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Research paper

Encounters, Affective Anecdotes, and the Archive: Traveling with Emilie von Berlepsch to Scotland

Elena Rieger *

ETH Zurich, SWITZERLAND

***Corresponding Author:** riegerelena1@gmail.com
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ABSTRACT

This article explores a feminist, embodied approach to architectural historiography through a re-enactment of Emilie von Berlepsch's (1755-1830) travels to Scotland in 1799-1800. In 2023, I retraced part of her route and reread selected passages aloud on site, treating both her historical encounter and my contemporary one as architectural evidence. Focusing on St. Martin's Abbey near Perth, where Berlepsch stayed for a period, the article weaves historical analysis with personal, creative writing, which I call *affective anecdotes*. These anecdotes register frictions, breakdowns, and failed attempts to 'follow' her footsteps that shaped my encounters with sites and archives. They function as protocols of affects that conventional, rigorous academic writing cannot accommodate, and, in doing so, they call into question the conditions under which architectural knowledge is produced. I argue that Berlepsch's travel writing offers a situated architectural critique grounded in routine, movement, and use, evaluating domestic space through the daily routes it demands and through the gendered and classed spatial organization. By placing Berlepsch's eighteenth-century critique alongside my own embodied encounters, the article interrogates the persistent assumption of the disembodied researcher in architectural historiography. Discomfort functions as an analytic and methodological lens across both temporalities, not to collapse them, but to make visible the asymmetries of access, expectation, and epistemic authority and to rethink how architectural histories are written.

Keywords: architectural historiography, encounters, affective anecdotes, embodiment

Between 1799 and 1800, Emilie von Berlepsch, a German aristocratic writer, traveled to Scotland and the Scottish Highlands to follow the traces of Ossian, a purported Gaelic poet associated with a celebrated cycle of epic poems. Her primary goal was to gather evidence supporting the existence of the poet, whose works had stirred controversy over their authenticity (Shields, 2010, p. 24). Berlepsch published her experiences in *Caledonia*, initially planned as a three-volume work but ultimately released in four volumes between 1802 and 1804 (Berlepsch, 1802a, 1802b, 1803, 1804).[1] This was the first German travel account of the Scottish Highlands and Berlepsch's first comprehensive publication on travel writing (Bär, 2013, p. 343).

[1] Berlepsch was partly accompanied by the Gaelic-speaking James Macdonald, whom she had met in Weimar. Caledonia was dedicated to Johann Gottfried Herder, whom she saw as her mentor. (Berlepsch, 1802a, pp. vii,xi).

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Caledonia was based on diary entries, letters, essays, and conversations with people she encountered. She also discussed English and Scottish literature, including legends (Scheitler, 1999, p. 136). She offered statistical information about cities, discussed infrastructure, resources, and legal matters such as tenantry, and combined these with romantic descriptions of landscapes, castles, and estates, focusing on the sublime and its affect. *Caledonia* was widely read in Germany, and cultural historian Michael Maurer credits Berlepsch as the starting point for the reception of Scotland in Germany (Maurer, 2006, p. 53).

This paper focuses on one specific site discussed in *Caledonia*, St. Martin's Abbey near Perth, where Berlepsch stayed with her friend Cecilia Macdonald, and from where she wrote small parts of her book. Since Berlepsch lived in this house for a period, she became familiar with its layout by repeatedly walking through it. These everyday acts of walking through the house, her spatial practice, informed Berlepsch and enabled her to discuss and critique the general floor plan organization of British houses by sketching the daily routes of the female inhabitants. I understand this critique based on movement and everyday practices as 'architectural evidence' (Chee, 2023, p. 6).

In 2023, I retraced her journey. On site, I read relevant passages of *Caledonia* to immerse myself in the environments she encountered more than 200 years earlier and to attune my attention to the spatial features, routes, and atmospheres she foregrounds, in order to trace continuities, transformations, and losses across time. In practice, however, this attunement failed repeatedly. It presumed comparability between her encounter and mine, a symmetry of bodies. Physical barriers, logistics, and the limits of my own body repeatedly disrupted the effort to encounter the landscape through her account. Rather than collapsing two temporalities, the re-enactment exposed their asymmetries. It shifted my attention from recovering Berlepsch's encounter to analyzing the disruptions that shaped my experience, and to asking what such breakdowns mean for writing this architectural history.

This paper operates at two analytical levels. Its primary level is historical: Following Lilian Chee, I read Berlepsch's travel writing as an account of 'affective encounters', which Chee argues are central to architectural epistemology and should be treated as 'architectural evidence' (Chee, 2023, p. 6). It reads Berlepsch's travel writing as architectural knowledge that emerges through experiences, movement, routine, and perception. A second, reflexive level addresses the conditions under which this kind of evidence is produced and interpreted. Feminist scholarship has long argued that knowledge is situated and that epistemic authority is unevenly distributed (Alcoff, 1999; Haraway, 1988). The question of whose accounts are trusted reveals that epistemic reliability is not only gendered but also depends on the social location constituted by class, race, gender, ability, and other intersecting identities. As Elizabeth Grosz has argued, the subject is corporal; its specifics cannot be neutralized away (Grosz, 1994, p. ix). This raises a guiding question for the paper: what role do bodily experiences and affect play in the production of architectural knowledge and in the writing of architectural historiographies?

Reading Berlepsch through this lens foregrounds the body as fundamental to knowledge production and considers her account as architectural evidence arising from situated, affective encounters. At the same time, this paper reflects on the assumption of a disembodied researcher by attending to the discrepancy between expectations and the lived realities of the research process. To do so, it introduces *affective anecdotes* as an exploratory methodological approach rather than a stabilized or generalized method. They offer a space in which frictions, failures, and unmet expectations can be registered. They disrupt the rigorous academic writing process and serve to reintegrate the researcher's concrete body into it. These considerations guide my analysis, which, after outlining the methodological framing, moves from my 2023 encounter with St. Martin's Abbey to a historical analysis of Berlepsch's lived experience in 1800.

RE-ENACTMENT AND AFFECTIVE ANECDOTES

Daughter of the distant land,
The dweller of the secret cell!
Do I hear the whispering of the groves,
Or the voice of your song?[2]

When Emilie von Berlepsch traveled to Scotland in 1799, she was on a mission. She followed Ossian to the Scottish Highlands to gather evidence of his authenticity (Schmidt, 2003, p. 281). In the quote above, drawn from one of Ossian's poems, 'The Battle of Lora' (Ossian, 1762, p. 111), Berlepsch, while on-site, transforms the

[2] 'Tochter des fernen Landes, der heimlichen Zelle Bewohnerin! Hör' ich das Säuseln der Haine, oder die Stimme deines Gesangs?' (Berlepsch, 1803, Vol. 3, p. 124)

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narrative by reimagining it through her own voice. Specifically, she creates space for herself by changing the addressee from the original 'son' to 'daughter,' thereby imagining Ossian speaking directly to her. She states:

> (…) I only needed to change the sex in the first and in a few other lines and give myself over to the beautiful illusion as if the splendid old man, whose image I had lovingly contemplated again, was sitting in front of me with his harp and talking to me.[3]

By situating herself in the poem's environment – caves, groves, and mountain streams – she overcame the temporal and geographical distances, transforming a distant past into an embodied and personal encounter through these acts.

This practice of reciting on site, through which Berlepsch brought the past into her present, was the starting point for my re-enactment of her experiences. I wanted to revisit the sites Berlepsch had encountered on her journey to Scotland, follow her footsteps if possible, and reread the relevant passages aloud to, on the one hand, transform the place before my inner eye into its 1800 appearance and, on the other hand, pull Berlepsch from the past to the present and to my side. Berlepsch was my travel companion as much as Ossian, among other Scottish writers, was hers.

Part of this method is inspired by architectural historian Emma Cheatle and her method to 'materialize' the English writer Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). In 'Between Landscape and Confinement', Cheatle states that '(…) it is almost as though she stands at my shoulder as I read' (Cheatle, 2017, p. 67). I took this quite literally and let Berlepsch speak through my voice at the site she described 200 years ago. To imagine Wollstonecraft walking by her side and to connect on a personal level, Cheatle wrote 'love letters' on the back of postcards (Cheatle 2017, p. 67). She states that these letters are situated 'between fact and fiction, walking and writing' to 'change the pace, temporality, place, and script of the essay' (Cheatle 2017, pp. 75, 77). Following Cheatle, I wrote letters to Berlepsch from my hotel rooms, libraries, archives, or nearby cafés, sometimes echoing her language and at other times attempting to write my own travel account. But the majority of my letters were not love letters, because what I experienced totally clashed with my expectations shaped by Berlepsch's vivid descriptions of landscapes and architecture. Instead of love letters, the majority of my writings were saturated with frustration due to the limitations of my body. I captured these frustrations, my embodied responses to the sites and the discomfort of navigating unfamiliar spaces, as what I call *affective anecdotes*.

These *affective anecdotes* became a crucial tool for capturing my 'affective encounters'. Architectural historian Lilian Chee argues that 'affective encounters' are central to architectural epistemology and should be recognized as a form of 'architectural evidence' (Chee, 2023, p. 6). She asks, 'What happens when these sticky entities are admitted into architectural discourse?' With sticky entities, she refers to forms of 'affective evidence' such as anecdotes, stories, situations, and field notes usually not considered in the traditional architectural historiography (Chee 2023, pp. 19–20). For Chee, such admissions acknowledge that knowledge gained from encounters is both imaginative and situated, and that this tension is critical 'to embodying architectural history within a lived contemporary milieu' (Chee, 2023, p. 5).

In Queer Phenomenology, for instance, Sara Ahmed explores how bodies are oriented in space, how social norms shape what feels familiar or at home, and how non-normative bodies disrupt these spatial and social arrangements (Ahmed, 2006). The disruption does not occur through mere presence but through the body's encounter with spatial and social arrangements that were never designed to accommodate it. The built environment materializes politics; it disciplines bodies through its norms. The frictions or discrepancies between disciplining architecture and bodies are registered as affects, revealing how power operates through space. In my own creative writing, such affects are recorded as *affective anecdotes*, which document how the built environment acts upon the body. Affect, registered through these encounters and documented in the *affective anecdotes*, plays a constitutive role in the 'production of knowledge and subjects' (Stephens, 2015, p. 274).

My anecdotes are such affective evidence of how architectural knowledge is negotiated and recorded through the body. They document the friction between expectation and reality and offer a space to reflect on my body's limitations and how this shaped my experience of the environment. They record how the past persists materially and affectively, revealing the frictions, failures, and accommodations through which architectural knowledge is produced. The affective anecdotes that emerge from such embodied re-enactment constitute the primary method of this study. While experience, either of Berlepsch's in the past or mine in the present, is mediated through writing, the affective anecdotes are an attempt not to fall into the mode of mediation and instead follow a more diary-like format. Nevertheless, mediation cannot be avoided entirely. Ultimately, it is a translation of an affective encounter into text.

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[3] '(…) weil ich nur nöthig hatte in der ersten und in ein paar andern Zeilen, das Geschlecht zu verändern, und mich der schönen Täuschung zu überlassen, als säse der treffliche Greis, dessen Bild ich wieder liebend betrachtet hatte, mit seiner Harfe vor mir und rede mich an.'
(Berlepsch, 1803, Vol. 3, p. 123)

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The dominant affect of my research trip was discomfort. Rachelle Chadwick describes discomfort as 'an affective intensity' that 'can dis/orient researchers in particular (…) ways, potentially opening up or closing down questions and lines of inquiry' (Chadwick, 2021, p. 2). Affective intensities can 'trouble master narratives and conventional forms of critique' (Fullagar & Bozalek, 2021, p. 26). I too was troubled and was forced to rethink and recalibrate what I had intended with this trip, how to sit with the clash, friction, and discrepancy between the idealized theoretical approach and the realities of physically encountering these spaces. Melissa Carr argues that 'discomfort provides a juncture that illuminates regimes of truth and power and allows reflection on how subjectivity is constituted in research' (Carr, 2025, p. 1). While both Chadwick and Carr discuss discomfort in the context of qualitative research, I treat discomfort as an analytical tool within the field of architecture: Discomfort points to the politics of space: who is accommodated, oriented, and who is rendered out of place, who must constantly adjust.

Chadwick and Carr turn to creative writing to document their affects; I similarly turn to *anecdotes* as a space where these 'undisciplined' feelings, the messiness of affect, sometimes not yet precisely grasped, can exist outside the constraints of what is considered academic writing. These creative writings can take different forms: diary entries, poetry, and experimental texts. Where academic writing necessitates structured thoughts and arguments, creative writing is a place where you can put everything, where writing, as Audre Lorde captured so precisely when discussing poetry, '(…) help[s] give name to the nameless so it can be thought' (Lorde, 2019, p. 25).

If discomfort signals how power operates through affect, Iris Marion Young helps to think through how power is lived through the body. Her concept of the 'body-in-situation' connects structure and experience. Young defines the 'lived body' as 'a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context (…) Her specific body lives in a specific context (…)' (Young, 2005, p. 16). This framework insists that the political, social, and cultural context we embody, including class, race, gender, and ability, influences which experiences are available, what we attend to, how we orient ourselves, and the blind spots we have. Importantly, this is not neutral reciprocity between body and environment but a negotiation under uneven conditions, in which we constantly adjust our behavior in response to spatial and social cues, especially when a space or situation appears hostile or exclusionary. Affective states, such as fear and desire, as well as contingent circumstances, such as weather, crowd, and time of day, further mediate our orientation. 'Body-in-situation', as I use it, acknowledges this entangled mesh of structural and affective relations.

While I employ different concepts, the letters from Cheatle, Chee's approach to affective encounters as architectural evidence, and re-enactment as a way of inserting myself on site, my methodology is embedded in critical feminist theory. At its core, it draws from Black feminist scholarship, which has long modeled how personal narrative functions not as self-expression but as a method: beginning with embodied experiences, sharing anecdotes not as endpoints but as entry points that open toward the collective and the structural. Christina Sharpe includes the personal to tell a story that engages with and counters the violence of abstraction (Sharpe, 2016, p. 8). Her refusal of abstractions informs how I understand my affects captured in the anecdotes as an analytical lens. Patricia Hill Collins begins *Black Feminist Thought* with an autobiographical memory, and explains later that 'the voice that I now seek is both individual and collective, personal and political, one reflecting the intersection of my unique biography with the larger meaning of my historical times' (Collins, 2002, p. 8).[4] This assertion, that personal narrative can serve as a bridge between lived experience and structural critique, guides how I understand my own methodology.

My approach, which includes re-enactments and affective anecdotes, also exposes the assumptions embedded in the research process. It grapples with the realities and expectations of research practices, such as archival research and site visits. It asks what happens when our expectations are unmet or we 'fail' to find evidence. Confronted with the realities of my research trip, I realized that my methodological approach implicitly assumed an able-bodied person. This assumption stands in stark contrast to my own experience as someone who struggles with mobility. Moving through landscapes and built environments brings particular uncertainty and anxiety: Can my body manage, and if not, what will I do? How can I avoid such situations or handle them when I'm unable to? How do I work as an architectural historian? How do I do productive research? While navigating a familiar

[4] Learning from this genealogy also means acknowledging the limitations of my own position. My use of affective anecdotes does not carry the same survival stakes or proximity to violence as those experienced by racialized people. Yet different forms of oppression are not separate from these genealogies but are rooted in anti-Blackness: the organizing logic that not only structures racism but also anti-fatness, and capitalism (Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019). Writing from my situated body does not equate my experience with that of racialized people; instead, I must acknowledge that some bodies, including my own, are disciplined within systems of convenience and accommodation, while others are rendered disposable or erased altogether. This informs the boundaries of my perspective and situates my embodied research within the unequal conditions that make it possible.

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space with established routines, I am aware of how much energy each activity consumes. In an unfamiliar setting, it becomes a gamble that requires foresight, extra preparation, a backup plan, and increased awareness of our bodies. Ellen Samuels, through her notion of *Crip time*, articulates this re-examination and increased awareness concerning the body poignantly:

> (…) it requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking, feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively (…) (Samuels, 2017).

While I advocate for a method of re-enactment, I am also critical of it. As Laura L. Ellingson reminds us, all 'knowledge is produced not by the disembodied voices (…) but by researchers, whose bodies unavoidably influence all aspects of the research process' (Ellingson, 2006, p. 298). In practice, discomfort, anxiety, and accessibility complicate this approach. Rather than viewing my mobility issues as hindrances, I frame them as a critical lens through which to engage with landscapes, architecture, and their histories. Alison Kafer urges a similar shift in perspective away from understanding disability as an individual problem located in certain bodies and minds and towards recognizing that 'the problem is located in inaccessible buildings (…)' (Kafer, 2013, p. 6). The built environment becomes an instrument of discipline, naturalizing the exclusion of non-normative bodies. As Elizabeth Mohr, Kimberly Jamie, and Hester Hockin-Boyers note, 'this sense of non-belonging is actively reproduced through the policing of non-conforming bodies in public space' (Mohr et al., 2025, p. 3).

While lived experiences, captured through *affective anecdotes*, are central to my methodology, they are neither universal nor just personal. Instead, they reveal power relations, exclusions, and moments of friction. Crucially, I do not use experience to depoliticize. As Robin Truth Goodman warns, experience can be mobilized within a neoliberal framework '(…) abstracting experience from its social context and deploying it in a competitive discursive arena in which historical dynamics, social contexts, and structural power relations are obscured.' (Goodman, 2019, p. 150). I am particularly concerned with how discourses around embodiment in academia often presume an able-bodied subject. Such an approach obscures the multiple intersectional ways in which bodies navigate the world, shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by structural conditions such as race, class, gender, and ability. Garland-Thomson argues that race and gender are now central to the analysis in feminist theory, but disability is often overlooked (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 2).

Ultimately, the *affective anecdotes* depart from personal reflection, and they point toward systemic and institutional structures of exclusion. The limitations of my own body, the discomfort, the anxiety, and the restrictions are integral to my experience and cannot be ignored in writing architectural history. They offer a way to bring the embodied and affective experiences of the researcher into conversation, transforming historiography from a static exercise into a living, dynamic engagement with the built environment.

DIS / COMFORT

My encounters are often shaped by discomfort, insecurity, and a sense of being out of place. Chadwick argues to work with these affects, she writes: 'the politics of discomfort can function as a useful feminist methodological and epistemic strategy' (Chadwick, 2021, p. 2). One key moment of friction became apparent during my visit to the archive of the Historic Environment of Scotland in Edinburgh. Here, I hoped to find a specific drawing of St. Martin's Abbey before its alteration and extension, to give me an idea of the space that Berlepsch experienced and critiqued. Instead, I was confronted with a low-resolution, grainy scan of the image. I became fixated because it was the only concrete piece of evidence I could cling to, and to justify my plan to visit the house to ask if I could see the drawing. The archivist gave me the address, and my supervisor wrote me a letter of recommendation. I was, in hindsight, painfully naïve to believe I could simply go to the house, ring the doorbell, and hand over my request. But I went anyway.

This story starts with an anecdote, and this anecdote begins with a photograph I could not take and a drawing I could not understand. I set out to visit St. Martin's Abbey, determined to see the house where Emilie von Berlepsch once stayed, but the house refused to reveal itself to me.

Last November, during a research trip to Scotland, I arrived in Perth with a plan: visit the archives and see St. Martin's Abbey, where Berlepsch had once resided. My previous archive visits to Edinburgh were not as fruitful as I had hoped. Therefore, I wanted to speak with the owner of the house to ask about a specific drawing I had found in the Historic Environment of Scotland archive. The first challenge was getting there. The closest bus stop was still too far for me to walk. A cab then.

At the hotel reception, I was given a phone and three phone numbers for different taxi companies. Both companies hung up on me after they could not understand my request due to the bad telephone connection. I did not even try to call the third one. I tried Uber, but it does not exist in Perth. The receptionist recommended waiting further down the road at the cab stop. So, I did. I stood there for 10 minutes, which felt like ages. I got nervous, I had a tight schedule, and today was the only day I could see St. Martin's Abbey. Then, finally, a cab! I

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showed the taxi driver a piece of paper with the address of the house that I got from the archivist in Edinburgh. It was a 15-minute drive. On our way, he told me he was from Libya but had lived in Perth for a long time. 'I like it here,' he said. I was not fully convinced; I thought Perth was quite depressing. I told him I was a PhD student and wanted to deliver a letter to the owner of St. Martin's Abbey. He assured me that he would help me.

As we approached the estate, we were stopped by a gate. Even though it was open, it was not welcoming, warning us with a sign that said 'strictly private road'. 'We can go anyway,' my guide told me, but I hesitated since the sign clearly told us otherwise. I stepped out of the car to see if I could find a letterbox. There was none. 'There should be another entrance; let's try that,' I told my guide. On the way, we stopped by a church where I wanted to see the memorial of William Macdonald, the owner of St. Martin's Abbey. On our way there, we passed the second entry to the estate, again a wide-open gate warning us that this is a 'private road'. Less strictly, though. Again, no letter box. I became increasingly nervous; this was not as I had pictured it. I did not expect a vast estate, let alone such a serious marking of private territory. To buy myself some time, I asked the driver to park in front of the church so I could look for the memorial. Of course, the church was closed.

I did not know what to do with myself, so I turned to the graveyard behind the church to look for graves belonging to the Macdonald family. I wanted to find a trace of the family Emilie von Berlepsch visited; I tried to find proof that my archival research was correct, that I was, in fact, in the right place. I found a gravestone of Elizabeth Macdonald, who died in 1932. I felt pressured to go back so as not to let my guide wait too long. In my absence, he had taken me under his wing and spoke on my behalf to people to find help. He thought of my mission as his as well. 'We can enter, it's no problem,' I was still insecure since we had no appointment or legitimacy to enter the strictly private road. But he assured me that it was okay.

It is a beautiful estate, with a little river running through. Part of the estate is forest, and since it was early November, all the trees had different colors. The scenery was very picturesque, and I would have enjoyed the view from the car window very much if I had not been so tense. The small road meandered through the estate. Several times, we came to an intersection, and we had to stop to reorient ourselves. There was no sign of how to get to the house. We arrived at the end of the road, which opened to a turning area. Two smaller roads continued to different areas of the estate, but I could not understand which would lead to the house. I assumed we were quite close to our destination, but I could not see a letterbox. I was also unable to determine the main entrance of the house to look for a doorbell. 'I will walk from this point,' I told my guide, because I did not want him to drive directly to the house; we already had problems with the muddy road, and we were trespassing, after all. I got out of the car and looked around. I saw a tiny part of the house hiding behind huge bushes and trees. Then I saw a woman in the distance, dressed in green, accompanied by two dogs. She carried a basket and walked toward the forest. I imagined her on her way to pick some mushrooms in her grounds.

I thought this was my only chance. Therefore, I shouted in her direction to get her attention. 'Hello, I have a letter!' 'For whom?!' she yelled back. 'For the house owner!' I knew this response was not very satisfying, if at all slightly concerning, since I, a stranger, did not even know the owner's name. The woman began to move in my direction. I also started walking towards her, but I was hesitant because the dogs had started running towards me while barking. Another warning sign. It felt like ages when we finally stood in front of each other. It was an awkward conversation, with me explaining myself, her listening, and sometimes asking one-word questions. She confirmed that her father had provided the Archives of Historic Environment of Scotland with documents related to the history of the house. I explained that this particular drawing, made before the original house was altered, was poorly copied. Therefore, I wanted to contact the house owner to see if they still had this drawing. I further explained that I did not intend to intrude on her private property. I just wanted to leave a letter with my contact details and a letter of recommendation from my supervisor, Anne Hultzsch. Since I did not know the owner's name, I had to deliver the letter by myself. And since I was not able to find a letterbox, I did not know what else to do other than to come to her house. I would have rung the doorbell, but there was none. She took my letter and told me she would look into it.

I took one photo of the house hidden behind the trees and returned to the taxi. I did not dare to ask if I could see the building up close. When I entered the cab, my guide wanted to know how it went. I was unsure, and even though I was successful in my delivery, I felt weird. I told him. I felt like a peasant. The whole trip made me uncomfortable. I do not know exactly what I expected, but not this. Something clearer, something more intuitive. Not all these mechanisms are in place to repel uninvited guests, or people who do not know the drill. I expected it to be way more accessible. I did not know how to navigate these mechanisms of inaccessibility. My whole approach marked me as an outsider: my language, my accent, my insecurity. I had no sense of protocol; I had no permission. My guide comforted me by saying that we did everything we could. And so, we drove back to Perth.

To this day, I have not heard back from the house owner, which is unsurprising given her disinterest during our brief, awkward encounter. So, in one way, I was unsuccessful in my mission. Yet I have written about this affective encounter, and it is this experience that I admit as architectural evidence. So, what did I learn from it?

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As it turned out, I was not very well equipped for this trip. I have no knowledge about this kind of wealth I was about to encounter. I know houses with a short driveway and a letterbox, not mansions sitting in vast estates with many confusing roads and multiple entrances. I felt awkward, uneasy, and out of place, not just because I did not understand the codes, the scale, how these estates operate, and the etiquette of navigating such estates, but also because of the limits of my own body. The success of my mission depended entirely on whether I would find someone to drive me there. Public transportation was not an option because the bus stop was too far away for me to walk.

It also made me realize the contingency of this whole encounter. If I had had another taxi driver, one who wasn't as patient and helpful, I probably would have given up. The taxi driver 'reoriented' me and made this mission possible (Ahmed, 2006, p. 157). And if I had not run into the lady of the house on her lawn, maybe I would have made it to the house itself. Or maybe I wouldn't have dared to approach at all.

This experience led me to reflect on the dynamics of privilege and accessibility. Berlepsch, armed with recommendation letters, had no trouble gaining entry to private estates like St. Martin's Abbey. But these recommendation letters came with social obligations that annoyed her. In one instance, she complained that she had to drink tea with the owner of the house while all she wanted was to wander around on their estate. In her writings, she shows little interest in the interiors of these spaces, stating that she 'rarely [had] the curiosity to see the inside of any house unless lured by the expectation of strange paintings.'[5] Her annoyance stems from a place of privilege, since access was never a concern for her (at least she does not write about it). She had the recommendation letters that literally opened the door for her, but they came with an obligation to socialize. She also depended on social encounters, for example, to gather information about a place and its people. For me, however, access was not guaranteed, and the barriers were far more tangible.

One of the rare instances where Berlepsch does describe a house's interior is her account of St. Martin's Abbey, where she stayed for an extended period to explore the surrounding area. The house belonged to her friend Cecilia Macdonald and her brother William, a lawyer and one of the founders of the Highland Agricultural Society, which worked to preserve the Gaelic language and culture.[6] William Macdonald bought the property around 1750 and started to build St. Martin's Abbey between 1791 and 1795. Initially, the house was south-facing, with a five-bay façade, double-piled and three stories high. In the 1840s, a chapel was attached to the east of the house, which gave the house its name, St. Martin's Abbey (Scott, 1911, p. 29). During the 1860s, the house underwent significant alterations and expansions, including the reorientation of the entrance to the north (Gifford, 2007, p. 688).

When Berlepsch visited St Martin's Abbey in 1800, she must have seen the original five-bay building. In the archives, I found an old pencil drawing from July 1743. It shows the south façade with an adjacent one-story building on the left. Unfortunately, the pencil is in such poor condition that the details of the façade and the outlines of the building are not identifiable. The lower one-story building, a pavilion, most likely contained the service rooms.

Berlepsch on the meaning of comfort

Throughout *Caledonia*, whenever Berlepsch pauses or settles for a while and gets familiar with a place, she starts to reflect more generally. Therefore, when Berlepsch settles in St. Martin's Abbey, she reflects on her temporary home and describes the daily routes of the female inhabitants of the house. Berlepsch draws on this specific house to discuss the general floor plan organization of British houses and how women navigate their homes. She introduces this topic by reflecting on the word comfortable. She had observed that British people always talk about comfort as the main aim concerning lifestyle and interior. In this reflection, Berlepsch's own feeling of superiority shines through. She questions whether British people understand what comfort entails.

> I doubt whether the British know quite definitely and logically what they mean by this [the term comfortable]. If they said efficiency, expediency, or solidity, I would have no objection. I would also allow the English, but by no means the Scots in general, to include cleanliness under the term comfortable.[7]

[5] 'Ich habe selten die Neugierde, das Innere von irgend einem Hause zu besehen, wenn mich nicht die Erwartung merkwürdiger Gemälde anlockt.' (Berlepsch 1802a, pp.1,89)

[6] For this information I would like to thank the Local & Family History Team from the A K Bell Library of Culture Perth and Kinross. Email dated September 5, 2023.

[7] 'Ob die Britten ganz bestimmt und logisch wissen was sie darunter [unter dem Begriff Bequemlichkeit] verstehn, mögte ich bezweifeln. Wenn sie Tüchtigkeit, Zweckmässigkeit, Solidität sagten, so hätte ich nichts dagegen einzuwenden. Den Engländern, aber bey weiten nicht allgemein den Schotten, würde ich auch erlauben, die Reinlichkeit mit unter dem Begriff des comfortable zu verstehn.' (Berlepsch, 1802a, Vol. 1, p. 89).

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As we see in this quote above, Berlepsch uses hygiene and comfort as parameters for othering British and Scottish people. To 'other' someone involves creating a separation between oneself and those seen as different, placing those 'others' in a lower status. This process occurs through the continual use of stereotypes and traits that mark the 'other' as deviant or outside the norm. Othering goes beyond mere differences; it reinforces power dynamics, with the dominant group asserting its superiority while positioning those who differ as inferior or subordinate. 'Others' are often determined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion (Gallaher et al., 2009, p. 328). The process of othering is evident in travel writing, which often reflects imperialist attitudes (Thompson, 2011, p. 137). Berlepsch uses comfort, hygiene, and food as parameters for cultural difference and othering. At the same time, she uses her own discomfort in traversing the house layout as a lens to critique it.

In early modern England, comfort was firmly associated with emotional well-being, with a sense of being comfortable and of offering comfort (or consolation) to others. But during the 18th century, it also began to relate to physical comfort (Crowley, 2001, p. x). John Crowley argues that 'the extent and degree of convenience and comfort among the populace became measures of northwestern Europe's progress from barbarism to civilization' (Crowley, 2001, p. 153). Comfort and convenience became markers and part of a rhetoric of progress; therefore, travelers often found the places they visited falling short of their own country's higher standards (Stobart, 2022, p. 8). For Crowley, this 'invention of comfort' was reflected in changing attitudes among householders, as well as a corresponding shift in domestic material culture. These changes included technological innovations designed to make homes warmer, lighter, and better ventilated, along with a broader range of furniture, particularly upholstered furniture like easy chairs and sofas. Moreover, there was a shift in the organization and layout of homes, with a growing emphasis on privacy (Crowley, 2001).

Berlepsch's reflection on the term comfort and what it entails demonstrates this shift in meaning, even though Berlepsch seems unaware that comfort was initially related to emotional well-being. Instead, she has a top-down attitude towards British and Scottish people. In 1813, Joachim Campe offered a definition of comfort in his *Wörterbuch zur Erklärung und Verdeutschung unserer Sprache (*Dictionary for the Explanation and Germanization of Our Language). He writes that Comfort can be translated as *Gemächlichkeit*, *Bequemlichkeit,* or *Trost*: comfort, convenience, or consolation (Campe, 1813, p. 203). Campe's definition demonstrates that there was awareness of two different meanings: comfort in a physical sense and comfort related to comforting someone. However, Berlepsch's understanding of comfort aligns more with *Behaglichkeit*, *Bequemlichkeit*, and *Erquicklichkeit*, which are forms of comfort in a physical sense that relate to ease and joy. Based on her understanding of comfort, she verdicts that 'their [British] apartments, tone of society, and life apparatus do not seem comfortable to me.'[8] For example, she draws on St. Martin's Abbey, the house of her host, Cecilia, which, in Berlepsch's view, can be seen as representative of all apartments of wealthy, middle-class families.

Berlepsch and the daily routes of women

Berlepsch acknowledges the perfection of the façade, with its partitions, decoration, and use of sandstone, but notes that the way the British apartments are organized on the inside wouldn't be comfortable for German women. In the following, she describes how the rooms dedicated to women are scattered across the different floors of the building and sketches the routes of the female inhabitants, walking us through them. In relation to the wealth of the building, she argues, it would be very uncomfortable for German women not to inhabit a series of rooms that follow each other. Instead, sleeping quarters are located on the top floor, while the clothes and the equipment for reading, writing, and working are kept on the second floor (Berlepsch, 1803, p. 169).

Her reflections resonate with broader late eighteenth-century architectural discourse that treated *Bequemlichkeit* as a key measure of domestic design and cultural refinement. Contemporary treatises such as Johann Christoph Schmidt's Der *Bürgerliche Baumeister* (1790) and Georg Suckow's *Erste Gründe der Bürgerlichen Baukunst* (1781) reveal how comfort had become both an architectural and a moral category, linking spatial order to social progress. Schmidt presents the modernization of domestic architecture as an index of civilization, arguing that as 'culture increases, and customs and ways of thinking change, dwellings require more elegance and convenience than in former times' (Schmidt, 1790, p. 5). Both authors equate comfort with the efficiency of domestic labor and the moral order of the bourgeois household (Schmidt, 1790, pp. 10-11; Suckow, 1781, p. 4). While Schmidt and Suckow articulated comfort as a design principle, Berlepsch grounds it in her lived experience, measuring architecture through movement, routine, and effort. She describes how women are required to spend the day on the lowest level of the house, in a common parlor where personal belongings cannot remain and where social traffic is constant. From there, they must descend further to perform domestic labor in the kitchen and cellar.

[8] '(…) so muss ich sagen, das mir ihre [Britische] Wohnungen, ihr Gesellschaftston, ihr ganzer Lebens-Apparat, nicht comfortable dünkt.' (Berlepsch, 1803, p. 169).

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With such an arrangement, Berlepsch continues, 'we would feel that we were badly equipped for our health and comfort.'[9]

This experience of physical effort and vertical movement is inseparable from the social choreography of domestic space. As Berlepsch observes:

> It is well known that no woman, of whatever rank or age, can accept any visit in her own sitting room, but it must be in the common parlor, which is always downstairs in the house. Thus, the drawing-room, where the ladies go after dinner, must be quite distant, if possible, on a different floor, from the dining room, where the men are left to the often somewhat tumultuous enjoyment of the bottle.[10]

Here, domestic comfort emerges not as a matter of furnishings or decoration but as a gendered condition produced through the organization of space. Women's bodies are required to move repeatedly between floors, rooms, and degrees of visibility, while men remain spatially anchored. Architecture thus structures both physical labor and sociability, distributing effort, exposure, and rest unevenly along gendered lines. However, her position is not only gendered but also classed, since she does not take the servants into account when considering what a comfortable floor plan means.

Berlepsch describes the domestic only through the activities of certain women, the inhabitants. As Karin Wurst notes, 'domesticity is experienced through activity but also through an ephemeral atmosphere or ambience' (Wurst, 2023, p. 145). Dell Upton argues that bodily memory is formed through 'repeated action in organized time and space' (Upton, 2002, p. 720). Having lived in this house for some time, Berlepsch became familiar with its layout by repeatedly walking through it; this repeated action informed her and enabled her to develop a broader idea of a comfortable floor plan. For Berlepsch, it is not the material, the objects, or the design that determines a comfortable home; it is, first and foremost, the physical distance the body has to cover to perform daily life in the house (Wurst, 2023, p. 148).

For Berlepsch, comfort here refers to convenience and the organization of the rooms. A convenient house meant a rational and functional spatial organization that could meet the owner's needs for both representation and everyday living (Stobart, 2022, p. 23). Berlepsch identifies the tension between aesthetics and practicalities, external appearance and internal organization. While these observations emerge from the effort and repetition of the gentry women's movements through the house, they also anticipate Berlepsch's broader concern with how domestic space organizes visibility, sociability, and gendered roles.

Berlepsch's observations also address how domestic space organizes degrees of privacy and publicity within the house. She notes the differentiated use of rooms, such as the drawing room, where women would withdraw after dinner to brew coffee or tea, while men remained in the dining room. Only later would the men join the women in the drawing room. Such practices exemplify the socially codified use of space, in which the structure of rooms not only shapes movement but also the timing and visibility of gendered sociability.

Architectural historians have often emphasized the representational and political functions of the country house. As Mark Girouard argued, the country house operated as a 'powerhouse': not merely a residence for affluent families, but a seat of the ruling class, rooted in land ownership and designed to display authority, refinement, and success through architecture, furniture, and textiles (Girouard, 1978, p. 2). Within this framework, interiors served both representational spaces and as spaces of dwelling. Berlepsch's account sits uneasily within this representational logic. Her repeated expressions of irritation during social encounters and domestic routines can be read as a refusal to conform to the expected decorum of admiration and display. Her concern with comfort was not focused on the quality of the armchairs, heating, or lighting, but rather on the spatial organization of the rooms. The domestic thus emerges not merely as a spatial arrangement or a symbol of power, but as a lived, gendered, and classed environment, one in which comfort operates as both a material and a moral category, unevenly distributed through everyday practice.

CONCLUSION

Emilie von Berlepsch reflects on the general layout of middle-class houses at St. Martin's Abbey, a shift enabled by her longer stay, which allowed her to familiarize herself with the place and establish routines. Her recommendation letters opened doors for her, drawing her into these sites of consumption and display. Yet she

[9] '(…) so würden wir uns für unsere Gesundheit und Bequemlichkeit schlecht eingerichtet glauben.' (Berlepsch, 1803, p. 170).

[10] 'Es ist bekannt, das kein Frauenzimmer, wes Standes und Alters es sey, irgend einen Besuch in ihrem eigenen Wohnzimmer annehmen kann. sondern es muß im allgemeinen Sprachzimmer, (Parloir) das allezeit unten im Hause ist, geschehen. So muß auch das Theezimmer, (Drawing Room) wohin sich die Damen nach dem Essen begeben, ganz entfernt, wo möglich in einem andern Stockwerke seyn, als das Esszimmer, wo die Männer, dem oft etwas tumultuarischen Genuß der Flasche überlassen bleiben.' (Berlepsch, 1803, pp. 171–172).

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refused to follow the expected decorum of praising and acknowledging the decorations and exquisite furnishings. Her resistance, however, stemmed from a position of privilege, as access itself was never in question; at least she made it seem that way.

Comfort emerges as one of her key parameters for judging the quality of living. For her, a comfortable house is not defined by its lavish furniture or exquisite design. Instead, comfort is determined by the physical distance a body must cover to carry out daily life within space. This focus on the spatial organization of the home reveals an embodied understanding of comfort, one that positions the movement of the body and convenience at its core. However, Berlepsch's analysis is selective, as she fails to consider the bodies of the servants who inhabit and perform labor within these spaces. This omission underscores her positionality and the privilege embedded in her perspective: her comfort relies on a clear separation between those who own and those who serve, a hierarchical spatial and social division. It obscures the fact that the labor of the servants sustains the comfort of the gentry. In articulating her definition of comfort, Berlepsch engages in comparison and othering, evaluating the 'other' through criteria such as comfort, hygiene, and food. She defines comfort not only in terms of physical ease but also through cultural assumptions that dismiss or overlook the lived realities of other classes. The absence of a reflection on the German way of living may be because Berlepsch assumes her audience, Germans, would already share these norms or standards.

Discomfort became central to my own affective engagement with Berlepsch's account, particularly as I navigated the archives and grappled with how to immerse myself in the landscapes she encountered. I was confronted with the discrepancies between theoretical research and my embodied experience of moving through these spaces. This led me to weave together different temporalities, personal narrative, historical inquiry, and the complexities of architectural historiographical writing to address frictions and tensions between body and the built environment, discomfort, and failure. What began as a re-enactment of her experiences transformed into a broader reflection on navigating spaces through tension. The *affective anecdote*, as developed in this paper, provides a way to admit those situated frictions: moments of uncertainty, awkwardness, or failure as methodological evidence. It translates affect into critique without depoliticizing it. Attending to the affective and embodied dimensions of research allows us to perceive architecture as a system of orientations: who it welcomes, who it disciplines, and who it dismisses. These encounters demonstrate that writing architectural history is not a detached act of observation, but a situated, bodily process shaped by context, capacity, and positionality.

Ultimately, this study sketches an approach to feminist architectural historiography that is attentive to discomfort as an epistemic condition. To write from discomfort is not to seek resolution or empathy, but to acknowledge the uneven distribution of access, visibility, and ease. Structural conditions shape how we navigate space and how we are affected. Writing from discomfort treats the bodily encounter as a site where politics materialize in space. In placing Berlepsch's eighteenth-century reflections beside my own twenty-first-century experiences, the paper does not conflate them. Still, it lets their frictions speak between comfort and its critique, privilege and exclusion, architecture and its discontent.

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Author contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conceptualization, research, analysis, and writing, as well as the preparation of the manuscript.

Data availability

The sources analyzed in this study consist of publicly available primary literary texts and secondary sources cited in the reference list. No new datasets were generated for this study.

AI disclosure

Grammarly was used to improve clarity, grammar, and spelling. The author retains full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Biographical sketch

Elena Rieger is an Art Historian and PhD candidate at the Group Hultzsch in the Architectural History and Theory Institute at ETH Zurich. She is part of the ERC funded project 'Women Writing Architecture: Female Experiences of the Built 1700-1900' (WoWA). Her PhD research focuses on women as recipients, critics, and theorists of the built environment in the 18th and 19th centuries and centers around their embodied experiences.

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