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Space: Notes on the Thought of Luce Irigaray

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Abstract

In March 2015, a conference was held in New York entitled *Feminism in Architecture 2015*, and subtitled, 'We need to change our expectations. We need new models of success. We need to change what and how we teach.' I made an application, and I suggested adding to the subtitle 'And we need an evolution in love' (it was not accepted). And yet, the concept of affect, but not apparently affection, is a current conversation in architecture. The question of atmosphere and affect, of space and mood, has been pondered in a number of conferences recently including: *Atmospheres* (University of Manchester, July 2015), with the British place-poet Simon Armitage as keynote speaker, and *Sites of Production* (UCL, London, July 2015), with Gernot Böhme in attendance. And, for Gernot Böhme, an important philosopher in this field, the "whatness" of our immediate surroundings is understood through affect. Importantly, he argues (and this is his interest to the architectural profession) this vague and poetic experience of atmosphere and affect is described as the authentic dialogue of architecture; a discourse specific to architecture and borrowed neither from engineers nor art historians.

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Space: Notes on the Thought of Luce Irigaray

by Andrea Wheeler • 23 November 2015

Key Concept



In March 2015, a conference was held in New York entitled *Feminism in Architecture 2015*, and subtitled, 'We need to change our expectations.

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But can atmosphere be a way of thinking about an ecological aesthetics? Can it help us to move beyond the domination of the technical perspective in architecture and into the realm of the aesthetic (so lacking from the conversation)? And, furthermore could we extend this question towards a feminist critique, towards the development of a feminist ethic, so absent in the social considerations of sustainable architecture? What if, for instance, we could consider the philosophy of Luce Irigaray in this context – presented as a new aesthetic of architecture: and yet corresponding so well in its vagueness to older conversations on place? Climate change brings with it pressures on relationships between living beings, and the poetic and aesthetic dimensions of architectural design tend to be poorly considered in the field of sustainable architecture. But add to this an absence over the question of sexual difference, a difference in the way we want to live that exists between the different sexes, and a difference in our aesthetic preferences; a complex question emerges. The work of Irigaray is known to the community, and has been proposed as a profound ethic, but it is, albeit perhaps not unsurprisingly, absent from the conversation. Why? Perhaps because it is siloed as feminist thought? Is it presumed to be only a feminist discourse, rather than a contemporary philosophical perspective of some note, and one that engages with what it means to be human in our current environmental crises? And, what about the affection that exists between two sexually different subjects, experiencing place in their own ways, how could this atmosphere be thought? Could this begin to describe a new and profound ecological ethics and aesthetics, through an attentiveness to sexual difference?

It is not a challenging observation to acknowledge that our day-to-day experience in relation to the natural world may seem separate from our scientific understandings of climate change, distinct as if two different languages. And, the poetry of place, the re-evaluating of our experience, of our relationship with the natural world as a way of examining a proper ecological belonging, is easing its way into conversations on architecture. But the architectural profession is masculine in character: its traditions, its educational practices, its artistic conventions, all privilege the male. Women architects face discrimination, and women students are subject to abuses within the institution (as was described in the *Feminism and Architecture* conference by young students). Despite its conviction in a belief in neutral bodies and inconsequential sexes, design education and its culture privileges the male. The tradition has so much to defend in its resistance to sexuate difference, so much to hide from a sexuate politics that calls for at least two different ways of being-in-relation, two ways that begin with a recognition of a morphological belonging proper to and different to each sex and gender. Irigaray's philosophy has been cited in relation to notions of space, but the depth and potential of her ideas are not really engaged with. Irigaray has written a paper on architecture, 'How Can We Live in a Lasting Way Together?' Some years old now, it was originally presented at the Architectural Association in London, and it promotes the protection of an interiority and a self-affection nurtured by our surroundings. The natural elements find a place in architecture, and the house is split in two – protecting an emerging space and time of the female. In this architecture, the feminine finds self-affection in an environment (and in forms, features, and representations valuing her morphology and

relationality). And, she finds some energy in this that enables her to cultivate the joy, love or compassion (although the experience of this affect may indeed need new words and new ways of speaking) of a radical difference. The purpose of architecture is thus deeply connected to supporting human relationships, 'enabling the human subject to subsist, exist, and to be,' Irigaray writes, 'while most often being two, or more than two.'¹

Being-two, or being-at-least-two, distinguishes Irigaray's work from any other philosophical perspective on living, and in addition, from any feminist politics, or participatory co-creation in architecture. There have been conferences discussing Irigaray's influence in architecture: *Sexuate Subjects, Politics, Poetics and Ethics* (UCL, 2010); books written on Irigaray and architecture, such as *Irigaray for Architects* (in a series of *Philosophers for Architects*, edited by Adam Sharr), and *Relational Ecologies*, edited by Peggy Rawes, which broadly cites Irigaray's philosophy. Irigaray has published conversations on architecture and edited her students' papers on love, architecture and the perspective of being-two in architecture. Her most recent book *Building a New World* (2015) publishes chapters from students engaged with questions as broad as education, gothic literature and fashion. Theory in architecture tends towards the need for legitimization from authorial voices, more often than not male, explaining the discourse using the right perspectives, telling us what is inappropriate to the profession, and what can enter the dialogue as architectural. Perhaps bodies, especially women's bodies, have to be thought of in the right way (perhaps this is the same for law). But sexuate difference is not a static definition. Sexuate difference is a relation between at least two who are different in a way that challenges notions of difference. To recognize sexuate difference would be to acknowledge a different sort of relation between the sexes, and differently-embodied ways of being-in-relation. The problem with this understanding in architecture is only how we can affirm our places which, as Irigaray argues, 'corresponds to our sexuate identity without letting ourselves be reduced to a neutralizing "whatever" individual.'² In her paper on architecture, she also writes: 'Without doubt, architects have given no thought as to how to articulate one's own world and the closeness with the other. They have not asked themselves how to harmonize subsistence, each one's becoming, and a relationship with the other that respects everyone.' But how to understand and develop this radical ecological ethic and aesthetic: in an acknowledgment of the places of different becomings? These are difficult questions about living together. But, importantly for the current conversation in architecture, the notion of atmosphere is raising a contemporary perspective on how we can live together in ecologically-responsible ways that are truly concerned with human relationships. But how easy is it also to dismiss such a dialogue as inconsequential for architecture in the face of the certainty science proffers. The dialogue of atmosphere is a demand made of architecture to concern itself with its invisible dimensions, the realm of the vague, the poetic and the female as consequential to its future. As Irigaray argues: 'The respect of difference, particularly of sexual difference, does not correspond to the respect of something visible but of something invisible which results from a relation with oneself, with the other, with the world peculiar to each gender'.³

The places of becoming (we could also think of this as atmospheres or affects), belonging to neither one nor the other, paths always in relation to the other, attentive to the other and the others living, protected and natured by architecture (but this would be architecture rethought to include atmospheres for the becoming of at least two subjectivities) architecture at its most originary, evoking an ecological beginning, nature and relationship rethought: this could be a new aesthetics for architecture, and a new ethics. A world peculiar to each gender splits the world, Irigaray argues, and biodiversity, when thought of in this way, cannot represent the entire world, biodiversity cannot unite all species into a world (with human privilege) and we cannot be tied to a set of common unsexed values; sexuate difference embodies only a part of the world.⁴ In this a profoundly different way of thinking about ecology, a new understanding of ecology: male and female identify not with species but in a similarity with the gender of other living species. So we need an evolution in love, a new understanding of relationship in architecture, and we need to reconsider our differences, and to rediscover: see, touch, smell, breath, sense anew, places of our ecological belonging, and in that rich difference of experience, and in an energy of discovery (perhaps prompted by our architectures), a different dialogue of living could be born.

Dr Andrea Wheeler is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at Iowa State University. She is the author of two essays "Architectural Issues in Building Community through Luce Irigaray's Perspective on being-two" and "About being-two in an architectural perspective" in the edited collections of student work by Luce Irigaray: Teaching and Conservations.

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