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Article:

Ren, X. orcid.org/0000-0002-6086-616X (2020) Thin mask, thick mnemonic : the idea of the wall and genius loci in two contemporary buildings. *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 24 (1). pp. 37-48. ISSN 1359-1355

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135519000460>

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A study into a form of the wall and its archetypal engagement with places as found and genius loci is articulated through contemporary architectural design and construction practices.

Thin mask, thick mnemonic: the idea of the wall and genius loci in two contemporary buildings

Xiang Ren

The idea of wall provides an important reference point for the genealogy of architecture and human settlements. In both ancient western and eastern civilisations, the wall has not only been used to claim physical territory, but also socio-cultural identity and spiritual belonging, and has therefore been largely manipulated for political and religious purposes. Pier Vittorio Aureli argues that the sacred was defined through the construction of spatial limits.¹ And the wall is asserted by Simon Unwin as the most archetypal concept of spatial limit.² By choosing a built archetype such as the ancient sanctuary, one of the archetypal models for the city in western civilisations, Aureli explains how it was built as a space enclosed by the wall – the ‘temenos’ – meaning ‘to cut’ in its original Greek root.³ As an ancient Roman concept of spirit of place, the idea of genius loci was explored by Christian Norberg-Schulz, who stated that it is determined by the simple architectural motifs of the building such as doors, roofs and moldings.⁴ John Brinckerhoff Jackson defines genius loci in its current meaning as:

*the atmosphere to a place... that certain localities have an attraction which gives us a certain indefinable sense of well-being and which we want to return to [...]*⁵

However, the fundamental idea of the wall and its connection to the genius loci has steadily diminished during the emergence and continuous development of secular modernity since the 20th century, and manifested in contemporary forms of urbanisation in both the West and the far East. The wall in architecture has a tendency to be reduced to a merely technical, graphic and environmental business without a deeper spiritual engagement with a specific place, or group of people.

The English word wall does not suggest or differentiate its two meanings as well as in the German language within which the two wall types – ‘Mauer’ and ‘Wand’ – were differentiated by theorists such as, Gottfried Semper, as a loadbearing structure and infilling structure respectively.⁶ However, it is questionable that there

is no place for the wall as a loadbearing structure among other ancient building elements in Semper's theory of 'Four Elements' – hearth, roof, mould (earthwork) and enclosure (membrane).⁷ Undoubtedly, the idea of wall is not the only determinative force for revealing and sustaining the genius loci of a specific site and place. Without the substantial materiality of the wall that physically defines architecture and emotionally sustains the place-atmosphere, architecture would lose its disciplinary capacity and potential to be related to an authentic and deep structure of place, and without this aspect, architecture would be reduced to a purely technical practice and superficial visual design. Although under contemporary construction and building regulations a wall would hardly achieve a monolithic constructional presence in its most authentic loadbearing form, 'the questions of authenticity' cannot be neglected in contemporary architectural interpretation on the form linking the wall and place,⁸ or architecture's mnemonic potential to link people with place.⁹ This is the departure point of this article: the idea of the wall in contemporary architecture that exists in a familiar spiritual relationship to a specific place and group of people.

The contemporary idea of the wall and the historical roots of its associated issues, such as the relevance of surface treatment and the authenticity of tectonic expression, can be traced back through architectural discourse to the 19th century. From the perspective of structural rationalists like Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and Viollet-le-Duc, application of attachment was objected to unless it related to a functional and constructional presence. According to this principle, ornament must arise out of a logical consequence of fundamental tectonic inspiration, and propriety of ornament only occurred when it was merged with structure. In other words, a wall of surface ornament was an outer mask, which should be separated from the bone structure. However, arguably a clear hierarchy has never been established architecturally and philosophically between the non-structural and the structural, i.e. 'the accidental' and 'the essential'. 'The accidental' differentiates from 'the essential' as the ontological part of building that is irreducible in its elements, what Karl Botticher describes as the 'core-form' (*Kernform*).¹⁰ 'The accidental' refers to a mask with an ornamental surface treatment and is only legitimate when it is in intimate connection with the fundamental articulations of the building, in particular the overall structural loadbearing system, or the proportional system. Only in this manner is the accidental mask not merely an applied attachment, but also able to claim an honesty in construction and moral authenticity.

From an anthropological and phenomenological perspective, Peter Zumthor attempted to establish a stronger overall presence through 'atmospheres' rather than 'space' in architecture and its surroundings, by focusing more on the sensibility and sensuality of materials in the wall enclosure.¹¹ This 'wholeness', which could be asserted as a very German understanding of built structure, is counter to the orthodox Modernist separation of elements including the wall. An extreme condition of the latter can be found in 'Mies-ian' architecture, the wall articulation of which can be seen as a worship of building technology with extreme control of the interior

space and its visual connection with the outdoor environment. The 'Mies-ian' walls of 'absolute nothing', made by continuous transparent surfaces, with their extreme tectonic clarity in a visual sense, are however a key component of the spiritual temple of an individual architect-hero. Consciously or unconsciously, this masks specific site conditions, and erases the long-sustained genius loci of a specific place.

For an existential and archetypal return to the idea of wall, human scale should be centered: 'accidental' articulation of the wall has been produced on site, with craftsmen and makers taking part in authorship and improvisation. Since the idea of ornament was introduced to soften the monotonous presence of the wall and to represent the symbolism of architecture, this articulation of wall was meant 'to adorn' space. This can be seen as a marker of the disjunction between architecture as anonymous, spontaneous construction, and architecture as a culturally-meaningful production. Later, an industrially-informed modern movement and its construction methodology shifted the focus to pursue efficiency, precision and mass production, which has often been associated with a radical replacement of the hand-made with the machine-made; excepting a minority group including Louis Kahn and Sigurd Lewerentz, who provided counter examples of public buildings and sacred spaces.¹² The Arts and Crafts Movement of the 1880s, and the intellectual progressions around the 'Tectonic Culture' of built form from the 1980s to mid-1990s, both grew out of concern for a culturally-neutral modernisation with a spiritually-flattened wall and a physically-flattened 'wall-as-wallpaper': on handmade production, on traditional craftsmanship and on everyday lives and the collective memories of ordinary people.¹³ The ability of the maker's hand to create irregularities and to encounter 'happy accidents' is an innate source of expression of individualism and innovation that – as John Ruskin and William Morris would argue – machines are not capable of. What also deserves emphasis is that this anthropological and phenomenological turn of architectural fundamentals does not mean a return to a nostalgic past and long gone pre-modern building methods. Instead, it should offer a contemporary architectural interpretation, or a *modus operandi*, to preserve and advance the attachment between people and place through the wall as a link, a link which was suppressed in the single white color of orthodox Modernism,¹⁴ and simplified as a thin surface since Venturi's rediscovery of Italian hill towns.¹⁵

This architectural form and *modus operandi* uses the wall to establish meaningful links between a group of people and a specific place, moving away from the contemporary architectural claim of a disciplinary quasi-autonomy with a focus on abstraction, which can be seen in the work of architectural theorists and practitioners such as Pier Vittorio Aureli and Valerio Olgiati.¹⁶ Rather than abstraction, it is about specificity. It should point to a specific architectural way, which provokes the reinvention of architecture from within the given conditions and place as found.¹⁷ All material cultures, social histories, group memories and rituals should be treated as architectural fundamentals behind the mask of built forms and structures, and should be expressed in both building processes and in the production of the wall. Based on this framework, two contemporary architectural

projects are selected, the gallery of Nottingham Contemporary, designed by Caruso St. John Architects for a post-industrial midland city of England, and the Che'tian Village Cultural Centre designed by West-Line Studio for a pre-industrial rural village in remote south-western China. The rationale behind this selection and comparative case study is that both reinterpret a lost and fragile mnemonic of the genius loci of a specific place, through a de-familiarised use of the familiar form of wall. Although within very different cultural contexts and external conditions, the archetypal engagement between the wall and the place has been traced clearly and consistently in the following two projects.

Nottingham Contemporary Gallery, Caruso St. John Architects

Built in 2009, the gallery of Nottingham Contemporary is situated at the contemporary arrival zone of the city [1]. As a historical part of the Lace Market Quarter, the site was a prosperous area in the nineteenth century and still has a series of Victorian warehouses to the east, supported by prefab steel frames and red-brick stereotomic walls. The site is situated in a triangular sloping topography, which is sliced by several modern and industrial infrastructures, with a post-war commercial building occupying nearly a full block on the west side and a pre-industrial church to its east. The need to provide a contemporary place with enough socio-spatial capacity to host the city's art, past and future, would challenge any architectural language. The building attempts to transform the decaying warehouse site character into an art-house atmosphere, without losing its indigenous spatial identity. The conceptual proposal from Caruso St. John Architects in their winning competition entry was to produce a billboard-like form as a folded 'carpet', consistent with the architect's urban proposition of a public building in their earlier Walsall New Art Gallery project.¹⁸ Beyond the mere functional fit of the site's topography and a thin-skinned abstraction of the building programme, Caruso St. John Architects have explored an architectural form based on careful observation and creative interpretation of the physical, topographical and historical qualities from within the site's context. Their reconsideration and reinterpretation of the lost spirit of hand-based craftsmanship in the Lace Market have led to an architectonic wall which is mnemonic of the as-found conditions and vanishing textile-industrial memory of the area's genius loci. The final built form prioritises and takes up its communicative role, almost reducing the building to a group of walls in order to activate and define an urban frontage from Nottingham's city train station. The building volume is continuously wrapped by pre-cast concrete panels in subtle mint green and slightly curved forms, with each panel imprinted with patterns of indigenous lacework [2]. This specific wall expression and surface treatment is a subtle response and mediation to its immediate surroundings, with its use of colours, textures and details highly attuned to and inspired by the specificity of the place and context.¹⁹ As Adam Caruso, one of the founding partners of Caruso St. John Architects and the architect-in-charge for Nottingham Contemporary project, claims in his design notes:

The exterior image takes its inspiration from the amazing 19th century buildings of Nottingham and in particular from the impressive facades of the Lace Market, where hard bricks form a tough shell to the repetitive structural frames of the warehouse buildings. The toughness of these facades was originally about durability and low maintenance but the rigour of their repetitive pattern and precise material assembly also lend a dignity to the streets of the quarter. The facades for Nottingham Contemporary are developed as a continuous patterned surface of pre-cast concrete elements. Whilst pre-cast has long been popular for the efficiencies that stem from prefabrication, the crude techniques and materials of the 1960s have undergone intensive development resulting in a surface that has the potential to be somewhere between stone, terracotta and concrete.²⁰

This expression of the wall with a material presence – which lies in between stone, concrete, and terracotta – with a specific, readable pattern language, aligns with the principles of the building's layout and spatial organisation. Together they connect the new art gallery of Nottingham Contemporary to the site and its history. The strategic orientation with a set-back of the main building volume from the southern and eastern sides shows a great spatial sympathy to its immediate surroundings. An urban promenade is curated through a generous public stairway, which physically connects a series of semi-public external spaces at different levels between the new gallery and the nearby church and warehouses. Furthermore the visual scale of the monolithic wall, with its repetitive lace pattern can be sensed through this set-back, as pedestrians walk towards or pass across the site and building. The small scale is blurred at distance, which seizes the peripheral vision. Such subliminal peripheral vision can be described as absent-mindedly gazing into the depth, and suggests multiple interpretations and imaginations. It provides the mind with a perennial state of anticipation and renewal. However, when setting out from the gateway of the train station, the lace wall is discreet from and distance and scale, if not visible at all. What appears to be a layer of white lace skin draped onto the wall can be sensed and recognised only when approaching nearer to the facade. Not until closely adjacent to the building, within two meters, could a passer-by realise that the lace pattern is in fact carved into the surface of the concrete as a reductive stance rather than an addictive one [3]. There is a more densified lace pattern at the top of each 600 mm wall panel – a subtle metaphor of capitals of the classical order, as seen in Western art galleries and museum building typologies – besides the wall panels' hollowed semi-circular geometry reminiscent of classical columns. Nevertheless, this human-scale lace-patterned wall is offered to hands and fingers, which is then perceived and confirmed as an inseparable part of the structure in precast concrete. The whole progression provides people with a sense of satisfaction through routinely questioning and confirming their intuition and perceptions. The wall acts as a physical puzzle not only for professionals to read but also for the public to enjoy by solving it too. Therefore, the reading of the wall acts as an agent to invite people to discuss, question, and enter the space to learn the hidden meaning behind its production and representation. This intensive and informal engagement between the

art displayed in the gallery and the public under a wider idea of 'City-ness' was the shared vision of the patron and the architect from the beginning of the project. Rather than adding to a completely exotic atmosphere imposed from the outside – the creative quarter of the once textile-industrial city – the wall of the Nottingham Contemporary reclaims the artistic substrate and genius loci of the Lace Market through everyday visual and spiritual engagements, so as to reconstruct a ritual progression from the mundane into a more sacred world of art.

The external references for Caruso St John's expression of the wall and surface texture can be linked to those historical attempts, which celebrate a kind of tactile quality and narrative of the monolithic wall, in a single material softened by surface treatment in natural botanical patterns. The building refers to plants' texture on the terracotta walls and capital details of the Guaranty Building in Buffalo, designed by architect Louis Sullivan in the 1890s, and also Frank Lloyd Wright's later exploration of a textile block system using tree leaf patterned concrete blockwork, up until the late 1920s.²¹ Correspondingly, the internal reference is undoubtedly related to Nottingham's very own lace production on the site. The actual construction process of the lace wall of Nottingham Contemporary is one of measurement and procession, largely owing to contemporary advanced techniques such as digital milling and fabrication, as well as close collaborations with local researchers at the textile design department of the University of Derby [4]. Adam Caruso states:

*The cast pattern is taken from a specific example of Nottingham lace, which itself was a machine-made copy of a French handmade original. The lace was scanned, and then the scale, tiling and contrast of the two-dimensional image was worked. This modified image was then converted into a three-dimensional description which was used to drive a milling machine that produced a full sized positive in MDF which was then used to make hard latex moulds. Four 14-metre-long latex moulds were used to cast all of the pre-cast elements on the building.*²²

A piece of original lace pattern was selected and enlarged 2.5 times larger in order to suit the standard size of prefab concrete panel, which was produced off-site and transported to the site for assembly. The lace pattern traces the truthfulness of the casting process. According to Adam Caruso, 'the scale of the decoration should have a direct relationship to that of the building's constructional articulation.'²³ Some of the precast panels have the lace pattern along their length, and these were cast first [5]. Other panels use the lace pattern as an edging, and the latex casts were cut down gradually to form these part-decorated panels.²⁴ The construction process of this lace wall has found reconciliation between the advantage of the machine to produce an affordable artistic expression, which would cost exponentially more if carved traditionally by hand. Such reconciliation differentiates the production of Nottingham Contemporary from the indigenous on-site production of the historical Lace Market. But it is not a repetitive, uniform production either. As the solidity of the concrete varies, the surface porosity after acid treatment is unique every time, as well as the milling speed and drill size, all of which determine the nature of the lace pattern as a product of individualism. It is imaginable that the making of the

lacework surface involved constant experiments and repeated errors before reaching acceptable results. This coincides with that of the genius loci of the old site, where the new building of Nottingham Contemporary is constructed within a spirit of testing, making and craftsmanship, like the production of a decent and durable piece of lace in the Lace Market of a much earlier historical period. In this sense, the wall and its surface of Nottingham Contemporary are not a facile use of past image, but rather a firm reminder and register of a lost mnemonic of the place. The genius loci has therefore been deeply embedded in the tectonic narrative of building. The wall has further evoked a collective memory of local communities and an emotional echo of its social fabric.

Che'tian Village Cultural Centre, West-Line Studio

The issue of the restoration of a 'broken' genius loci is much more complex in a fragile built environment undergoing rapid urbanisation processes, which give less consideration to the embedded place-memory and traditions.²⁵ West-Line Studio, a lesser-known contemporary architectural practice quietly working in the remote rural regions of Guizhou province in China since 2004, consistently searches for a reproduction of genius loci in peripheral south-western China.²⁶ As its founding architect,²⁷ Haobo Wei has been deeply influenced by European 'organic' modernist architects, such as Hugo Häring, Hans Scharoun, Gunnar Asplund and Ralph Erskine.²⁸ The practice shares an intellectual ambition with those early modernist pioneers in mediating a universal modernity with a reinvention of the regional built tradition, and has maintained many years of social and architectural investigations in the local vernacular architecture, which was built by, and for, ethnic minority communities. Based upon these investigations, West-Line Studio has gradually formulated the unique architectural modus operandi for which Haobo Wei claims to be the 'atmospheric reproduction of genius loci.'²⁹ Here, 'atmospheric reproduction' is explored and illustrated in three parts: firstly, building to enhance the 'layout of local context and order of regional ties'; secondly, building to sustain and stimulate 'communal events of the ethnic minority commune'; and thirdly, building to explore a 'layered construction' without losing the appropriateness of traditional building methods and the convenience of modern building techniques.³⁰ The 'layout of local context and order of regional ties' informs design tactics, dissolving architectural volumes into an aggregation of associated spatial units, so as to merge into the unique site and territorial topography, which is a result of ancient Karst geomorphologic evolution. The 'communal events' direct communities to a more balanced coexistence and strategic coupling of two social structures, the first inherited from traditional clan lineage, and the second based on a modern notion and organisation of community with distinctive, diverse ethnic cultures. The 'layered construction' advocates overlapping traditional architectonic methods of the region with more adaptable, transferrable, modern construction modes, which aims to achieve a reconciliation between efficiency in terms of repetitive construction, and the sustaining of diversity in building as a cultural process. All

strategies of 'atmospheric reproduction of genius loci' are used in the search for a generating order, a communal life model and a craft of place-making,³¹ with a particular focus on the wall, roof, room, corridor, courtyard, light and materiality, interwoven into spatial organisation as a mnemonic of place. One of the interpretations of this *modus operandi* of genius loci is the completed Cultural Centre project located in Che'tian, a village in Guizhou province, in 2015 [6].

Che'tian is a small Miao ethnic village³² with a population of around 800 people distributed across 200 households. The village has a history of more than 200 years in utilising blue stone, a locally abundant material with dolomite as its main ingredient, for the fabric of its buildings. However, less than one fifth of the buildings of this village are surviving stone structures, as these are slower to manufacture compared with rendered blockwork which is perceived as being more modern, with lower costs leading to its use in the region since the 1990s.³³ The village still runs several quarries, but only to target external commercial markets. Besides the abandonment of this locally-sourced material, this remote village faces a more urgent situation in that it lacks a public centre, both physically and spiritually.³⁴ This was the point of departure for West-Line Studio's project, which was commissioned by the local government with the aim to knit together the physically fragmented village through a public building to instil a strong collective sense of belonging. The central question was how to readdress the local Miao people's tacit understanding of their place in this village, and how their established habitus reframes their specific use of place and its enclosing walls. An anthropological vision of 'a Big House' in local blue stone within the stone settlement was proposed by West-Line Studio in consultation with local communities, on the one hand to anchor it to the site's existing topographical and cultural context, and on the other hand to spiritually connect the ethnic community.

To begin with, the north-eastern part of the given site, occupying the majority of this vast wasteland and covering an area of around 4000 sqm., is kept as an outdoor open plaza, which is paved and stacked with stone stereotomics for the Miao ethnic communities' ritual assembly and dancing ceremonies. A series of small and medium-scaled physical symbols which carefully address local folk myths was reintroduced into the spatial narrative framework of this waterfront plaza as an outdoor stage-room. Among them is a winding water channel for recalling the village's historical dependence on water, and nine stone columns that recall a local tale of the village as an ancient resting place for nine dragons. In contrast, the 700-sqm. 'Big House' – the community cultural centre building is placed quietly at the south-western edge of the site to maintain a humble presence, but also to form a backdrop wall for the ritual plaza [7]. This unusual orientation works well with the existing terraced topography and reconfirms a vernacular idea of 'terra firma.' The primary functional rooms, including a series of meeting and performance rooms, are organised in parallel with a series of plug-in courtyards, operating as outdoor rooms. These two spatial sequences are linked by a stepped circulation system, starting from the eastern and ending on the northern boundary of the 'Big House'.

All of the walls are built in local blue stone to generate a coherent wholeness, which reinvents the genius loci, in a similar way to the primitive clearing out of the wilderness by stone earthworks in order to settle and facilitate 'dwelling' on a piece of land. This architectural modus operandi is reminiscent of Sigurd Lewerentz or Peter Märkli's approach to the 'raw qualities of materials and simple process of making'.³⁵ Architecture returns to its most elemental articulation of basic architectonic elements, evoking the collective sense of ritual, memory and tradition belonging to a particular social group and regional locality.

The persistent use and expression of naked stone in the walls gives a familiar scale and establishes an emotional attachment to the place, which is inherited from many generations of Miao workmanship. The sloped roof plates are covered by ragged stone veneers – again a familiar reintroduction of a vernacular construction – and punctured by different coloured top-lit skylights which identify the interior rooms and space-in-transition, with a strong cultural memory and metaphor [8]. The specific colour scheme is also referenced from ornaments of the walls found in this settlement and its vernacular architecture. Boundaries between the exterior and interior are not blurred as in many modern buildings of the village, rather, they are clearly distinguished through the stone 'walls-as-the-wall'. Enhanced by enclosing and dividing walls, the spatial experience across this monolithic stone building is shaped by interactions between the stone wall and body movements, particularly a series of changing sensual qualities of the walls. These include the subtle colour reflections on the patchwork walls with irregular patterns, different smell-scapes from inside stone layers under sunlight and rain, differentiated and echoing sound-scapes generated by moving across the stone paving in dry and humid conditions, and the subtly precarious light and shadow effects from the cuttings of the walls and the interplay of solid and void. In this sense, it is primarily the wall that makes this cultural centre as a newcomer to the 'Big House,' which represents both the as-found and the lost qualities belonging to this stone settlement. The genius loci of the site and location is therefore regained through a familiar form of the wall and the place. Haobo Wei states:

*The loadbearing structures are a hybrid composite, which is largely reinvented from the vernacular craftsmanship, with the 400mm-thick monolithic stone wall in the traditional wet constructional technique, and generalized structural posts in the modern dry construction at the corners of the building massing, in order to meet the modern regulatory requirements on the structural stability of the stone structure. In this way, the modern construction pressures are mediated in a way connected to the possibility of the continuity and authenticity of vernacular construction techniques and craftsmanship.*³⁶

The actual construction process of the Che'tian Village Cultural Centre is traced on the 'finished' wall surface, or the never-finished wall in an alternative sense [9]. The building object is strongly sensed as a whole in the open plaza from a distance; the dramatically changing scale of the stone stereotomics can be perceived upon approaching the irregular organisation of the stone pieces in developed in

horizontal arrangement. No two stone pieces are the same, the natural result of a handmade construction by many different hands. Since West-Line Studio could not bring in experienced masons from their previous built projects elsewhere in the province, the engagement of local builders and even unskilled labourers from the village became a necessity and a challenge. As most of the local masons could not read conventional drawings, West-Line Studio worked closely with them on site, consciously or unconsciously following a more locally-rooted oral building tradition [10]. Mistakes and happy accidents were routinely inevitable as one could imagine, but the walls and surfaces honestly recorded and registered the multiple construction traces. Even if in the end, when the project was completed by three different construction teams due to sophisticated site administration and management changes, the diverse and communal efforts in making a public building can still be read and sensed without an insider's reminder.³⁷ This constitutes an undividable part of the overall spirit of place and sense of atmosphere, an organic architecture absorbs unexpected changes and tolerances both on and off site, cultivating an inner order from within rather than an imposed order from outside.

The Che'tian Village Cultural Centre was produced by many hands, and after its official opening ceremony, feeds many mouths in continuous ritual and mundane events. The design and making of this public building, in particular the wall, is strangely familiar, with its authorship shared and its transformative power distributed to the ordinary villager. Understandably this is partly the reason why the new building has been well accepted by the local ethnic community.³⁸ The very idea of wall, and the act of building the wall based on a reinvented craftsmanship is of paramount importance to restore a sense of familiarity and materialise an 'atmospheric reproduction'. The substantial materiality of both interior and external walls, and its restorative surface, spiritually fixes the physical fractures of the village which were caused by a lack of coordination and mediation between the dense traditional fabric and the tabulation of them by the ongoing modernisation development. The building reveals more cultural meaning and identity in its everyday social use.³⁹ It continues a new chapter of genius loci. The wall further cultivates a spiritual form of a 'Big House,' with an enclosed communal space and ritual setting both internally and externally, through a collective reproduction of place-memory and as-found character.

Conclusion

The projects of Nottingham Contemporary and the Che'tian Village Cultural Centre are respectively situated in a post-industrial urban context of a developed country, and a pre-industrial rural context in a developing country. However, they present a consistent and shared form of contemporary architecture, of which the wall articulation and expression are based on and linked to a specific place. Both buildings aim at speaking an architectonic language which is sympathetic to the wider public and is bound to the genius loci. Both projects demonstrate that no matter whether in a post-industrial English city, or a pre-industrial Chinese village,

architecture and its elemental wall can form a mnemonic of collective memory, which is closely linked with group identity and a history of place. The genius loci of a place is thus a palimpsest, and architecturally an accumulative process of 'identification of place,' involving layer upon layer.⁴⁰ The wall of Nottingham Contemporary concretises three centuries of production history when the site formed the center of the world's lace industry. The wall of the Che'tian Village Cultural Centre celebrates two centuries of indigenous ethnic settlements and buildings, and reinterprets vernacular elements as contemporary moments without blindly following superficial ethnic-nostalgic styles. In this sense, the walls of both projects become a familiar form of architecture at its most elementary, which could not be clearly explained by the genius loci, but could explain what genius loci is and could be.

On the other hand, a comparison of the two projects raises a tension that is related to the authentic representation of the genius loci through architectural fundamentals, and to the broader contemporary relevance of this *modus operandi*. Adolf Loos, one of Adam Caruso's acknowledged sources of inspiration, called for the propriety of materials' own properties. Loos prohibited the use of surface materials to represent themselves as something else. On the contrary, Gottfried Semper, whose theories deeply influenced Haobo Wei,⁴¹ claimed that the symbolic value derived from weaving, binding and other forms of material articulation offer a second life and encourages material transposition. The wall of Nottingham Contemporary gallery is an off-site, digitally-aided, highly-controlled process and product; whilst the wall of the Che'tian Village Cultural Centre has the nature of an in-situ, handmade production that celebrates the accident. But both face a dissipating culture as found context, which requires a "thicker interpretation" of genius loci.⁴² They have all drawn inspirations from ingenious work, giving shape to an ephemeral object, rendering the familiarity of material form through a contrasting mode of construction. They all work with the given,⁴³ in the meantime working with tolerance⁴⁴ in order to strike a balance and 'reconciliation'⁴⁵ between a universally-generic value from without, and locally-specific value from within. Thus, the idea of wall in both projects is a distilled and crystallised emblem of the as-found character of the place – either being part of Nottingham's historical crafts quarter, or Che'tian's decaying stone settlement. The very process of making the lace wall and stone wall in each project is a continuity of the genius loci respectively, and a refurbishment of memory for a specific place.

To conclude, 'anything that can contribute to the fragile continuities between the contemporary situation and past architectures is worth the effort.'⁴⁶ There is an urgent disciplinary need to restore and reinvent the very archetypal relationship between the idea of wall and the genius loci of a specific place. It will not grow in its own right, but it should be restored and renewed in the manner of a palimpsest with reference to place, memory and identity. Multiple narratives and collective memories have the potential to mediate the conflicting desires in building a wall between perfection and spontaneity, clarity and vagueness, authority and

anonymity, economic compromise and cultural resistance. In this mediating process, the wall as an archetypal architectural element can further continue and sustain the very concept of the genius loci of a place, and facilitate more meaningful architectural engagements between people and place. Furthermore, in confrontation with the increasingly and seemingly unlimited possibilities brought by contemporary urbanisation and interdisciplinary professionalisation, it is worthwhile to begin with a wall to reinvent a disciplinary knowledge of architecture from its own traditions.

Notes

1. Pier Vittorio Aureli, 'Rituals and Walls: On the Architecture of Sacred Space', in *Rituals and Walls: The Architecture of Sacred Space*, ed. by Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici (London: AA Publications, 2016), p. 14.
2. Simon Unwin, *An Architecture Notebook: Wall* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 19-25.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
4. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1980), pp. 170-180.
5. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 158.
6. Vilmos Katona, 'Reconsidering the Tectonic: On the sacred ambivalence of the tectonic in the light of Martin Heidegger and relevant theoretical studies on architecture', in *Periodica Polytechnica Architecture*, 41:1 (2010), 19-25.
7. Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Hermann (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
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 18. Adam Caruso, *The Feeling of Things* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2008), pp. 81-83.
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 20. Adam Caruso, 'Nottingham Contemporary Facades', unpublished text (2009), p. 1.
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 22. Adam Caruso, 'Nottingham Contemporary', p. 3.
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 25. Chinese rural villages have been meeting great sustainability challenges under accelerated urbanisation in the past decades. A sense of place and belonging is disappearing quickly in the country's under-developed, culturally-diverse and socially-sensitive ethnic villages. Many of these ethnic settlements, once marginalised, have started the process of modern development with a focus on economic development as a result of the nation's rapid urbanisation. Architecturally, physical development is driven by the principles of efficiency and standardisation, based on the land-based financialisation mode adopted by local governments, which has produced more and more homogenous built environments throughout rural China.
 26. Guizhou has been one of the most underdeveloped of China's 28 provinces since 1949, largely due to its peripheral geographical location, at the very end of the south-western Chinese mountains, and because its main population is made up of more than 17 ethnic minorities. In the most up-to-date GDP league table (China Economy, 2019), Guizhou province is 23rd, with only 663 billion RMB, (as a province it is less than half of Beijing city, or one third of Shanghai city).
 27. The other founding partner of West-Line Studio is Jingsong Xie, who takes charge of the studio's interior design and external relations.
 28. Haobo Wei, 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: the practice of West-Line Studio 2004-2018', Peter Blundell Jones Memorial Lecture Series 1, organised by the author at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture on November 26th, 2018. For an alternative or organic modernist tradition, see Peter Blundell

- Jones' series work: *Hans Scharoun* (London: Phaidon, 1995); *Hugo Häring: The Organic versus the Geometric* (Stuttgart: Menges, 1999); *Gunnar Asplund* (London: Phaidon, 2006); and Peter Blundell Jones, 'Ralph Erskine: an organic architect?', *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 18:3 (2014), 210-217.
29. Interview by the author with Haobo Wei on August 13th, 2017. See more interpretations in: Haobo Wei, 'Emotional Displays: the atmosphere moved by the production of materials', in *Urbanism and Architecture*, 80 (2011), 44-47. See also: Haobo Wei, 'Up to the Mountains and down to the Village: The Force of Practice in the Countryside', in *Urbanism and Architecture*, 57 (2009), 34-36.
 30. Haobo Wei, 'Up to Mountains, Down to Villages', in *Architecture Technique & Art*, 4 (2013), 42.
 31. Haobo Wei, 'The Cultural Centre in Che'tian Village, Gui'An New District, China', in *Urbanism and Architecture*, 183 (2015), 92-99.
 32. Miao ethnic people live in South China and Southeast Asia with their own language and complex belief system. In China they are one of 55 minorities, and many of them are currently living in South China, in particular Guizhou province. This is not the first project where West-Line Studio have engaged with the Miao community. A previous built project includes the Folk Complex of Hua'xi Bai'long of a Miao village near Guiyang, see more in: Haobo Wei, 'Body-based Construction: Design of the Folk Complex of Hua'xi Bai'long Miao Village in Guiyang', in *Urbanism and Architecture*, 35 (2007), 26-29.
 33. The mid-1990s is roughly the beginning of a systematic rural modernisation in Chinese villages under a newly established Market Economy since the Reforms of 1978.
 34. This is a typical contemporary issue of Chinese rural villages. For more background related to rural to urban transition in contemporary China, see *Rural Migrants in Urban China: Enclaves and Transient Urbanism*, ed. by Fulong Wu, Fangzhu Zhang and Chris Webster (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). For architectural abandonment in rural China, see also: Xiang Ren, 'Social-engaged Architecture in a Chinese Rural Village -- Xihe Village Community Centre, China', *arq: Architecture Research Quarterly*, 20:2 (2016), 119-130.
 35. Pamela Self, 'Material presence and the mystery of the object', *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 4:3 (2000), 190-192.
 36. Haobo Wei, 'The Story of Stone: the case of Cultural Centre in Che'tian Village in Series of Trips to Hilly and Rural Areas of West-Line Studio', in *Journal of Human Settlements in West China*, 30:3 (2015), 124-129.
 37. Interview by the author with Haobo Wei and Jingsong Xie on November 25th, 2018.
 38. This social reception can be evidenced from at least two post-occupancy observations. The first is a viewing platform that has been arranged by the local villagers in a spontaneous way, in a vacant plot opposite the Cultural Centre building site. The second is that there has been a popular tendency to expose the stonework from the modernist white-washed walls, or even rebuild ordinary

- residential buildings' walls in local blue stone in the Culture Centre's adjacent areas, after the project's construction. See more details in Xiaofeng Fang, 'Beautiful Countryside and Ethics thinking on Rural Construction: Review on Che'tian Cultural Centre', in *Time+Architecture*, 154:1 (2017), 126-133.
39. Peter Blundell Jones, 'The Meaning of Use and Use of Meaning', in *field: a free journal for architecture*, 1:1 (2007), 4-9.
40. The idea of architecture as identification of place has been explored by Simon Unwin as the third one of the five premises in the first edition of *Analysing Architecture* in 1997, and the postscript of the fourth edition. See more in: Simon Unwin, *Analysing Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
41. One of the important intellectual links that Haobo Wei establishes is with architectural theorist Yonggao Shi, whose book is one of the earliest introductions of Semper's theory of Four Elements of Architecture to the Chinese audience. See: Yonggao Shi, *The Presence of Material: Research on Material's Constructional and Spatial Properties in the 19th and 20th Century Western Architecture* (Nanjing: Southeast University Press, 2008).
42. Largely inspired by anthropologist Clifford Geertz's idea of 'thick description' in his seminal work *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Peter Blundell Jones developed the methodology of 'thicker interpretation', started from *Modern Architecture Through Case Studies* and achieved the peak in his last book *Architecture and Ritual*. See more details in Peter Blundell Jones, 'A Forty Year Encounter with Hans Scharoun,' (PhD by Publication thesis, School of Architecture, The University of Sheffield, 2013), p. 47.
43. Peter Blundell Jones, 'Working with the given', *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 5:4 (2001), 305-311.
44. Stephen Bates and Jonathan Sergison, 'Working with tolerance', *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 3:3 (1999), 221-233.
45. Russell Light, 'Three projects, Calver, Derbyshire', *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 1:1 (1995), 22-29.
46. Adam Caruso, 'Traditions', in *OASE*, 65 'Ornamentation' (Amsterdam, Netherlands: 2004), 76-89. First published in: *As Built – Caruso St John Architects*, ed. by Aurora Fernandez Per, *a+t Ediciones*, Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2005.

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges:

Author, 1-3

Caruso St. John Architects, 4, 5

Haobo Wei, 6-8, 10

West-Line Studio, 9

Acknowledgements

This article is written in memory of the late Professor Peter Blundell Jones at the University of Sheffield, School of Architecture, and his many publications in **arq**. The author wants to thank anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Further acknowledgements go to Simon Davison from Caruso St John Architects and Haobo Wei from West-Line Studio, for their support in accessing the practices' archives, Dr. Martin Beattie and Dr. Ian Trowell for editing the paper, architect Xinzhu Zhu and Russel Light from Sheffield for advising the draft papers.

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CAPTIONS

1 Nottingham Contemporary, site context. The sense of scale and proportion in its external form made up by the monolithic wall, seeking to stitch and weave the new form into the immediate surrounding of the Lace Market quarter.

2 Nottingham Contemporary, urban frontage and promenade. The urban-facing wall has a strangely familiar material quality in between stone, concrete and terracotta, with an imprinted lace pattern, which reminds people of the lace making history of the place, when they get closer to the building.

3 Nottingham Contemporary, UK, wall detailing and surface treatment.

The vertical order structuring the walls and the tectonic expression of the lace pattern, engages with the 19th century textile making history and memory of this specific site.

4 Nottingham Contemporary, detailing drawings of wall-type.

5 Nottingham Contemporary, prefabricated wall panels during construction process.

6 Che'tian Village Cultural Centre, site context. The building is humbly placed at the corner of the site, acting as a substantial backdrop 'wall' and setting the scene for the waterfront ritual assembly plaza to be used by the ethnic communities.

7 Che'tian Village Cultural Centre, the wall viewed from its back. The back wall continues the raw intensity of the building, sitting humbly within the immediate settlements and landscape. Irregular openings are carved from the stone stereotomics wall like a 'Big House' in an ancient stone settlement.

8 Che'tian Village Cultural Centre, the wall, the roof, and the outdoor room.

9 Che'tian Village Cultural Centre, detail drawing of wall type.

10 Che'tian Village Cultural Centre, wall construction process. A few local masons and many unskilled villagers made up of the construction team, building the wall by hand and with vernacular tools, leaving a trace of changing teams on the wall surface and details.

Website abstract:

This article explores the familiar form of the wall and its role as mnemonic of the genius loci in contemporary architecture, by selecting and studying two contemporary buildings – the gallery of Nottingham Contemporary by Caruso St. John Architects, and Che'tian Village Cultural Centre by West-Line Studio. Placing the case studies from different cultural contexts and external conditions within a dialogical structure, the article aims to shed intellectual light upon them beyond the interpretation of two specific buildings, and reinterpret the wall as an archetypal form of architecture which sustains the genius loci as found.