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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I will explore the work of two contemporary environmental philosophers: Gernot Böhme, celebrated for his philosophy of architectural atmosphere although less known for his work on ecological aesthetics, and Luce Irigaray, a French philosopher renowned for her work inspiring a generation of feminist scholars but less well discussed for her work on environmental ethics. For Böhme, our designed environments are experienced through atmosphere; we feel our own presence in a built environment and feel the environment in which we are present. His approach to design depends on feeling experienced through being in space rather than seeing space or imagining it. Irigaray, on the other hand, now in her eighties, distinguishes experience as different between the sexes, not as already cultural, but rather to be cultivated. Her philosophy is provocative and challenged by many; while on the margins of Parisian intellectual society, she still works, teaches, and writes prolifically about environmental ethics. This paper examines how these two marginalized ecological philosophers can benefit the field of environmental design.

## **Keywords**

philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, environment, architecture

## **Disciplines**

Architecture



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## **Outsider ethics and marginalized aesthetics: The value of contemporary environmental philosophies for designing sustainable architecture**

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### **Introduction**

What relevance has mood or atmosphere to the discourse of sustainable design? What is the perceived importance of feeling to an architecture that can engage and communicate with users the problems of sustainable development? These questions are seldom raised in the discourses associated with green and sustainable architecture, but feeling connects us with our environment and while the science of climate change produces statistics distancing the problem, and the workings of an environmentally sustainable building can remain obscure to many, feeling is immediate, physical, every day; it is about how we experience our environment in the moment.

According to Gernot Böhme, a contemporary German philosopher, our designed environments are experienced through feeling; we feel our own presence in space and feel the space in which we are present. He establishes an approach to understanding architecture that he describes as an aesthetic dependent on feeling, experienced through being in space rather than seeing or imagining it. Similarly, in his eco-aesthetics, we feel our relation to nature: We feel nature's crisis because we feel the nature we are ourselves.

Luce Irigaray, on the other hand, is an influential feminist philosopher whose work has been pivotal to feminist thinking, shaping a generation of feminist theorists. Liberation is to be experienced, she argues, with our bodies and intimate feelings, in our environments, in place. Irigaray's philosophy is radical and provocative and challenged by many. While on the margins of Parisian intellectual society, with her works refused in her native language, and

challenged by those seeking liberation in post-human identities (I describe her philosophy as post-post-human), she teaches and writes prolifically about sexual politics and environmental ethics.

The intention of this paper is thus to examine how in the context of environmental concerns social aspiration is limited, in particular in the literature on sustainable development. The aim is to address the question of design's role in the engagement and communication of environment awareness through feeling and to carefully and critically examine texts of Böhme and Irigaray to evaluate how these rich relational and ecological philosophies, engaging with ethics and aesthetics, mood or feeling, can supplement the discourse of sustainable development to benefit the field of sustainable design.

### **Sustainable development and social aspiration**

Sustainability can be explained in many ways, but sustainable architecture is focused on how we live. It can be ethical and aspirational. It can ask us how we can live in ethical relationships with other living beings without excessively exploiting our shared environment, but this is most typically expressed as a concern for assessing performance. While sustainability is a social construct, meaning different things to different people across cultures and locations, it is also an environmentally sensitive and responsible expression of our relationship to other living and non-living things. Sustainable design is about our social relationships as well as our relationships to nature and, moreover, it is about how we would like them to be.

In 2013, the United Nations (UN) created the Sustainable Development Goals, replacing the previous Millennium Development Goals, as a definitive statement on aspiration for human development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015) are a set of 17 global goals with 169 targets among them, including ending poverty in all forms everywhere, ending hunger, ensuring healthy lives for all at all ages, and ensuring inclusive and equitable education. The goals address gender inequality, and goal 5, in particular, states: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (see Table 1; United Nations, 2015). Other goals concern access to energy, water, productive employment, resilient infrastructure, and safe cities, addressing climate change and environmental degradation, and promoting sustainable consumption and peaceful society. These SDGs are ambitious, and they supersede the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Furthermore, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* asks world leaders to begin efforts now to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Initiated by Ban Ki-moon, the SDGs are a shared vision for humanity and a social contract between the world's leaders and the people; they constitute a to-do list for people and planet. They include 17 goals to transform our world for the better. However, there are criticisms, and the very number of goals and targets has been called into question. The degree of accountability of all the parties who have voluntarily adopted the agenda is vague and like the scientists' statistics for climate change they are distant goals. The SDGs represent a common aspiration as a policy tool.

Table 1. Sustainable Development Goals (from United Nations, 2015)

Goal 1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Goal 4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
Goal 5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
Goal 8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Goal 9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
Goal 10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
Goal 12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Goal 14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

### Feeling, ethics, and sustainable design

So, if architecture as a discipline invites engagement and inhabitation, how can architects and designers invite users to engage with the problem of sustainable development? Architectural aesthetics is a discourse positioned somewhat at odds with the performance agenda of sustainable design, including that it might have some of the same distant social and humanitarian aspirations as the SDGs. However, researchers recognize diverse ways of constructing knowledge, even in the field of construction, and, moreover, within the field of construction research, scholars are increasingly challenging methods adopted to collect performance data, questioning tools and measures, and highlighting the complexity of the impact of any building on its environment, including its social and economic contexts. Nevertheless, these are experimental studies with little impact as yet on the industry and professions. Such studies are themselves aspirational. Confronting accounting perspectives that promise to build future ecological worlds is a difficult challenge in light of biases of the architectural and construction professions.

So, what is design's role in engaging and communicating the problem of sustainable development? Also, can eco-aesthetics be separated from architectural ethics? What is really at stake with such questions?

We feel nature and we feel its destruction. We feel it as the nature we are ourselves. This is Böhme's argument. So, we might be able to feel, and feel intimately, our own impact on the environment. We can thereby act ethically toward the nature that we are ourselves. We can better feel our lived environment, we can feel ourselves in our environments, feel the reality of our existence in relation to our environments and, in this way, cultivate a more

intimate ethic toward the environment. This is a powerful perspective as a way of engaging people with the problem of environmental crises and motivating action. As designers working in the built environment, the important addition to sustainable design becomes one of communication.

This sort of dialogue, this understanding of our own nature in relation to nature, Böhme has described as an eco-aesthetic discourse (*ökologische Naturästhetik*). 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 in our becoming civilized; nature and the natural in us are not to be overcome. As he argues, "...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).

Nevertheless, Irigaray is of a similar age to Böhme and she is known for her work on sexual difference, or rather her ethics of sexual difference, that which she calls *sexuate* difference. Her philosophy is not without some contestation, and she similarly describes starting with the nature we are ourselves, returning to ourselves, discovering a natural belonging, but importantly for Irigaray this is also *sexuate* belonging: It is the discovering of the life that we are ourselves in relation to *sexuate* difference rather than in our cultural descriptions and designations (Irigaray, 2015, 101). It is a rethinking of relations from intimate relations and this means rediscovering a living embodiment in ways not yet culturally recognized. Like Böhme, 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). So, she adds to an eco-aesthetic a perspective difference in feeling between the sexes, an 'ethic' to be culturally recognized.

Hence, if we feel nature, as Böhme suggests, we feel our relation with the natural environment, we feel ourselves as nature; Irigaray asks, do man and woman feel in the same way, and can we engage with such questions without falling into stereotypes? Moreover, is this a development of an ethic that can cultivate the emergence of at least two equal and different subjectivities? We can reflect on our social experience, our relationships and our sensory experience, and we can find excitement in the post-human and futuristic; many different perspectives engage and incite. The document that describes the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is, after all, entitled *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. However, entering the world of these philosophers is not the same work as developing the SDGs. So, why bring tricky outsider ethics and marginalized aesthetics into the field of sustainable architectural design? The value is one of criticism, but the validity of such criticism is immediately at risk because of its outsider status. This is an argument about feeling, every day, immediate, physically embodied; however, the merit of such is yet to enter into the dialogue on sustainable design.

In her most recent publication *To Be Born* (2017), Irigaray writes, "Who could maintain, that he or she is not in search of their origin in their dreams regarding the future, their amorous desires, their aspirations for the beyond? ... who is able not to make up one's mind according to a secret nostalgia for at least understanding in what one's origin consists?" (Irigaray, 2017, 3). These feelings are understood through cultural traditions, through language, poetry, art, often lamenting the loss of a truly natural environment, but the feelings seduce, romance us, and are artificial. Our reality is, as Irigaray argues, that we are made not from one apparent source of such nostalgia, to which we long to return, for refuge, for peace, a desire characteristic of so much of environmental philosophy, but our

existence is “...an actualization of the elusive event of a meeting between two humans” (Irigaray, 2017, 4). Feeling is key to Irigaray’s philosophy, and feeling is how we can rethink environmental awareness. However, this is the ecological reality of an as yet to be recognized and cultivated relationship between at least two human subjects in a relationship of equality and difference. She writes:

*...so as long as we do not consider the two ec-stasies from which we can exist as humans: the ec-stasis with regard to our origin, and the ec-stasis for which our desire calls us. These two different ec-stasies, in a way these two not being must be taken on in order that we can discover what means our ‘to be’ as human and endeavour to incarnate our own destiny (Irigaray, 2017).*

So, we need to question our reality and discover our own ecological and sexuate belonging; this is a radical perspective, albeit one that also critically situates body and feeling, mood and feeling, in questions of environmental and sustainable design. Outsider ethics and marginalized aesthetics have some value, not only to serve as a critical lens but also to enrich the discourse of sustainable architecture through the reevaluation of feeling.

### **Outsider Ethics and Marginalized Aesthetics in Sustainable Design**

We design buildings to be energy efficient and to be ethical. We design them to be beautiful, and yet we tend not to ask people how in actuality they feel in buildings or how they understand their built environments. We do not fully recognize the power of the sensory dimension in our methods, in our predictive energy modeling tools that shape how we understand design, or in how we assess buildings and their performance in actuality. With the few exceptions of theorists who are described as engaged with humanities perspectives on climate change (Hume, 2011, 2015; Barnes et al., 2003; Ingold, 2011), architects and scholars following research methods that challenge dominant intellectual or policy research perspectives (Divine-Wright, 2005) and researchers examining and adopting innovative methodologies in construction science (Pink et al., 2010), the dominant perspective from which we view the problem of environmental design and, moreover, sustainable design in architecture is that of the sciences.

The need to widen our perspective on research methods is, nevertheless, being explored in building and construction research. Pink et al. (2010), for example, describe their work as a response to a more thorough application of social science theory and methodology to industry research. They argue that approaches to research can even be designed to enable sensory ethnographers to share other people’s experiences and “...to generate closer and empathetic understandings of these experiences” (Pink, 2010). However, there is still some need to step back and engage with philosophers and philosophies, and with humanities perspectives, that are driving such motivations. The call to re-envision a human future and ecology is radical and, as Irigaray writes, “... 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).

Furthermore, while social theories of behavior change are developing and Gill et al. (2010) argue the field is a major untapped route for energy savings, the varying knowledge, attitudes, and abilities of users or occupants nevertheless present a fundamental barrier to strategies of education and building performance optimization. Building researchers tend to conceive the problem of sustainable design as a technical challenge to which acceptance needs to be solicited. Moreover, future strategies to educate users require, they argue, “...a

thorough interdisciplinary understanding of attitudes and behaviours due to their inherent complexity and impacts” (Gill et al., 2010, p. x). Behavior, of course, is a person’s response as a consequence of complex interactions between internal and external factors, which for all intents and purposes, describes how affect, the vague feeling of being in a building, motivates action. These factors, they argue, might include “... emotional, moral, habitual, contextual, attitudinal, social, normative, and control factors” (Gill et al., 2010, 496). There are methodological questions to be directed to the field, but while the question of feeling is raised in performance-based studies of energy-efficient and sustainable design, the question of feeling is not addressed as feeling. Feeling in terms of an emotional connection to place, however, is not new to architecture (Seamon, 2000; Manzo, 2003). It is just that the fields are disconnected and Böhme and Irigaray are new philosophers to enter the conversation on environment and place and to offer perspectives on questions of co-existence between us and in relation to the natural environment.

Böhme’s eco-aesthetic describes a relationship between the human and nature, but Irigaray questions the very feeling for such an original relationship and indeed the ethics of the feeling. She argues that romantic feelings for nature are artificial and created by cultures, which at their foundation are unethical with respect to the environmental. We might say that her radical philosophy challenges the reality of Böhme’s eco-aesthetic, as well as the ethics of his approach. It also challenges the value of environmental philosophies and the traditions to which they belong and questions, radically questions, the human condition. Also, perhaps without articulation, Irigaray’s is also contested by both feminist philosophies and those working with the tradition.

## Discussion

So, what should we do about feeling, this dimension of experience with competing philosophical perspectives? The dominance of a technical point of view in sustainable building design is shaping a growing alternative conversation, which includes provocative and political philosophies, but design is also emerging as a method by which to address these questions. Why examine this field through the work of these two philosophers – Böhme and Irigaray? Why is this sort of radical, this sort of outsider, significant? Both seem to 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. However, 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 that “...finding ourselves involved in environmental degradation, it is our own nature that is being affected” (Wang, 2014). What current environmental conditions have destroyed is thus not the object that is the environment, or that of our own nature, but our relationship with it. For Irigaray, the tradition of philosophy, a patriarchal tradition that has excluded socially marginalized voices, including women, does not value questions of embodiment or the rediscovery of embodiment or the reality our ecological co-dependency, the intimacy of our sharing of the world. It is this tradition that has destroyed our relationship to our environment. She writes: “This 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 (*Ökologische Naturästhetik*) are largely untranslated, but they include *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (1989), *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (1995), and *Die Natur vor uns. Naturphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (2002). The difference between the co-existence suggested by Böhme and that offered by Irigaray rests in the intimacy with which we experience a natural or ecological belonging. According to Böhme, our interest in nature and in our environmental crises is not motivated by a selfless concern to save the earth, but by a concern for ourselves: It is our own nature being affected. Irigaray, however, calls for a deeper intimacy and an ethics toward the environment by considering social relationships first and discovering a way to recognize the embodied versus sexuate difference.

So, which should be the preference for the field of design, if indeed sustainable development is aspiration? Is Böhme's approach, mediated by an understanding of nature and our human experience, steeped in tradition, the real correspondence with nature, or is Irigaray's the more ethical approach and more attentive to cultural and sexual differences?

Böhme's *ökologische Naturästhetik* is not a visually focused aesthetic view about whether nature is beautiful or not; it is about how nature influences our own feeling of being there, our locatedness (*Befindent*). He argues that it is through our senses that we feel the environment in which we are located and it is the atmosphere of an environment that brings the human situation and the quality of the environment together (Wang, 2014). According to Irigaray, however, we have subjected this world, our world, within ourselves as well as outside ourselves, to a fabrication, an artificiality, one that prevents us from finding ourselves, our locatedness (Irigaray, 2015, 102). While the senses still offer a way to cultivate feelings, our senses are, she writes, "...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). Even to value our embodiment and recognize the value of our sensory experience, we need to co-construct a culture which understands an intimate co-existence: We need an eco-aesthetic of sexuate co-habitation. Environmental and sustainable buildings can be pleasurable to live in, beautiful at a sensory level, and this may be an immediate and physical way to engage with people and communicate the importance of environmental awareness and motivate action. This would be Böhme's argument. However, is this an eco-aesthetic and ethical theory in terms of our own feeling of being there, for both man and woman? Can a more intimate approach appeal more as philosophy that considers the variety of social inequalities in experience and cultural differences, including those of women? Böhme's thinking about architecture and atmosphere suggests an experience through all the senses: a multisensory experience. Architecture is best understood through feeling. Böhme discusses sexual difference as a discovery in relation, but this is not the same sort of intimate discovering or embodiment and relationality that Irigaray describes. Living beings are sexuate, Irigaray argues, and if we continue to consider ourselves as neutered individuals, if we sustain a misrecognition, we cannot behave in an ecological way (Irigaray, 2015, 103).

There is a trail of implications, not the least of which is the failure of sustainable building design in actuality if we continue to disregard the social dimension of sustainable design and how architecture can engage and communicate. Buildings do not use energy, people do; the growth of knowledge about energy use and user behavior in buildings is not leading to better user education. As Janda argues, "...no one is accepting responsibility for

the education of the 99.3% of the population who use buildings” (Janda, 2011, 20). The problem does not simply involve communication, it also involves intimate engagement. Without exploring the significance of complex interactions of building and user, without a reason to include the affective dimension of our environmental experience, and without a theory regarding how such affect shapes our understanding, architects and other building professionals will continue to underestimate its power of feeling to engage and communicate the problems of sustainable development. I have put forward an argument and I want to conclude with the idea that radical thinking is needed; outsider ethics and marginalized aesthetics can provoke the building sciences and can present a critical perspective of value to the conversation on sustainable design. We need critical thinking, not simply for the sake of criticism, but so that we can regain our humanity, our aspirations, our feeling, in these current crises. This is not the end of an argument but only the beginning: To be an environmentalist, to claim oneself to be an environmentalist, before questioning our cultural traditions does not really make sense (Irigaray, 2015, 101). Sustainable architecture needs philosophy as well as science.

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