

Animals, with their myriad superhuman senses, can teach us new unprecedented ways of occupying space.

Companion Species

Living with animals is not a new idea. Though today our animal cohabitants are generally limited to our pets, scarcely 100 years ago, we lived with more animals in more shared spaces, more frequently. Where did they go, and why has this changed? And moreover, what would a return to greater cohabitation look like in today's world?

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Illustration: Brandon Youngt

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There are roughly 163 million pets in the United States. Approximately 44 per cent of all households in the United States have a dog, and 35 per cent have a cat. Said another way, that's nearly one pet for every two humans in the U.S.

And while pet ownership is popular and likely on the rise, our interaction with animal life in general is increasingly prescribed, controlled, and in decline. But this has not always been the case, and is in fact contrary to the bulk of human history. Not all that long ago, animals and humans – though, really, we're animals too – intermingled closely throughout the day in our public and private lives. Cities were filled with non-human life: Horses pulled trollies, street carts, and wagons down urban streets; pigs, chickens, and other fowl were kept loose in small city plots; pets and domesticated animals roamed neighbourhoods. The great cities of the 18th and 19th centuries like New York, London, Paris, and Berlin were rife with animal life. Between 1718 and 1852 the number of London cows grew from 6,000 to over 20,000 at its peak,

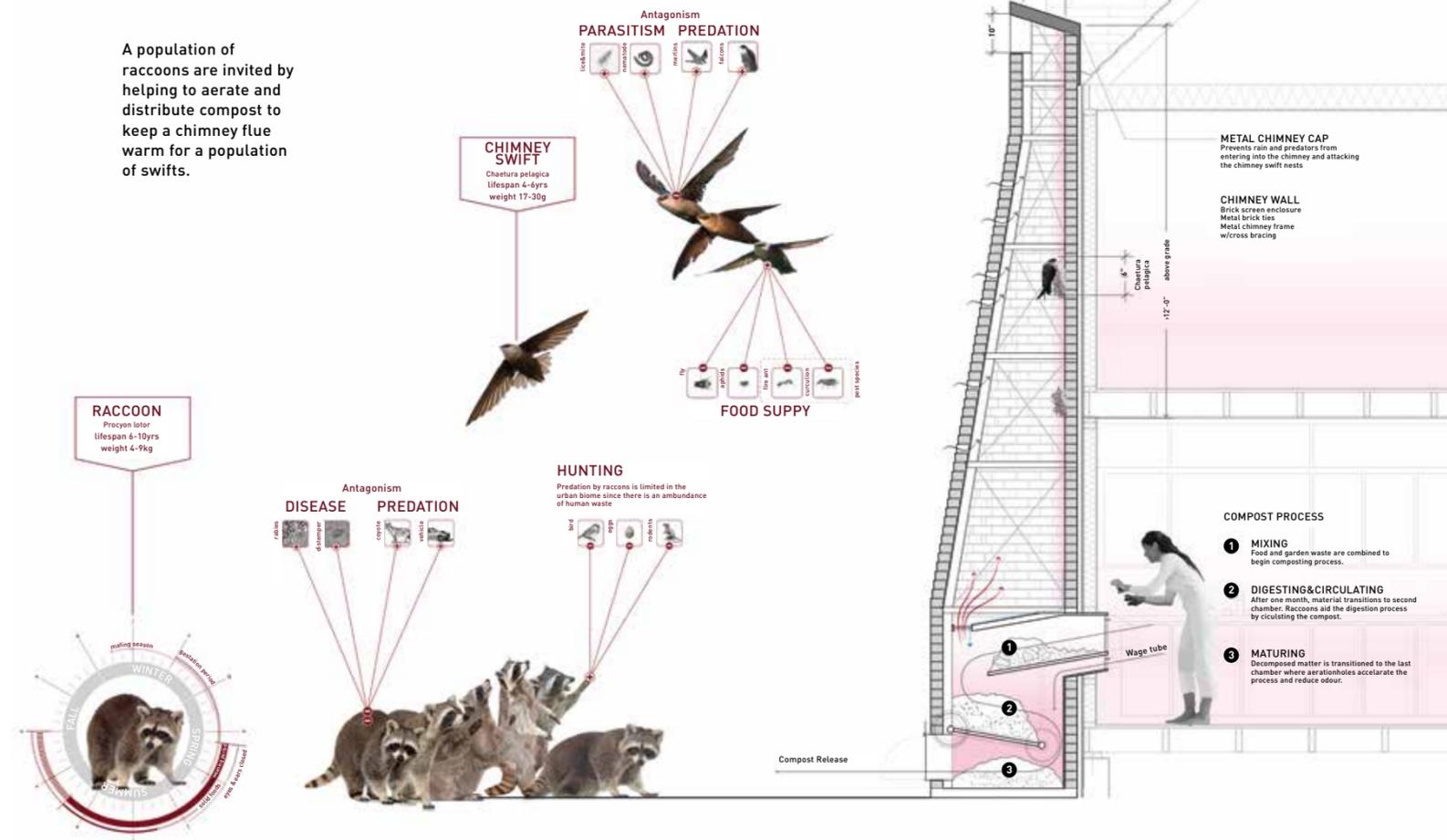
dropping slightly to 18,000 by 1914. Similarly impressive figures can be found for other animals: 200,000 horses in London at the end of the 19th century, and hundreds of thousands of pigs, sheep, fowl, and other animals.

Animal cities

The Georgian and Victorian city was filled with a constant animal presence in almost every aspect of city life, with all of the accompanying sounds, smells, blood, guts, and frankly, disease-inducing conditions. But by the 19th century, things began to change. City planners had taken a proactive attitude towards reducing animal waste in urban centres, and popular attitudes towards cleanliness, miasma, and disease were also changing. The presence and popularity of the newly built London Zoo was a further indication of a growing trend of separating and reconsidering animal life and value in the European city. And by the start of the Second World War, most animal life had been dramatically reduced in

European cities. In Paris, for example, the horse population plummeted from 110,000 in 1902 to 22,000 in 1933. Today's cities, not only Western but in general, have almost no animal life in their cores, and if they do, it is strongly curtailed.

But perhaps this is all soon to change. Despite the century-long trend of declining urban animal life, there is an increasing desire among many designers, planners, and thinkers to reintroduce an animal presence in our contemporary lives and cities. Driven by the growing threats of climate change, population growth, and rising species extinctions, their projects ask questions about how we could co-exist with a greater biodiversity in denser, more populated areas, about the benefits of animal cohabitation, and about what the messy, less romantic consequences of this would be. Several strategies have presented themselves: Co-species cohabitation, urban agricultural projects, and urban greenscaping each offer new and varied lenses through which we can start to rethink living more



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closely with our animal counterparts. Some of these are a reawakening of dormant ideals, some are indeed boldly avant garde.

Co-species cohabitation

Living in closer proximity with our animal companions, as any devoted pet owner will tell you, is a foundational, loving, and transformative experience. And there are numerous benefits to living with pets: decreased stress, decreased blood pressure and levels of cholesterol and triglycerides, as well as decreased feelings of loneliness. Overall, pet-ownership results in increased longevity, and a greater desire for physical activity and socialisation. If we can happily coexist with dogs and cats, why not with raccoons, owls, or squirrels? Though the thought of inviting “pests” into our homes might strike some as off-putting, several designers are proposing just that – if not quite to the extent of our domesticated companion species.

The works of two architects, Sarah Gunawan and Joyce Hwang, stand out in this field for their beguiling and sensitive invitations to non-human life. Sarah Gunawan, currently the Reyner Banham Fellow at the University of Buffalo, NY, developed her graduate thesis at the University of Waterloo, entitled *Suburban Appendages*, to address synanthropic species in the typical North American suburb. In her thesis, she displays an array of ways in which the average Canadian or American home could be host to more than a nuclear family. In the proposals shown here, a small roost is constructed on the home for nesting barn owls, bats are invited to hang out between wooden slats along an exterior wall, and a population of raccoons are invited by helping to aerate and distribute compost while foraging through residential waste. Moreover, the project suggests that these non-human activities can be symbiotic, not only benefitting the human inhabitants but the other animal lives. In this newly outfitted animal-centric suburb,

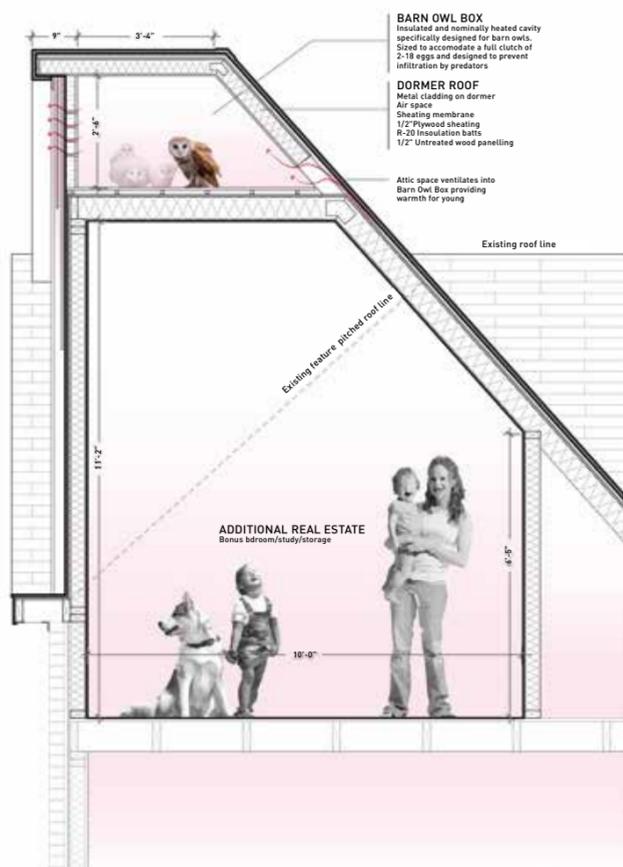
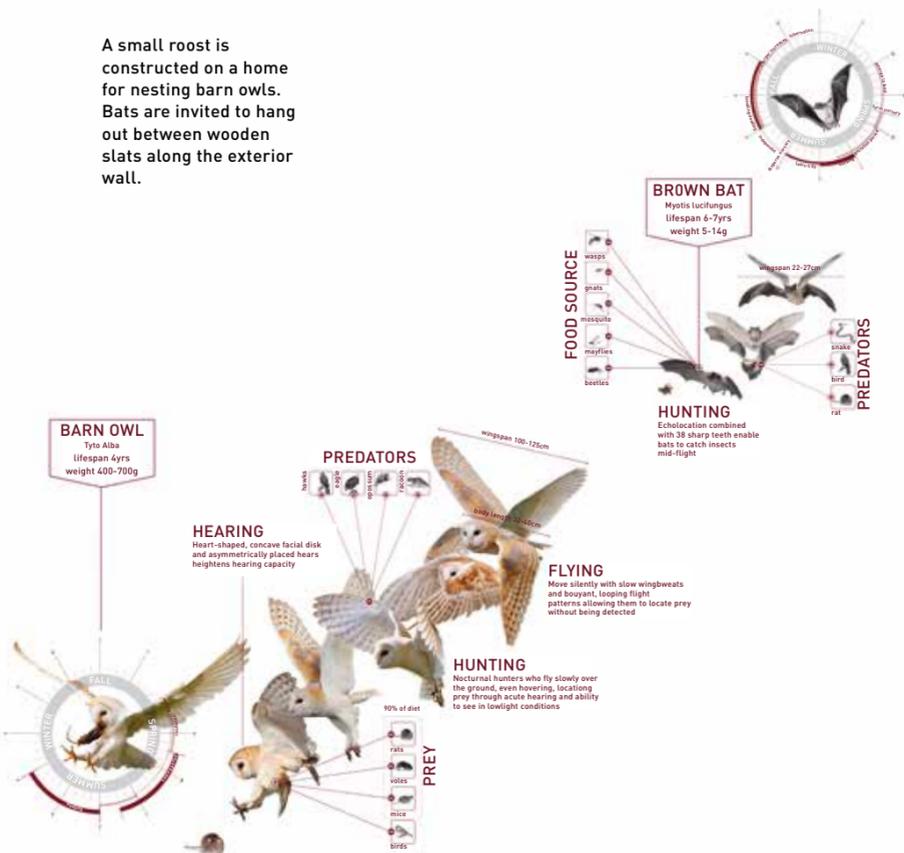
compost-turning raccoons keep a chimney flue warm for a population of swifts, insects drawn to the residential waste become food for the bat population, and owls feed on smaller rodents. Each action creates an inter-linked and interdependent world – a web of animal life.

Joyce Hwang, director of the experimental practice Ants of the Prairie and associate professor of architecture at SUNY Buffalo, has developed several built animal-centric designs. Two projects, Bat Tower and Bat Cloud, also show how successful animal habitats can be when designed for symbiotic uses: In Bat Tower, an installation outside of a park in upstate New York, native plants known to draw insect life are encouraged to colonise a structure for roosting bats. Similarly, Bat Cloud elevates a planted garden into a tree canopy to provide food and roosts for local bats.

But clearly, other than personal, emotional, or ecological benefits, the main reason that people have lived with other animals is agricultural.

Illustration: Sarah Gunawan

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Again, the period in Western cities from the 17th to 19th centuries seems to be an aberration of human history: Throughout the majority of human civilisation, the garden has been a central and arguably centralising part of normal life. But as the large metropolitan cities of the 18th century modernised and densified, agricultural activities were driven further and further out, and the small urban garden disappeared. But more and more designers are harvesting the potential of urban agriculture in their designs, for instance Carey Clouse and Zach Lamb of the Massachusetts-based architecture office Crooked Works. Both architects by training, they address the tough issues of urban identity, food security, and environmental stewardship through design interventions. Their projects Cart Coop and Window Unit reenvision domestic life with food-producing domestic animals.

In Window Unit, fish, chicken, and bees are each positioned within reach of the kitchen. Cart Coop transforms your basic

shopping cart into a sophisticated chicken roost, repurposing a discarded commercial tool and suggesting a kind of literal farm-to-table approach to farming, where one can push a mobile coop right up to your doorstep. Still, many other architects and landscape architects are designing apiaries on urban roof tops, raised planter beds, and indoor hanging gardens.

Urban Greenscaping

One line of thinking, and an increasingly popular strategy for promoting animal life in our urban cores, views the city as a whole as a place for increased biodiversity. For decades, a pervasive sense that “nature” does not exist in city centres has dominated how we define animal life in and outside of cities. But a growing group of landscape architects, ecologists and planners, bolstered by increasing scientific studies in ecosystem services, are changing this perspective. They argue that

animal life indeed already exists in urban centres and can in fact flourish there.

Urban landscapes, rather than commingling the human and animal spheres as closely as in the above, aim to achieve a kind of pan-species balance between our built and unbuilt environments. These are projects that generally seek to soften urban infrastructure and to create “green ways” in, around, and through metropolitan areas. Many of these projects are large-scale landscape projects like Arc Wildlife Crossing located along I-70 in Colorado’s Vail Pass, the acclaimed Highline in New York City, and Houston’s Buffalo Bayou Park, a beautiful, snaking greenway through the heart of a major urban metropolis. But urban greenscaping interventions can be smaller – working at the scale of a bird house, a bee hive, an insect hotel, or a bird perch. The projects of the Houston-based Expanded Studio, the London-based 51 per cent Studios, and Lisa Lee Benjamin’s Zurich-based studio are all representative examples of the myriad ways in which small-scaled

interventions can be deployed within the built environment to encourage animal colonisation.

There is yet another way of approaching this discussion of alternative-species roommates. And that is through the lens of post-humanism – or rather, through our own and generally neglected animism. There are two basic truths here: First – we are already animals. Even alone, we have roommates, permanent roommates. Our bodies are home to millions of micro-organisms that are certainly not human. The micro-biome in our stomachs and intestines is probably the best example of these symbiotic housemates.

But there are countless other mites, bacteria, and small organisms that make human life possible. We are all of them. From this perspective, the idea of living with other animals is a centrally human condition. In fact, it would contradict a key part of our humanity to not recognise non-human lives in our world. Artists, designers and architects working in this field

show us a new, or neglected, side of our humanity and offer that in a posthuman world, a world where possibly humans recognise that they are one of many, many key species, a truer sense of cohabitation could be achieved.

Designer and architect Simone Ferracina’s Theriomorphous Cyborg, for example, offers a human user the ability to enter into the animal world of a pigeon or a mouse. Sense perception would be reorganised according to the animal of choice and the world would appear to be a very different place. In praise of dust, a student project by Young-Tack Oh, and a recipient of the 2015 Expanded Environment Awards, celebrates the microcosm of microbial life in a series of architectural ornamental designs. Similarly, the work of Brandon Youndt, an LA-based designer focused on the coexistence of animals and architecture, illustrates ethereal worlds where traditional boundaries of animal/human, animate/inanimate, are transgressed, reshaping human and animal perceptions of the environment.

Future thoughts

Architecture, cohabitation, and animal life are not your typical bed-fellows – or at least haven’t been in the Western world for the last century. After peaking in the 19th and 20th centuries, animal populations in urban life quickly declined and the animals themselves have been continuously marginalised since. But, while we grapple with cataclysmic ecological events and as the world’s population soars to new heights, how we relate and inter-relate to other animal life will become critical to our own survival. Whether it’s living more closely with a greater variety of synanthropic animals or by understanding ourselves to be more complexly animalistic, our future will depend on the value we place on a rich urban ecology. Should we return to a time where horses pulled trollies and pigs roamed the streets? Perhaps not... but should we marvel at and welcome other life into our urban cores – a coyote, a hawk, or a moose? Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.

Illustration: Sarah Ginnawan