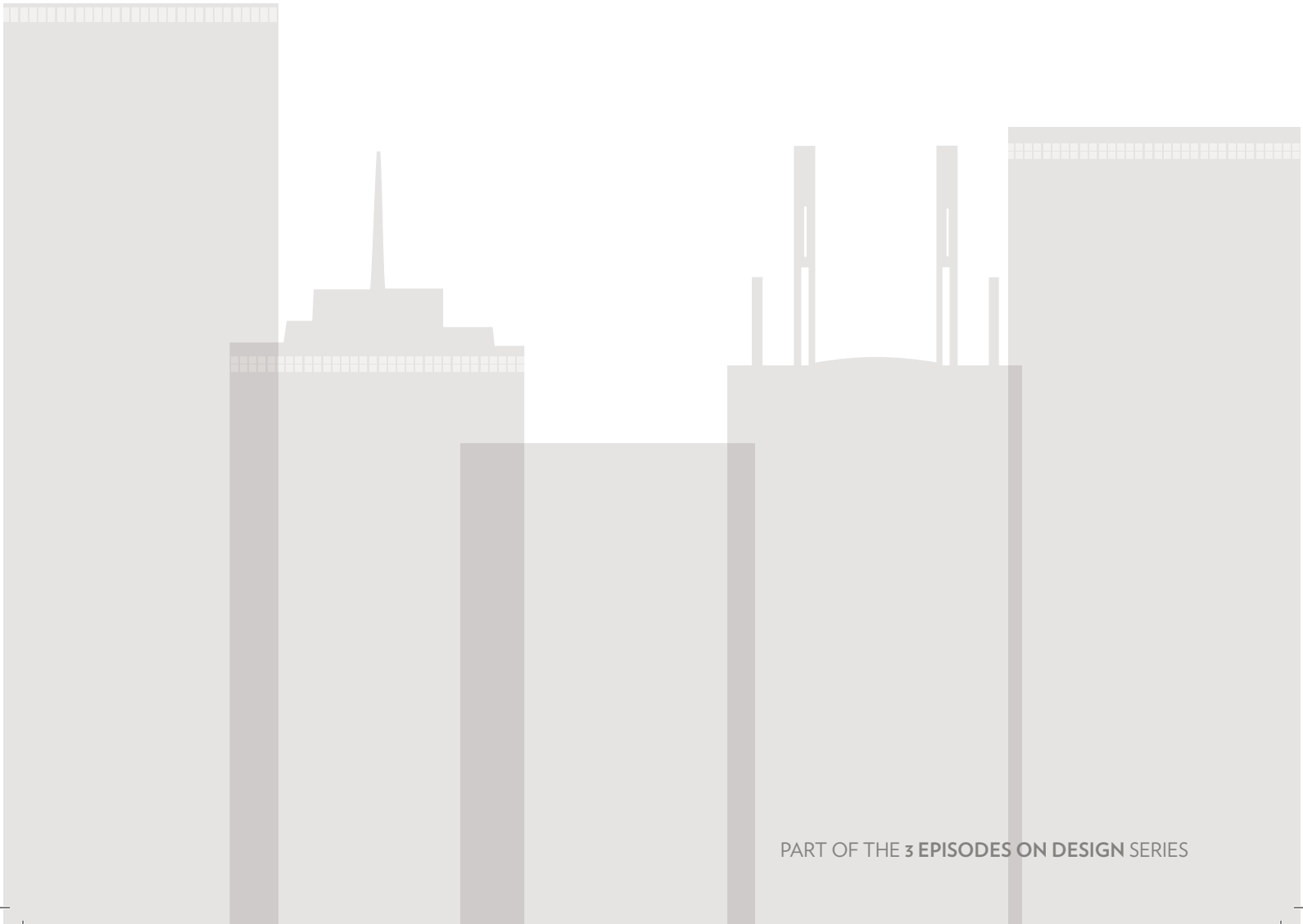




# *Written on the City*



PART OF THE 3 EPISODES ON DESIGN SERIES

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**Written on the City**

## ***Kilroy Was And/Or Was Not Here (And So Are You) Public Art As Correspondence***

Among the signs of interrupted life preserved in Pompeii is a fair amount of graffiti. Much of it is particular and concrete; authors identify themselves by name, address specific people, explain what they were doing there. At its heart is a very simple impulse: to prove you existed, and that you acted on the world. This particular trace is you, your thumbprint on history. You were here. But who are you talking to?

In ancient Rome the phrase *genius loci*—literally, “the spirit of a place”—referred to a personified spirit. The smallest spirit, perhaps, is the *lar*, the household god. Every house had one, but so did neighborhoods have their *lares compitales*, and a city its *lar publici*. The world was full of spirits back then, and we spoke to them, asking them for favors and perhaps expecting replies in return. Some of these conversations were etched into stone, as public evocations of the lares, or conversations with them. Here are two kinds of ancient public text: the personal and concrete addressed to someone out there, and the communal, anonymous evocation of a specific entity, a guide in daily life and a protector in war.

Two thousand years later, during World War II, American GIs in Europe developed a habit of drawing a rough caricature of a big-nosed character peeking over a wall, with the note below it Kilroy was here. There was no Kilroy, of course, or rather, everyone who made the doodle participated in being Kilroy. It was a statement of presence, but of group presence. It was a way of assuring oneself, and others, that we all belonged together, if not in this foreign place then at least in this common endeavor. These identical notes were written by foreigners—rescuers, invaders, tourists. Part of the history of these modern cities is the history of disruption, invasion, and reconstruction.

Kilroy no longer exists, except in memory; his graffiti evocations are gone. Today by genius loci we mean not a specific, personified spirit, but rather the identity of a place, the sense of location that arises out of a group act of imagination by the people who live there, engendered by their material surroundings. Kilroy is a brief, forgotten genius loci, the spirit of a place where he didn't belong, that was shaped in part by his not-belonging presence.

In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some artists and designers have chosen to adopt the act of writing in public, and in so doing, to adopt the narrative voice of the genius loci. When we create text in public, we often strive not to identify ourselves as author, or to speak of our particular histories. We adopt the authority of anonymity; we avoid our own voices. We want the place itself to be speaking, not us. We exert ourselves on the city as a sign of our agency, our ability to write on its face—but when we do, we want it to seem like the city is the one with the voice, talking back to us.

These particular public texts are correspondence we write in the persona of nobody in particular, addressed to no particular body. So who's speaking? Do they have a regional accent? Are they telling us something about themselves, or something that's useful for us? Is there something to be gained from hiding our particular selves in this way?

There's a sudden moment of recognition when we realize the world speaking to us in a way we understand. This the moment of communication we want to reproduce, and this is why we feel we have to remove ourselves as authors, and as particular readers, in order to speak to each other in this public, impersonal manner. Is this really how a genius loci is made? Is this a clumsy attempt at intervention in a process that happens best by accident, without our conscious intent—one that, like Kilroy, is just as much a disruption as a common identity? Probably. But the possibility of an occasional moment of connection, not aloud between people, but internally between us and the universe, is worth the risk.