An Architecture of Affect

1. An architecture of affect cannot be object based. It is not the building of sensational bodies, like the design of cars. It is not “e-motive styling,” to use a term coined by Kas Oosterhuis.

2. Affect is immersive, a sort of sensational edifice. We live within affect, like we live in buildings. But in order to emerge as affective landscapes, buildings must be conceived in terms of sensational intensification, analogous to the nineteenth century concept of gesamtkunstwerk: a total environment in which subject and object coincide.

3. The architecture of affect must create an augmented reality: the contamination of the virtual with the actual, and the actual with the virtual.

4. In this regard, the development of digital technologies eases and renews our understanding and awareness of affective landscapes. Thanks to the injection of virtual realities into our material reality, space can no longer be conceived as stable, autonomous, and homogeneous. It is now invaded with affective elements. Space becomes a phenomenon of emergence.

5. Architecture’s materiality is always composite, made up of visible and invisible forces. In her critique of style, architect Farshid Moussavi explored, through the notion of ornament, how figures and affects can emerge from the material substrate of buildings. She sought to extract, through the skilful manipulation of material composition and processes of construction, the expression of embedded forces. Through the setting up of incidental, unfocused, and haptic, sensations, architecture emphasizes the affective. Specific tactile sensations suggest specific muscle movements, enhance certain sensory activities, and thus condition social and even cognitive processes.

6. Digital tools are useful to manipulate construction and design processes, permitting richer effects. Digital tools have the capacity to renew the range and complexity of tactilities in constructing ornament.

7. But media theorist Timothy Murray appropriately described the promise of digital aesthetics as the creation of an enhanced zone of “interactivity” through which the beholder or the user enters within the orbit of the art work, projecting their own visualizations, fantasies, and memories.
in consort with the artwork. (Murray, 2008, 195) This interactivity between the work and the beholder, each “acting” and “reacting” to the other, is one of the uncanny potentials of new media art: the world becomes alive to our sensations.

8. In terms of digital architecture, the task is to catalyze the production of affect as an interface between the domain of information (the digital) and embodied human experience. A simulational circuit must be open between the body and information processing.

9. The interface must trigger the body’s capacity to supplement technology, collaborating with the information, so that the body becomes the medium of exchange with the work.

10. It assumes that we see no inherent rupture between human embodiment and technical mediation. We must forge contact with the domain of information, whereby digitization generates sensibilities.

11. How can we introduce human embodiment into the simulational circuit? How can the tactility of ornament overfill experience, so as to elicit a special interactivity at the edge of the olfactory and the hormonal? Can we create an architecture of pheromone?

The Nature of Affect

12. Affect is the investment of energy that anchors people in particular practices, identities and meanings. Affect is a pre-semantic topography of sensations—it does not provide its own justification.

13. It is the affective investment in particular sites that bonds particular representations and realities. The affective investment enables ideological relations to be internalized and, consequently, naturalized. (Grossberg, 1992, 83.)

14. Recent cultural theory has increasingly come to realize that affect is one of the central categories in understanding communication and practices of our information-based society (Massumi, 2002, 27). In fact, our post-modern condition is characterized by a surplus of affect. With the eclipse of grand narratives and beliefs, it is through affect, or affective maps, that people know where and how they can become absorbed into the world and their lives.

15. According to Lawrence Grossberg’s work on popular culture, we live today within “affective alliances” rather than within functional social roles. “Everyone is constantly located within a field of the popular, for one cannot exist in a world where nothing matters” (Grossberg, 84). Even religion is now a matter of “affective investment” rather than a matter of faith in a stable set of beliefs.
16. Affect is thus the new mapping of belonging and identification (Grossberg, 84). To find ourselves “at home” in the social world, we must be part of “affective alliances.” It is similar to Goethe’s Elective Affinities or Charles Fourier’s passionate attraction. Today these affective alliances are concretized in social networking.

17. There is no precise cultural-theoretical vocabulary to describe the phenomenon of affect. Yet, cognition apprehends through affect: psychic life being nothing but a flux of affects.

18. Attention to affect reveals that even higher cognitive functions occur within the context of the body: “The body doesn’t just absorb pulses or discrete stimulations; it infolds contexts. It infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated” (Massumi, 30).

19. It is important to distinguish emotions from affect. Anger, fear, envy, or jealousy are emotions. Emotions are reactions to determinate objects. I am angry against somebody. I fear something. I envy or am jealous of someone. Even if my fear or my anger is irrational, even if its object is fictitious or imagined, the emotion is still aimed at something, or maintains a symbolic link to it. Emotions are always caught in a subject/object and form/content relationship. They are open to cognitive articulation.

20. Affect, in contrast, is a bundle of sensations—diffused. It partakes of moods, ambiance, and atmosphere. Affects do not have determinate objects—they are non-intentional; they permeate our thoughts, desires, and motivations and thus have an unbounded claim on our attitudes. Affects are immersive, like a sort of broad emotional climate. We live through and within them. We slip into affect, like we slip into moods. Affects deteriorate, disperse, vanish, and reappear. They are a dynamic reality.

21. Affect is a de-territorialized emotion—feelings in movement.

22. Affect is the results of processes occurring at the pre-individual level. It is not a subjective reality, in the sense of the emotional disposition of a given person; it is immanent, a general tonality that enfolds people and things at a given place, at a given time; it constitutes the world as lived reality.

23. Affect is a corporeal, material phenomena: there is a specific physicality of passionate transmission. According to late feminist theorist Teresa Brennan, affects are real entities like ghosts that pass through the air from one body to another—she describes it as a scent, as a perfume, as the transformation of hormone into pheromone. Affect is essentially tactile, transmitted as contagion, as olfactory entrainment. We project unconscious affect onto others and we introject affects that others project on to us. When we transmit affects to one another, the boundaries of our bodies are breached.

24. There is thus a virtualization of the body through the medium of affectivity. “Virtualities,” writes media philosopher Pierre Lévy, “are inherent to a being, its problematic, the knot of tensions, constraints, and projects that animates it.” (Levy, 1998, 14). The body is as immediately virtual as it is actual. The virtual, the pressing crowd of [expectations] and tendencies, is a realm of potential. [...] The body is as immediately abstract as it is concrete; its activity and expressivity extend, as on their underside, into an incorporeal, yet perfectly real, dimension of pressing potential” (Massumi, 30). Affect is precisely this “becoming-active,” a state in-between activity and passivity.
Architecture and Affective Sites

25. Various practices transform the world in various ways. But only certain dimensions can be changed by any single practice, whether material, economic, social, cognitive, etc. Only by knowing which aspects of reality are transformed by any given discipline, can that discipline begin to hone its tools effectively.

26. Material reality is architecture’s domain. Architecture coordinates materials into specific configurations at the service of institutions and property: it compartmentalises and allocates space; it creates limits and boundaries to serve social functions.

27. From an architectural perspective, however, the material configuration of the world is not merely a matter of quantities, the architect being acutely aware that the world’s appearance is always meaningfully given. His work is precisely to reveal qualities in what first seemed merely quantities. The architect concentrates energy in particular places or sites, demonstrating and describing how we should care about them.

28. It is the intensity of energy invested that is important, not the exercise of judgement or cognition. The relationship between levels of intensity and qualification does not depend on a specific form/content relationship, but rather on levels of resonance and amplification. It is purely a question of affect.

29. The source of architecture’s power can be identified by the way space comes to play a role in people’s affective lives. The coherence of a work of architecture depends upon the affective relationships it sets up, and how it can allow or resist integration within people’s passionate landscapes.

30. Architecture thus invests sites through a principle of excessiveness—marking sites with an unusual intensity.

31. Digital architecture re-invests the age-old issue of the affective frontier between technology and life itself.

32. Architecture as a discipline is thus primarily about the transformation of the world into affective sites. It can be anticipative—the creation of new sites—or retrospective—the identification of existing ones.
References


