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Notes on Stickiness and Architecture

Christian Parreno, Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Ecuador, cparrenor@usfq.edu.ec

This essay relates stickiness to architecture. It imagines an alternative to the distinct boundaries associated with modernism, conceiving the built environment as a fluid agent, with forms derived from apocryphal arrangements, imbued in sentiments and connected through an ecology of totality. To unravel, speculatively, this possibility, the elaborations on *sliminess* by Jean Paul Sartre, *fluidity* by Luce Irigaray, *emotionality* by Sara Ahmed and *interrelatedness* by Timothy Morton are juxtaposed and construed in architectural terms. These qualities of stickiness posit architecture as an existential and feminist project, in continual mutation, opposed to pure rationalism and strict functionalism.

Keywords: Stickiness; Sliminess; Fluidity; Emotionality; Interrelatedness

In 1929, offering an alternative to the distinct boundaries of modernism, Georges Bataille referred to a spider, an earthworm and spit to describe the *formless* — that which has been experienced but awaits manifestation. To the philosopher, not only do their difficult contours portray what 'has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere', but also their physical baseness resembles 'the universe' (Bataille 1985: 31).[1] They are organic, of small size though expandable, deemed frightful. From a historical stance, Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alan Bois observe that the stickiness of the formless 'brush[es] modernism against the grain' (2000: 16). By being an agent of adhesive abrasion, derived from the myth of progress and fuelled by a surplus of energy that has eluded the economies of capital accrual, it transgresses conventional opposites, including those of form and content, interior and exterior. The instability of viscid matter generates a soft traction, which leaves residues and, by doing so, promotes the advent of the unexpected.

If stickiness would be incorporated in the thinking of the built environment — its interpretation, theories and chronicles — architecture would emerge as the negotiation between solidity and liquidity, being neither entirely dry nor perfectly watery, with attendant temperatures, textures and odours. First, architecture would be perceived as spaces of unhurried movement, housing activities that sway with deceiving passivity, devoid of programmatic determinism. Second, the understanding of the appearance of architecture would derive from the suggestive possibilities of form rather than from its use as a medium for the abstraction of ideas, a circumstance of suppleness that bolsters apocryphal arrangements through typological and stylistic deviations. Third, the inhabitation of architecture would acknowledge sentimentality and negativity, focusing on those mishaps produced by dampness and its capacity to unite bodies by turning them soggy, contrary to impenetrable intellectualism. And fourth, the relationships proposed by architecture would be assumed as interconnections that possessively cling to every constituent of all settings, through an ultimate ecology of totality and scalar progression. These characteristics offer a filter that, by warping and marring, revisits what is presupposed of architecture, motivating the rewriting of its histories. Like fortuitous falls caused by unctuous surfaces, the implementation of stickiness requires readiness to collision, malleability and undesirability, with the aim to confront architecture with itself as it encounters what lies outside of itself — themes and genres, in literatures that address the built environment, are combined, compromised and eventually subverted.

1. Sliminess

The architecture of stickiness would propound diversity by melding with the surroundings, a process that unfolds with the realization of individual existence.

To Jean Paul Sartre, for whom the intricacies of experience precede any essence, the slimy is a '*bestowal of self*', with a meaning, 'full and dense', that 'releases for us first being-in-itself in so far as the slimy is at the moment that which is manifesting the world, and second an *outline of ourselves*' (1992: 773; all italics in original). Sliminess establishes zones of transition with others and therefore questions where one ends and the rest commences, different to the solipsism of mirrored reflection. With irregular pace, for slimy substances move with different flows, it resists the purity of canons and enables the assimilation of exterior particles, stirring what is in the surface with what is in the core. Since sliminess cannot impose a unidirectional force and does not constitute an immobile motif, spontaneity and unpredictability arise, with novel outcomes that escape the logical sequence of thesis–antithesis–synthesis. In architecture, this self-agency glues edifices to inhabitants, in temporal dynamism as sliminess eliminates the conceptualization of the built environment as isolated, isotropic and static; Sartre insists that 'the slimy appears as already the outline of a fusion of the world with myself' (1992: 773). By being the projection of itself while being itself through the mixing with others, sticky architecture requires deciding a moment of beginning, posing the conundrum of what version of the built environment ought to receive its influence, a jolt equally energizing and serene.

To rouse this action, stickiness adopts inter- and trans-disciplinarity as means to instate doubt — in line with Sartre, the slimy is 'essentially ambiguous' (1992: 774). These approaches encompass dissimilar traditions of design as well as the juxtaposition with other fields of study, prompting their clashing and capitalizing on the procured fissures and inadvertent overflows. On the one hand, architectural composition, through drawing and construction, and academic discourse, through research and a variety of modes of writing, are not practices with parallel trajectories but tasks to be intersected. And on the other, the random placement of architecture next to divergent specialties makes use of the spaces between them, inducing their bridging. The subsequent happenstances can foster the literal, as in the mixture of methods of illustration, or constitute catalysers for the pondering of the intentions of architecture, as in the reconsideration of its ethics. Aware of external presences and under the pressure of comparison, these operations deform what is available. They further horizontal and vague relationships, disregarding vertical and distinct hierarchies, in an ontological manner; Sartre posits that sliminess — in its viscosity and foulness, 'frightening enough' — permits 'the absorption of the For-itself by the In-itself as ink is absorbed by a blotter' (1992: 777). In this manner, as 'the revenge of the In-itself', slime transforms each reality through the dissolution of itself by softening neighbouring edges (Sartre 1992: 777).

2. Fluidity

The architecture of stickiness would be formal, employing geometry — not to affirm its rigidity, as it has habitually been used, but as pliable and unsubordinated media. Following Luce Irigaray's plea for a theory to recognize figures outside solid symbolics, this fluidity results from excess and uncertainty. Its language is 'not "like", not "the *same*", not "identical with itself" nor to any x', but 'continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductive, diffusible'; the consequent speech turns 'unending, potent and impotent' (Irigaray 1985: 106, 111). Unlike masculine models of hardness, exactitude and the misguided belief that blurriness and imprecision entail debility, this 'fluid speak' is confirmatory and can only be articulated and understood by those willing to be fecund (Irigaray 1985: 111).[2] In architecture, the aptitude to change does not equate to outlines that resemble congealed liquids with the intention to awe, as in the efforts of 18th-century Baroque or late 20th-century blobs and their smooth and flawless surfaces. Instead, stickiness adopts formal fluidity to consider plethora, defectiveness and what has been forgotten; for instance, practices that acknowledge the heritage of unrepresented minorities, in their own terms. Similar to an elastic membrane, a gelatinous substance or a current of liquid interacting with another, form turns into expression as well as content, in a perpetual state of morphosis, unbounded by requests to become firm. This fluidity, moreover, retains generative possibilities along the proclivity to cause terror due to its uncanniness and exposure of the suppressed; in this mode of communication, '*one must know how to listen otherwise than in good form(s) to hear what it says*' (Irigaray 1985: 111).

To attain this plasticity, boosting mutation and escaping the fixation with the ideal, the forms of stickiness depend on the materials and systems used for their fabrication. This demands the profound study — mechanical and historical, with their political ramifications — of matter and technology to qualify the mediation between interior and exterior, domestic and public, actual and virtual. Rather than triggering residual contamination, the patterns of this architecture urge entropy — the passing of information from one space to those contiguous, assisting in their necessities and in solidarity. Form becomes an act of reverse sublimation in which materiality creates and binds ideas and sentiments, probing how architecture can exploit the understanding of matter as agency, without relegating its role to representation. Stickiness undoes formal determination and the policing of borders by defying the upright autonomy of patriarchy and signalling to the humid fertility of the ground. The language of fluidity — essentially female, enabled by a 'mechanics of fluids' — relies on gravity and the variations of the terrain; it can only be heard by those with unclogged ears, close to surfaces splattered with gooey solutions: 'urine, saliva, blood, even plasma, and so on' (Irigaray 1985: 113).

3. Emotionality

The architecture of stickiness, as a vessel for experience, would indulge in emotions. Focusing on the intersection between interiority — the space of sentiments and thoughts — and exteriority — the realm of the physical world — Sara Ahmed remarks that 'emotions are not "in" either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects' (2015: 10). These demarcations fluctuate, resisting inertia and repelling uniformity, and, by being saturated with affect, exude the possibility of empathy. Different to a model of contagion, without imposing a 'feeling-in-common', the emotionality of 'sticky objects' gesture to the respect for the becoming of nearby beings and environments (Ahmed 2015: 10). The perception of buildings as geneses of feelings emphasizes the ability of architects to evoke — they who, steeped in social responsibility and in collaboration with others, ought to decide what conditions to irradiate and through which techniques. As components of the architectural whole, the emotions that inundate sticky environments resemble 'a thickness in the air, or an atmosphere' (Ahmed 2015: 10). Stickiness upholds the tension between inhabitants and the architecture they inhabit, proceeding as an indivisible substance that erases the distinction between creator, an actor of genius, and user, a passive consumer.

Oozing sentimentality, stickiness invades all pores. It advances and touches, rebounds and moves into reverse, filling and emptying. To Ahmed, 'what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place'; emotions and their oscillation therefore 'do not cut the body off from the "where" of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others' (2015: 11). When stickiness pollutes, adding information to the entered room, it allows dwellers 'to be moved' by letting them experience a more complex version of their surroundings. And when stickiness cleanses, subtracting existing material, it presents them with a refined edition of what already exists. Both variations admit that the altered environments can be construed — felt — differently by everyone, unleashing the latency of individual occupation. Importantly, by polluting and cleaning, stickiness entails criticality; its action acknowledges an imperfect present and the need for betterment. The detection of failure in standing architectures utilizes history as a method of composing narratives that advance enlightened accounts of harmful episodes by focusing on the voids they created, mending some and thus negotiating the future — the essence of politics. For the architecture of stickiness, emotionality is a channel for bonding, directly related to the flow of everyday living even when 'sticky objects' get stuck; Ahmed avers, 'there is hope, of course, as things can get unstuck' (2015: 16).

4. Interrelatedness

The architecture of stickiness would be based on interrelation, contemplating its impact in all scales of the environment. For Timothy Morton, in his rejection of the supremacy of humanity over the existence of objects, the idea of Nature as a realm different from the built environment 'fails to serve ecology well' due to its 'unnatural' attributes, namely 'authority, harmony, purity, neutrality, and mystery' (2012: 3, 19).[3] This division can only be counteracted by imagining the world as a mesh-like organisation in which nothing exists in isolation, and everything lives in multiplicity and simultaneity. Opposed to the nostalgic greenness and Edenic wholesomeness of environmentalism, stickiness magnetizes impurities, with an unsealed peel that permanently appends new grains — Morton describes the new ecological thought as 'mysterious, and open, like an empty city square at dusk, a half open door, or an unresolved chord ... realistic, depressing, intimate, and alive and ironic, all at the same time' (2012: 16). This coalescence blurs figure and ground as well as background and foreground. Invalidating the local and establishing all reality as global — "'here" already includes "elsewhere", ... "here" is "anywhere"' — stickiness carries the duty of handling worldwide problems, such as extinction and warming (Morton 2012: 56). By implication, conceiving the built environment as another component of the ecological totality necessitates adaptation through the intelligent use of what is known: popular strategies of design, prevalent technologies, standardised materials. Since buildings and spaces adjust to their surroundings while defining the surroundings, the architecture of stickiness does not ask what can be done for the environment, for it deduces architecture is the environment.

To consciously attain closeness with the world, architecture ought to acknowledge its durability. The contemporary built environment not only preserves pieces of the past but also constructs objects with synthetic composites that live longer than traditional materials. To Morton, these entities of vast temporal and spatial dimensions are 'hyperobjects', presences that 'invoke a terror beyond the sublime, cutting deeper than conventional religious fear'; they surpass the longevity of 'a massive cathedral dome' or 'the mystery of a stone circle', outlasting human generations (2012: 131). Hence, rather than conceiving architectural design as the production of innovation to be rapidly consumed and discarded — part of the modern cycle of excitement and boredom — the architecture of stickiness incorporates processes of slow decay and rapid recycling. If 'hyperarchitecture' is a condition of resilience, then it clamours for an attendant economy, encouraging the rise of sociocultural and political systems capable of sustaining the environment, different to high capitalism (Morton 2012: 131).[4]

4, 3, 2, & 1

The architecture of stickiness would be inaccurate and diffuse, circumventing all formulas.[5] Antithetical to prescriptions and styles, this openness constitutes an approach, intimate and flexible, capable of absorbing disparate phenomena and stances difficult to categorize when thinking about architecture and its past. As Morton warns and advocates, the desire to be tied to everything is ugly and can turn into horror, but ugliness and horror 'compel our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity' — '"harmony" is out, but cooperation is in' (2012: 17, 35, 101).[6] Through sentimentality, even if it is negative, stickiness facilitates democratic encounters. The resultant commonality exhausts the efforts of architecture to equip spaces with opportunities for respectful interrelation, fostering new ones; following Ahmed, 'transformation is not about transcendence' but about disobeying limits that imped individual and social movement (2015: 16). In this reconsideration and rewriting of architecture, form is a defiant instrument that manoeuvres matter rather than a forced product in the search for archetypes. To Irigaray, contrary to novelty and functionality, radical configurations can only stem from the irresolution of fluids and their ambiguous expressions, since 'fluid — like that other, inside/outside of philosophical discourse — is, by nature, unstable' (1985: 112). Deeming the built environment as an operation by which to produce intangible conditions involves an ordinary contact between architecture and other realities, through a heterological process that begins in the defiance of architecture to itself, as sliminess does; Sartre affirms that 'the slime is like a liquid seen in a nightmare, where all its properties are animated by a sort of life and turn back against me' (1992: 777). Instead of adding to the recognition of genius and the extraordinary, as in the architecture of ever more perfected resolution, stickiness is concerned with lowness and declassification, proudly embracing confusion, anonymity and staining while letting the unplanned occur. The construal of the environment would follow the non-structure of irruption, in continual change, compiling and recalling messy histories.

Notes

[1] This was an entry for the Critical Dictionary section of *Documents* 1 (Paris, 1929), 382.

[2] Robert Harvey explains that 'in Irigaray's analysis, another "excess" beyond "form" is seminal fluid. In fact, Irigaray herself takes note of this substance of excess which she may say is "feminine" but which dwells in the male body, speculating that it may hold the secret of a *masculinity beyond phallocentrism*. Is it not, after all, the ejaculation of semen that initiates the gradual resoftening process of the male organ? According to Irigaray, the voice of this "excess" is woman' (1991: 56).

[3] Therefore, 'ecology equals living minus Nature, plus consciousness' (Morton 2012: 19).

[4] Morton concludes, 'the ecological thought must imagine economic change; otherwise it's just another piece on the game board of capitalist ideology' (2012: 19).

[5] As these notes attest.

[6] To Morton, 'we must abandon a Romantic ecology of community. To imagine ecological society as community is to inhibit future cooperation, because "community" language appeals to fantasies about a historical moment before the ideal of social-ism had appeared' (2012: 101).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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