most underprivileged of this trio – strangely, since without him or her there would be no literary texts at all. Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author.” One of the key insights of reception theory is in pointing out that, “all readers are socially and historically positioned, and how
they interpret literary works [and all works of cultural production for that matter] are socially and historically positioned.”6 As Eagleton further elaborates:

It is not literary [or other cultural] works themselves that remain constant, while interpretations of them change: texts and literary traditions themselves actively altered according to the various historical “horizons” within which they are articulated.7

This is to say that textual production and reception is a dynamic, two-way process.

The insights and perspectives produced by reception theory, while not without criticism,8 have been influential and taken up and applied within a number of different fields, including classics, cultural studies, art and visual studies, garden history, and architecture, to name a few. Architectural interest in reception theory has been wide-ranging.9 One key strand of this work has been concerned with examining the public reception of an architect’s design. This is the explicit focus, for instance, of Monteyne’s study of Boston City Hall. Drawing on reception theory, Monteyne argues that diverging interpretations of the building, and therefore of the building’s place in Boston civic life, “depend on the identities and contexts of different [receiving] audiences”.10 To date, less explicit attention has been given to the reception of architectural theory by fellow architectural theorists. The concern of the present article is with tracing how Christian Norberg-Schulz’s engagement with theories of place and the philosophical writings of Heidegger, and how both have been received within architecture. In exploring this issue, my focus is diachronic rather than synchronic. That is to say, I am not so concerned with examining specific moments of reception as I am with tracing this reception over time.

**Genius Loci: From “Crisis of Place” to “Strong Place”**

In order to set about building this picture, it is valuable to begin by sketching Norberg-Schulz’s larger intellectual project as it pertains to his engagement with place and phenomenological theory. Norberg-Schulz’s “phenomenological trilogy in architecture” consists of *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971), *Genius Loci* (1980), and *The Concept of Dwelling* (1985). The focus here is on the second of these, *Genius Loci*, a book which crystallises many of his key arguments.

*Genius Loci* develops an historical examination of place making and the basic properties or characteristics that contribute to the “spirit” or “genius” of a place – its *genius loci*.11 The role of architecture, according to Norberg-Schulz, is to provide a “means to visualize the *genius loci*, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he [sic] helps man to dwell”.12 The emphasis that is placed on the idea of dwelling in this passage gestures towards the importance of phenomenology, and especially Heidegger’s philosophical writings, in defining Norberg-Schulz’s ideas about place. As the philosopher Jeff Malpas writes:

The idea of a close connection between human “being-in-the-world” and spatiality, locality and embodiment, that can be discerned (through different ways and differing emphases) in the work of Heidegger and
Merleau-Ponty, reappears in the work of more recent thinkers working in a number of different fields. Something of that influence is to be seen in the explicit thematisation of notions of place and locality.\(^\text{13}\)

Malpas goes on to add that this is especially evident in relation to the Heideggerian influence on architectural theory in the 1970s and 1980s, such as is to be found in the work of writers such as Karsten Harries, Kenneth Frampton, and, particularly, Christian Norberg-Schulz, who is the focus here.

The shaping influence of Heidegger's ideas on Norberg-Schulz's own thinking is apparent. Underpinning Norberg-Schulz's understanding of place and architecture is an extended engagement with Heidegger's notions of “dwelling”, “gathering”, and “thing”.\(^\text{14}\) The meanings of these three terms, like so many of Heidegger's philosophical concepts, are intertwined in complicated ways. Yet, it is largely the first term in this trio, “dwelling”, which guides Norberg-Schulz's study of place. “We have used the [Heideggerian] word “dwelling” to indicate the total man-place relationship.”\(^\text{15}\)

Dwelling is a decidedly opaque and elusive term in Heidegger's writing. The meaning of dwelling – or, more precisely, the meaning of its Germanic root \textit{bauen} – appears to shift with each application, sometimes referring, it would seem, to a kind of fundamental ontological category, and sometimes taking on a more instrumental sense of cultivation and construction – an ambiguity which raises a number of issues that will be returned to later in this discussion. Both senses of dwelling inform Norberg-Schulz's statement that, “Dwelling [...] implies something more than 'shelter'. It implies that the spaces where life occurs are \textit{places}, in the true sense of the word.”\(^\text{16}\)

Place is thus understood by Norberg-Schulz to refer to “the concrete manifestation of man’s dwelling” and is constituted by material substance, shape, texture and colour, all of which give “character” or “atmosphere”.\(^\text{17}\) It is through an understanding of all these factors – the “total phenomenon” of a place and “the meanings which are gathered by a place” – that an attentive reader of landscape is said to be able to arrive at an understanding of \textit{genius loci}. In essence, Norberg-Schulz's argument is to repeat Alexander Pope's famous eighteenth century exhortation to “consult the genius of place in all”.\(^\text{18}\)

According to Gunila Jivén and Peter Larkham's reading of \textit{Genius Loci}, four “thematic levels” can be recognised in Norberg-Schulz's treatment of the concept of \textit{genius loci}. These are:

1. “the topography of the earth’s surface”;
2. “the cosmological light conditions and the sky as natural conditions”;
3. “buildings”; and,
4. “symbolic and existential meanings in the cultural landscape”.\(^\text{19}\)

Norberg-Schulz's application of these phenomenological principles is also framed by his reading of Heidegger's concept of “the fourfold”, which unites earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. As Heidegger explains:
“On the earth” already means “under the sky”. Both of these also mean “remaining before the divinities” and include a “belonging to men’s being with one another”. By a primal oneness the four – earth and sky, divinities and mortals – belong together in one.20

“Dwelling” is said to unify these elements; it “preserves the fourfold by bringing the presencing of the fourfold into things”.21 Thus, for Norberg-Schulz, regardless of whether it is a natural or a constructed place, a Norwegian landscape or a “cluster village” in Puglia, “the character of the place is to a high extent determined by how this standing [earth] and rising [sky] is concretized”.22 In other words, Norberg-Schulz “sees the skyline of the town and the horizontally expanded silhouette of the urban buildings as keys to the image of a place”.23

This emphasis on horizontality and verticality is strongly evident in the images illustrating Genius Loci, many of which repeat this high/low, sky/ground interplay through the extensive use of aerial photography that offers a bird’s-eye view of human settlement and surrounding landscapes, and of horizon and sky. These images are also often juxtaposed with tightly framed ground-level views of streetscapes, architectural details, and so forth. Such is the reliance on and repetition of this compositional pattern that the images can be read to serve key polemical functions within the text; they work to support Norberg-Schulz’s reading of Heidegger by attempting to represent in visual form “the fourfold” of “earth and sky, divinities and mortals”. In addition, through sheer weight of numbers they add vital visual support to the notion of genius loci, and particularly its four thematic levels, sketched earlier.

Norberg-Schulz’s overarching claim is that, “when all the components seem to embody basic existential meanings, we may talk about a ‘strong’ place”.24 It is significant that examples of “strong place” in a modern urban setting are few and far between in his analysis. It is this concern for a lack of clear examples of “strong place” that connects Norberg-Schulz’s examination of genius loci with the earlier writing of Mumford25 and Jacobs26, and the ongoing issue of a “crisis of place” in urbanism. In taking up this theme, Norberg-Schulz argues that when a focus on the identity or genius of a place is absent or forgotten the result is “loss of place”.27

Lost is the settlement as a place in nature, lost are the urban foci as places for common living, lost is the building as a meaningful sub-place where man may simultaneously experience individuality and belonging. Lost is also the relationship to earth and sky. Modern buildings exist in a “nowhere”; they are not related to the landscape and not to a coherent, urban whole, but live their abstract life in a kind of mathematical-technological space which hardly distinguishes between up and down.28

Moreover, as he elaborates elsewhere, in his book Architecture:

The loss of things and places makes up a loss of “world”. Modern man becomes “worldless”, and thus loses his own identity, as well as the sense of community and participation. Existence is experienced as “meaningless”, and man becomes “homeless” because he does not any longer belong to a meaningful totality.29
This, for Norberg-Schulz, is what is at stake in the “crisis of place” for us as social beings. The appropriate response to this apparent “crisis of place”, especially in a contemporary urban context, he argues, is to respect the “spirit of place” and work towards the creation of “strong places”. This involves realising that “cities have to be treated as individual places, rather than abstract spaces where the ‘blind’ forces of economy and politics have free play”.

**The Reception of Christian Norberg-Schulz’s Writing on Place and Heidegger**

Having given this necessarily brief account of Norberg-Schulz’s thesis, I move now to consider the reception of his work, especially his theories of place and his reliance on Heidegger as found in *Genius Loci* and elsewhere. Two things are noteworthy about this reception: the first is the enduring interest in Norberg-Schulz’s work, with consistent engagement with his writings over three decades; the second is the robust, at times hostile, reception his work has attracted.

At the time of its publication *Genius Loci* enjoyed a mixed reception. In a 1981 review by Harris Forusz for the *Journal of Architectural Education*, the book was received largely positively. The central contention of the book, Forusz writes, is Norberg-Schulz’s belief that “beyond the pragmatic and the experiential aspects of architecture there is a specific need for a metaphysical belief in architecture, an aspect which can contribute to the architect’s understanding of the existential ‘meaning’ of place”. For Forusz, the book is most rewarding when read as “a metaphysical view on the problem of the ‘recovery of place’”. Other critics, however, have been less receptive to Norberg-Schulz’s development of the idea of *genius loci*. For instance, despite Norberg-Schulz’s own claim that “to respect the *genius loci* does not mean to copy old models”, his understanding of place and his vision for its (urban) revitalisation has been viewed by some critics as strongly traditional and nostalgic. As Jivén and Larkham note in a 2003 article, “he promotes the traditional form of towns and buildings, which he sees as the basis for bringing about a deeper symbolic understanding of places”. It comes as no surprise, then, that in expounding the principles needed for achieving “strong place”, Norberg-Schulz appears more comfortable in his analysis of “old world” models of place-making – such as Prague, Khartoum, Rome, and his native Norway – than when applying the same principles to what Melvin Webber has termed the “non-place urban realm” of “new world cities”.

A similar critique can be applied to the use of images in *Genius Loci*. In order to explore how this is the case, it is necessary to return to reception theory. One field where the insights generated by reception theory have found specific purchase is within visual studies. The value of reception approaches in the study of visual images, Gretchen Barbatsis argues, is that they orient us “toward understanding the outcomes of encoding work”. That is to say, “the analytic tools of reader-oriented criticism direct attention to the manner in which a picture-text organizes and guides a reading-viewer’s acts of ideation” and sense-making.
As noted earlier, visual examples of so-called “strong place” dominate *Genius Loci*, and Norberg-Schulz appears far more comfortable in his handling of the composition and analysis of these images to support his arguments. Whereas the visual examples used to illustrate “loss of place” are rather more contentious. A case in point is the two illustrations used to highlight “visual chaos” in *Genius Loci*. The first (plate 327, printed on page 188 of the book), represents a winter scene in suburban Oslo. What is noteworthy about this particular image is the way that it has been composed so as to heighten the effect of visual chaos. The even spacing of the power poles in the foreground closes the image in and draws the eye towards the centre and then in two competing directions: down the central line of power poles and out to the vanishing point at right, and between the two centre left poles to the clustering of houses on the hill. Focusing on this urban infrastructure, the overall impression is of visual – and, perhaps more significantly, of urban – clutter. The second image of American roadside signage (plate 332, printed on page 190 of the book) is framed to similar effect, and is used as an unproblematic example of “visual chaos”. It is, however, impossible to receive this image, to view it, from a contemporary perspective without making mental reference to the work of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour, who, eight years earlier, in their influential book *Learning from Las Vegas*, argued that is equally possible to “read” roadside signage for its strong semiotic and symbolic meanings. In essence, their argument in that book was that by studying and adopting the tactics of commercial strip buildings and signs, it is possible to enrich the symbolic content of architectural design. It is thus telling that, while Norberg-Schulz quotes approvingly at various points in *Genius Loci* from Venturi’s earlier *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, no mention is made of *Learning from Las Vegas*. This aporia is arguably due to the fact that the central argument of Venturi’s later co-authored publication runs counter to – or, at very least, complicates – Norberg-Schulz’s own emphasis on the strength of, and lessons to be learned from, traditional place making practices and the processes of “symbolization” to be found in them. What the above examples also show is how images that are used in support of Norberg-Schulz’s thesis can also be (re)read against the grain, so to speak, to offer different interpretations, different “receptions”. For instance, it is just as possible to view the European cluster village, which Norberg-Schulz cites as an example of “strong place”, as examples of “visual chaos”. What passes largely unnoticed and unacknowledged in these textual constructions are numerous cultural and aesthetic assumptions and prejudices which inform these choices and visual preferences. They speak to issues concerning the (selective) reception by Norberg-Schulz himself of other influential works of architectural theory at the time of his writing.

How Norberg-Schulz uses images in his books is also given detailed attention by Jorge Otero-Pailos in his essay “Photo[historio]graphy”. Otero-Pailos’s contention is that, with *Intentions*, Norberg-Schulz “developed a new type of history book in which the pictures were not mere illustrations to the text, but alternate narratives”, a process that was further refined by the time of *Genius Loci*. Complementing his use of the concept of *genius loci* is the notion of “alétheic images”. Norberg-Schulz drew the term “alétheic” from his reading of Heidegger, with Heidegger using it to develop his description of truthful
experience; Norberg-Schulz, however, repurposes the term, construing it “as synonymous with the visual experience of photographs”.41 This deliberate misreading, according to Otero-Pailos, serves a particular strategic purpose for Norberg-Schulz, which is to present an “ahistorical”, overtly visual understanding of architecture. Otero-Pailos's argument is that, by doing this, Norberg-Schulz is suggesting that “only visual means could properly interpret architecture’s essence”.

The basic claim of Genius Loci, Otero-Pailos writes, “was that architects were looking at the wrong images. They were seeking inspiration in the ‘visual chaos’ of late modern architecture when they should have been looking at nature”.

For Otero-Pailos, the implications of this aim and method are clear: while the idea of place specificity would appear to “undermine modernism’s universalism”, in fact the opposite is true. Norberg-Schulz’s theory, he writes, “presumed a universal and ahistorical subject who learned through picturing, irrespective of the local topography he or she confronted”.

Elsewhere, the critical reception of Norberg-Schulz’s theory of genius loci paid specific attention not to the use of images, but to the historical evidence Norberg-Schulz used to develop and bolster his claims. For example, in an examination of how this idea is developed in his 1979 essay “Genius Loci of Rome”, Harriet Edquist writes the following:

If there is a genius loci, how is it manifested? For Norberg-Schulz it would appear to manifest itself directly to the human consciousness. It is, at base, an idealist and essentialist notion, an appeal to a “cosmic reality” which because “natural” can therefore be directly apprehended. The whole of the Roman argument is predicated on the notion that the entire experience of Rome can be condensed into a generalised overarching schema of this sort. But no concepts, these or any other, are “natural”. Nor do they come without the pre-structuring of language, the use of which is neither neutral nor objective.

In light of this, Edquist arrives at the following stinging evaluation: for Norberg-Schulz's argument to be sustained, it must draw upon “a very artificial and carefully controlled set of linguistic options: the obliteration of the human subject, the scrambling of history, the avoidance of a stated political framework, the insistence on an essentialist homogenous entity that unifies all difference”. According to Edquist, “the impersonality of his language parallels its a-historicity”. This leads Edquist to characterize his account of Rome as “wretched”, insofar as it moves “between Etruscan, Classical, Renaissance, and Baroque as though a space untouched by history”.

For Edquist, what is most troubling about this approach is the ease with which this sort of criticism, which she views as “predicated on essentialist notions of national identity, ‘spirit of place’ and the zeitgeist”, is able to be mobilised in order to “provide sustaining myths for authoritarian regimes whose call to nationalism is a signal factor in mobilising its people into whatever activity is deemed politically useful”.
Edquist’s stridently critical reception of Norberg-Schulz’s work is particularly interesting for the way that it accords with a series of philosophical debates developing around the same time concerning the problems associated with the concept of “community”. These concerns are most prominent in the work of the French philosophers Jacques Derrida51 and Jean-Luc Nancy52, both of whom have been committed to thinking through the perils that attend “an understanding of community based around a singular notion of identity, of totalitarianism, and of undertaking projects of community [and especially which tie community to place] that became apparent as a result of these events”53. Nancy, in particular, is particularly suspicious of various theoretical attempts throughout Anglo-American and European history that appear to be centred upon recapturing community. His suspicion is directed at the Christian understanding of community as communion – or what Nancy terms community’s “onto-theological” heritage.54 For Nancy, community is not communion. This is because community as communion, in Michele Willson’s words, “constrains a group of people into a monolithic form or identity, suppressing difference and promoting exclusionary practices”.55 These are issues that have also been raised in relation to Norberg-Schulz’s work. In addition to Edquist’s concerns, noted above, are those of Linda Krause who, in her damning review of Norberg-Schulz’s book Architecture, views his favouring of sacred architecture as “the most disturbing aspect of his work”.56 She describes his vision for architecture as “promised utopias [that] are bound by barbed wire”.57

In addition to Norberg-Schulz’s theory of genius loci undergoing thorough critique, his utilisation of Heideggerian concepts and terminology has also attracted a very strong critical reception.58 Towards the beginning of Genius Loci, Norberg-Schulz laments the fact that architecture has lost its way “after decades of abstract, ‘scientific’ theory”.59 He sees a “return to a qualitative, phenomenological understanding of architecture”,60 place, and the character of place as key to architectural theory achieving a “truly concrete basis”.61 There is a certain irony in this lamentation insofar as Norberg-Schulz turns to the “abstract theory” of Heidegger as the means by which to achieve this “grounding”. This turn to and embrace of Heidegger’s work by Norberg-Schulz has been viewed as problematic for a number of reasons.

To begin with, as David Seamon points out, it is not at all certain that the Heideggerian concepts of “gathering”, “dwelling”, and “thing”, are so readily transposable as critical tools for making sense of architecture and place making.62 They are certainly not readily translatable into built form. At very least, these concepts are far more ambivalent, elusive, and unstable than is generally credited. For instance, a certain “drift” seems to characterize Heidegger’s usage of the terms “dwelling” and “building” which is further accentuated by his consideration of “dwelling” and “poetics”. The difficulty facing architectural theory, then, is twofold. Firstly, architectural debates that engage with these concepts “usually silently presume the meaning of dwelling as to be well known” when this is not necessarily the case.63 Secondly, this leaves these concepts open to the possibility of widely differing interpretation. For example, contrasting with Norberg-Schulz’s reading of Heidegger is Dörte Kuhlmann’s commentary on “Building Dwelling Thinking”, with its discussion of the bridge as a gathering
force and the idea that art or architecture can bring about an unveiling of truth. As Kuhlmann remarks:

A bridge for example makes the river into a place and reveals its true essence by letting the two banks appear as opposites, thereby thematizing the crossing: the unveiling of the truth about the place becomes an attack against its essentialist characteristics. From this point of view it becomes possible to postulate that the specificity of a place, its genius loci, may in fact be radically secondary or even parasitical.64

Norberg-Schulz’s engagement with Heidegger’s thinking and writing is also seen to generate problems at the level of the text. For example, Timothy Gould argues that the difficulty of Heidegger’s thought and his prolix style (“the Olympian heights” of his “ponderously esoteric prose” as Eagleton refers to it)65 has dire consequences for Norberg-Schulz’s own writing.66 One impact, Gould argues, is that the incorporation of Heideggerian phrasing “distends” Norberg-Schulz’s own prose. Take, for example, this passage: “In general things gather world and thereby reveal truth. To make a thing means the ‘setting-into-work’ of truth. A place is such a thing, and as such it is a poetical fact.”67 The other consequence, Gould suggests, is that Norberg-Schulz’s (mis)use of Heideggerian terminology leads him to say things that are ultimately “something like what Heidegger is criticizing”.68 Gould concludes with the blunt assessment that, “In looking for inspiration and confirmation in Heidegger’s work, Norberg-Schulz is in danger of choking on words he doesn’t need for the sake of ideas whose consequences he evidently doesn’t understand”.69

Linda Krause draws out a related point. Writing in response to Norberg-Schulz’s claim that “places possess meaning when they are the locus of human activity, Krause offers the acerbic quip that, judging by his writing, “only those activities cited by postwar German existentialists and phenomenologists are legitimate”.70

Robert Mugerauer’s reception of Norberg-Schulz’s work, on the other hand, is somewhat more charitable. In his review of the 1985 book The Concept of Dwelling, Mugerauer writes that “Norberg-Schulz’s internationalization and use of Heidegger’s language is one of the sources of the book’s importance”.71 Nevertheless, he, too, acknowledges there are issues with this usage. For Mugerauer, like Gould, this is primarily due to Norberg-Schulz’s attempts to supplement a Heideggerian lexicon with a “cluster of words that violate Heidegger’s conventions”:

In the works that developed the thought of fourfold world, Heidegger opposed and avoided metaphysical words that blocked careful thinking about dwelling, words such as “represent”, “express”, “categories”, and “concept”, which Norberg-Schulz uses repeatedly.72

One consequence of this, Krause argues, is that we as readers “are given a series of solemn statements that sound more profound than they are, and are more obtuse than they sound”.73
Discussion and Conclusion

In his account of the importance of reception theory for the study of classics, James Porter writes:

While the zone above the apparatus criticus (to wit, the text) has been favoured in literary reception studies, only rarely does the apparatus criticus itself come in for scrutiny. Yet the apparatus criticus is itself a text, and as such it is worthy of reception theory.\textsuperscript{74}

Writing generated from the field of architectural theory appears to present a very different case from that of literary reception studies. The scholarship that is dedicated to examining Norberg-Schulz’s later writings has consistently focused on both the texts themselves and the “critical apparatus”, understood here in the sense of Heideggerian phenomenology informing a modernist architectural agenda – especially as they operate in unison. This examination of this body of critical work reveals a particular consistency to how Norberg-Schulz’s writing has been received over more than three decades. Moreover, what is noteworthy about this body of work is the strength of the criticism of Norberg-Schulz’s work, and it is this forceful critique that raises a number of questions. Why is it that architectural theorists and critics have returned so many times to Norberg-Schulz’s work? What is it in his work that is seen to be so compelling? And, moreover, what is it that draws critics back to his work in ways that are consistently critical of it? In closing, I offer two speculations on (if not quite responses to) these questions.

In a well-known article from 1978, the sociologist Herbert Gans, in the course of offering his view of the architectural profession, makes the following remarks:

A major distinguishing characteristic of high-culture architecture has been its self-conscious attempt to make philosophical and symbolic statements, but often this is overdone. [...] Architects are generally not accomplished philosophers in the first place; the statements they want to make are often half-baked or clichéd even when the architecture itself is good.\textsuperscript{75}

Within architectural theory scholarship, Norberg-Schulz has been criticised repeatedly for his perceived lack of understanding of Heidegger’s theories and arguments. It is possible that part of the continuing fascination with Norberg-Schulz’s writing is that it serves as a cautionary tale concerning the difficulties and possible pitfalls associated with the incorporation of theory into architecture. As scholars of interdisciplinarity have long noted, the reception of any idea or concept developed within one context that is drawn from another context necessarily involves acts of translation.\textsuperscript{76} The many issues that arise through and as a result of these acts of translation are well known to architectural theorists. For instance, Simone Brott details at length the intricacies involved in, and challenges presented by, architectural readings of Deleuze’s work on Leibniz’s concept of “the fold”.\textsuperscript{77} Elsewhere, Michael Speaks retells the infamous case of Derrida (at the Anywhere conference in Yufuin, Japan, in 1992) refusing “to outline a project for the new” and refusing to offer the assembled architects “a clear way to convert deconstruction (as the theoretical protocol) into architectural form”.\textsuperscript{78} It is in this context that Norberg-Schulz’s work provides a
kind of limit case. To give just one example: Elie Haddad concludes a detailed examination of Norberg-Schulz’s phenomenological project in architecture by stating that his desire “to translate phenomenological discourse into a tool for the generation of architectural forms that recreate a semblance of meaningful environments” is what “constitutes the weakest point” in his “theoretical proposition”.79

The second speculative remark is to suggest that perhaps part of the cyclical fascination with Norberg-Schulz’s work is that his “theoretical proposition” is not always apparent and can, in fact, be decidedly opaque, and his reliance on Heidegger does not appear to help. For instance, in the midst of an otherwise positive review of Genius Loci, Forusz remarks, “I am not sure what Heidegger’s prominent inclusion does for the reader’s understanding of the phenomenological view of architecture, other than to legitimize Norberg-Schulz’s theory”. Otero-Pailos gives this same point a rather different inflection:

Norberg-Schulz used Heidegger as a theoretical mask to add philosophical credibility to the visual project of modernism, at the precise moment modernism seemed destined to die. [...] The challenge was to open historical buildings (modern or otherwise) to the designer in a nonhistorical way.80

Otero-Pailos suggests that Norberg-Schulz's visual method and promotion of his take on the concept of genius loci aimed to achieve this, and did so in combination by serving as a sort of dog whistle to his architectural audience:

The promise was clear: by subjecting themselves to the rule of the genius loci, architects could become an elite avant-garde guiding society beyond its disillusionment with modernity.81

Further to this, in Krause’s stinging review of Norberg-Schulz’s collected essays, she concludes that, “despite their Heideggerian jargon of authenticity”, his essays “sound a lot like Pugin and Ruskin. Filled with a romantic nostalgia for medieval order, hierarchy, and unchallenged authority, they offer reassuring truths in an age of anxiety”.82

These are telling evaluations, especially in light of Dennis Sharp’s remarks on Norberg-Schulz’s “lifelong commitment to the explanation of the tenets of Modern Architecture”.83 They are telling in the sense that the reception and ongoing critical re-evaluation of Norberg-Schulz, developed from close readings of his writings, feeds a much larger project: the reception and ongoing critical re-evaluation of Architectural Modernism. It is as part of this larger initiative that Norberg-Schulz’s work offers architectural theorists and historians a particularly rich vein for scholarly excavation, or better still, given the overtly critical tone of much of the scholarship examined in this article, a possible fault line along which many of the previously held assumptions regarding modernist architectural theory might be and already are being unsettled.

The critical reception of Norberg-Schulz’s work is also significant, especially for the way that it, too, has opened up additional fault lines or points of contention within architectural theory. Arguably the most important of these are emerging
debates around the fate of phenomenology within architecture. Otero-Pailos further developed his critique of Norberg-Schulz’s use of images and Heideggerian terminology as part of a wide-ranging book project, in which he “determines the death of phenomenology in architecture”. This provocative contention, and the emphasis that Otero-Pailos gives to Norberg-Schulz in building it, is resisted strongly by Bryan Norwood in a review of Otero-Pailos’s book. In a familiar move – one adopted by Norberg-Schulz’s many critics but here applied to the work of one of these critics – Norwood accuses Otero-Pailos of basing his critique of phenomenology on a misreading of Heidegger (“Otero-Pailos’s muddled discussion of Heidegger continues the architectural tradition of conflating and confusing terminology by glossing complicated philosophical relationships”). For Norwood, this leads to a too hasty dismissal of architectural phenomenology. Both critics appear to agree that part of the trouble with architectural phenomenology is that it “still voices a metaphysics of presence by assuming the world is constituted by observing subjects and architectural objects”. For Norwood, however, this should not necessarily lead to a dismissal of phenomenology. Rather, what is preferable, he suggests, is “careful, critical self-reflection on phenomenology as an architectural method”. As Norwood points out, the subject/object split was something that troubled the phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz. And it was this issue that fed (if not led to precisely) the subsequent development and articulation of “post-phenomenologies”. Post-phenomenological approaches already have a firm foothold within a number of disciplines, including philosophy, geography, and media and communications. There are clear disciplinary differences in how each has responded to post-phenomenology. Even so, the last two disciplines in the above list are interesting in the present context insofar as their approach to post-phenomenological work has tended to have been developed along lines that treat “actors” more evenly (thus downplaying the aforementioned subject/object split) and have been explored explicitly in reference to the messy and complicated contemporary lived existence of urban dwellers (potentially providing an alternative path forward to that championed by Norberg-Schulz and criticised for its “romantic nostalgia”). It remains to be seen, however, how well “received” such work is within architectural theory, and whether or not it leads to a reinvigorated interest in, and further reconceptualizations of, architectural phenomenology.

Endnotes

3 See, for example, Terry Eagleton, “Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory”, in Literary Theory: An Introduction, Chichester: Wiley, 2011, 47-78;

4 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 64.

5 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 64.


7 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 72.


15 Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 19. One of the more curious and disconcerting aspects of Norberg-Schulz’s writing is the repeated use of the present-plural “we”. Whose is the second voice in this single-authored text? There is a strong case to be made for suggesting it is Heidegger’s. Certainly, Heidegger’s thinking and writing exerts such a strong influence on *Genius Loci* that he seems more than just inspiration and is closer, to paraphrase Derrida, to that of a spectre haunting this text and its authorship.

16 Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 5 – original emphasis.


and Epistles to Several Persons (Moral Essays), Plymouth: Northcote House, 1988, 93.


22 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 63 and passim.

23 Jivén and Larkham, “Sense of Place”, 70.

24 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 179.


27 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 190.

28 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 190.


30 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 182 – original emphasis.

31 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 182.

32 Jivén and Larkham, “Sense of Place”, 70.

33 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 179.


36 Barbatis, “Reception Theory”, 280.

37 Barbatis, “Reception Theory”, 279.


40 Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 220.

41 Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 220.

42 Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 236.
Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 236.
Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 238.
Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 238.
Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 238.


Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 10.

Willson, Technically Together, 149.


Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 5.

Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 5. For a detailed account of Norberg-Schulz’s turn towards phenomenology, see Otero-Pailos, “Photo[historio]graphy”, 234-236.

Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 15.


65 Eagleton, Literary Theory, 57.
67 Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci, 170.
72 Mugerauer, “The Concept of Dwelling”, 158.
80 Otero-Pailos, ‘Photo[historio]graphy”, 236.
81 Otero-Pailos, ‘Photo[historio]graphy”, 232.
84 Jorge Otero-Pailos, Architecture’s Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
87 Norwood, “Architecture’s Historical Turn”, 5.
88 Norwood, “Architecture’s Historical Turn”, 7.
89 Norwood, “Architecture’s Historical Turn”, 7.
90 Norwood, “Architecture’s Historical Turn”, 7.