

Undoing Architecture

To re-negotiate the relation that the 'feminine' might have to 'architecture' from a critical and theoretical position is no easy task, it involves work - speaking and writing. Audre Lourde once stated that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', if so what other tools do we have at our disposal?

French feminist theory provides the starting point for my rhetorics of misuse, a place which offers me room for both emancipatory impulses and opportunities for self reflection. The work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous suggest modes of writing and relations of economy which differ from the masculine, from an economy of appropriation, of the self-same - where more is better and the other is only regarded in relation to the self.

This essay has a way with words, it is a particular patterning of speech, a feminine rhetoric, an undoing of architecture. Mine is not to use examples of practice to illustrate theoretical positions, nor to apply theoretical insights to modes of practice, but through writing to imagine and reflect upon a different the relation between the two.

This 'speaking' subject, speaks in between.

From this place on the threshold between the two, it is possible to consider both, to be attentive to the concerns of theory and at the same time consider modes of practice; to be attentive to modes of practice and at the same time reconsidering new theoretical insights.

She speaks in threes.

1 and 1 is three.

11 threes.

Her speech is tripled.

i

between doing it and undoing it
any theory of the 'speaking' subject

The architectural profession encourages us to think of architecture exactly in these terms - as something only architects do. As architects we remain true to this ideal, and ensure that we, and only we, do things our way.

Luce Irigaray has argued that 'any theory of the subject' has always been appropriated by the masculine. Constructions of self which have important ramifications for theories of identity and desire, in the work of Freud and Lacan, for example, have been based on the male subject. When women submit to such theories they either subject themselves to objectification by being female, or try to re-objectify themselves as a masculine subject.

I was taught how to do architecture, taught how to do it the right way. I was taught that architects do architecture all by themselves. They imagine architecture, and then, as if by magic, with minimal fuss, and certainly no mess, they make it, whole and perfect pieces of it - just like in their dreams.

ii

between use and misuse
écriture feminine

Architects do architecture. Builders do architecture. Long after 'completion', users do architecture, they 'do-it-themselves'. Architects do architecture with designs on the user, that the user will follow certain intended patterns of consumption. Consuming - the act of acquiring and incorporating goods - indicates distinct social identities. But these distinctions are created not by buying more of the same or even different goods, but by playing with an existing 'vocabulary' of goods, inventing subtle variations, developing a 'rhetoric' of use. The simple pleasures of commodity consumption are ripe for elaboration. Texas Homecare' and other (sub)urban sheds (on circular roads around towns) offer a satisfying Sunday afternoon solution to the malaise of house proud home-owners. These week-end picnic spots are veritable bazaars, jammed full of purpose-made tools and a glittering array of easy-fit, ready-to-fit, components which slip soporifically into domestic bliss.

One of the causes, but also the consequences, of social comparison through distinction, is desire. Desiring creatures transgress, 'desiring practices' resist conventional ways of doing architecture, (un)do architecture. Doing it yourself can (un)do the commercialisation and commodification of architecture, can work against the logic of architecture and the architects intentions. Undoing it yourself can signify an act of resistance. Notions of architecture as the other who completes the self are rejected. A new relationship with architecture is invented, where spaces is used in contradictory ways, where objects are never fit for their intended purposes, form never follows function - these are the rhetorics of architectural misuse.

'Ecriture de la femme' - to free women from a language governed by the presence of the phallus. A symbolic language in which a feminine presence can make itself known. A language not based on a syntax of has/has not. Not merely the reversal of the hierarchy of male and female but a challenge to the opposition itself, showing that the feminine and female sexuality exceed the complementary role that they have been assigned in the opposition male/female. Ecriture féminine displays a different relation to 'the other' - écriture féminine is a 'writing shot through with differences'.

One hot day in Moscow summer-time, I visited Mr. Melnikov's house – a symphony of architectural geometry, and there, in the marital bedroom, in that safe haven, at the heart of their home, Mrs. Melnikov had made a mess. With complete disregard to her esteemed husband's endeavours, she had gathered together all manner of ugliness, decorative trappings, ornaments and lace. Mrs Melnikov's Soviet bric-a-brac, or as the Russians call it poshnost, was architecture undone.

iii

between home and nomadism

'where and how to dwell'

Through ownership and appropriation - male philosophers have 'placed' women, confined them within male symbolic systems and constructed dwellings for themselves within their bodies. Irigaray suggests that for women to dwell and to remain alive, we need to re-conceptualise women's relation to space. Woman's space and time, her morphology and topography, can be imagined in new ways - through nomadism, through generosity, through porosity, through two lips, through mimicry, through jouissance, through multiplicity, through fluidity, through the angel - through the passage between.

Houses are by far the most expensive commodities that we buy. The houses we choose to live in, and the way we choose to live in them, distinguishes us from others, emphasizing difference and/or similarity. Our choices are limited by all sorts of factors, not least by our desires. Nowhere do these desires resonate more spatially than in the place we call 'home'.

On a leafy street in south London is an ordinary terraced house which was my home for two years. Scattered all over London, all over the world, are other homes, houses where I have once lived. In some still standing, I return and revisit past lives and loves. Others have been destroyed, physically crushed in military coups, or erased from conscious memory only to be revisited in dreams. In all the places I have lived I recognize myself, but this particular house means something very special to me. Its neglected and decaying fabric, its disparate and drifting occupants, offered me a way of living which had nothing to do with comfort, security, safety, permanence. Through its fragile structure this house physically embraced my need for transience, and it was perhaps this 'unhomeliness', which made it feel like home to me.

iv

between profitability and generosity the gift

An economy of the capitalist market is based on pricing mechanisms - specialization, efficiency, scarcity, maximization of profit and utility, and on principles of homogeneity, rationalism and calculation. This masculine economy requires strict delineation of property from the ownership of one's body to the ownership of the fruits of own labour, it is an economy of appropriation and of the self-same. This exchange economy of masculine subjects involves the pleasure of appropriation, ownership and exchange of women's bodies in space. Within the masculine economy of patriarchal capitalism women are feminine products of exchange.

Irigaray rejects the masculine libidinal economy and gestures towards a female libidinous economy - a gift economy based on generosity and not lack - endless and without closure. From woman's ability to have a child within her body and yet allow its existence, comes an image of positive giving, an ability to embrace difference and the other, not to dominate and to incorporate. The ability to sustain this diversity contradicts the phallic desire for unity and appropriation and stems from a woman's closer links to the imaginary, where the

difference between mother and child has not yet been established. The économie feminine could be described as a theoretical construct or poetic utopia which can inform practice - showing that profit maximisation is not universal and inevitable in all spheres of exchange

The gift has no goal. No for. And no object. The gift – is given. Before any division into donor and recipient. Before any separate identities of giver and receiver. Even before that gift.¹

The woman who owned the house I lived in refused rent. Although her home was large, five stories, she lived frugally off her pension, in two first floor rooms. She occupied a world beyond the everyday, inhabited by spirits – ‘the powers that be’. The ‘powers’ were not adept in the material world, their decisions were unreasonable and random. Large pieces of furniture moved nightly; plumbing, electrics and general household maintenance followed erratic management systems. The ‘powers’ refused council money for repairs – this disturbed the karma of decay. Theirs was the rhetoric of generosity.

v

**between property and reciprocity
porosity**

In patriarchy men own women and space. Women do not own their own space but provide place for men - wombs. Property is defined by boundaries, walls which are closed, fixed and permanent, with controlled thresholds.

Cixous has suggested that there are two simultaneous economies - the masculine and the feminine - the latter is one of proximity of taking the other into oneself and being taken into the other - of mutual knowing and knowing again - of re-cognition. Irigaray talks of mucus as essential to exchange and communication between the sexes. At the threshold is mucus. Mucus is not a part object like the penis, it cannot be separated from the body, it is neither simply solid nor fluid, it has no fixed form it is porous. Mucus expands but not in a shape, it is mobile and immobile, permanent and flowing with multiple punctuations possible.

The wall between them is porous. It allows passage of fluids.²

¹ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), p. 73.

² Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), p. X.

My house was home to quite a number – friends and strangers – all people who, in their own ways, set themselves outside conventional codes of living. Two young children, at times with their mother, at others their father, and occasionally with their mother's lover, lived in the basement. Two young women lived on the ground floor. Two homeless young Polish men have now moved into the top floor where I used to live, with my friend, the one who originally discovered the house, derelict with a pigeons' graveyard in the roof, and made it home for me. There were conflicts, vicious attempts from inside and outside to wrest control of the ownership of space from the powers that be, to categorise - to establish some kind of hierarchy of property ownership. We all lived in a rhetoric of reciprocity.

vi

between divisibility and multiplicity

two lips

Doing architecture, we follow certain rules – we specialise - we buy spaces and objects for certain purposes, we plan spaces and objects for certain purposes, we use spaces and objects for certain purposes. Living space is mapped and defining according to ideologies of domesticity, where sleeping is divided from playing, from working, from cooking, from eating, from cleaning and so on. Every activity has its compartment, is one, is homogenous.

Irigaray's most common metaphor to rethink, to represent and construct the spatiality of the female subject are the 'two lips'. Two lips suggest space and time together, suggest a different syntax of meaning, a symbolism that auto-erotically challenge the unity of the phallus. The 'one' of the male subject becomes 'two' constantly in touch with each other in which they are not separated by negation but interact and merge, not unitary but diffuse, diversified, multiple, decentered, a threat to masculine discourse because of their fluidity and double role as inside and threshold. Two lips allow openness as well as closedness.

Openness permits exchange, ensures movement, prevents saturation in possession or consumption. [. . .] My lips are not opposed to generation. They keep the passage open.³

³ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), pp. 63-5.

In my home the boundaries, which usually control and contain were intentionally blurred and transgressed. This was not to enable the free flow of pure space as in the modernist open plan, but rather to intensify the occupation of space by overlaying one kind of living over another – intentions of use, with mis-use, questioning of the boundaries of bodies and places. The bath sat in the centre of the roof – bedworklivingspace. From the bath you could talk to the person lying next to you in bed, look up into the sky, down onto the stove, beyond to those eating, and further, through the window onto the street. Architecture is soft like a body if you (un)do it.

vii

between the 'self-same' and the 'other'

mimicry

Doing architecture, we follow certain rules, decor follows structure. The displayed surface is expected to represent exactly what lies beneath, if it seeks to disguise or to cover as in a veil then this is perceived as duplicitous. The play of the form of the surface for its own sake is also perceived as problematic.

When working within a symbolic system where there is no theory of the female subject, Irigaray's theory of 'mimicry' suggests a strategy for self-representation by mimicking the system itself. Mimicry is a subversive act which seeks to expose the limitations of the binary oppositions of phallogentric discourse. Women's conception of themselves as objects, provokes a critical concern with surface, and seeks to reveal the gap between the female subject and the feminine sexed identity she is imitating.

[. . .] woman must be nude because she is not situated, does not situate herself in her place. Her clothes, her makeup, and her jewels are the things with which she tries to create her container(s), her envelope(s). She cannot make use of the envelope that she is, and must create artificial ones.⁴

Our house was resistant to the logic of decoration. The soil pipe gushed diagonally through the stairwell and out of the rear wall of the house; a proud dado rail. The stripping back of partition walls, asserted the fabric of the building as a

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1993, p. 11.

living component of the space. Cracking brickwork and rubble revealed between the splintering stud partitions, formed a decorative skin. Metal rivets holding the decrepit ceiling plaster together, shone at night like stars. You could see into the toilet – a place where we traditionally demand privacy from prying eyes, ears, noses. The doors to this tiny blue room were spliced open like a swing saloon. Bare bottomed, in an intimate space, to flush, you placed your hand through a smooth circular hole out into the public void of the stairwell, where you grabbed a wooden spoon hanging from the ceiling on a rope. Rejecting the constraints imposed by rules of domestic order where ‘everything has its place’, the dividing line between messiness and tidiness is blurred. The seams are the decor.

viii

between scarcity and abundance

jouissance

Doing architecture, we follow certain rules, we use only certain specified materials and only for certain purposes and in particular ways.

*Participating in your economy, I did not know what I could have desired.*⁵

A limited number of possessions demands re-use. For this a detailed knowledge of the geography of the local skips is required, to collect, scavenge, recycle. Only in wealthy pockets can fine furnishings be found abandoned in the street; rugs, three piece suites, four poster beds, washing machines, duvets. A limited number of possessions can also provide a catalyst to achieve flexibility through transformation, through mis-use. Within one life a table was crowded focus of a drunken evening, several café tables, frames for candle-lit icons, and a hot blaze on a cold night. Deciding just how and when to use an object in a certain way provokes interesting questions. At what point does furniture become firewood?

Recognising potentiality opposes the autocratic architect’s pompous regimes of mono-functionality but also rejects the banality of highly flexible multi-purpose spaces designed for anything (but nothing) to happen in. Potentiality produces instead a density of possibilities, a heightened awareness of the ever-changing nature of static objects. A rhetoric of abundance of excessive pleasures, refuses to measure against a

⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), p. 61.

standard, against specialism, against scarcity, against a rationality of utility, against a calculation of profit.

ix

between calculation and approximation

the female imaginary

Doing architecture, we follow certain rules, form follows function, we follow the designers' intentions.

You grant me space, you grant me my space. But in so doing you have always taken me away from my expanding place. What you intend for me is the place which is appropriate for the need you have of me. What you reveal to me is the place where you have positioned me, so that I remain available for your needs.⁶

A desire for starlit baths and a seamless transition from inside to outside meant cutting holes in the roof. We stapled and re-stapled blue plastic sheets over the twin holes, but the wind blew in and rain water dripped onto the edge of my bed. We waited through a few winters, finely tuning the exact design details and spending the money we saved to buy the expensive components. Finally, glass sheets were laid to rest directly on slim timber linings rising just proud of the roof slates, elegant steel yachting hooks and rope delicately attached the glass to the frame carrying through in the details the transparency from inside to outside, revealing the sky an un-obscured fantasy blue. But alas for bathing en plein air. Lifted to allow in balmy air on a sunny morning, one pane shattered directly into the soapy water narrowly missing a tender skinned bather. We had many disagreements about the unsuitability of nautical details for domestic requirements. Finally I threatened to buy a 'Velux' roof light from 'Texas Homecare'.

The bricoleur is a home-maker who finds new uses for found objects, who uses them in ways for which they were not intended. Mis-using waste relies not on availability, utility and rationality, but on a fertile imagination. Placing found objects in new combinations and contexts produces accident and juxtaposition. Everyday items acquire new meanings, become lively, animate and communicate to us differently - this their 'psychic' life. We are in uncharted territory. Lost, our cognitive mapping devices de-stabilised, no longer stagnant with the inscription of specific and expected responses, we imagine a new poetics of space and time. The rhetoric of approximation

⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), p. 47.

establishes the absence of precise calculation - in dissimilarity exchange is non-quantifiable.

x

between efficiency and excess

fluid mechanics

Doing architecture, we follow certain rules, regarding services, structure and construction detailing. Challenging ideals of low maintenance, the ordered comforts of domestic routine, comfort and laziness, questions notions of efficiency, opting instead for a high degree of strenuous user involvement, and tipping the balance of safety and danger.

There is a unstable logic to the gift. Some gifts must be returned, there are others that should not be reciprocated. Expected repayment is deferred - temporally and spatially - to whom, at what time, and in what a place a gift may be returned.

The ladder to the upper floor, far too short, had missing rungs, and in one place, a piece of sharp cold iron. Vertical movement, especially at night, took place as a series of jolts and slipped footings. No room for complacency, every moment of occupation was *écriture féminine* – a writing from, and on, the body. Architecture here was no longer solid and dependable, but transient, as fragile as human life. Life lived with unstable materiality is fraught with physical danger. One morning I awoke to a horrible crash and scream; a friend unfamiliar with the intricacies of the household, had missed her step and fallen three metres to the kitchen floor below. Her head narrowly missed the cast iron stove. She spent months in hospital.

xi

the angel goes between and bridges

The angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelope(s) or container(s), goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing every decision, thwarting all repetition.⁷

⁷ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 15.

Shortly after the accident I moved on.

I moved on.

The house moved on.

The home I remember is only my imagining.

Only in dreams do I ever go home.

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