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# Livability and CoExistence Between the Sexes: An Architectural Question

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# Livability and CoExistence Between the Sexes: An Architectural Question

## Abstract

If we feel our lived environment, if we feel the reality of our existence in relation to our environment, can we also feel nature's destruction? Understanding of our own nature in relation to nature, has been described as an aesthetic discourse, or eco-aesthetics (ökologische Naturästhetik) by Gernot Böhme, a philosopher more currently popular among architects for his theory of architectural atmosphere. According to Böhme, nature must be recognized as our partner and we should gradually adapt to such a partner relationship. Nature is not something we have left behind in our becoming civilized; nature is us and is not to be overcome. He states that <it is only now that we realize that what has been carried out as the domination of nature is, in fact, a totally impossible project> (Wang, 2014).

## Disciplines

Architecture | Cultural Resource Management and Policy Analysis | Environmental Design | Gender and Sexuality

## Comments

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## Livability and Co-Existence Between the Sexes: An Architectural Question

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If we feel our lived environment, if we feel the reality of our existence in relation to our environment, can we also feel nature's destruction? Understanding of our own nature in relation to nature, has been described as an aesthetic discourse, or eco-aesthetics (ökologische Naturästhetik) by Gernot Böhme, a philosopher more currently popular among architects for his theory of architectural atmosphere. According to Böhme, nature must be recognized as our partner and we should gradually adapt to such a partner relationship. Nature is not something we have left behind in our becoming civilized; nature is us and is not to be overcome. He states that «it is only now that we realize that what has been carried out as the domination of nature is, in fact, a totally impossible project» (Wang, 2014).

Luce Irigaray is of a similar age to Böhme and she is known for her work on sexual difference. She similarly describes starting with the nature we are ourselves, returning to ourselves, discovering a natural belonging, and discovering the life that we are ourselves (Irigaray, 2015: 101). She argues that «the first ecological gesture is to live and situate ourselves as living beings among other living beings in an environment that allows life to exist and develop» (Irigaray, 2015: 101). Irigaray's argument is that to be an environmentalist, to claim oneself to be an environmentalist, before questioning our cultural traditions, does not really make sense (Irigaray, 2015: 101). To address the environmental issues we face, rather, she suggests «it would be advisable to wonder about what being alive signifies, and whether we are really living, or how we could be or become living» (Irigaray, 2015: 101). However, if we feel nature, we feel our relation with the natural environment, if we feel ourselves as nature, as Böhme suggests, can we feel nature in the same way as man and woman? Wondering in this way, can we, with our bodies and senses, and our different desires to be in relation to nature, see and feel and respond to nature's crises?

We design buildings to be energy efficient and to be ethical but we do not fully recognize the power of the sensory dimension in our methods of environmental and sustainable building design, not in our predictive energy modeling tools, nor in how we assess buildings and their performance in actuality is evident. We design them to be beautiful, and yet we tend not to ask people how they feel in our buildings □ how in actuality they feel. With the few exceptions of theorists who have engaged with humanities perspectives on climate change (Hume, 2011, 2015; Ingold, 2011), and architects and scholars following research methods that challenge dominant intellectual or policy research perspectives (Divine-Wright, 2005, Pink et al., 2010): the dominant perspective from which we view the problem of environmental design is that of the sciences.

Pink *et al.* (2010), describe their work as a response to the need for a more thorough application of social science theory and methodology to industry research. They argue that approaches can be designed to enable ethnographers to share other people's experiences and «to generate closer and empathetic understandings

of these experiences» (Pink, 2010: 649). Gill *et al.* argue (2010) that while the field of behavioral change is a major untapped route for energy savings, the varying knowledge, attitudes, and abilities of users or occupants presents a fundamental barrier to strategies of building performance optimization. Educating users require «a thorough interdisciplinary understanding of attitudes and behaviors due to their inherent complexity and impacts» (Gill *et al.*, 2010: 492). These factors might include «emotional, moral, habitual, contextual, attitudinal, social, normative, and control factors» (Gill *et al.*, 2010: 496). Janda argues that the growth of knowledge about energy use and user behavior in buildings is not leading to better user education: «no one is accepting responsibility for the education of the 99.3% of the population who use buildings» (Janda, 2011: 20). This is not a new conversation for architecture, at least not in terms of an emotional connection to place (Seamon, 2000; Manzo, 2003). Böhme and Irigaray, however, are philosophers new to the conversation and they do offer new perspectives on the questions of co-existence and the livability of environments, designed and built.

Böhme and Irigaray both address questions of coexistence (of man and nature, man and building, man and woman, man and woman, and nature), together with the felt, bodily or experiential reality of our environmental crises. For Böhme, what counts in terms of our environmental crises is that we can rediscover our identity as natural beings «and develop the consciousness that “our body is the nature that we ourselves” are (*Der Leib ist die Natur, die wir selbst sind*)» (Wang, 2014). He argues that we must recognize that we care about nature because it affects us, it has been affecting us, and it will continue to affect us. He states in an interview: «finding ourselves involved in environmental degradation, it is our own nature that is being affected» (Wang, 2014). What current environmental conditions have destroyed is not the object that is the environment, nor our own nature, but our relationship with it. However, for Irigaray it is tradition that has enforced the invalidity of women’s experience, of women’s specific feelings, and that has destroyed our relationship to our environment. She writes: «[t]his tradition has, in this way, rendered us extraneous to our environment, extraneous to one another as living beings, and even extraneous to ourselves» (Irigaray, 2015: 101).

Böhme’s major works on eco-aesthetics, or ecological aesthetics of nature are largely untranslated, but they include *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (1989), *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (1995), *Die Natur vor uns. Naturphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (2002), and *Leibsein als Aufgabe*. He has also published on the question of sexual difference (Böhme, 1995, 2004, 2016). Nevertheless, the difference between the perspective suggested by Böhme, and that offered by Irigaray, rests in this question about our natural or ecological belonging and one of whom’s concerns is women’s liberation.

Böhme’s is not an aesthetic view about whether nature is beautiful, but rather that nature influences our own feeling of being there, our

locatedness (*Befinden*). He argues that it is through our senses that we feel the environment in which we are located and it is atmosphere that brings the human situation and the quality of the environment together (Wang, 2014). According to Böhme, our interest in our environmental crises is motivated not by a selfless concern to save the earth, but rather a concern for ourselves. It is our own nature that is affected: the environment concerns us because we feel it through our bodies, through our relationships, and through experiences of our everyday lives. According to Irigaray, however, we have subjected this world, our world, within ourselves as well as outside ourselves, to a fabrication and an artificiality of our own creation, one that prevents us from finding ourselves, our living in it (Irigaray, 2015: 102). To recognize our sensory experience as different: we need an eco-aesthetics of sexual difference.

Böhme discusses sexual difference as a discovery in relation, but this not the same sort of discovering in relation that Irigaray describes. While the senses still offer a method, a way to cultivate feelings, and «are one of the mediators through which we can pass from a mere natural belonging to a cultured humanity, because they represent a privileged access to our communication with the world and with the other(s)» (Irigaray, 2015: 102), living beings are sexual, Irigaray argues, and she states that if we continue to consider ourselves as neutral beings, we cannot behave in an ecological way (Irigaray, 2015: 103).

Both Irigaray and Bohme argue that the natural world inspires us to its own perspective and in its way can give us seeing: it gives us nature, but here is the problem. In Böhme's eco-aesthetics, nature is given, but also in Irigaray's aesthetics. Irigaray's philosophy is a critical perspective on the tradition, but it also proposes the necessity of affection. In a world full of unacknowledged and ill-explored feelings with respect to difference, the question is whether our ethics toward the natural environment can be resolved without some attention to sexual or sexual difference. Environmental and sustainable buildings can be pleasurable to live in, beautiful even at a sensory level, but could this an eco-aesthetic and ethical theory in terms of our own feeling of being there, be for both man and woman? What I have discussed is the challenge and implication of the problems we face in designing for co-existence. I have argued that the dimension of affect has benefits for environmental design. This is not the end of an argument, however, with new ways of communication emerging, new ways of working together, building community and building the structures for that community, this could bring with it the genesis of a new ecological humanity.

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