

Between sign and meaning: genius loci as an (in)visible framework in heritage conservation and regeneration

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Received: September 20, 2025

Accepted for publication: October 6, 2025

Abstract

A building often preserves, beyond visible traces of the past, an invisible dimension composed of subtle signs intrinsically linked to its historical character. This intangible layer—shaped by collective memory, cultural perceptions, and symbolic references—generates a continuous dialogue between past and present, essential in the conservation and regeneration of built heritage. This paper explores how such (in)visible traces reshape space through two key concepts: *genius loci* and architectural semiotics. The qualitative methodology combines semiotic analysis with a comparative study of three relevant interventions, addressing how contemporary architecture can engage with historical meaning without falling into rigid preservation. Tourism's impact on the perception of *genius loci* is also examined. In heritage cities, visitors' views often overshadow local voices, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of how the spirit of place is interpreted by different urban actors. Semiotics offers a valuable framework for translating this spirit into a contemporary architectural language, reinforcing memory and identity.

Keywords: Architecture, Collaboration, Trust, Convergence, Genius Loci, Semiotics, Trace, Heritage, Tourism.

Introduction

Conservation of architectural heritage can no longer be limited to protecting its physical substrate; it must preserve the (in)visible traces embedded in the memory of the built environment. In the contemporary city, the regeneration of historical buildings becomes a strategy for restoring community history, reinterpreted through a contemporary language. "The form of the city is always the form of a particular age of the city; and there are many ages in the form of the city" (Rossi, 1982, p. 63). *Genius loci* expresses this intangible dimension—where sign, symbol, memory, and perception intersect—calling for a critical question: how can authenticity be preserved without turning places into static museums?

Reinterpreting historical elements requires understanding their cultural meaning. Semiotics offers a key tool for this analysis. As Eco (1976) notes, "every sign is a message, but every place is also a message... complex systems of signs loaded with cultural meanings." The convergence of architecture and semiotics enables a language that transcends the visible, activating the spirit of place. As Eco, Santambrogio, and Violi (1980) state, "architecture is a system of signs that produces meaning."

Tourism shapes perceptions of place, often privileging visitors' spectacle-driven perspectives over those of residents and revealing the need to recognize multiple layers of interpretation. Within this context, semiotics acts as a collaborative tool to analyze and communicate cultural values in architecture. Case studies—where heritage is reinterpreted symbolically, not replicated—highlight architecture's role in supporting cultural continuity. The paper aligns with the theme of Convergence, proposing semiotics as a bridge between memory and present, professionals and communities, in shaping meaningful urban space

Literature Review

The concept of *genius loci*, developed by Norberg-Schulz (1980), defines the spirit of place as a phenomenological presence that gives meaning and identity to space, reinforced by Bachelard (1958) through the link between affective experience and architectural perception.

Eco (1976) and collaborators (Eco, Santambrogio & Violi, 1980) view architecture as a system of signs expressing cultural meanings through form and space. Jencks (1985) similarly interprets buildings as symbolic texts with historical layers.

Rossi (1982) argues that urban heritage must be reinterpreted, not imitated: "The city and its monuments function as signs that communicate the collective memory and identity of their inhabitants" (pp. 66). He highlights the temporal depth of cities: "the form of the city is always the form of a particular time of the city." (pp. 63).

Recent authors—Paolella (2023), De Carlo (2013), and Ricci (1977)—stress architecture's social role in fostering inclusion, participation, and cohesion. In the context of **Convergence**, these perspectives support architecture as a mediator between memory and function, reinforcing *genius loci* through semiotic and collaborative approaches.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology that combines semiotic analysis with comparative case studies to explore how interventions in built heritage communicate *genius loci*. Three examples were selected—Castelvecchio in Verona, Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo, and the Colosseum arena floor in Rome—for their ability to reveal the dialogue between past and present and the symbolic expressiveness of architectural design.

The analysis follows three main criteria: **materiality** (how physical elements function as signs and carriers of meaning), **contextual integration** (the relationship between new interventions and historical

layers), and **user perception** (the ways in which residents and visitors interpret symbolic values). Examining each case study through these dimensions ensures a systematic and transparent application of semiotic analysis, allowing for consistent comparison and interpretation

a. Castelvecchio Museum (Verona) – Carlo Scarpa (1957-1975)

Fig. 1, 2, Carlo Scarpa's intervention at Castelvecchio Museum, Verona (<https://divisare.com/projects/318224-carlo-scarpa-ezio-zupelli-castelvecchio-1958-74>)



Scarpa's intervention (Fig. 1-2) illustrates a carefully studied mediation between the deeply historic fabric and a precisely organized architectural insertion aimed at preserving the *genius loci*. The restoration is both critical and poetic, seeking to regenerate existing spaces to create a sensory experience. Architecture becomes a language composed of carefully selected elements, each functioning as a sign within a visual narrative. Scarpa skillfully manages spatial heterogeneity in both structure and expression, employing diverse proportional systems that coexist freely. This material complexity results in a surprising ensemble, rich in chromatic and formal values, distinguished by its diversity and quality—making Castelvecchio perhaps the most articulated and ambitious museum project of the Venetian master (Frediani, 2019, p. 74).

The accessibility of open spaces invites users to move through and experience the architecture. The inner courtyards serve as reflective spaces—public and open—allowing for moments of relaxation, social interaction, and outdoor events. Scarpa's use of semiotics is seemingly

subtle yet deeply layered, continuously communicating the history and spirit of the place.

b. Palazzo Abatellis (Palermo) – Carlo Scarpa (1953-1954)



Fig. 3, 4. Interior contrast in Scarpa's Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo. (<https://www.donusweb.it/en/speciali/manifesta/2018/carlo-scarpa-the-set-design-of-the-palazzo-abatellis-gallery-in-palermo-1953-54.html>)

At Palazzo Abatellis (Fig. 3-4), Scarpa translates the (in)visible meanings of the past into a contemporary architectural language without imitation. The contrast between old and new is expressed through material tension—modern gestures using concrete, glass, and metal. Junction details reflect both modern symbolism and craftsmanship. For Scarpa, each intervention is a deliberate semiotic act. Every element plays a role in a carefully composed architectural scenography. His approach is not merely restorative but a regeneration of *genius loci*, interpreting the meaning of historical space. The museum layout becomes a *mise-en-scène*, designed from the visitor's perspective to highlight Sicilian art and architecture.

Moving away from traditional museum design, exhibits become active spatial actors. "He reinterprets the building as a palimpsest, layering meanings that invite the visitor to read the architecture as a complex semiotic system" (Buchanan, 2016, p. 161). Scarpa's architecture operates as a system of signs, where materials, details, and spatial rhythms convey layered meanings (Dal Co, 1991, p. 89). From a tourism perspective, the intervention fosters strong engagement: outdoor areas remain open and multifunctional, promoting both social use and integration into everyday urban life.

c. The Colosseum's New Arena Floor – Milan Ingegneria, Labics, Fabio Fumagalli (2021)

Fig. 3, 4. Design proposal for the new Colosseum arena floor.
(<https://buromilan.com/progetto/nuovo-piano-arena-del-colosseo/>)
([abatellis-gallery-in-palermo-1953-54.html](https://www.abatellis-gallery-in-palermo-1953-54.html))



The project aims to restore the Colosseum's original image with a removable Accoya wooden floor at the level of the ancient arena (Fig. 5–6). This reversible, sustainable intervention protects the hypogeum and visually reconstructs the arena. While historically evocative, the intervention raises questions about the shifting meanings of the monument over time. The arena's functions evolved—from spectacles and battles to a medieval fortress, quarry, cemetery, and gunpowder storehouse. Only in the 18th century was it consecrated as a religious site, with major restorations beginning in the 19th century under Raffaele Stern, who preserved its authenticity. Since then, interventions have focused mainly on consolidation. The 2021 design competition marks the first expressive change to the arena.

Functionally, it demonstrates active, reversible conservation enabling cultural events, yet its tourism-oriented focus reinforces the Colosseum as Italy's most visited monument. The broader museification of the Roman Forum and symbolic gentrification risk excluding residents, as local communities are not clearly involved. Semiotically, the intervention restores a lost sign but adds tourist-oriented overcoding, creating a new interpretive layer that may favor visitors over inhabitants.

Results

The analysis of these interventions reveals distinct yet coherent strategies for expressing *genius loci* through contemporary architecture. At Castelveccchio, Scarpa reinterprets the site's memory in a critical and poetic way, using expressive details and open spaces to foster trust between users and architecture. At Palazzo Abatellis, meaning arises through contrast between old and new, creating a scenographic, multisensory experience that integrates the building into everyday community life. In contrast, the Colosseum project revives the historical image but risks tourist overcoding and lacks community engagement, which may compromise authenticity. Overall, interventions that enable symbolic interpretation, distinguish the contemporary gesture, and involve users tend to better preserve the spirit of place and strengthen trust in the built environment.

Discussion

The results confirm that architecture conveys *genius loci* not through imitation or strict preservation, but via a semiotic language linking memory and the present. Scarpa's interventions at Castelveccchio and Palazzo Abatellis show how symbolic details and contrasts between old and new foster cultural attachment, while the Colosseum project warns of tourist-focused overcoding that may exclude residents and undermine authenticity.

Participation involves not only physical access but also meaningful involvement of local communities in decision-making and interpretation. Accessibility alone does not ensure inclusion; sustainable regeneration relies on shared authorship. By treating architecture as a system of signs, semiotics can support dialogue among professionals, residents, and institutions, promoting collaborative heritage conservation.

Conclusion

This paper explored the role of semiotics in heritage conservation and regeneration, showing that architecture can activate *genius loci* through thoughtful gestures, without relying on formal replicas or historicist rhetoric. Case studies revealed three distinct approaches: two based on sensitive symbolic integration (Scarpa) and one more problematic in its tourism-oriented focus (Colosseum).

Findings suggest that interventions distinguishing new from old while maintaining symbolic continuity support participatory experiences, whereas tourism-driven projects with little community involvement risk alienation and loss of symbolic value. The paper offers a semiotic framework for analyzing heritage interventions, recommending early local involvement, differentiation between tourist- and community-focused uses, and participatory workshops to foster plural readings, engage residents, and support sustainable, inclusive heritage policies.

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Între semn și semnificație: Genius loci ca un cadru (in)vizibil în conservarea și regenerarea patrimoniului

(rezumat)

O clădire păstrează adesea, dincolo de urmele vizibile ale trecutului, o dimensiune invizibilă compusă din semne subtile, intrinsec legate de caracterul său istoric. Acest strat intangibil – modelat de memoria colectivă, percepțiile culturale și referințele simbolice – generează un dialog continuu între trecut și prezent, esențial în conservarea și regenerarea patrimoniului construit. Acest articol explorează modul în care astfel de urme (in)vizibile remodelează spațiul prin două concepte cheie: genius loci și semiotica arhitecturală. Metodologia calitativă combină analiza semiotică cu un studiu comparativ a trei intervenții relevante, abordând modul în care arhitectura contemporană poate interacționa cu semnificațiile istorice fără a promova proiecte rigide de conservare. Impactul turismului asupra percepției genius loci este, de asemenea, examinat. În orașele de patrimoniu, perspectivele vizitatorilor eclipsează adesea vocile locale, evidențiind nevoia unei înțelegeri nuanțate a modului în care spiritul locului este interpretat de diferiți actori urbani. Semiotica oferă un cadru valoros pentru traducerea acestui spirit într-un limbaj arhitectural contemporan, consolidând memoria și identitatea. Studiile de caz – lucrările lui Carlo Scarpa la Castelvechio și Palazzo Abatellis, precum și propunerea de acoperire a hipogeului Colosseumului – demonstrează cum memoria locului poate fi integrată în designul modern, evitând transformarea orașelor în muzee în aer liber