

5-22-2019

Measuring the Added Value of Regenerative Architecture through the Problematic Example of the Aesthetic Dimension

Andrea S. Wheeler
Iowa State University, andrea1@iastate.edu

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Recommended Citation

Wheeler, Andrea S., "Measuring the Added Value of Regenerative Architecture through the Problematic Example of the Aesthetic Dimension" (2019). *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations*. 137.

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Measuring the Added Value of Regenerative Architecture through the Problematic Example of the Aesthetic Dimension

Abstract

Regenerative architecture seeks to impact positively on an environment. Raymond Cole writes that regenerative architecture promotes a responsibility to produce buildings that 'reduce the degenerative consequences of human activity on the health and integrity of ecological systems' (Cole 2015, 1). This positioning of regenerative design as "greater than" is key to its enthusiastic uptake, but it also raises concerns. Chrisna du Plessis states that the paradigm that underlies the regenerative approach is one that calls for radical changes to structures of society; to the dominant world view that 'sees nature as machine, understood and managed by reducing it to its parts' (du Plessis, 8); and thus at the core of regenerative design is the challenge to understand and evaluate its positive potential, reconciling, as Cole writes, 'widely different interpretations of value and value-adding that exist within the sustainability movement' (Cole 2015, 2). What is the real condition against which 'adding value' is measured? How can it be measured in the context of transformation of cultural values? Aesthetics is one of the domains that the tools of regenerative designers suggest can add positively to the environment. Designers promote biophilic, biomimetic design tendencies but theoretical underpinnings can elevate – with seemingly good intention - the environmental, over the social and neglect the cultural. Finding new ways to live, is a common statement amongst theorists of sustainable design. Few examine what this might mean to explore life through the field of aesthetics. In this paper I will thus examine: firstly, the conversation in sustainable design diverts attention away from aesthetics, especially in the field of architecture; secondly, how an ecological aesthetic might be understood within the aspirational discourse of regenerative architecture and thirdly section, I will suggest regenerative design as mode of critical and aesthetic inquiry.

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Architectural Technology | Architecture | Environmental Design

Comments

This accepted presentation is published as Wheeler, A.S., Measuring the Added Value of Regenerative Architecture through the Problematic Example of the Aesthetic Dimension. Held at the Proceedings of the Environmental Design Research Association 50th Conference. Brooklyn, New York. May 22-26, 2019

THE ADDED VALUE OF REGENERATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY

A B S T R A C T

Regenerative architecture seeks to impact positively on the environment. It aims to produce buildings that reduce the degenerative consequences of human activity and add positively to the environment. To add value, in dimensions such as beauty, included in the design approaches of regenerative architecture, and in, for example, the Living Building Challenge, where the biophilic and biomimetic are raised as aspirations, however, poses some fundamental questions for the ways of thinking that underlie regenerative architecture and the discipline of architecture. Design tools suggest that the "greater than character" can be determined, measured even, in all categories, but aspirations also call for radical changes to the way we see and understand human lives. Understandings of aesthetics and the primacy of a sensory connection with the environment are little acknowledged questions within the philosophy of regenerative design outside the suggestion of biophilia. In this paper, I examine the foundations of environmental aesthetics: stories, myths, dreams and the importance of the creative imagination in understanding and reevaluating the way we see and understand human lives and our relationship to our built and natural environments.

Andrea Wheeler
Iowa State University
andreal@iastate.edu

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KEY WORDS

SUSTAINABLE
REGENERATIVE
INANNA
GODDESS
AESTHETICS
PHILOSOPHY
ARCHITECTURE
THEORY
DESIGN
FEMINISM

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of regenerative design is a challenge to understand its ability to impact positively on the environment and to be able to evaluate its additive sum character. Regenerative architecture aims to design buildings that reduce their negative impact on the environment. Raymond Cole writes that regenerative architecture aims to ‘reduce the degenerative consequences of human activity on the health and integrity of ecological systems.’¹ This positioning as better than (a qualitative measure) or “greater than” (a quantitative measure) – as additive rather than subtractive – raises a question, nevertheless, about the real condition against which such added value is measured.

Widely different interpretations of what sustainable architecture is exist within the sustainability movement. Interpretations stretch from those governed by conservative perspectives to radical approaches calling for social transformation, and this means that evaluating regenerative architecture also requires reconciling what Cole sees as ‘widely different interpretations of value and value-adding that exist within the sustainability movement’.²

The regenerative approach to architectural design has a broad base of concern, and aesthetics are included. This includes the aesthetic dimension, and regenerative philosophy in design directs architects towards biophilic or biomimetic approaches as those attributed to have the most positive impact. However, in the performance-dominated, engineering-heavy field of sustainable architecture, the politics of aesthetics have been neglected. While sustainable designers propose finding new ways to live, few scrutinise aesthetics as encompassing the aspiration to find new ways to live.

In this paper, I thus examine sustainable design theory that diverts attention away from the sensual; and secondly, I examine how regenerative architecture might be conceived as mode of sensory inquiry. The intention, in all these sections, is to think in part outside traditional understandings of regenerative design, and to include in this an examination of the aesthetic dimension.

THE POSITIVE SUM IMPACT OF REGENERATIVE ARCHITECTURE

Regenerative architecture adds more to an environment than it takes away. Its sum impact is positive. Chrisna du Plessis states that the paradigm that underlies the approach is one that calls for radical changes to structures of society, but at the same time, allows for the conceptualisation of this “greater than” character

because it adopts a world view that ‘sees nature as machine, understood and managed by reducing it to its parts’.³ The additive quality appears to us as a quantitative measure but what is radically aspirational in intention may not easily be measurable.

Before such exploration, I would like to take a detour from the path to delve deep into this regenerative quality. I would like to present a story. Stories can touch us subtly and my motive, here, is to evoke a connection to some sense on the periphery of our vision, in the liminal spaces of our thinking and feeling. The story is of Inanna, the goddess of heaven and earth: a Sumerian goddess and a goddess of one of the first known cultures.

Symbols of the goddess present a resistance to male privilege, but Inanna’s story is more than a simple resistance. She has strength and cultural skills. She has an independent will. She is not a passive and receptive female character of patriarchal myth, and yet her strength acts not to overcome rule, not to resist progress, or to resist logos modes of thinking (logic and reason).⁴ She shares the knowledge found in her journey with the male gods and it changes them and their rule. It was her own decision to explore prohibited spaces outside of her culture. Inanna’s story is a demand for recognition as an equal, in her new understanding of life. Inanna’s story is about a passion for an exploration of life itself and this meant a descent into the underworld and inevitable death, but from which she returned. She is a goddess of regeneration.

Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer describe all the written stories of Inanna as stages of life. In youth, for example, the young Inanna, leaning against the apple tree “rejoicing her vulva, wonderous to behold,” as the prose states, and calls out: “I the queen of heaven, will visit the god of wisdom,”⁵ and she sets out, by herself, to *Enki*, the god of wisdom and a creative, sculptor god. He was an inventor and an improviser; a problem solver. He was called an “image fashioner” and the “god of the original form, archetype.”⁶ He was not especially bound by obedience to the other patriarchal gods and this makes him occupy, like Inanna, the space between an old (patriarchal order) and a new social and environmental relationship.

He was a god flowing with life, and with creative energy, and Inanna sought him out. The story says that beguiled by Inanna, and in a drunken state, Enki gave her the “*Me*”; that is to say, he gave her all of Sumerian culture, all the laws of heaven and earth, all the ordering principles and potencies, rites of civic society, all the skills and talents. He gave the young Inanna all his creator-god knowledge. She sings:

He gave me the high priesthood... He gave me the art of forthright speech. He gave me the art of slanderous speech... He gave me the art of the hero. He gave me the art of power... He gave me the secure dwelling place... He gave me the craft of the woodworker... copperworker... scribe... smith... leather maker... fuller... builder... reed worker.⁷

Enki gave Inanna the art of Sumerian culture, and the story continues: “Then Inanna standing before her father [the moon] acknowledged the *me* Enki had given her.”⁸

However, in her more mature search, she casts off these forms of culture given to her by the god to understand life beyond the gods’ rules and creations. Inanna, in her descent into the underworld, wanted knowledge of what was real and what was life. The realm was forbidden by the gods: she wanted to feel and to witness-with her sister (the goddess of death), her grief for the death of her husband.⁹

Inanna’s decent to the underworld was her decision: “The goddess opened (set) her ear, her receptor for wisdom, to the Great Below.”¹⁰ Inanna decided to go into the underworld and was condemned to death, but Enki saved her, brought her back, regenerated her, (the only god to offer help) sending messengers made of dirt, carrying the food and water of life to revive her and allow her escape.

Inanna’s story, which is expressed here all too briefly, is about a desire to understand living beyond what is known or permitted to be known in the existing system; to be able to travel outside the frame of contemporary cultures (or the *me*). Her stories tell us to listen to a different way of knowing, to “see” differently, imperfect ways perhaps, or just different ways. Like many other different approaches that could be suggested to us as a different manner of understanding living: she “sets her ear”.

For the psychoanalyst Sylvia Brinton Perera, the myth holds a pattern of seasonal transformation and rebirth that has a psychological connection. Perera writes of Inanna:

She represents the liminal, the intermediate regions, and energies that cannot be contained or made certain and secure. She is not the feminine as night, but rather she symbolises consciousness of transition and borders, places of intersection and crossing over that imply creativity and change and all the joys and doubts that go with human consciousness that is flexible, playful, never certain for long.¹¹

REGENERATIVE ARCHITECTURE, POLITICAL AESTHETICS - A NEW THEORETICAL DIVERSION

To return, then, there are three philosophers that I would like to draw on to explore further this “eye” on a regenerative aesthetic: Jacques Rancière, for his political aesthetics – a human right for all that in its freedom spills over into a criticism of social, environmental and economic conditions;¹² Gernot Böhme, for his architectural aesthetic of atmosphere – a sensory aesthetic most appropriate for architecture;¹³ and Luce Irigaray, a philosopher and feminist, for her new human¹⁴ – born with its own will to live, (but unrecognised) and that demands an environment in which to grow and develop freely.¹⁵

Rancière’s early academic publications looked to the journals of artisans and poets, and books that eluded history, to discover historical perspectives that had not always been seen.¹⁶ For Rancière, these were works of authors whose views were equally as valid as any other more traditional record of history. From the beginning his work was an engagement with understandings of equality. The people he acknowledged were not naïve, or ignorant. Their stories were neither inferior, nor illustrative of a lesser knowledge. In the *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, for example, he argues for just this, for a levelling of knowledge in a new educational community: ‘One based on undoing the rigid stratification of scholars and their knowledge – a kind of levelling at the top – and the creating of a convivial, open, more egalitarian atmosphere in the schools.’¹⁷ Rancière was dismantling the inequality between a teacher and student.

Dismantling the distinctions made between the world of art (available only to those educated in taste) and an art of everyday life – between the traditions of the avant-garde and the aestheticization of common existence (or life) and in the “setting of our ear” (the attitude or approach of Inanna) to life – is potentially socially and environmentally transformative. The aesthetic dimension in life, and the staging of this experience, Rancière argues, can revolutionise life.

The philosophy of Rancière aims to reframe our aesthetic experience, where politics and everyday affect share the same space: ‘...the original scene of aesthetics,’ he argues, ‘reveals a contradiction that is not the opposition of art versus politics, high art versus popular culture, or art versus the aestheticization of life’.¹⁸

Preconceptions abound, and aesthetics is fraught with concerns about seduction and the “marketing” of sustainability. In the aesthetic experience, however, for Rancière, art and the spectator are caught up in a specific sensorium, cancelling

the oppositions of activity and passivity. In this free play, art understood as being without practical function, and art of the revolutionary, are not counterposed, and this scene or plot, he argues ‘...promises a still unheard-of state of equality’.¹⁹ However, being “political” in this context, also carries ambiguities. This is both political and non-political:

‘Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity. That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want it to fulfil its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy.’²⁰

Rancière’s political aesthetics are not developed with the same attention by other aesthetic philosophers but, he is not necessarily discussing architecture. By contrast, Böhme, a contemporary German philosopher, links it with architecture in his theory of atmosphere. The theory of atmosphere is the only aesthetic theory appropriate for architecture, he argues.²¹ For Böhme, architecture has to be understood as sensory experience and as a co-production of experience between a subject and the environment. Architectural atmosphere is “felt” (but there is here no distinction between thinking and feeling in the lived-felt-body). His work on an ecological aesthetics adopts this same approach of co-production, challenging our usual understanding of lived bodies in the environment. Nature is ahead of us, to be co-constructed and reconstructed forever in our aesthetic expression. Our understandings of nature (and perhaps we could also say of life) are to be created in our stories and in our regenerative architectures.

Irigaray, critical of current environmental debates and arguing that they separate thinking from living. She argues that before any ecological deliberation ‘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’.²²

This is a discovery, but not as rediscovered truth of an original way of thinking and feeling about life. One of our strongest cultural motives, Irigaray argues, is this search for origin seen in academic research, philosophy, art and also in the background to theories of sustainable design. This motive for the disclosure of origin – as a foundation upon which to construct something new – is of a patriarchal societal construction. It is an equal and different relationship between two humans that goes unrecognised in philosophical traditions and patriarchal cultures. The search for original ways of feeling and thinking are symptoms of patriarchal cultures. Recognising the incompatibility of such a search with the aesthetic construction of new notions of the human being could

free humans from the desire always for (re)connection with a refound origin, and from the seduction of affect: nothing has been lost, so nothing is to be regained. In this way desire towards excessive consumption could be mitigated.

Discussions in sustainable design condemn aesthetics because they are based upon the artificial distinction of seeing and doing, but sustainable design as mode of inquiry calls upon us to journey outside traditional understandings of living to give up the security of (patriarchal) logos, the security of (mathematical) reasoning, to adopt some imperfect ways of thinking. Stories can help us to draw connections. Stories can illustrate particular complications in living, but stories also level the storyteller and listener. Inanna's stories are those of her own rights and responsibilities in life in a world otherwise full of artificial "oughts" and "should". She has choice and the will. She brought her own gifts, adding to the "me" given to her by Enki: 'She brought allure. She brought the art of women. She brought the perfect execution of the me.'²³

CONCLUSION

To return (and Inanna did return from the underworld) to regenerative architecture, and to its character, that is to say, to give more back than is taken from the environment: the role of aesthetics takes on a new fascinating intent towards liberation. The additive character of regenerative architecture could be described as an approach giving back to logos by "setting an ear" to what lies outside our reason; to what it means to live, to die and to be reborn with new knowledge. This would be a continuous and changing movement: the intention of an ecological aesthetic and thus the discovery of a perspective very different to rational approaches to sustainable or regenerative design or to the attribution of a calculable positive impact.

The ecological aesthetic of the regenerative architecture could also be the addition of the "eyes of life",²⁴ seeking to see through values that are false, and beyond what is good or bad, to what is before judgement. This may not be an aesthetic that is validated by the collective,²⁵ but it would be a fresh perspective, full of affect and full of the creative intention of a never-ending exploration.²⁶ Perera writes that the current order fears it, because: 'It is crude, chaotic, surprising, giving a view of the group below ethics and aesthetics and the opposites themselves: It is the instinctual eye – an eye of the spirit in nature.'²⁷ Inanna's fate, as Perera writes, is that she must see the limits of the fathers and be witness to what was repressed.²⁸

NOTES

- 1 John Robinson and Raymond J. Cole, "Theoretical underpinnings of regenerative sustainability," *Building Research & Information* 43, no. 2 (2015): 133.
- 2 Idem, 132.
- 3 Chrisna Du Plessis, "Towards a regenerative paradigm for the built environment," *Building Research & Information* 40, no. 1 (2012): 8.
- 4 Sylvia Brinton Perera, *Descent to the goddess: A way of initiation for women*. No. 6. (Inner City Books, 1981), 30.
- 5 Diane Wolkstein, Samuel Noah Kramer and Elizabeth Williams-Forte. *Inanna, queen of heaven and earth: Her stories and hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 12.
- 6 Idem, 123.
- 7 Idem, 16-20.
- 8 Idem, 16.
- 9 Idem, 55.
- 10 Kramer Wolkstein and Williams-Forte, *Inanna, queen of heaven and earth*, xvii.

- 11 Perera, 16.
- 12 Jacques Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster*. Vol. 1. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), viii (translators note).
- 13 Gernot Bohme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 14 Irigaray, Luce To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being (London: Palgrave, Macmillan)
- 15 Idem., 103.
- 16 Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, xix.
- 17 Idem, xiii.
- 18 Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes,” *Log*, No. 22. The Absurd (Spring/ Summer, 2011): 20. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41765703>.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Idem., 21.
- 21 Gernot Böhme, “Atmosphere as the subject matter of architecture,” (*Herzog & DeMeuron: Natural History*, 2006), 398-407.
- 22 Emily Anne Parker, “Interview[with Luce Irigaray]: Cultivating a Living Belonging,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 46, no. 2 (2015): 109.
- 23 Perera, *Descent to the goddess*, 26.
- 24 Idem, 32-33.
- 25 Idem, 34.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Idem, 33.
- 28 Idem, 52.

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