

6-2015

Building a shared world as a definition of sustainable architecture

Andrea Wheeler

Iowa State University, andrea1@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wheeler, Andrea, "Building a shared world as a definition of sustainable architecture" (2015). *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations*. 80.

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf/80

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Building a shared world as a definition of sustainable architecture

Abstract

Whilst the current debates on sustainable architecture is dominated by a conversation about energy performance and abstract certification—each easily manipulated to serve commercial gain—I argue that a philosophical reconsideration of relationality is key to a sustainable built environment, examining sustainable architecture through the perspective of Luce Irigaray’s philosophy of being-two. Defining sustainable architecture is a notoriously difficult proposition. Ambitious claims abound, demanding a critical distance, but equally important and necessary self-criticisms are heard. Edward Mazria (2013) founder of the Architecture 2030 Challenge, argues that “life depends on design.” Whilst the building sector as a whole, a major emitter of greenhouse gases, is currently making a significant negative impact on the natural environment, it can also be a solution to climate change. Roger Platt, President of the U.S. Green Building Council, recognizing the limitations of the LEED rating tool, argues that we need to expand our definitions of sustainability to include social equity, actual performance, and well-being. Jason McLennan, creator of the Living Building Challenge, sees his role as that of steward and co-creator of a true living future, one that is culturally rich and ecologically restorative. Bjark Ingels calls not for a sterile energy performance engineering of buildings, but instead for “worldcraft,” the craft of making our world: making new and sustainable ways of being in our world, empowering people to transform their own environments. Defining sustainable architecture as building a shared world furthers each of these aims by exploring how, through a radical relationality which includes a relationship to the built environment, human beings can learn not to appropriate resources but instead share living. This presents an ethical and political task—a radical approach to building—to be accomplished together. This shared concept proposes a much bigger environmental picture, but one that reinforces the experiential and qualitative dimension of our lives and of our architecture, arguing against any simple technical approach to creating a sustainable built environment.

Disciplines

Architecture

Rights

This is an unpublished draft paper. Do not cite without permission of the author.

PAPER FOR WORKING GROUP 2 “DEFINITIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT” 13TH NORDIC ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL SCIENCES CONFERENCE, TRONDHEIM, NORWAY 9TH -11TH JUNE 2015 (UNPUBLISHED DRAFT PAPER, DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF AUTHOR)¹

BUILDING A SHARED WORLD AS A DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE

Andrea WHEELER¹

¹Department of Architecture, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA email: andrea1@iastate.edu

ABSTRACT

Whilst the current debates on sustainable architecture is dominated by a conversation about energy performance and abstract certification—each easily manipulated to serve commercial gain—I argue that a philosophical reconsideration of relationality is key to a sustainable built environment, examining sustainable architecture through the perspective of Luce Irigaray’s philosophy of being-two. Defining sustainable architecture is a notoriously difficult proposition. Ambitious claims abound, demanding a critical distance, but equally important and necessary self-criticisms are heard. Edward Mazria (2013) founder of the Architecture 2030 Challenge, argues that “life depends on design.” Whilst the building sector as a whole, a major emitter of greenhouse gases, is currently making a significant negative impact on the natural environment, it can also be a solution to climate change. Roger Platt, President of the U.S. Green Building Council, recognizing the limitations of the LEED rating tool, argues that we need to expand our definitions of sustainability to include social equity, actual performance, and well-being. Jason McLennan, creator of the Living Building Challenge, sees his role as that of steward and co-creator of a true living future, one that is culturally rich and ecologically restorative. Bjark Ingels calls not for a sterile energy performance engineering of buildings, but instead for “worldcraft,” the craft of making our world: making new and sustainable ways of being in our world, empowering people to transform their own environments. Defining sustainable architecture as building a shared world furthers each of these aims by exploring how, through a radical relationality which includes a relationship to the built environment, human beings can learn not to appropriate resources but instead share living. This presents an ethical and political task—a radical approach to building—to be accomplished together. This shared concept proposes a much bigger environmental picture, but one that reinforces the experiential and qualitative dimension of our lives and of our architecture, arguing against any simple technical approach to creating a sustainable built environment.

¹ This paper is work in progress a more contemporary version of this paper may be available, please contact the author andrea1@iastate.edu

BUILDING A SHARED WORLD AS A DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE

Andrea WHEELER¹

¹Department of Architecture, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA

ABSTRACT

Whilst the current debates on sustainable architecture is dominated by a conversation about energy performance and abstract certification—each easily manipulated to serve commercial gain—I argue that a philosophical reconsideration of relationality is key to a sustainable built environment, examining sustainable architecture through the perspective of Luce Irigaray’s philosophy of being-two. Defining sustainable architecture is a notoriously difficult proposition. Ambitious claims abound, demanding a critical distance, but equally important and necessary self-criticisms are heard. Edward Mazria (2013) founder of the Architecture 2030 Challenge, argues that “life depends on design.” Whilst the building sector as a whole, a major emitter of greenhouse gases, is currently making a significant negative impact on the natural environment, it can also be a solution to climate change. Roger Platt, President of the U.S. Green Building Council, recognizing the limitations of the LEED rating tool, argues that we need to expand our definitions of sustainability to include social equity, actual performance, and well-being. Jason McLennan, creator of the Living Building Challenge, sees his role as that of steward and co-creator of a true living future, one that is culturally rich and ecologically restorative. Bjark Ingels calls not for a sterile energy performance engineering of buildings, but instead for “worldcraft,” the craft of making our world: making new and sustainable ways of being in our world, empowering people to transform their own environments. Defining sustainable architecture as building a shared world furthers each of these aims by exploring how, through a radical relationality which includes a relationship to the built environment, human beings can learn not to appropriate resources but instead share living. This presents an ethical and political task—a radical approach to building—to be accomplished together. This shared concept proposes a much bigger environmental picture, but one that reinforces the experiential and qualitative dimension of our lives and of our architecture, arguing against any simple technical approach to creating a sustainable built environment.

Introduction

Definitions of sustainability in architecture are many and varied and ambitious claims abound. Claims are easily manipulated to serve commercial gain. And sustainable architecture is seen as a technical rather than a social concern. Even from within the social sciences and behavioral change there is an obsession with measurable solutions. In this paper, I examine the issue through the perspective of Luce Irigaray’s (2008) philosophy as described in *Sharing the World*. I propose that it is through a radically different relationship, that humanity—man and woman—could learn not to appropriate resources but to share living (together), and that architecture could invite this sort of living, an ecological living, as a definition of sustainability in the built environment.

However, a definition of sustainable architecture in the context of building a shared world, demands some investigation of concepts such as “world,” notions of what is shared, and notions of what can

be common. So what does “sharing the world” mean? And what could it mean for architecture? And what could it mean for sustainable architecture to define itself by this aim?

A common world and a shared world are two different perspectives: the first in common use within the discourse of sustainable development, the second adopted from the philosophy of Luce Irigaray to propose a completely different conceptual orientation on the problem of how we live. One of the problems with the discourse of sustainability is that it is driven by the need to meet global targets, and this has led building scientists and technologists to disregard questions of quality in human living. Architecture is particularly guilty in adopting this attitude. Science based and technology driven perspectives cannot, however, be sufficient to address the questions we face – environmental, social, cultural, and educational - where the cause of our crises is, a problem in human relationship. Despite our public dialogue, as human beings we continue to behave as if we have right to exploit nature, to use other living beings – animals and plants – without any consideration of our reciprocal relationship with them. Irigaray describes this as claiming to care whilst our interventions just simply enact a variety of alternative methods of control (Irigaray, 2015, 101).

Guy and Farmer (2001) argue that “sustainable architecture isn’t a prescription. It’s an approach, an attitude. It shouldn’t really even have a label” (p. 54). They argue that the possibility of many different approaches to sustainable design incites an argument that promotes the need for one objective approach, something that then becomes technologically driven, and by adopting this perspective underestimates the social and cultural problems implicit in sustainable design. The existence of a multiplicity of design approaches is identified by Guy and Farmer, as a significant barrier to solving what are considered to be self-evident problems. They write:

Seen this way, sustainable buildings are assumed to merely represent differently configured technical structures, with particular pathways of technological innovation viewed as objectively preferable to others. Reflecting the “technocist supremacy” that dominates most environmental research programs, this perspective tends to ignore the essentially social questions implicated in the practice of sustainable architecture. (p. 140)

Consequently, the search for a true definition of sustainable building should be abandoned, they state; instead, the concept should be treated as contestable and as “means of raising awareness of all the issues that can be considered” (p. 140).

What are the problems with definitions?

Practices of sustainable architecture are dominated by conversations comparing energy performances and abstract certification programs. Concern has led to the developers of popular design tools to propose modifications to the definition of sustainable architecture with a certain degree of self-criticism. Roger Platt, President of the U.S. Green Building Council, recognizing the limitations of the LEED rating tool, for example, has argued that we need to expand our definition of sustainable architecture (as defined by LEED) to include social equity, actual performance, and well-being (Platt & Hoboloh, 2014, Kapoor et al., 2014). LEED (2015) has recently incorporated Social Equity Pilot Credits, which rewards project teams for identifying neighborhood needs and responding to inequity by using strategies based on community engagement and involvement.

LEED describes its intent in this credit award as follows: “Creating fairer, healthier, and more supportive environments for those who work/live in the project; Responding to the needs of the

surrounding community to promote a fair distribution of benefits and burdens; Promoting fair trade, respect for human rights, and other equity practices among disadvantaged communities.”

But the tool as currently designed, however, cannot easily respond to such immeasurable concerns. LEED aims to account the provision of a number of design considerations within certain categories which contribute together to measure a sustainability design, but the problem is how to measure success within such a framework (and LEED acts for the most part at the level of design intent rather than actuality). Similarly, the question of actual building performance sheds light only on the superficiality of the method, and is concerned, at best, only with predicted performance. The question of wellbeing moreover is far too subjective for any tool that categorizes components of a sustainable building in a credit award manner to provide a rating.

Those who are critics of LEED often argue against the method, in that it is too easy to achieve and it does not go far enough to ensure the actual performance of the building. These critics often take a building engineering-based perspective, calling for attention to the measurement of actual energy performance. But the questions raised by Kapoor et al. (2014) concerning the LEED tool and whether it could account for social equity and social justice appear much more problematic. Social equity tends to be the least defined and least understood element of sustainable development, and yet it represents one of the triad of concerns—economic, environmental, and social sustainability—commonly used to describe sustainable development. The reality is that LEED demonstrates the absence of any real discussion of sustainability in the building profession.

Jason McLennan, a “deep green” researcher of the built environment and creator of the Living Building Challenge, sees his role as steward and co-creator of a true living future, one that is culturally rich and ecologically restorative (2004, 2012). McLennan’s Living Building Challenge is a criticism of LEED, but the high standard presented makes it difficult to achieve such buildings within existing building codes. Simply put, to build in this way is impossible, both economically and legally. The method is extreme in comparison to LEED, but a design tool nevertheless—and yet, a Living Building could mean so much more. When McLennan discusses living buildings, it is only in terms of a set of achievements – again in terms of immediately measurable outcomes: It is not a building described or discussed as a living dwelling. Despite McLennan’s philosophical background this is not living as a challenge to our contemporary ways of being-in-the-world and being-in-relation with other living beings. This is still care as just another practice of control.

Bjark Ingels (2014, 2015) criticizes the sterile world of building performance measurement and calls for the craft of making our world, making new and sustainable ways of being in our world, and empowering people to transform their own environments. He names this “worldcraft,” arguing that architecture is the art and science of accommodating life (and this language of accommodating life is particularly interested in the context of a shared world, but is ill explored in his declarations), and that, as such, architects are given power to create the world they would like to live in. He calls for architects to care about the dreams and desires of others, and to use these ideas as the driving force for their own architecture. He states that we have a responsibility, as architects, to create the world, and that we need to decide as a species how we will use this societally important cultural product: i.e., how will we use architecture to construct a world in which we want to live?

Each of these concerns is vital to an understanding of what it means to design in sustainable ways, but this is a rhetoric without any real philosophical discussion or indeed any self-reflective criticism of the difficulties these ideas pose in our current social and cultural conditions. Ingels asserts the

need for art, architecture, poetry, and theatre made through working together in radically new ways. It has to be recognized that architectural manifestos have aimed many times to give material form to visions of a new human society, but such grand dreams have also failed at a human level.

The dominance of the technological approach

Guy and Farmer (2001) define sustainability in architecture in terms of practices they describe under the categories of eco-technic, eco-centric, eco-aesthetic, eco-medical, eco-social, and eco-cultural competing logics. They associate social logic with participatory locally-based and community-based design; it has as its ideal decentralized non-hierarchical communities and the reconciliation of the individual and those communities. Cultural logic is associated with phenomenological and cultural ecology, and Guy and Farmer describe it as design practices that are concerned with the vernacular and low-technologies, with the aim of learning to dwell through buildings that are adapted for culturally appropriate reasons to people and place (p. 141). The aim of their paper is to challenge the notion that the environment is merely a physical entity and to resist its categorization only in scientific terms. However, when Guy and Farmer describe the eco-cultural logic as: aimed at a fundamental reorientation of values and a preservation of a diversity of existing cultures; inspired by a phenomenological perspective with an emphasis on place or *genius loci*; a reaction against globalism in architectural style; and cite Arne Naess as promoting the eco-cultural logic, stating that we should “aim to conserve the richness and diversity of life on earth—and that includes human cultural diversity” (Naess as cited in Guy & Farmer, 2001) and “Any model of ecologically sustainable development must contain answers, however tentative, as to how to avoid contributing to thoughtless destruction of cultures, and to the dissemination of the belief in a glorious, meaningless life” (Naess as cited in Guy & Farmer, 2001). They do so suggesting one approach in a plurality of possibilities, a plurality which they propose will free us from the dominance of the technological perspective.

The problem of methods and tools for design, and their inadequacy in addressing the big questions of social and cultural sustainability

So what would it mean to expand the eco-cultural conversation and to propose an architecture of a shared world as a definition of sustainable practice? The philosophical problem of sharing and of building a new world, are discussed in some of Irigaray’s most recent and forthcoming works: *Sharing the World* (2010); the papers “Starting from Ourselves as Living Beings “ and “Cultivating a Living Belonging” both in a special edition of the *Journal of British Phenomenology* (2015); and in her edited collection of essays *Teaching II. Building a New World* (2015).

And why is a philosophical discussion of a shared world of value to this conversation? Reducing our environmental impact on the world can no longer be solved simply by raising awareness of our consumption habits; that has long since lost favor as any way forward (Wackernagel & Rees, 1998). Moreover, many of have argued that a larger conceptual orientation towards sustainable architecture is required (Muller, 2014, p. 6). Whilst we need new dialogues to explore how we can realistically and effectively reduce our impact on the earth and live in less exploitative relationships, what is important to the discourse is that Irigaray addresses as the impulse of change—not an unachievable vision or an unobtainable future, nor the impulse of most utopian dreams as an act that destroys in its wake the old. She suggests an ecological ethic (and a building practice) starts with a proper concern for another subject. This is a phenomenological perspective in sustainable architecture quite different to that described within the eco-cultural logic of Guy & Farmer.

A shared world or a common world?

The problem of the common, and the question of the shared are distinctly different approaches. How we could compose a common world has been a recent design concern of Bruno Latour (2014). This common world—one that we can inhabit in a peaceful way without exterminating each other—is he argues a somewhat overwhelming question. Whilst the ecological problem demands a response in terms of design; it evokes a sense of obligation, but at the same time the problem as presented confuses. The Anthropocene era (the name given by geologists to our world's present nature as impacted by man) has as one of its symptoms a human disconnection with nature, but such guilt evoked prevents a proper relationship, preventing reconnection. Even the experience of the sublime in nature, Latour (2011) argues, is prohibited. In this way we become prisoners of our ecological problem and of its present conceptual orientation, We have no meaningful sense of ourselves sharing a collective responsibility, no sense of ourselves as one collective entity, and no sense even of sharing one human species – no common world.

So what does Irigaray mean by a shared world? For Irigaray, we currently confuse being-in-relation (with animals, plants and other human beings) as dwelling in the same world. This perspective, however, does not take into account the possibility of a diversity of worlds, nor the difference between the world of a man and that of a woman, and their different ways of dwelling (as cited in Wheeler, 2008). Moreover, Irigaray argues that “this ‘same world’ does not exist without destroying the specific world in which each one lives. She writes:

It is difficult to realize that we inhabit different worlds while apparently we share a common quotidian reality. But considering only this dimension, we already are forgetting the level of a being-in-relation(s) with respect for difference(s)—that is to say, a being-in-relation with the other as such. In order to leave a culture in which being with the other(s) only means to take part in the same world, we have to overcome an undifferentiated relation with respect to the other(s)” (as cited in Wheeler, 2008).

The problem of the common really only addresses difference as diversity and on this issue. In “Starting from Ourselves as Living Beings” Irigaray argues that the environmental movement, and its ethics, risks replacing one relationship of exploitation, with an equally dominating ethics of care, if environmentalism does not question the cultural traditions that have shaped our understandings of nature and of our relationship with the plant and animal worlds. She writes: “ We get in touch with the world, with the other, with ourselves according to learned codes, but not starting from original impulses, attractions or sympathies that have been educated towards respect for our own life, that for our environments and that for other living beings” (Irigaray, 2015 101).

A Living Architecture

Sustainability is a question about how we live and how we can live together. However, unlike other perspectives on our relationship with others, Irigaray argues that we are unable to open ourselves all the time to others different from us. She states, “We need to return to ourselves, to keep and save our totality or integrity, and this is possible only in *sexuate* difference. Why? Because it is the most basic difference, this one which secures for each one bridge(s) both between nature and culture and between us. It is starting from this difference that the other sorts of otherness have been elaborated”

(as cited in Wheeler, 2008). This distinguishes her understanding of difference from any other philosophy of difference.

Furthermore, for Irigaray, the problem in our relationship with natural and built environments is a symptom of an obsession with satisfying our needs, rather than cultivating our desires. Recognizing *sexuate* difference would allow us to cultivate desire: she argues that we have reached a point wherein we have almost forgotten how to enter an ethical relationship with the beings and things which compose nature. Women and men need to learn not ways to appropriate resources, instead learning ways to share life (Irigaray, 2008). An invitation to shared living emerges in the relation of *sexuate* difference.

Her work has moved from criticism of the masculine bias of philosophy (although not fundamentally changed) towards investigating how to forge a relationship between men and women where both have their own relationality, and where both different approaches are culturally valued, protected, and built upon. The dialogue between them in this context then brings about something completely new.

Hence, no ordinary relationship exists in Irigaray's philosophy. *Sexuate* difference is a key term. A shared world is thus quite distinct from the idea of a common world. It is a profound acknowledgement of co-existence at the level of subjectivity. It is an invitation to acknowledge the air we breathe as shared, our material resources shared among us—plant, animal and human.

In Irigaray's philosophy, sharing the world involves a way of speaking (and designing) that respects oneself and other: "Having oneself in mind" she argues "must intertwine with having the other in mind, and even the relation between the two" (Irigaray, 2008, p. 64).

If architecture has a key role to play in building a more sustainable world, then Irigaray's philosophy aims to uncover the potential to develop an eco-cultural perspective through a profound reconsideration of notions of living and dwelling. Irigaray writes that "few architects wonder about the necessary relation between building a house and building oneself, at least at the level of being and not only having, possessing" (as cited in Wheeler, 2008).

In her lecture at the Architectural Association in London in November 2000, "How Can We Live Together in a Lasting Way?" (published in *Key Writings*), Irigaray argues that architects do not take into account sufficiently the closeness with the other'—above all, an other who is different—in their designs, especially in the home. And she argues that perhaps it is through allowing different cultures or worlds to be respected inside a house or an apartment, that many people, including architects, could understand the necessity of being concerned with difference when dwelling or building.

A shared world as a definition of sustainability in the built environment

This approach, this definition of sustainable architecture as a question of living and living together, as sharing at the level of becoming, and as understood through the philosophy of Irigaray, is clearly not a simple a return to past architects' conversations with philosophy, nor is it simply an expression of support for a phenomenological reawakening in architecture (Borch, 2014). This is not akin to any definition of sustainability in the built environment commonly described, even within the phenomenological tradition (or an eco-cultural logic). This approach means resisting participation in the exploitation of the earth's resources means, and changing our modes of relationality, long enabled and fostered by societies, and cultivating new relationships, starting with those between women and men. And in her latest book, Irigaray (2015) envisions an ecologically attuned world that

flourishes on the basis of *sexuate* difference. In this way, architecture becomes a place for the protection and nurturing of new ways of living, no longer inside or through a single world (Irigaray, 2008).

We cannot share the world and its resources until we properly conceive our relationship with the world (Irigaray 2008).

References

- Borch, Christian (ed.). 2014. *Architectural Atmospheres: On Experience and Politics in Architecture*. Basel: Birkhauser.
- Guy, S., & Farmer, G. (2001). Reinterpreting sustainable architecture: the place of technology. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 54(3), 140-148.
- Ingels, Bjark (2015) "Advice to the Young". Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yMzZwAtZRw>
- Ingels, Bjark (2014) "Worldcraft" Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyNGDWnmX0U>
- Irigaray, L. (2008). *Sharing the world*. New York: Continuum.
- Irigaray, Luce (2015) *Building a New World*. Palgrave Press, London (forthcoming)
- Kapoor, P., Oussidhoum, F., Platt, R., & Kerswill, B. (2014). *Buildings: World's closing window: What could be the role of rating tools*. Paper presented at the World Conference of Sustainable Buildings, Barcelona, Spain.
- Latour, Bruno. 2014. "Another Way to Compose the Common World." *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1: 301-7. doi <http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau4.1.016>
- LEED. (2015). Social equity in the community. Retrieved from: <http://www.usgbc.org/credits/se-community>
- Mazria, E (2013) Lecture at GreenBuild 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWbAjLss5YU>
- McLennan, J. (2004) *The Philosophy of Sustainable Design*. EcoTone Publishing
- McLennan, J. (2012) *Transformational Thought*. EcoTone Publishing.
- Muller, B. (2014). *Ecology and the architectural imagination*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Naess, Arne (1988). Deep ecology and ultimate premises. *The Ecologist*, 18(4-5), 128–131.
- Naess, Arne (1994). Sustainable development and the deep ecology movement. In S. Baker, M. Kousis, D. Richardson, & S. Young (Eds.), *The politics of sustainable development in the European Union* (pp. 59-70). New York and London: Routledge.
- Platt, R. & Hobollah, A. (2014). *Global sustainable economy and sustainable building*. Paper presented at the World Conference of Sustainable Building, Barcelona, Spain.
- Wackernagel, M., and W. Rees. 1998. *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Wheeler, A. (2008). About being-two in an architectural perspective. *Conversations, London, Continuum*.