# OUT OF PLACE

*Genius Loci* and the boundaries of heritage interpretation.

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between the interpretation of cultural heritage sites and the *genius loci*.
In her seminal essay *Against Interpretation* (1966), Susan Sontag stigmatises the dissociation between form and content and the constant focus on the latter in the name of interpretation. She opposes the need for us to "learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more", and therefore to concentrate on the form. On the other hand, interpretation is paramount to the understanding of heritage site as promoted by the *Charleston Declaration on Heritage Interpretation* (2005) and *The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites* (2007). This work does not propose to refute in their entirety the possible or established benefits of site interpretation. It is however envisaged to discuss the potential shortcomings of interpretation as it is approached today and its possible detrimental effects on the *genius loci*.
Hence the two-fold question is brought forward: is interpretation out of *place* at heritage sites, or is a site out of *place* in the absence of interpretation?

In order to approach this question, the methodology suggested consists of the presentation and analysis of the existing literature and theory underpinning the principles of interpretation, as well as a discussion of the concept of *place*. The notions of significance, value and meaning are also explored, with a view towards understanding the process that informs site interpretation. This theoretical framework is put into perspective by considering the case of the Turkish Cemetery in Malta, a 19th century monument which presents in many ways, an interesting ground for testing different theories for interpretation.

**Keywords:** *Genius Loci* – Interpretation – Turkish Cemetery – Malta
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Trouver des mots pour ce qu'on a devant les yeux – comme cela peut être difficile. Mais lorsqu'ils viennent, ils frappent le réel à petits coups de marteau jusqu'à ce qu'ils aient gravé l'image sur lui comme sur un plateau de cuivre.

Walter Benjamin, "San Gimignano" in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, August 28, 1929.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, cultural heritage studies and conservation have taken a new slant with the development and institutionalisation of the notion of intangible heritage; for the built environment, the Victoria Falls Conference of 2003 entitled *Place – memory – meaning: preserving intangible values in monuments and sites* presented the latest works carried out in that direction. Despite the growing number of papers which refer to the intangible characteristics of heritage, such as *The Power of Place* (English Heritage 2000), or others that refer to the meaning of place or the sense of place, there still exists a certain uneasiness with the understanding of the intangibility concept and its inclusion in the day to day's approach to built heritage, most theory having remained at the level of research paper. This gap, present in heritage conservation literature has been the catalyst for this research as well as to its outcome.

The purpose of this work is to examine heritage sites in terms of their interpretation and *genius loci*. It is intended to investigate the current position of these two components with respect to views and practices and to gain insight into the potential relevance that other fields may offer.

The various theories that consider these concepts are first looked at with the aim of highlighting the underlying principles. Although by no means exhaustive, the choice of texts discussed reflects the relevance of the specific theories in terms of interpretation and *genius loci*, albeit not exclusively linked to heritage sites.

The following chapter considers a heritage site - the Turkish Cemetery in Marsa, Malta - as a case study. The choice for this particular site is based on the immense cultural significance that this site possesses by virtue of its connections with different cultures. The Turkish Cemetery as it stands today embodies several values including those encompassed in the design of a local Maltese architect, the will of a foreign Turkish patron and its use as a Muslim burial ground. This wide and diverse spectrum of characteristics made the Turkish Cemetery a suitable choice for this study. The *genius loci* as well as the question of the interpretation of the cemetery are then explored through the theories discussed in the previous chapter.

This study then leads on to a critical discussion where cultural heritage interpretation and its relationship with *genius loci* are contemplated. This discussion then goes on to a summary of the findings, which highlights the necessity for practices and theory to bridge the gap and consider a multidisciplinary approach with a view towards ensuring the sustainability of cultural heritage.

## Methodology

The methodology used for this report is based on the research and analysis of the concept of *genius loci* and on the study of the main international charters concerned with interpretation of cultural heritage. So as to understand the factors that led to the current situation, an analysis of the main theoretical literature was also carried out. However, it was felt that in order to broaden the perspective on both approaches, it was necessary to expand the field of research to other disciplines such as human geography and art interpretation.

To be able to test and comprehend the implications of the theory it was decided to consider a specific heritage site with the intention of illustrating the relevance of the study in a real context. The site, the Turkish Cemetery located on the island of Malta, was chosen for its interesting multicultural values as well as for the fact that it is currently not interpreted, in terms of what is generally understood as interpretation, and as such offers an un-chartered territory to explore the implications of interpretation. Since it was established from the onset that this study will be oriented towards an analysis of current theories, any professional information relating to the site and its management were left aside as these were deemed unnecessary within the scope of this work. As such this study does not intend to prejudice the ongoing conservation project. Insight on the Turkish cemetery was provided by past papers and research articles, as well as personal historical research.

The findings of the study are then discussed and put into perspective using theoretical frameworks developed in other fields, as efficient tools that could provide pointers to alternatives that could assist the evolution of current state of research.

## From Space to Place, to Site; boundaries and meanings

> This isn't France anymore. It's Europe, Asia, Africa, America. It's white, black, red, yellow. Everyone carries his homeland underfoot, and the soles of his feet carry it with him to Marseilles. But all countries are blessed by the same near, hot, bright sun, and the one blue porcelain sky arcs over all nations. All have been brought here on the broad swaying back of the sea; all had a different fatherland, now they all share the one fathersea.

It was around 1925[1] when Joseph Roth described the city of Marseille in these words. More than a simple recollection of the space encountered, Roth gives to his text the power to emphasise the qualities and characteristics of the city which he experimented first-hand during his trip there. To the reader, Marseille is not anymore another city amongst a multitude, thus still dangerous, or exotic, or appealing by one's standard; it has now moved from the status of *space* to that of *place*. The shift from one to another is not merely the result of the author's prose as it is the product of our imagination and our memory. Some eighty years later, Marseilles has considerably changed in its physical, architectural, form. Nonetheless the portrait of the city as established by Roth is still very evocative of the town's *spirit* and would still give the reader an impression of familiarity, if not of identity for some, with the *place*.

Yet the issue of the relation between *space* and *place* cannot be simply reduced to the use of particularly descriptive syntax and vocabulary. On the contrary, Casey (1996) argues that "there is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it". Thus, the

[1] Joseph Roth's journey to the south of France was first published together with other works in 1956, but the original manuscript was most likely completed in 1925. The abstract here is from the 2004 English translation of *White Cities* published by Granta Books, U.K.

proposition is that only active physical experience or "lived experience" as he puts it, generates the local knowledge necessary to know the place. In this respect, it necessitates a direct interface between the subject and the *space*, which places it in contradiction with the first proposition illustrated by Roth's text, that a simple description has the potential to evoke a *place* to someone physically absent from that *real space*.

Of interest in this opposition of thoughts for the present purpose, is the multiplicity if not the difficulty in giving a precise definition of *place*, or at least one that could help explore the notion of *genius loci*.

For the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (2006), *space* is organised and shaped by the intimate experience of man with his body and with other people, so that it fits his biological needs and his social relations. Here we can already see the importance of the interaction of human beings with their environment and with each other, their *space*, in order to create and maintain a *place*. Tuan focused his work on the role of experience in the definition of *space* and *place*, and crystallizes the importance of human emotions in the constitution of places.

| **Absolute Space:** *Mathematical Space* | **Relative Space:** *Socioeconomic Space* | **Relative Space:** *Experiential / Cultural Space* | **Cognitive Space:** *Behavioural Space* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Points | Sites | Places | Landmarks |
| Lines | Situations | Ways | Paths |
| Areas | Routes | Territories | Districts |
| Planes | Regions | Domains | Environments |
| Configurations | Distributions | Worlds | Spatial Layouts |

**Table 1**. Different types of space and their relation to human perception, illustrating the work of human geographers in the definition of space.[2]

While Tuan acknowledges the constituting role of architecture in defining *space*, he also emphasises the relativity of the architectural object and its temporality with special reference to their "cultural matrix". The cultural matrix embodies the imagination, the thoughts, and the efforts that accompanied the construction of a monument. It also reflects, in part, the period of creation, and the socio-cultural background surrounding the creators. In this way, if the physical object remains and survives the effect of time, its meaning, or its function, will not resist the decline of the said matrix. To paraphrase one of his examples, the statues of Queen Victoria have since the end of the colonial era lost their domination over the continents, even though the objects might still be in place.

Our relation with Tuan's cultural matrix, and our knowledge and perception of it, can only be achieved through research into history. Tuan therefore suggests the interesting idea that the experience of "*sense of place*" is the result of a "deliberate effort" from the community to remember the past, and by that conscious action, the past will then become a commodity of knowledge and be

[2] Based on Counclelis, H., 1992. "Location, Place, Region and Space" in Abler, R., *et al.*, Geography's *Inner Worlds*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992, table 10.1, p. 231. Reproduced from Janssen, C., 2005, *Space, Place, Identity*.

forgotten as past. This is central since it then participates to the transformation from *space* to *place* and contributes to the evocation of the associated *sense of place*. With this approach, Tuan can be put into perspective with Rousseau and Levy-Strauss and with the anthropological approach to *space* in general. As a sign of the transformation that took place progressively within the (post-) modern society, Tuan sees a shift from a society based on the materiality of objects and therefore a society of the environment and of values, to a society that is more literate, where words take the place of objects, and where "books teach more than monuments".

Belting goes further in his approach to *space* and *place*, in what could be characterised as a shift from *place* to *site*. In his *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwűrfe fűr eine Bildwissenechaft* (2004)[3] he explores the multiple facets of images and their relation to the human body, and dedicates an entire chapter to the role of images in relation to *places* and *spaces*. In his writing he advocates the disappearance of the notion of *place* in contemporary society, and the blurring of its boundaries. For Belting, from the museum as refuge for images without places, the society evolved into a visual society where "instead of going to see images in determined places, we today prefer to visit places in images". The parallel with Tuan's approach is evident here, in that they both consider the museum as the epitome of dis*place*ment, a collection of uprooted objects[4]. Belting therefore stigmatises

[3] *For an anthropology of images* (my translation) was published in German by Wilhelm Fink in 2001. I refer in this text to the French translation published by Gallimard in 2004.

[4] This theme was explored at length during the 1996 symposium "Patrimoine, Temps, Espace" chaired by Francois Furet, and published by Fayard in 1997; F.Furet (Ed.) *Patrimoine, Temps, Espace. Patrimoine en Place, Patrimoine Déplacé.*

the fact that visual media have taken over our first-hand experiences, and perhaps he also criticises indirectly our capacity of absorbing any visual material as a primary source of information. Images are now a means of travel, education, and communication for society at large. They are not *only* a medium, they are also an interface between the *real* world and our imagination. The *place* transposed and mediated through images becomes a *site*, historical, local, beautiful, or for tourists. To a certain extent it becomes a new item on the list of our knowledge.

Quoting Gabriele Paleotti's *Discourse on Images*, Summers (2003) writes that "people make images because it is the predicament of human life that what we desire most to see and address is absent in space and time". This is further reinforced in today's society where one is constantly bombarded with pictures of exotic destinations to lure the potential global tourist. Interestingly, in times of increased visual references to which I referred earlier on, Summers proposes an interpretation of art history based on space. He opposes the traditional notion of "visual arts" to that of "spatial arts", based on the fact that the circumstances in which works of art were created have ineluctably changed over time, inducing "new patterns of use and meaning". It follows that our perception and our relations to works of art are shaped by the *space* in which they are seen. *Space*, in Summers, is understood as *social space,* that is culturally specific. It does not mean, however, that all the values of works of art, embedded or perceived, are to be understood only by a specific socio-cultural group. Perez-Gomez (2007) thus proposes that "artistic products from the most diverse cultures touch us by

virtue of their paradoxical universality; they both belong to a time and place and transcend it, contributing to our self-understanding regardless of our own particular culture".

The text by Perez-Gomez draws heavily on the seminal work of Norberg-Schulz entitled *Genius Loci. Towards a phenomenology of architecture* (1980). The question of *genius loci*[5] has been at the heart of contemporary architectural research, probably in response to the post-war reconstructions and the associated urban aftermath. Norberg-Schulz refers to the Roman origin of the concept of *genius loci*, which he defines as "the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life". In this sense he emphasises the importance of the place in the constitution of man's identity. This is a recurrent theme in the literature dealing with the relationship between *space* and *place*, most of which is based upon Heidegger's concept of dwelling and expressed by Norbeg-Schulz as the idea of "existential foothold". As I have outlined earlier, the concept of *place* is constantly evolving, reflecting and inscribing itself in a changing society. It is therefore expected that in a society primarily concerned with the quest for identity and where multi and mass media have taken over a large portion of human interaction, the necessity to reconsider the idea of place be critical. "In sum, the increasing rationalization of world and life has generated deep nostalgia for more human-scaled places and times" (Summers 2003).

[5] The concept of *genius loci* is translated in English by *spirit of place* and in French by *l'esprit des lieux*. The original Latin expression, however, encompasses an aspect of universality which justifies its use over the translation in this text.

With this statement, Summers may be put into perspective with the work of Pierre Nora who, in the 1980's and 1990's stigmatised and explored an aspect of the notion of *genius loci* in France in the three volumes of *Les Lieux de Memoire* (1984-1992). Nora also appears as an advocate of the idea of a nostalgic facet of society which contributes to the need for repositories of memory. His analysis, however, is based upon the shift in recent times between history and memory. *Genius loci* is seen, in what Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, as the result of a process in which society strives to compensate for the loss of collective memory, a society where memory is "no longer spontaneous" but "relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (Nora 1989). As with Norberg-Schulz and Perez-Gomez the concept of *genius loci* is therefore here envisaged as a possible and suitable catalyst for a better understanding of cultures and to offset the effects of globalization; an expression of "signs of distinction and of group membership in a society that tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal" (Nora).

The importance of the *genius loci* as a tool in the identity quest for individuals and for places has also been central to recent research in heritage. The notion was however only clearly outlined during the 2003 General Assembly of ICOMOS[6] that took place at Victoria Falls under the title *Place – memory – meaning: preserving intangible values in monuments and sites*. The paper presented by Prats and Thibault, *Qu'est-ce que l'esprit des lieux*[7](2003), is the only one that attempted to give a definition of the *genius loci*, as "the synthesis of the different

[6] International Council on Monuments and Sites
[7] *What is the spirit of place*

elements, tangible and intangible, that contribute to the identity of a site". The materiality of the site is expressed in its physical attributes and is "inherent to the site". This is nevertheless debatable since it raises the issue of "authenticity of material" which is determinant in the historical value of the site, and therefore contributes to its identity (Mason 2002). As for the intangible elements that constitute the *genius loci*, Prats and Thibault highlight the subjectivity of the matter, and the role played by one's perception in its characterization. In this definition, the *genius loci* is a cognitive and sensorial experience of a place and as such is intrinsically unique and personal.

In order to refine the understanding of the *genius loci,* it is interesting to consider the relationship between the site and the population currently living in the area. This is essential since it illustrates the condition of the permanence of the *genius loci*. In a paper also delivered at the Victoria Falls conference, Visy Zsolt (2003) characterises the various relationships as follow:

- The monument in a heritage site was built by the ancestors of the present population;
- The monument in a heritage site was built by a previous but unrelated people, but is nevertheless used by the present population;
- The monument in a heritage site was built by a previous but unrelated people, and the visible remains became part of the cultural heritage of the present population;
- The monument in a heritage site was built by a previous but unrelated people. However, having remained invisible and unknown during a long period of time, the unidentified remains could not become part of the cultural heritage of the present population.

The most important aspect of this approach is that it directly relates the site's "builders" to the contemporary population, putting into perspective the concept of belonging and identity with respect to the idea of place or "existential foothold", which I discussed earlier on; the most direct relationship being the one where the builders were "the ancestors of the present population". I will come back to this characterisation in the next chapter within the context of the Turkish Cemetery in Malta.

Following ICOMOS General Assembly in Victoria Falls, the reflection on the *genius loci* was developed in the *Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas* adopted in 2005. The second principle of the declaration is particularly interesting in the context of this work.

> Heritage structures, sites or areas of various scales, including individual buildings or designed spaces, historic cities or urban landscapes, landscapes, seascapes, cultural routes and archaeological sites, derive their significance and distinctive character from their perceived social and spiritual, historic, artistic, aesthetic, natural, scientific, or other cultural values. They also derive their significance and distinctive character from their meaningful relationships with their physical, visual, spiritual and other cultural context and settings.

Of interest here is the fact that the idea of *genius loci* approached at the Victoria Falls conference, has evolved into the notion of *setting*. This is representative of the necessary increase in tangibility required by an international policy document. Although more restrictive, this terminology has the advantage of facilitating the understanding and the evaluation of the concept in terms of value and significance for the site; it also encompasses the idea of perceived values. Nonetheless, the Xi'an Declaration is still mainly aimed at protecting the physical

characteristics of the site and of its setting, expressed through the recommendations of monitoring skylines, sight lines, and the possible "establishment of a protection or buffer zone".

The concept of *genius loci* is complex and changing in its understanding. "In general we may say that the meanings which are gathered by a place constitute its *genius loci*" (Norberg-Schulz). In this respect and in view of its role in terms of value and significance for the site, it should be carefully considered when planning any interpretation scheme.

The issue of interpretation was discussed, relatively extensively over the second half of the 20th century. However, interpretation is a discipline which was for a long period of time almost exclusively concerned with two main domains: arts and the natural environment. Cultural heritage interpretation came into the picture only recently, although this new phenomenon aspect is debatable (Uzzell 1989), and primarily as a follow up of environmental interpretation – hence the distinction made between art interpretation and cultural heritage interpretation. This status "as an emerging area in cultural heritage" was highlighted during a roundtable discussion organised by the International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation[8] of ICOMOS (2006). Although its importance has only recently been formally acknowledged, interpretation, or at least part of its aims, was most often included in the various international charters and declarations on cultural heritage, principally under the headings of presentation

[8] ICIP

and dissemination, though with no particular reference to the means needed to implement such a policy.

The *Charleston Declaration on Heritage Interpretation* was adopted in 2005 by ICOMOS. This declaration is a milestone in the drafting process of the "Ename Charter", which in turn "seeks to establish an international consensus on the scientific, ethical, and educational principles for the public presentation and interpretation of cultural heritage". In this respect it seems relevant to consider the approaches presented in both texts. The main objective of the *Charleston Declaration* is to define two essential terms: presentation and interpretation.

> "Presentation" denotes the carefully planned arrangement of information and physical access to a cultural heritage site, usually by scholars, design firms, and heritage professionals. As such, it is largely a one-way mode of communication.
>
> "Interpretation," on the other hand, denotes the totality of activity, reflection, research, and creativity stimulated by a cultural heritage site. The input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds is essential to interpretation and the transformation of cultural heritage sites from static monuments into places and sources of learning and reflection about the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue.

In these definitions we can appreciate the distinction made between what can be considered a process – *interpretation*, and what is presented as a tool – *presentation*.

The scope of *The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites* (2007)[9] also known as the "Ename charter" is more ambitious, as already outlined in the *Charleston Declaration*, and is further stated in the preamble of the charter as "to define the basic principles of Interpretation and Presentation as essential components of heritage conservation efforts and as a means of enhancing public appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage sites".

The charter proposes a somewhat different definition of presentation and interpretation.

> Interpretation refers to the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage site. These can include print and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and directly related off-site installations, educational programmes, community activities, and ongoing research, training, and evaluation of the interpretation process itself.
>
> Presentation more specifically denotes the carefully planned communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretive information, physical access, and interpretive infrastructure at a cultural heritage site. It can be conveyed through a variety of technical means, including, yet not requiring, such elements as informational panels, museum-type displays, formalized walking tours, lectures and guided tours, and multimedia applications and websites.

It is interesting to notice the differences in the Charleston Declaration's definitions. If *presentation* remains well defined as "carefully planned communication" primarily oriented toward the implementation of tools,

[9] The charter is currently in draft form. The Proposed Final Draft was published in March 2007, and it should be submitted to the ICOMOS Executive Committee in September 2007.

*interpretation* has seen its approach changed from a process to the implementation of tools as well, even though it is presented as "potential activities". Significantly, the ideas of "*input* and *involvement* of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds", of "*sustainable community development* and intercultural and intergenerational *dialogue*", and of "*creativity*", have somehow been left out of the main definition[10]. It must however be noted that these notions have been included to a certain extent, in the different principles outlined in the charter; it is therefore probable that this change happened as a consequence of the desire to reach a consensus at international level.

One can see in both sets of definitions the "origin" of heritage interpretation. Freeman Tilden is often quoted as being the "father" of interpretation, not least in relation to his work within the National Park Service[11] in the United States of America, and with his best-seller *Interpreting Our Heritage*, first published in 1957. In his book he defines interpretation as "an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information". Not entirely pleased with the reductive nature of definitions, Tilden offers a further two definitions of interpretation: "interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact", and "interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit".

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[10] my italics
[11] NPS

In all these definitions, from Tilden to the Ename Charter, what appears to prevail when dealing with interpretation is the idea of education or awareness and understanding. A will to reveal what is hidden is expressed, especially in Tilden's statements, and to stimulate appreciation for the interpreted site and the site in general. In terms of content, interpretation is overtly concerned with the significance of the site, and with the presentation of the different values associated. However, the potentially large quantity of information pertaining to a particular site, the vast array of technological tools readily available for presentation and display, and perhaps also a certain amount of market and performance pressure, may sometimes lead one to forget that when dealing with heritage "the facts are less important than the values out of which they are derived" (Laenen 1989). This is certainly evident when dealing with multi-cultural sites, and when considering the universality of artistic products as expressed by Perez-Gomez (2007).

## The Turkish Cemetery, Malta

In the previous chapter I reviewed some of the existing reflections that underpin the concept of *genius loci*, as well as some of the main aspects guiding the practice of heritage interpretation. In this chapter, I would like to consider a specific cultural heritage site, so as to illustrate and develop the theoretical points previously explored. The choice of the Turkish Cemetery on the Island of Malta is motivated by two reasons, the first one being the multi-cultural significance of the site, and the second one the fact that this site underwent some restoration works in October 2006 and as such one may envisage the possibility of implementing an interpretation scheme.

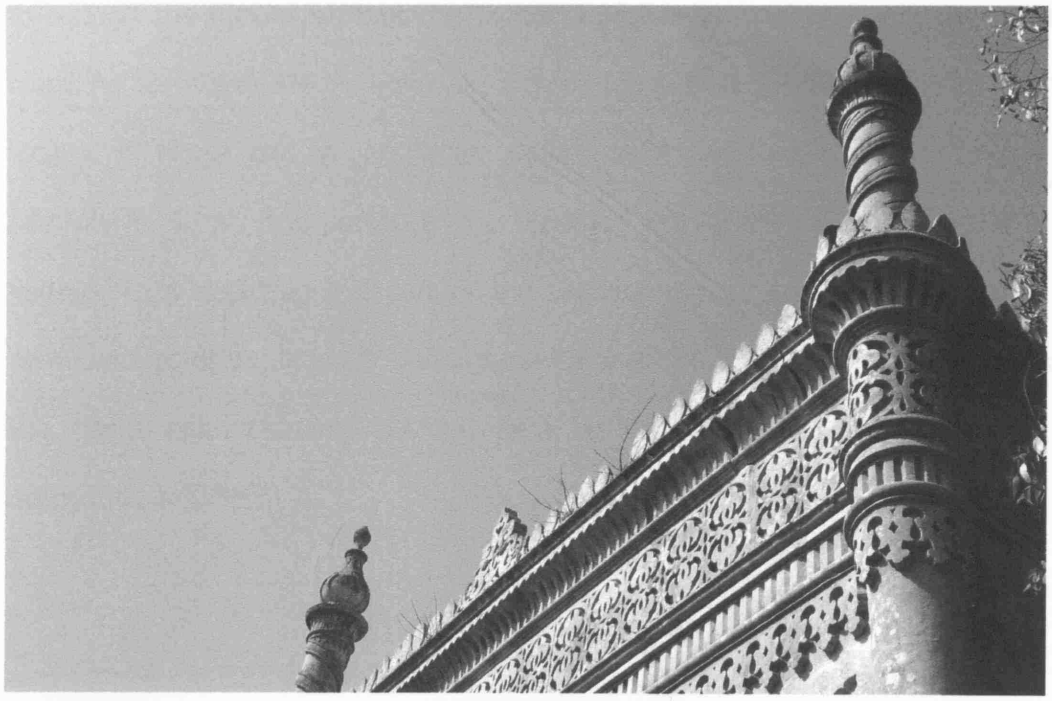

**Figure 1.** Detail of the ornamental vocabulary used by Galizia to decorate the Turkish cemetery (July 2005 – Photo: GD).

The history of relations between Malta and Turkey is mainly remembered because of the several encounters of the Turkish navy with the naval forces of the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem during the 16th century, which culminated with the Great Siege of Malta between May and September 1565. Although there is no agreement on the number of Turkish soldiers involved in the battle, Blouet (1993) suggests that about 20,000 Turks might have been shipped over to Malta. The main Turkish camp was established in Marsa at the head of the Grand Harbour, located a few kilometres south of the present-day Valletta. The Turks, as well as the Knights and the Maltese population, suffered a considerable number of casualties and organised the setting up of a hospital and a cemetery nearby their main camp (Cassar 1964). To date, no evidence has been uncovered to support the hypothesis that the Turkish burials were still in use in the years following the Great Siege. However, Cassar mentions a Turkish cemetery also located in Marsa and in use "since before 1675 for Turkish slaves dying in captivity in Malta". The presence of a cemetery in that area is substantiated by various maps depicting this part of the harbour region, and also according to some sources of the late 18th century mentioning "an old Turkish cemetery" near the Marsa entrenchment, position held by the Maltese during the French occupation in 1798[12].

[12] Source: http://marsa.freehomepage.com/custom3.html, accessed on March 30, 2006.

**Figure 2**. Undated map of the Marsa area (probably late 17th – early 18th century), indicating "Cimiterio de Turchi" near the water's edge (Courtesy of the National Library of Malta – Photo: GD).

**Figure 3**. Undated map of the Marsa area (probably second half of the 18th century), indicating "Cimitero de Turchi" near the water's edge (Courtesy of the National Library of Malta – Photo: GD).

**Figure 4**. *Plans of the Harbours and Fortifications of Valetta in the Island of Malta by Captain W. H. Smyth*, 1821; indicating the "Turkish Cemetery" (Courtesy of the National Archives, Kew).

In the early 1870's, the site of the Turkish cemetery near the Marsa *menqa* was to be at the centre of road works and it was therefore decided to find a new site to accommodate the burials. On the 11th June 1873 a contract was signed between the local government and the Turkish consul whereby the old Turkish Cemetery was exchanged for the site on which the new Turkish cemetery was to be built[13]. According to Azzopardi (2005) all the remains contained at the old site, some of which could have dated from the Great Siege of 1565, were to be transferred to the new cemetery. However, Grassi (1987, 2004) based on the presence of a Turkish tombstone in one of Valletta's museums, argues that "most likely not all the tombs reached the new site". The new site is also located in

[13] Source: http://marsa.freehomepage.com/custom3.html, accessed on March 30, 2006.

Marsa, but in an area which was then still outside the reach of the harbour's expansion.

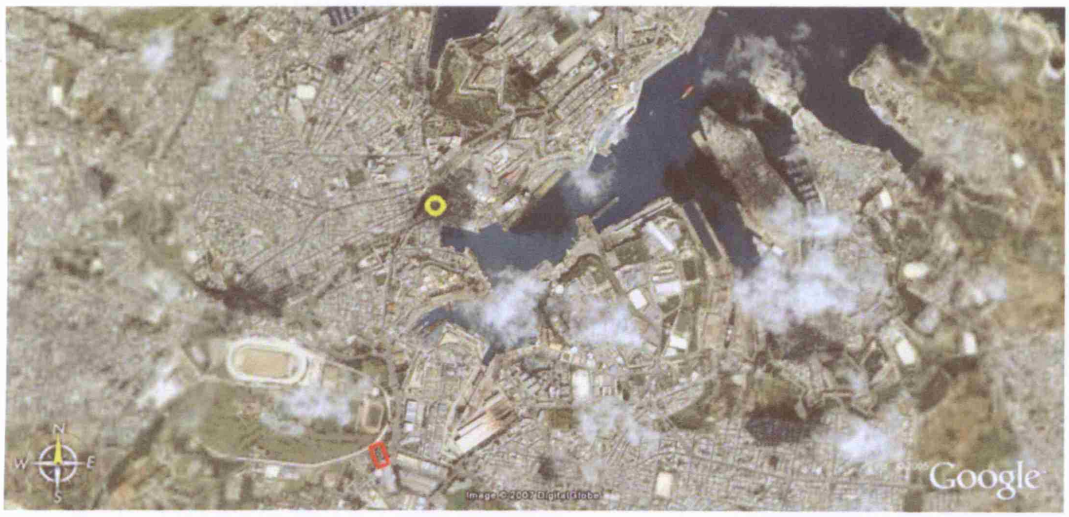


**Figure 5**. Aerial view of the Marsa area with the approximate site of the old Turkish cemetery marked in yellow, and the site of the new one in red (Courtesy of Google Earth).

It is interesting to note that the issue of the partial or total relocation of the old tombs has not been thoroughly investigated so far, resulting in a gap in the understanding of the possible values and meanings of the *place*. Also as a result of this lack of research, the focus has been mainly concentrated on the physical characteristics of the site in order to assess the significance of the cemetery.

The design of the new cemetery was entrusted to Emanuele Luigi Galizia (1830-1906). The architect was not new to the task, since he had just completed Malta's largest burial ground, the Santa Maria Addolorata cemetery a few years earlier. Built in Neo-Gothic style and inaugurated in 1869, Malta's main catholic cemetery

was admired by all as a masterpiece of architecture (Buhagiar 1982, Mahoney 1996). Galizia's first important work was the design of the main Protestant cemetery at Ta' Braxia, located near Floriana. Galizia had therefore designed, in a span of 20 years three of the most important burial grounds in Malta, following the development of extramural burial grounds that took place in the second half of the 19th century (Azzopardi 2005).

**Figure 6.** Galizia's Addolorata Neo-Gothic cemetery, Malta (Photo: GD).

The construction costs for the Turkish cemetery were entirely paid for by the Turkish government, however the grounds were meant to accommodate the burials of Muslim from all countries (Grassi 2004). For his design, Galizia chose a strongly oriental architectural language, which Mahoney (1996) describes as being inspired by "Muslim India" found at Nash's Royal Pavilion at Brighton. The general layout includes an external perimeter wall with a second perimeter wall set within it having front, side and back gardens lying in between the two walls. This has in effect acted as a buffer zone from the surroundings, which has had a beneficial impact on the preservation of some aspects of the *genius loci* such as the quietness of the place, despite the drastic change in the immediate surroundings of the cemetery since its construction.

**Figure 7**. Early photograph of the central alley and the *masjid* of the Turkish cemetery (Courtesy of Edward Said – Photo: R. Ellis).

**Figure 8**. Early 1960's aerial view of the Turkish cemetery, with on the left the Jewish cemetery. The industrialisation of the area is already visible. (Courtesy of B. S. Young – Photo: H.M.S. *Falcon*, Photographic Section).

The four corners of the external wall are adorned with pillars that rise above the wall and are topped with moulded finials. The front wall is interrupted with six smaller pilasters again topped with decorated finials, whereas the internal perimeter wall is decorated with four minaret-like towers at each of its corners. On the front of the cemetery is a groin vaulted couvre-porte which serves as the main entrance to the cemetery. This structure also boasts four minaret-like towers at the corners as well as an onion-bulb dome at the centre of its roof. On either side of the couvre-porte is a series of three horse-shoe arches housing timber frames and wrought ironwork, all set within intricate masonry and topped with a decorated finial at the centre. Past the main entrance through the couvre-

porte, the graveyards lie on either side of a central aisle that claims two fountains, one at either end, that were added later. The two graveyards have sparse random tombstones as well as a small monument and a larger one with inscriptions depicting the names of the deceased. Towards the back of the cemetery, at the far end of the central aisle is an externally elaborate free standing edifice, referred to as *masjid* or mosque that contains two side rooms divided by a central porch. One of the rooms houses an elevated limestone and marble table intended for the washing of the deceased prior to burial, while the other was used for prayer.

**Figure 9**. *Malta Mahometan Cemetery*. Undated postcard (probably late 19th century) (Courtesy of www.delcampe.net).

Throughout the cemetery Galizia used a vast ornamental vocabulary, with intricate designs that evoke those of calligraphy. The quality of the work was such that the Turkish Sultan Abdul Aziz Khan conferred him the Order of the Mejidie (Guillaumier 2002), one of Turkey's highest honours that was created by the Sultan a few years before. Galizia was himself influenced or inspired by this project, and he carried over this oriental style in the *Moorish houses* in Rudolph Street, Sliema.

**Figure 10.** Galizia's *Moorish houses* in Rudolph Street, Sliema (Photo: GD).

Although financed by the Turkish government, the cemetery soon saw the burial of Muslims from other countries, according to the agreement mentioned earlier. In a list of 1928 "there were 103 unidentified Muslims buried there, 24 that had died in an accident on board the ship *Sardegna*, 6 French, 6 English, and 23 Turkish prisoners of war that died in Malta"[14]. This clearly shows the importance of the Turkish cemetery as a testimony to the various colonial corps that formed part of the armies of the British Empire and of France, such as the Egyptian

[14] Source: http://marsa.freehomepage.com/custom3.html, accessed on March 30, 2006.

Labour Corps and the *Tirailleurs Algeriens* (Grassi 2004). Miraculously, the Turkish cemetery did not suffer any damage during the Second World War, and its fabric survived mostly unchanged, except for the effects of time, till today.

Malta's Turkish cemetery presents a complex range of values and significances, which in the present state of research would be impossible to assess comprehensively. Yet, it seems relevant for the purpose of this work to explore some of these areas.

The context surrounding the realisation of the cemetery is worth noting. Even though there was an earlier Turkish, or Muslim, burial ground in Malta[15], the construction of the cemetery took place less than two decades after the end of the Crimean War (1854-1855), in which the British Empire and France were allied to the Ottoman Empire against Russia. It is also interesting to note that in 1856, Napoleon III "wishing to attract Turkish sympathy" created a Muslim ground within the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris (Ragon 1981), and that in 1866 the new Turkish cemetery of Berlin was inaugurated, followed the next year by the erection of an obelisk within the cemetery in the presence of the Sultan Abdul Aziz Khan then touring Europe (Duggan 2002, Wikipedia 2007). Although in Malta's case I cannot argue in favour of the political motivation as the sole reason behind the erection of the new cemetery, and especially since the road works that led to the demolition of the previous burial ground are well documented (Borg

[15] It is to be noted that Muslim burials were also found on the site of the Roman Villa in Rabat.

1998), it is undeniable that the *occidentalisation* initiated by the Sultan Abdul Aziz Khan and past political allegiances may have played a role in its inception.

On the other hand, the Turkish cemetery is a unique architectural realisation for Malta, in its distinctive style, but also in its commissioning by the Ottoman Empire. It also increased the good reputation Galizia had previously gained with the Addolorata cemetery, making him one of Malta's most prominent architects of the 19th century. Finally, the probable partial transfer of the remains found in the previous cemetery, grants the new burial ground a historical dimension, in that it might be the symbolic repository of the Turks that fell on the battle field during the Great Siege, and embodies the memory of the Muslim slaves employed in Malta for decades after the end of the Great Siege.

These are the principal elements of the site that could contribute to the *genius loci*, in Prats and Thibault's understanding, and that in turn could be interpreted. Furthermore, following Zsolt's proposition of the relationship's characterisation, it is possible to postulate that the heritage site (Turkish cemetery) was built by the ancestors of the present population, but is not used by the present population. This raises the question to whether the cemetery forms part of the cultural heritage of the present population, as in contributing to its identity, which is difficult to answer. This theme will be developed further in the next chapter. However, as a short answer I would like to mention that during an initial visit in July 2006 the site was open and a gardener was present on site who was responsible for opening the cemetery. This was also the case at the end of

October 2006 after the restoration works had been completed. However during a visit in August 2007, the gate was found closed, with no one on site to open, and a recently affixed marble slab reading "Turkish Military Cemetery" was the only information to the passer-by – this plaque is in itself in contradiction with the fact that the cemetery has accommodated, from its beginning, burials from other countries, as mentioned earlier.

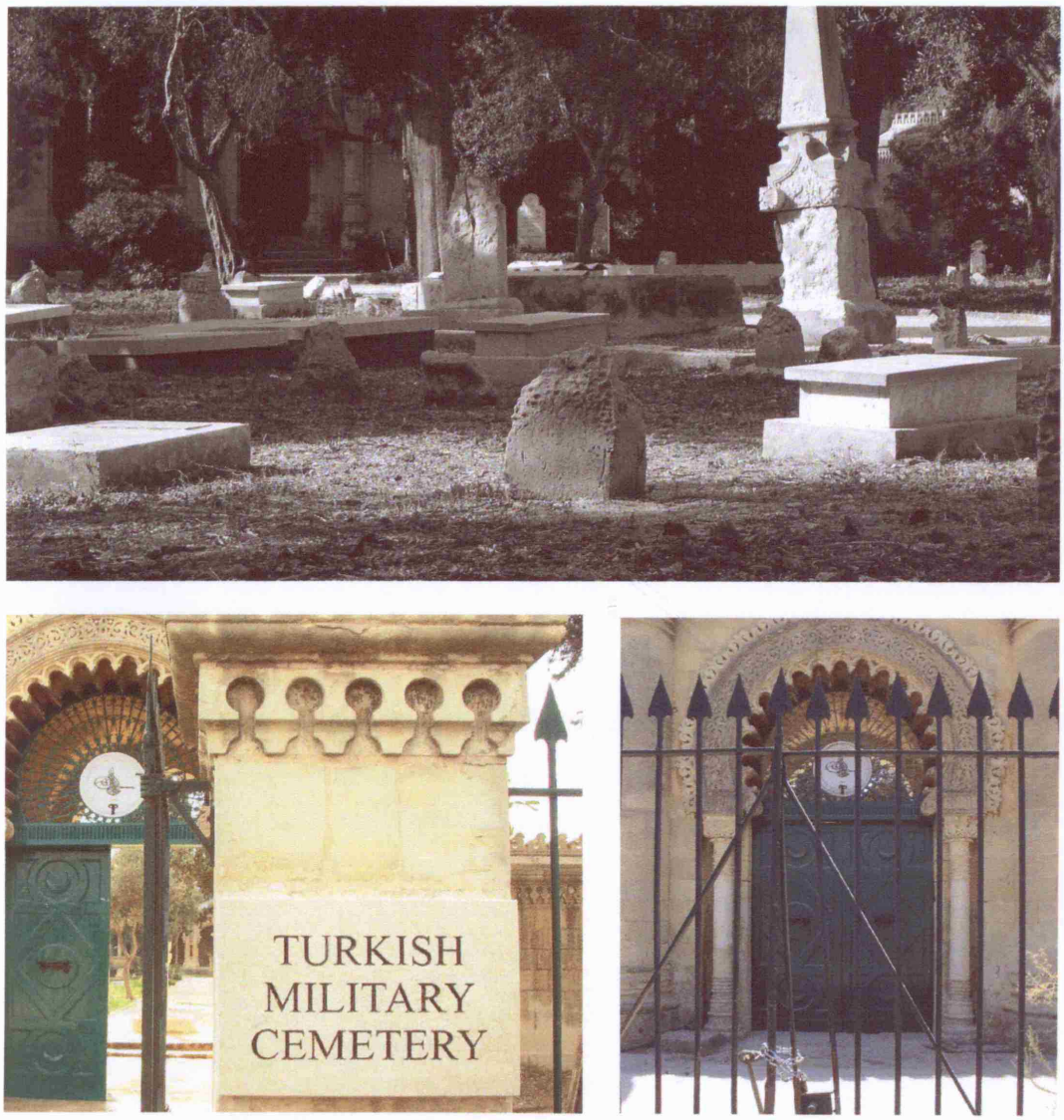


**Figure 11**. The Turkish cemetery in July 2006, October 2006 and August 2007 (anticlockwise – Photos: GD).

Furthermore, another example of conflicting values became evident in September 2005 when a pilaster of the cemetery was chosen as the support for racist graffiti, and the site became a subject of choice for the expression of xenophobic views about illegal immigration on a particular extremist internet forum (www.vivamalta.org, accessed December 12, 2006). Although it is not easy to ascertain whether the site was chosen out of convenience or intentionally, it leaves no doubt that at this point in time it represented for some people values which they were not sharing. The site was targeted because it represents a foreign presence in the country, then associated with problems of immigration, that ignores the original process of this extraordinary artistic realisation of one of the most famous local architects. This is perhaps the epitome of the dissociation of the *place* from its "cultural matrix". Interpretation might have provided a remedy to the ignorance of the multi-cultural significance of the site, while also preventing a biased misunderstanding of its meanings.

As this chapter has outlined, the Turkish cemetery in Malta crystallises some of the most important issues encountered when dealing with the understanding of the *genius loci* and its interpretation. These issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

**Figure 12**. September 2005. Racist graffiti on a pilaster of the Turkish cemetery (Courtesy of www.vivamalta.org).

## How close should we look?

"All places have unique characteristics which give them an identity, if only we look close enough". These characteristics mentioned by Uzzell (1996) can be related to the *genius loci* of a site, in that they contribute to its identity. However, as was discussed earlier, the issue of *place* and *identity*, as one participating to the construction of the other, is complex to understand. In this respect, is it possible to define and assess with accuracy the *genius loci* of a particular heritage site?

In the previous chapter I gave a description of the Turkish cemetery in Malta, and provided various images to illustrate my depiction. It would be nonetheless pretentious to claim that this account is exhaustive in its content and that it would give the reader the opportunity to understand or appreciate the *genius loci* of the site. To the same extent it would be invalid to present it as an interpretation of the site. For the most a description can be considered as a mediation of the site, and perhaps even an evocation of some kind of nostalgic feelings for the past. But lacking a first hand experience of the site, or without the architecture itself, the feelings about space remain vague and diffused (Tuan 2006). In this way, it is possible to say that a site may be understood without being appreciated, and thus that the provision of factual information, as accurate and scientific as those may be, does not fulfil the necessary conditions to experience the *genius loci*. The definitions of *genius loci* as exposed earlier do not deal with its constituents as much as with its effects or function. I can only agree with Prats and Thibault's approach, in that they recognise the inherent complexity

of the concept, while offering clues on where to look in order to refine our understanding. Whereas the tangible elements and their evolution throughout the years can be assessed with a certain amount of confidence as we have seen with the Turkish cemetery example, it has been shown that the intangible constituents of a heritage site may prove more elusive, and call for a multidisciplinary approach that may need to include social sciences, human geography, and ethnology amongst others[16]. It is therefore essential to stress again the subjectivity of the matter, even though, one cannot ignore its importance in contributing to the identity of a place and thus of community and of individuals.

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, the permanence of the building may not necessarily be an indication that it is being perceived as a *place*, in a way that would contribute to one's identity. Similarly, the rate of change of a place – and it is now clear that no place is to escape change – does not necessarily condition the change of the *genius loci*, or even its loss. This does not mean that the *genius loci* is permanent, but rather paradoxically that "to protect and conserve the *genius loci* in fact means to concretize its essence in ever new historical contexts" (Norberg-Schulz 1980). In this respect it is perhaps more appropriate to aim at establishing a characterisation of the *genius loci*, rather than attempting to define it once and for all. This should (re-) establish the prominence of the process as opposed to the application of a formula. If we were to consider once again the categorisation proposed by Zsolt (2003) we can see a plausible way of exploring and assessing the relationships between a site and its hosting

[16] The Victoria Falls conference presented many of the possible approaches to intangible heritage, although they did not all relate to the *genius loci* directly.

community, offering a link between the facts of history as collected through archival research and building archaeology, for example, and the collective memory and group perception as it is expressed by a community.

For its safeguarding, sometimes its understanding perhaps, and often its marketing, heritage has been objectified as has been its context. But by doing so it has been left devoid of many possibilities to evolve within contemporary society, running the risk of becoming alien to the host community; an object of nostalgic contemplation at best. Furthermore if heritage is simply considered as "an autonomous geometrical object in the Cartesian space of our mind" (Perez-Gomez 2007), it is all too easy to *protect* it by means of standards and regulations. To a certain extent the *Xi'an Declaration* (2005) illustrates that drift by suggesting the implementation of buffer zones to protect the settings of cultural heritage sites. Even if one were to accept the beneficial effects that a buffer zone may have upon the prevention of the degradation of the context of a site, it is clear that this is solely concerned with the physical environment of the site. Moreover, an extremist attitude in the establishment of such areas will not prevent alterations to take place, or slow down the rate of change[17]. On the contrary, it is often the beginning of an alienation process between the site and its socio-cultural context. The *genius loci* does not have the task of creating "illusions of eternity" (Nora 1989), but it represents overarching values which communicate the universality of *place* and its importance for our "existential foothold". To allow the *genius loci* to be perceived and understood, a site must

[17] Recent examples such as the Tower of London and the skyline of Vienna, have shown the difficulties and limits to the application of buffer zones.

overcome the nostalgic dimension which it is often associated with and we must acknowledge that the "porousness of boundaries is essential to place" (Casey 1996) in order to sustain its relevance in a changing society.

It is within this framework that interpretation, as it has been outlined with the Turkish cemetery example, may be considered. Since its inception heritage interpretation has been contemplated as a new phenomenon, whereas it is probably "one of the oldest practices of cultural transference in existence" (Uzzell 1989). As the former, the objectives were, and still are to a certain extent, to convey a consensual message to a willing audience with the ultimate aim being that of enhancing the visitor's experience of a site. Furthermore, from the initial ideal of Tilden to cater for "the enrichment of the human mind and spirit" mostly through the means of interpreters, we have reached a point where it is the ultimate marketing tool in order to keep visitors' numbers up, or even better, to increase them. It is therefore possible to say that in a certain number of cases interpretation has been reduced to the application of recipes for success. In a document titled *What is interpretation?* and published on his website, interpreter Veverka stresses that "interpretation is not topic or resource specific" and that it is an "objective driven, and market (audience) focused process that looks for results (the accomplishment of stated objectives)". The issue lies in the fact that objectives are too often driven by an overarching corporate objective or, in an ever increasing competitive cultural heritage market, by performance targets and visitor figures. The Turkish cemetery is a conundrum in that respect.

To date, its management is not the responsibility of any heritage conservation agency, nor is there any visitor data available. On the other hand the sacred dimension of the place, the multiplicity of cultures associated with the site, and the dynamic relationship of the cemetery and its meanings for the contemporary community, or perhaps the lack of such a relationship, question the boundaries of interpretation in its current most common form. Neither the typical Perspex display with stainless-steel fixtures, nor the audio-guide, nor an interactive touch-screen will generate an increase in visitor numbers to the site, neither will it help bring the site back within the realm of the community, even though it could be useful for the potential passer-by. If global interpretation is undesirable, as exposed by Aldridge (1989), his claim against off-site interpretation cannot be sustained in all cases; even if "interpretation is about place and the concept of place", some places will benefit from the absence or from a minimal amount of on-site interpretation. It might, however, prove difficult to establish standards and typologies identifying cultural heritage sites where on-site interpretation is required and to what extent. This is highly intuitive and in that respect it must be noted that the National Parks Service initial approach of employing interpreters mitigated this aspect by relying on the human factor to exert his judgement on whether or not interpreting part of or all of a site. The ease associated with modern information technology has had the effect of enabling many heritage groups to envisage the possibility of providing interpretation for their various sites, a task otherwise impossible with limited human resources.

As I previously mentioned, cultural heritage interpretation has only recently been considered as a subject of discussion in its own right, in international heritage circles. The *Charleston Declaration* was adopted in 2005, the ICOMOS Interpretation charter is about to be proposed this year after a long process of drafting, and the ICIP was only created in 2006. This is symptomatic of two phenomena: the large reliance on technical means to provide interpretation, with little theory to inform the process itself (Tilden's book of 1957 is often the sole source quoted), and the increased demand for on-site information and its associated pressure on heritage organisations to better present their sites in order to keep their share of the cultural heritage tourists revenue. These combined actions, which may have inherent causal relationships, have resulted in a lack of new heritage interpretation theory, and the convenient use of the natural environment interpretation literature available, together with the simple application of formulas to answer complex situations. In the process, Tilden's fourth principle – "the chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation", has been forgotten. To cope with and cater for masses of global tourists, as well as sometimes with corporate objectives, too many existing interpretive schemes rely solely on dispensing information. Heritage interpretation has to fill a cultural, aesthetical, and emotional educational void for visitors who, in the same year will consume layers of heritage as they will accumulate air miles. Unfortunately, in that context little space is left for Tilden's *provocation*. This stimulation of our "sensual capability" as expressed by Sontag (1966) is often left aside, as is the encouragement for creativity and imagination.

The sustainability of such an approach is in turn questionable. I previously argued that the *genius loci* of a cultural heritage site can contribute to the "existential foothold" of man and as such participate to the identity of a community. However, this relies mainly on a *guided*[18] self-discovery, appreciation and understanding of meanings and values for the site to which one can relate his own experience and cultural background. As I exposed, this is a dynamic relationship in which the preservation of the *genius loci* necessitates the continuous interaction between the site and the host community and visitors alike. Therefore an interpretive scheme whose success is judged exclusively by visitor statistics is unlikely to convey the right values to the community, and as such is not sustainable on a social level, nor would it be perceived as such by the results of a statistical survey. Equally, it is difficult to imagine, with the restrictions put on time, space, and individuals' concentration capacity, not forgetting the language and cultural barrier, how a typical interpretive scheme could transmit the various values and meanings one may associate with a heritage site. Furthermore, it must be noted that the recent interpretive hype has accustomed the cultural heritage tourist to interpretive displays and other interactive tools in order to capture the essence of a site; it has also put pressure on heritage organisations of various sizes to deliver such schemes, to avoid the risk of being deserted by tourists. This logistical and financial challenge has been met more or less successfully by the various organisations involved. In some cases the help of sponsors was required, as was the case in Malta a few years ago.

[18] By *guided* I imply as much ones' personal, cultural, social and educational background as the provision of stimulating clues by the various encounters made along ones' journey.

**Figure 13**. St Catherine of Italy Church, Valletta (June 2003). Two *interpretive* displays for the same building (Photo: GD).

In an attempt to provide visitors with information relating to various individual sites in Valletta, a scheme was implemented whereby small displays were affixed near or on the major buildings of the capital city. The displays only gave the name of the building, the construction period, the architect's name when known, and sometimes a few words about the building's function; the visitor was then invited to use his mobile phone to call, at a charge, and get a two minute long voice recording (available in five languages) about the site. The displays were sponsored by a mobile phone operator, who was in turn recovering its investment by charging for each call. An interesting situation arose when a second similar

scheme was implemented for the same buildings, in the same city. Obviously this time the displays were sponsored by the direct competitor of the first mobile phone operator, and offered the same service against a similar charge. Both schemes were officially endorsed, one by the Malta Tourism Authority and the other by the Valletta Rehabilitation Project. If the success of these programmes was never proven, the resulting impact on the façade of the chosen buildings is still visible, with both colourful displays affixed a couple of meters apart in many cases. Besides the visual intrusion of such methods, which in essence contradicts the use of modern portable technology such as the mobile phone, the probable below-par return on investment for both companies, leaves the question of the actual maintenance and continuous operability of the system open, not forgetting the accuracy and updating of the information provided on the voice recording.

The *need* for interpretive displays and other similar tools has prevented the development of adequate theory-based research in heritage interpretation and its fundamental objectives. Uzzell (1996) suggests that "while learning is central to a museum visit [and other heritage sites], it is how visitors place that learning into the context of their world view which is important, and indeed, how their world view may change as a consequence". Research in theory of interpretation that occurred in other domains, such as history of arts with the works of Sontag (1966), of Gadamer (1975) who developed a phenomenological approach to interpretation based on author / viewer contexts, of Ricoeur (1974) and of Foucault (1970), but also more recently the work of Stecker (2003) which

explores the differences between two major views of interpretation – historicism and constructivism[19], offer a multiplicity of possible explorations for developing heritage interpretation. From within the heritage field, the existing research carried out on the definition and assessment of values, as published by the Getty Conservation Institute (Avrami *et al.* 2000, de la Torre 2002), should provide an inspiring example for research in interpretation. In turn, theory will inform interpretation as part of a holistic conservation process and will allow for a more sustainable approach to a domain which has too often been left in the hands of marketing departments. "Our aim must be to generate a condition in which visitors can experience a sense of discovery [...] rather than find themselves standing on the conveyor belt of history" (Serota 1996).

[19] Historicists claim that interpretations discover meaning; constructivists claim that interpretations create meaning (Stecker 2003). There is an interesting similitude with the process of valuation of heritage.

## Conclusion

In 1880, John Ruskin in "The Lamp of Power", the third of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* wrote rather poetically and emphatically of "the white image of some secluded marble chapel, by river or forest side, with the fretted flower-work shrinking under its arches, as if under vaults of late-fallen snow". What the ancient Greek would have call *ekphrasis* – the poetic description of visual arts – we would probably call nostalgia. In a fast-paced world where one goes to work while reading the latest news, listening to the latest *hit*, and simultaneously keeping a virtual link via text messages, cultural heritage sites may perhaps seem to be at a standstill. Hence, most visitors, upon entering a site will be reaching for an audio-guide, looking for a video display, or a touch-screen, perhaps some might have used the Internet to gather some information about the place before their visit. How many will just stand there, in awe, just looking, listening, sensing? This phenomenon is no stranger to the (re-) emergence of the notion of *genius loci*, and to the increasing number of references made to the role of *place* in the constitution of identity. The next ICOMOS Canada congress in October 2007 will be entitled "Finding the Spirit of Place". This will be a prelude to ICOMOS 16th General Assembly that will be held in Quebec in 2008 under the title "Where does the spirit of place hide?". Similarly the recent creation of the ICIP highlights a renewed interest in understanding the principles of interpretation and developing them further.

It is the aim of this study to contribute to the growing research in these fields and hopefully to provide some *food for thought*.

The research carried out has shown, and illustrated, the importance of the concept of *genius loci* and its increased relevance in the contemporary society. More than contributing to the construction of identity, the understanding of the built environment not as a series of objectified *sites*, but as real *places*, will ensure the sustainability of the values and meanings associated with these *places*. In this respect, interpretation is a powerful tool that allows the intergenerational transmission, given that it acknowledges the dynamic relationship between the community and the cultural heritage. Striving to express the *genius loci* could in turn develop interpretation towards a more value-based approach as opposed to the commonly practiced end-user-based approach.

This study has shown that there is a need for more research in theory, as well as a need for interdisciplinary studies. However, and as scientific as these studies should be, they should not deter the visitor from being simply in awe. As Feld (1996) wrote, "as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place".

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