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# Affective injustice and built environments: bringing together analytical and phenomenological insights

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**Abstract**

The concept of affective injustice refers to harms inflicted upon someone in their affective capacity. Spatial or ecological injustices are subtypes of affective injustices that occur in relation to built environments, involving the limitation of spatial agency and powerlessness. In this paper I will review recent work on these concepts in order to map out how they employ a toolkit from both the analytical and phenomenological traditions. Specifically, these types of investigations seek to both clarify concepts and to capture the relevant lived experiences. I will further argue that a similar, if not even closer connection between the two, is required to further develop these investigations. Given the importance of the topic beyond philosophy, particularly in relation to urban studies, a broader point is that in order to address practically relevant issues, philosophical investigations need to move beyond the traditional divisions.

**Keywords:** injustice, affection, body, architecture, environment

## Introduction

Recent work in philosophy includes the analysis on non-material types of injustice. The success of the epistemic injustice research program and its application to a wide array of areas across legal, scientific and medical contexts, among others is illustrative in this sense. The growing research on affective injustice deploys philosophical analysis to analyze a

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different type of injustice, that targets one's affective life and practices. This can refer to various social experiences and dynamics and, as shown by the case of ecological injustice, it can expand to issues around the built environment. As I will be discussing below, although this latter type of injustice has a material dimension – involving the architecture and the objects present or absent from one's environment spelling out the kind of emotional harms it can bring about requires particular ways of articulating the notion of the self and its relation to the world. Specifically, I will highlight how conceptual analysis, traditionally employed in analytic philosophy intertwines with phenomenological investigations to explain how particular urban design choices instantiate affective injustices.

The paper will be organized as follows. Section 2 will introduce the notion of affective injustice with focus on its context within philosophy and recent developments. Section 3 will focus on spatial injustices as a subtype of affective injustices and explore two examples from the literature – hostile design and the absence of "third places" from urban environments. Section 4 will highlight the central role played by phenomenological contributions, particularly the notion of affordance and that of the lived body, in the articulation of these concepts and their further uses in the development of this research.

## Affective injustice

While the debates over the notion of affective injustice constitute recent contributions to philosophy, earlier discussions on this topic can be identified in areas such as the ethics of care or capabilities approaches. Lopez Cantero (forthcoming) points to the work of Srinivasan (2018), Whitney (2018) and Archer and Matheson (2022) as setting up the groundwork for this concept by analyzing specific instances. Gallegos (2022) provides a more systematizing view stating the specific conditions under which something counts as affective injustice. Without going into the differences between the views, henceforth I will go with Lopez Cantero's formulation: "affective injustice is the unjust interference with people's affective lives,

with regard to their own affective practices or through those of others (such as the experience, expression, regulation, interpretation, and sharing of emotions and other affective phenomena)" (forthcoming, 5). As an example, think of a woman that has to deal with a rude or recalcitrant client in her workplace but she cannot express her anger due to specific norms where employees should always act so as to please the clients. Furthermore, when expressing the concern with the manager, she is told she is overreacting. This counts as an affective injustice insofar as the woman's justified anger is either concealed or dismissed.

The distinction between affective existential injustice (Vespermann & Tirkonen 2024) and ecological injustice (Krueger 2023) is particularly relevant for my purposes here. The former refers to subjective or interpersonal feelings, as in the example above, while the latter goes beyond the psychological or interpersonal, looking at affordances. An example of the latter kind would involve neighborhoods that require driving significant distances or walking uncomfortable routes in order to access basic services, from grocery shopping, to green spaces, to education or healthcare facilities. Given its focus on the living space, in this paper, the focus will fall on the latter, particularly how "affective injustice can be built into the environment through the presence or absence of affordances—possibilities for action and (emotional) experience as enabled by things, spaces, and other people" (Lopez Cantero forthcoming, 6-7).

More broadly, the work on affective injustice can be situated within work falling under "non-material and structural forms and conditions of injustice" (Lopez Cantero forhcoming, 7), particuarly linked to Marion Young's (1990) pioneering work. An analogy can be drawn with the expanding philosophical literature on epistemic injustice focusing on harms brought about to someone in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007). In fact, definitions such as that by Archer and Matheson, talk about affective injustice as harms brought about to someone in their emotional capacity. Interestingly, and as I shall be arguing henceforth, just as Fricker builds her concept of interactions between knowledge and power structure,

intertwining work such as that by Foucault with epistemology, work on affective injustice also employs phenomenological insights. As Lopez Cantero puts it, "the debate has expanded the shared grounds between views of justice and novel frameworks in phenomenology, philosophy of cognition, and philosophy of mind, such as situated affectivity and environmental scaffolding" (forthcoming: 7).

## Spatial injustice

Krueger (2023) seeks specifically to expand the work on affective injustice beyond the psychological descriptions, to the built environment, which involves a broader, ecological approach. The kinds of injustices analyzed are those where one is "deprived of access to goods affording the development and maintenance of their subjective well-being" (2023: 85). Krueger looks at two cases, the one of hostile architecture and masking practices in autism. While both provide valuable insights on ecological injustice, bringing together phenomenological and analytical insights, my focus will fall on the former. In order to describe the effect of the two, Krueger employs the term coined by Wildman et al 2022, "affective powerlessness", understood as "the feeling that a significant portion of one's affective life is manipulated by the decisions and actions of others, those with greater affective power" (Krueger 2023, 21).

Krueger's account employs the notion of spatial agency, understood as "our ability to inhabit, negotiate, and use the different spaces we move through in everyday life" (2023, 18). As further pointed out by Kukla (2022), spatial agency includes the possibility to changing the environment according to one's needs. This concept draws on work in ecological psychology, particularly the relational approach – as a mental ability, spatial agency does not only look inside the mind, but in the overall environment that the agency inhabits. More importantly for the purposes here, is the link to embodiment and emplacement going back to classic contributions to phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) – the agency of a body can only be understood through

the places through which it is enacted (Krueger 2023, 18). I will be exploring this aspect in more depth in section 4.

The notion of affordance is particularly important in this context. Following Gibson (2014), affordances are defined as action possibilities within the world we inhabit. An example would be a staricase that would enable one to access the upper floor of a house. Yet, the same affordance may be perceived differently across individuals or even by the same individual at different moments of one's life. For example, for someone suffering from mobility issues, the staircase does not enable access to the upper floor, likewise in the case of someone who has lost the ability to climb stairs. It now also becomes clear how this conceptual toolkit enables a finer gained understanding of ecological injustices: if a staircase affords access to an essential service but it fails to enable specific groups (such as those suffering from a disability) from achieving such access, then one can speak of spatial injustice. In this particular case, ramps or elevators may work as affordances. As with the earlier concepts, affordances also have a phenomenological background to be further explored in the next section. Krueger further discusses niches as affordance spaces that determine how one may act within a certain environment.

Moving on to the case of hostile architecture, the notion refers to ways in which the built environment is meant to control or limit spatial agency. The term has been initially discussed in the context of architecture and urban studies (see Rosenberger 2020), but, as I shall be explaining below, there are important philosophical aspects to it that merit further investigation. While most elements of urban design control or limit spatial agency to some extent – for example bicycle lanes or sidewalks are meant to single out specific uses for the respective space, hostile design amounts to deliberately excluding specific groups or needs. Perhaps the most well known example is the presence of spikes in public spaces to keep homeless people away. Other example includes the design of benches for apparently aesthetic or comfort reasons so as not to allow sleeping or laying down or the presence of increasingly visible surveillance cameras for seemingly safety reasons in

order to enforce self-policing (Krueger 2023, 23-24). Further instances of hostile architecture involve absences: such as the lack of water fountains or toilets in public spaces in order to impose the use of private ones, or the lack of benches and tables to discourage public gatherings (Davis 2006). When it comes to the motivation of hostile architectural design, Krueger discusses the propagation of urban fear even in the context of insufficient evidence of increasing crime rates as well as the propagation of gated communities as a way of asserting class status (Davis 2017). While the latter insight was made in the context of Los Angeles, similar patterns can be noted across the world, particularly in increasingly unequal societies and in a context of increased hostility towards minorities or other groups deemed undesirable.

Krueger (2023) spells out the injustices resulting from hostile design in terms of their reduction of resources and opportunities for particular individuals and groups to pursue subjective well-being (cf. Gallegos 2022), of which spatial agency is a part. Affective resources required to pursue, among others, meaningful social relations and the need for recognition are mentioned. The latter is manifested through the spatial design that makes it clear that certain people (like homeless people or those suffering from a disability) are not welcome in public spaces. Krueger spells this out as affective powerlessness, "the feeling that a significant portion of one's affective life is manipulated by the decisions and actions of others with greater affective power" (2023, 39). Its effects go beyond spatial agency, affecting also one's sense of self, insofar as the self has a relational component – feeling at home within the lived environment or within one's social surroundings. A further point to mention is that these injustices disproportionally affect the more vulnerable groups, such as those who are homeless or disabled, but can also affect other groups, that may need to stand while waiting or purchase an expensive coffee to use a bathroom. At the same time, in contrast with the former, the latter have the power to negotiate and demand, e.g., public benches and toilets.

For another relevant example, I draw on Kukla's (2022) discussion of urban living. Kukla employs an ontological

approach where "spaces are shaped into niches, into which possibilities for agency are sedimented through users' micronegotiations and place ballets" (2022, 45). This renders the things we encounter in cities, such as neighborhoods or rush hours, real through the dwellers' uses of space. Kukla's discussion of city living includes what Oldenberg (1989) deemed "third places", that is to say places that are neither one's home, nor the workplace. Third places have also been described as social centers where people can interact with one another and where there are regular participants as well people that come and go (McCulloch 2019). Examples include cafes, bars, gyms as well as parks or other types of public spaces. While much of urban studies focus on residential areas and work places, Oldenberg stresses the importance of third places for subjective well being. As Kukla describes them, what is peculiar about third places "is their fluid, territorialized, and social character and their separation from work and home, not their privacy or publicity. They are their own kind of space, and they seem to be essential to flourishing urban life" (2022, 272). Kukla points out that third places are essential to city living, as becomes apparent, for instance when someone moves to a new city and does not yet feel quite yet at home although they already have a place to live and a place to work. Feeling at home also requires third places. Some examples of absence of third places or of access to them takes us back to the issues of spatial and affective injustices discussed above. One example includes new parents (typically mothers in societies where the largest proportion of care work is still assigned to women) that either find themselves enclosed at home or do not find third places that would be suitable to visit together with the baby. The COVID-19 lockdowns provide another example, where access to third places was essentially cut off. Part of the loneliness felt by many people during that time (cf. Popa 2017) can be explained to the absence of third places that could afford social interactions. Beyond this specific cases, Kukla also points to urban design and political decisions: "if some poor neighborhoods are third-place deserts, because of a combination of a lack of businesses and services and revanchist policing of

what could be common spaces, this is a specific form of injustice — a violation of these residents' right to the city" (2022, 273).

The discussion above shows the examples of hostile architecture and the denial of access to third places or their absence altogether as spatial injustices. Bringing this together with the discussion in section 2, these can fit within the broader type of affective injustices, particularly ecological ones. The analysis of these types of injustices enables one to point out why examples above are instances of injustice, particularly through diminishing spatial agency and access to affective goods that are necessary for subjective well being. The explanation of the experience of space and the living environment has drawn from both ecological psychology and the phenomenological tradition, particularly in describing niches in terms of affordances where one's sense of self is relational, i.e., interlinked with one's lived environment. In the following section I will explore this phenomenological background into further depth in order to point to new ways of developing this recent research program.

## Phenomenology meets analytic approaches

Broadly speaking, the work on affective injustice and spatial injustice discussed above involves an analysis of non-material types of injustices in relation to affective goods, spatial agency and power. In this sense, the project can be defined as analytic. More specifically, it fits under the recent "social turn" in analytic philosophy, i.e., a surging interest in socio-political topics and in analyzing and introducing concepts helpful for various political purposes, such as justice (Richardson 2023). Yet while the endeavor of providing definitions and analyses is an analytic project, the content of these concepts require core contributions to phenomenology, such as the notions of lived body and affordances. For the reminder of this section I will explore this background and highlight its essential role in spelling out the phenomena referred to in the previous sections.

The phenomenological background of how affordances work in spatial agency can be spelled out in connection to Heidegger's (2010) considerations of types of

beings, particularly the notion of availability (or readiness-to-hand). While Heidegger's examples involve tool use, the majority of objects in one's environment can be said to be available to use. Wrathall translates the term *Bewandtnis* as "affordance" and the subsequent discussion of affordance-and-reference situates a particular entity in relation to other available entities in affording an activity. According to Wrathall's interpretation of Heidegger "in our everyday encounter with available entities, we do not encounter objects with occurrent properties. Rather, what we encounter in the first instance are holistic contexts that are articulated into invitations to act, invitations which move us (i.e., "refer" us) to further affordances" (2025, 2.1.1). This helps further spell out the previous examples, such as a park with benches and tables as inviting us to engage in social activities, while a park where such objects are either absent or uncomfortable would not provide such invitation. The Heideggerian notion of availability and affordance can thus help explain why certain designs are not conducive to particular uses of space related to the user's needs. This provides the background for the ethical analysis in terms of subjective well-being being related to particular ways of relating to one's built environment.

A further relevant contribution can be traced to Merleau Ponty's considerations of the lived body and perception. Wilkinson and Chemero (2025) highlight the link between Merleau Ponty's approach and ecological psychology. In Sachs' (2020) interpretation, Merleau Ponty introduces a "basic account of intentionality, pre-reflective or motor intentionality" (Sachs 2020, 295). The embodied nature of perception is particularly relevant in the context of ecological psychology, spelling out the experience of the built environment discussed above. According to this interpretation, Merleau Ponty holds that "physical sensations cannot be separated out from the complex process of pre-objective experience, because sensations are not copies of something out in the world but rather are constituted by the perceptual experience itself" (Wilkinson & Chemero 2025, 92). Subsequently this means that "to understand the lived body, we must view the world of perceptual objects not as a seal that presses into the passive

wax of human experience, but as a space for the active and embodied side of perceiving" (2025, 92). Further specifying the lived body enables an account of the structure of perception located "neither in the perceiver or the world perceived, but in the structural coupling between perceiver and perceived qua system and environment, a coupling that only ever instantiates across a temporal dimension" (2025, 93). This allows for a coupling of acting and perceiving and the organism and the environment, opening up the space for a relational notion of self (involving the environment) and the notion of action possibility at the organism-environment interface. Once again, the phenomenological approach helps articulate the relevant notion of self needed for the ecological analysis.

As mentioned about the analyses above also involve psychological contributions, but my purpose has been to highlight the intertwining of the analytic and phenomenological perspectives in articulating patterns of affective and spatial injustice. As this is still a recent, ongoing research program, a further point to make is that the same perspectives may be used in articulating, for instance, requirements for spatial justice. Spelling out what kinds of niches and affordances different types of bodies would need would involve both the relational perspective as well as an analysis of the environment in terms of its action possibilities. The inextricable organism-environment relation also helps stress the importance of the built environment for subjective wellbeing providing an argument that can be used in applied ethics or in urban studies. A broader point to draw from the discussion above is that a philosophical toolkit across both traditions can be employed to address practical questions, such as those involved in urban design. As the conceptual and ethical inquiry works together with the phenomenological framing, this research program also provides an example of overcoming of traditional divisions, which may be used to address further questions.

## Conclusions

This article has reviewed recent work on affective injustice and spatial injustice, as concepts that draw from both

the analytic and the phenomenological traditions in order to provide philosophical approaches to questions arising in urban design and policy. Particularly, the analysis of cases such as hostile design or the third places in urban environments relies of a relational understanding of the self and frames the built environment in terms of niches and affordances. Thus, this research program moves beyond traditional disciplinary divisions. I have further suggested that this collaboration is needed in order to address remaining questions, such as spelling out the requirements for spatial justice. The talk of affordances and the lived body can be seen as preliminary, with further phenomenological contributions to be explored in relation to issues around emotions and built environments.

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