



**HAL**  
open science

## Natural and warm? A critical perspective on a feminine and ecological aesthetics in architecture

Andrea Wheeler

### ► To cite this version:

Andrea Wheeler. Natural and warm? A critical perspective on a feminine and ecological aesthetics in architecture. *Ambiances, tomorrow*. Proceedings of 3rd International Congress on Ambiances. Septembre 2016, Volos, Greece, Sep 2016, Volos, Greece. p. 713 - 718. hal-01414241

**HAL Id: hal-01414241**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01414241v1>**

Submitted on 13 Dec 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Natural and warm?

### *A critical perspective on a feminine and ecological aesthetics in architecture*

Andrea WHEELER

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

**Abstract.** *How can we redefine the fundamentals of atmosphere to include sexual difference? Built forms, ways of living, and inhabiting, are changing, but where is the progress in relation to the subject that is woman, her body, her experience and her resonance within the built environment? Where is architectural theory and criticism with respect to atmosphere and the experience of women? In both the private and the public sphere, sensorial space is being transformed but the role of women remains the same and furthermore more or less absent from any philosophical understandings of notions of ambience. But can new notions of atmosphere help in analyzing these changes, in building a new world of equality between the sexes, or does such a criticism simply embody some utopian perspective, some unachievable equality between the sexes? Where is contemporary feminist philosophy in this discourse? Atmosphere calls upon our entire embodied and existential sense. It stimulates and guides imagination. But if atmosphere in architecture is a new ecological aesthetics, and a proper aesthetic discourse for architecture, as suggested by Gernot Böhme, can it be so now, in our contemporary world, without properly considering sexual difference? And what philosophies are current and emerging that could enable us to envisage tomorrow's architecture, could suggest a path, through the notion of atmosphere with the perspective of sexual difference? In a time where architectural theory is keen to resurrect the question of feminism this paper explores a theory of atmosphere through the prism of contemporary feminist philosophy to ask whether adding the possibility of sexual difference to theories of design for mood, design for feeling, design for atmosphere, would change our notions of atmosphere and architecture.*

**Keywords:** *atmosphere, feminism, sexual difference, architecture*

### Introduction

For Gernot Böhme ecological aesthetics, that is to say, architectural atmosphere, can allow architecture to reclaim its aesthetic discourse from the arts through atmosphere. Establishing an aesthetics as different from sculpture or painting, unique in comparison to other arts, and dependent on 'feeling' more than seeing.

This is architecture as experienced through being in it, rather than seeing it or imagining it. We sense rather than see our 'whereness' and architecture in this way, he argues, is understood through our bodily movement in it: 'By feeling our own presence in space we feel the space in which we are present' (Böhme, 2005, p.399). But for Böhme, despite his contemporary appeal, his philosophy remains one extraneous to a feminist agenda.

Perhaps, it is not surprising for a philosopher of his generation, however, Luce Irigaray, a foundational feminist thinker and a philosopher of the same generation (in fact a little older) and with some, and perhaps even greater, cultural significance would suggest some limit ungendered way of thinking. Her philosophy is positioned within and also critical of the contemporary continental context that Böhme is engaged with and is one also addressing the current problems of ecology. In this paper, I examine some notions of gender difference hidden within the discourse of architectural atmospheres and examine the work of a philosopher of sexual difference, Luce Irigaray, who has, over the course of her 30-year career, shaped the development of feminist philosophy and continues to write on questions of ecology arguing for the benefit to ourselves, and value to others, of sexually different theories of atmosphere.

### *Are contemporary theories of atmosphere exclusionary?*

Now in her mid-eighties Irigaray has always been radical in her rethinking of sexual difference. There are few contemporary feminist thinkers who can bypass her work. She incites a criticism of cultural production, including architecture, and calls for new ways of thinking and practicing; new ways of thinking about our relationship to the natural and built environment that include thinking about gender in architecture. Her philosophy asks us also to uncover the hidden narratives in our cultural dialogues belonging to the experience of women, and to build anew the experience of women within our societies and their artistic traditions, to include those experiences explored in philosophy and architecture (as just two examples, but she writes on law and many other disciplines). She demands that we (both men and women) construct our differences ourselves and in relation to the other sex – and her language is one of building a new world. So this is not any simple understanding of gender, or even a discussion of gender as such, but rather a calling into question notions of gender (of a privileged and a subordinate gender), by asking us, asking cultural producers, artists and architects, to rebuild the relationship between the sexes as equitable. This notion of gender, one that is profoundly equitable, equal and different, is unique to Irigaray's thought. It is our dominant logic, she argues, of the one and other(s), a logic that envisions a fundamental sameness of experience between the sexes and undervalues women's experience: it is this that she is challenging. Gender is thus more than just another difference – it is the difference that is the most complex, the most difficult to address, because, she argues, it is not (simply) a cultural construction (and this is how she renames her concern sexual difference, so not to imply gender only as a cultural construction but as a necessary reconstruction from an embodied experience). And, for Irigaray, it is the one question that, if we could address it properly might elicit an approach that is invaluable to us and our ways to address other crises, including the global environmental crisis. The question is one of value and validity, and it is not

unproblematic for the recognition of her arguments. But herein lies the significance of the discourse of art and architecture.

### *Atmospheric questions*

So why is there no serious and current feminist critique of atmosphere? The philosophical inspiration exists, in the work of Irigaray, and maybe also in the work of other feminist thinkers, agitating the attraction to the theories of atmosphere, disquieting them. So is it because the profession of architecture to which this aesthetic discourse appeals is male, and protected as such, with the philosophy cited by its theory acting only to support its biased traditions and artistic practices? Is it because unauthorized voices must be kept out of the conversation? Because the 'radical' philosophy and cutting-edge theory has been legitimized as properly radical? And gender must be properly controlled, attributed to just another difference a disadvantage over the norm? Even if this gendered discourse was only aimed at the bias of the profession, gendered theories of architecture that propose full equity between the sexes and theories shaping practice, (that we may have to entitle *sexuate theories*) these are ways of thinking about architecture that merit recognition.

And so what might this mean for the problem of our gendered practices in architecture, by which I mean our discriminatory practices, to include a gendered atmospheric question? Could the construction of gender difference as *sexuate difference* be a type of practice of architecture, architecture that starts with our being-in-relation with one another and with the natural and built environment; an architectural approach that critically positions the problem of gender as illustrative of our exploitative relationships with all living beings and natural resources? Or indeed an ethical architecture that properly houses and nurtures our relation to the other gender.

What Irigaray is calling into question are *sexed bodies* within our practices of architecture, within our architectural theory. And, she argues, for a return to ourselves to a part of us that is still unformed, like an energy to be cultivated, as an addition, and it is this 'wild' energy that might begin the criticism of the notion of atmosphere in architecture.

### *Architectural Atmosphere*

For Böhme it is only through the vague sense of atmosphere—this notion of experience belonging neither to the subject nor the object—that we can fully appreciate architecture: it is only through sensory feeling that we can fully experience the 'being-in-something' that distinguishes architecture from all the other arts. But what if the problem of two sensory experiences is raised, two fundamentally different sorts of sensory experiences; two bodies reforming their cultural presence; what happens to this philosophy then, what happens to our architecture and the experience of it? As Böhme writes, 'by feeling our own presence we feel the space in which we are present' (Böhme, 2005, 402). The experiencer and that experienced are co-related, and co-created: we feel architecture. Through our experience, our feeling, we experience space, and thus we experience architecture (Böhme is influential on Peter Zumthor, on Juhani Pallasma

and to the whole conversation of mood, feeling, and atmosphere and architecture. His philosophy is not insignificant in this respect.)

It is mood that allows us to sense where we are and to sense architecture, to fully experience architecture. And architecture, for Böhme, is not an art governed by the visual senses but experienced through all of the senses. Furthermore, Böhme goes as far as to suggest that atmosphere is the proper discourse of architecture, because it is not an aesthetic borrowed from engineering nor from art theory, as both are limited in their capacity to describe architecture, or in his words, to describe the being-in-something that is architecture (Böhme, 398–399). So, according to Böhme, philosopher of atmosphere, influential to architects and theorists alike, architecture has no aesthetic discourse of its own (Böhme, 399). And the new aesthetics Böhme describes, his ecological aesthetics, excludes inspiration from the philosophy of women. And yet while sculpture might be the closest art from which architecture can borrow – as both architecture and sculpture shape matter, and both work in the realm of the visible – the visual senses are not the only way by which we commonly experience architecture. We experience architecture through our bodies, our different bodies, through our senses and our moods but the question is whether such an experience is fundamentally different at the level of sexed bodies, and moreover, whether this difference has significance where the philosophical tradition to which Böhme belongs suggests not.

### *Ecological aesthetics and the question of interiority*

Nevertheless, while architecture requires a discourse that can describe spatial experience to the fullest, Böhme also argues for the existence of atmosphere without things. This is something Mikel Dufrenne in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, calls interiority. According to Dufrenne, atmosphere, belonging to neither the subject nor the object, is keenly felt, and it is feeling that reveals the capacity of the subject to bring interiority into the exterior. Dufrenne writes: 'We should realize that, in seeking to grasp expression, we disclose an unpopulated world, one which is only the promise of a world. The space and time which we find there are not structures of an organized world but qualities of an expressed world which is a prelude to knowledge' (Dufrenne, 1975, 183). Atmosphere in this way is precursor to experiences seeking meaning.

### *Affect*

But men's bodies and voices have been privileged in our cultures so much so as to render women's experience either invalid or non-existent. Insider and outside, interior and exterior, warm, wild, natural or constructed: our languages gender these notions and attribute value. We do not even think that there could be equality and difference, that sexual difference could be reevaluated so that each gender was of equal value. Such thinking would require us to work on the meanings of our language and while this really only means cultural development, there is nothing within our cultures to give validity nor value to sexually different experience – this is not a beautiful discourse (or if it is beautiful it is a beauty determined only by male sexual desire). The notion of interiority built upon women's desire for relation, has both a different story and a different feeling.

### *Natural and warm?*

While 'gender' is fraught with the difficulties of language and tradition within our current understandings, what Irigaray proposes, is a relationship between two radically embodied subjects – male and female – becoming in relation to the other and sharing at the level of this becoming (and where the notions of such relationships between male and female and the very idea of difference in a process of building, shaping, growing, becoming). Thus, architecture following this argument starts not with atmosphere as architectural aesthetic, not with the vague between unsexed subject and the environment, but with a being-in-relation that recognizes two subjects in a relation of radical difference, a difference that is one of the most difficult to reconceive, but one that would bring the acknowledgement that there are two notions of atmosphere, in relationship to one another. Interiority and self-affection would mean the rediscovery of a sexuate relationship to everything natural – this is also a new ecological thinking, a new ecological aesthetics.

### *The benefit to ourselves, and value to others*

Architecture evokes meaning, and yet within its traditions, it cannot see the possibility of two, at least two different experiences of relation, of inhabitation. And Irigaray's work is an unapologetic project to incite the building of new modes of inhabitation, of being-upon-the earth which she describes as building a new world; through cultural products and practices that recognize sexuate difference. This means new notions of space, new notions of atmosphere, new notions of building, thinking, caring about the environment and other living being – in the correspondence between two radical differences.

So this is a conversation yet to be had within the architectural community and the importance of such a conversation has to be recognized. It is a question of value, the value of environmental thinking but also for a critical gender discourse within design. There are no quick answers to the problems of gender in architecture – but the questions could be asked critically, carefully and creatively; understanding that those marginalized (including philosophers and feminists) those still outside the family may have important stories to tell that express their experience and these are important to architecture which so heavily shapes our day-to-day environments.

### *Significance*

We can argue that we need to build value for the discourse, without doubt, for the very question. And we can illuminate the fact that our bodily senses may not be devoid of difference between male and female but this is not the only argument being made here. Irigaray's philosophy is suggesting that shaped by a different, freer but shared understanding of body, we might shape a different understandings of the world. It is here that she is arguing that we can acknowledge that, despite the discriminations of cultural practices, and the thinking about those practices, that we are living, connected, sharing, and growing in our ability to construct ourselves differently.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Provost's Office at Iowa State University for research funding support, the Department of Architecture and Luce Irigaray for her continued teaching of graduate students and mentoring of young academics.

## References

- Böhme, G. (2005). Atmosphere as the subject matter of architecture. *Herzog & de Meuron Natural History*, pp. 398–406
- Irigaray, L (2015) 'Starting from Ourselves as Living Beings.' *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 46 (2), pp. 101-08
- Dufrenne, Mikel (1975) *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Northwestern University Press

## Author

Andrea Wheeler is Assistant Professor of Architecture at Iowa State University where her teaching and scholarship challenges the sustainability agenda in architecture. Her scholarship has been supported by start-up funds from the Provost's Office and NSF Iowa EPSCoR. She teaches a seminar on green and sustainable design to graduate, undergraduates and honours students, and is a studio instructor.