

Sweet Affects? Political and Ecological Aesthetics in Architecture

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In the performance-dominated field of sustainable architecture, aesthetics has been neglected as a field of study. While sustainable designers propose finding new ways to live, few scrutinize the discourse of aesthetics. Or examine what this might mean to explore life through the field of sensory aesthetics – in particular in terms of affect, sweet affect. In this paper I will examine: firstly, how the conversation in sustainable design diverts attention away from aesthetics, especially in the field of architecture; then secondly, I will investigate, how an ecological aesthetic might be understood – examining some different contemporary approaches in the work of Jacques Rancere, Gernot Bohme and Luce Irigaray ; and in the third section, I will suggest sustainable design as mode of aesthetic inquiry. The intention, in all these sections, is to think, in part, outside traditional understandings of sustainable design, and of aesthetics. The question I ask: What sort of understanding of sensory aesthetics could allow us to better make, create, build, preserve, care for, or maintain, sustainable environments?.

SENSORY AESTHETICS AND PLAY

‘Man is only completely human when he plays’¹ according to Jacques Rancière, examining the philosophy of Frederick von Schiller. Comparing this apparent contradiction with his examination of contradictions in aesthetic philosophy, he argues that the aesthetic - this specific sensory experience - holds a potential to transform life. The free play of the sensory experience, and the staging of this experience, can revolutionize life, he states, reconstructing individual life and community.

Dismantling the tradition of distinction made between the world of art (available only to those educated in taste) and the art of everyday life: Between the traditions of the avant-garde and the aestheticization of common existence; he argues that sensory aesthetics (I could say sweet affects) are political.

So, what does this mean for a sustainable architecture (I use the term widely to encompass a broad range of approaches from the somewhat conservative LEED to the more radical)? My motive is critical: to challenge some of the preconceptions in this field of sustainable design when it comes to talking about aesthetics; and to suggest that aesthetics cannot be dismissed as some superficial addition to the serious business of sustainability. However, I also want to explore this in a sensory way and to examine how a sensory aesthetics, the aesthetics of feeling, could be political in the field of sustainable architecture. How such theories could be put to work

to suggest that the promise of aesthetic experience and its sweet affects are those of transforming our ways of living – individual and collective.

POLITICAL AESTHETICS

In his paper, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes”, Rancière reframes aesthetic experience, and distinctions namely between those educated in taste and those expressing an everyday experience and writes: ‘...the original scene of aesthetics reveals a contradiction that is not the opposition of art versus politics, high art versus popular culture, or art versus the aestheticization of life.’² Rancière proposes rather that in the aesthetic experience art and the spectator are caught up together in specific sensorium. In this “free play” of affect; art understood as without practical function and art of revolutionary are not counterposed; and this plot, he argues ‘...promises a still unheard-of state of equality’³ Politics and affect share the same space. For Rancière, in refusing hierarchical divisions in how we understand aesthetics, and in the making meaningful aesthetic expression as human right, aesthetics spills over into a criticism of the conditions of life. This spilling over, reconfigures art, and reasserts what the political is. But being “political” in this way, is also ambiguous for Rancière: it is and is not political. For example, Rancière writes:

‘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 fulfill its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy’⁴

THE CANDY STORE

So here we are, and a storm is brewing: imminent global catastrophe – social, environmental political. It is announcing its arrival, we can hear it, and feel it. In the midst of divisions and distinctions, and yet here we are too with the colors and smells, the warm lights of the candy store of human desire to delight. The question of sustainable architectural and its aesthetics brings us to somewhere where we might ask ourselves not about the collective simply, but about the intimate also and about what it means to be human. The sites of aesthetics and of desire are really serious business for sustainability and the political and the aesthetic problem reconceives what could mean to propose a green and sustainable architecture –, not biomimicry, biomimesis, biophilia, but as something sensory and newly human.⁵

ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

I have suggested three philosophers to explore and I would like to explore a different view of aesthetics now, a second voice in the plot. For Gernot Böhme, architectural aesthetics must be understood as an aesthetics of atmosphere: understood as a co-production between subject and built environment. The built environment, he argues, is most fully experienced through the senses: Architecture is felt, albeit in this understanding of the relationship between human and environment there is no distinction between thinking and feeling. This aesthetic philosophy challenges our usual understanding of our lived bodies in the environment in his notion of a lived-felt-body. Nature and the natural Böhme argues is not what we understand it usually to be, it is ahead of us⁶; to be constructed and reconstructed in our aesthetic expressions: We ourselves in our lived experience are nature and natural and this is to be expressed in a sense a new.

The aesthetics of architectural atmosphere for Bohme is the most appropriate aesthetic philosophy for architecture. It is only through atmosphere that architectural can be fully experienced and while his ecological aesthetics depend on notions of atmosphere the approach is distinct, it is through sensory experience we understand the nature that is ourselves.

And, here is my final philosopher in this second part, introduced for her critical perspective on the predominately male tradition. And I want to suggest some work by Luce Irigaray in her recent publication *To Be Born: The Genesis of a New Human Being*. This pivotal philosopher, standing on the threshold between second and third wave feminism is a philosopher, psychoanalytic and linguist. Expert on desire. Expert on a phenomenological tradition which as she has argued separates thinking from living. It is living, our living, that philosophy does not yet reflect. In some of her most contemporary environmental writing 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.'⁷ What it is to live, and how this is described in both the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy is however the core of her criticism. A living (rather than an ecological aesthetic) aesthetics in the context of the philosophy already described could illustrate the conscious human development and which requires some cultural changes, is the task she gives us, before any ecological deliberation.

In *To Be Born* she suggest a new way of understanding the human being: and it is the impossibility of origin⁸ (and we could also describe this as the quest to understand or conquer nature) that Irigaray's philosophy focuses upon. One of our strongest aesthetic motives, she argues, is the search for origin, but, her argument follows, such a disclosure of original is impossible very simply because we are born as one from a union between two. In this realization in this we are freed

from the desire for (re)connection, because nothing has been lost, nothing is to be regained (or appropriated). This suggests a very different sort of relationality with the living world.

AESTHETIC INQUIRY

Science in sustainable architecture is still thought of the ultimate form of rational inquiry and all other forms of inquiry – poetic perspectives, artistic perspectives, religious perspectives – are outsider to the discipline. The aesthetic philosophies discussed demonstrate the artificiality of such distinctions between rational thought and artistic inquiry. While methods and tools in sustainable design are being adopted for simple economic gain, new sort of approaches engaged with thinking an feeling are needed to understand the impact of ecological endangerments, unseen, unrecognized, by our institutions. The tools are necessary to see and address the dangers the human imposes. .

CONCLUSION

The conversation in sustainable design dismisses the transformative potential of a sensory aesthetics based on an artificial distinction but an ecological and living aesthetic suggests both at the same time an individual and a collective transformation. Sustainable design as mode of inquiry is an approach by definition transformatory, and to propose a transformation in this context is to propose nothing less than a question how we understand ourselves as human and also as desiring. Desire is at the heart of sustainability, a desire founded on a culture that can 'see' or properly recognize only one half of humanity,

The intention, in this paper, has been to think, very quickly, in part, outside traditional understandings of sustainable design, and in particular of aesthetics in this context. The question I have asked is: What sort of understanding of aesthetics allow us to better make, create, build, preserve, care for, or maintain, sustainable environments? We cannot forget that this question has an aesthetic dimension.

ENDNOTES

1. Rancière, Jacques. "On the Aesthetic Revolution." *Log, No. 22, The Absurd* (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 17
2. Idem, p. 20
3. Ibid.,
4. Idem., p. 21
5. See Irigaray, Luce. *To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being*. Springer, 2017.
6. See Böhme Gernot *Die Natur vor Uns, De Graue* Edition, 2002; and Böhme, Gernot. "The Concept of Body as the Nature We Ourselves Are." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2010): 224-238..
7. Irigaray, Luce, and Michael Marder. "Without Clean Air, We Have Nothing." *The Guardian*, May 17th, 2014; See also Parker, Anne Emily 'Interview: Cultivating a Living Belonging' (Luce Irigaray interviewed by Anne Emily Parker) *The Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, 2015, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 109-116
8. See Irigaray, *To Be Born*.