

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

Companion Species

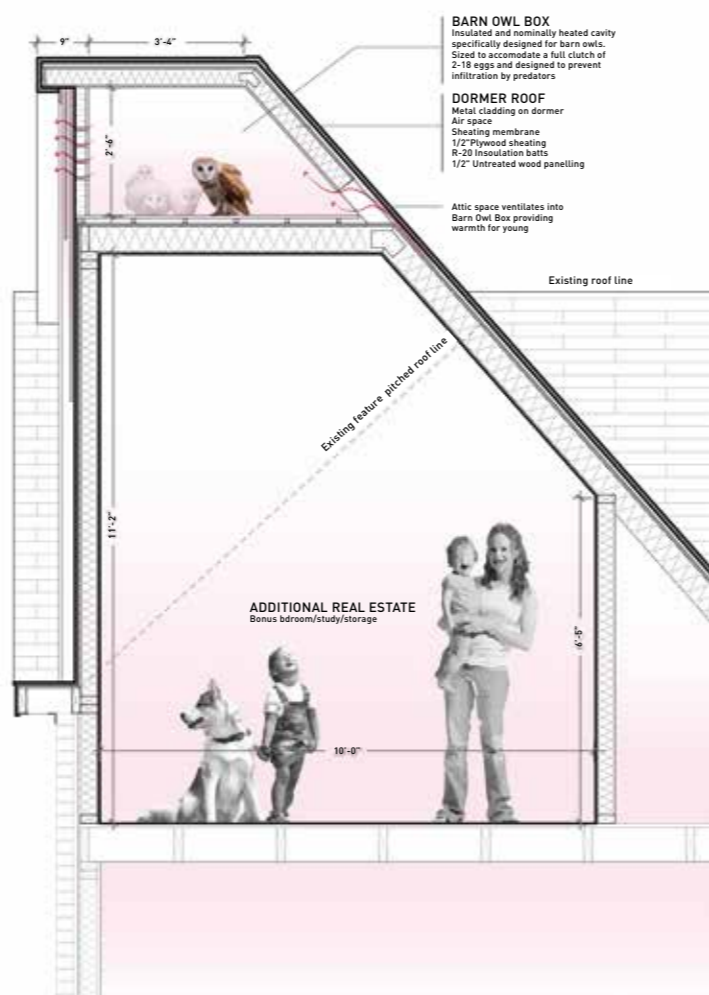
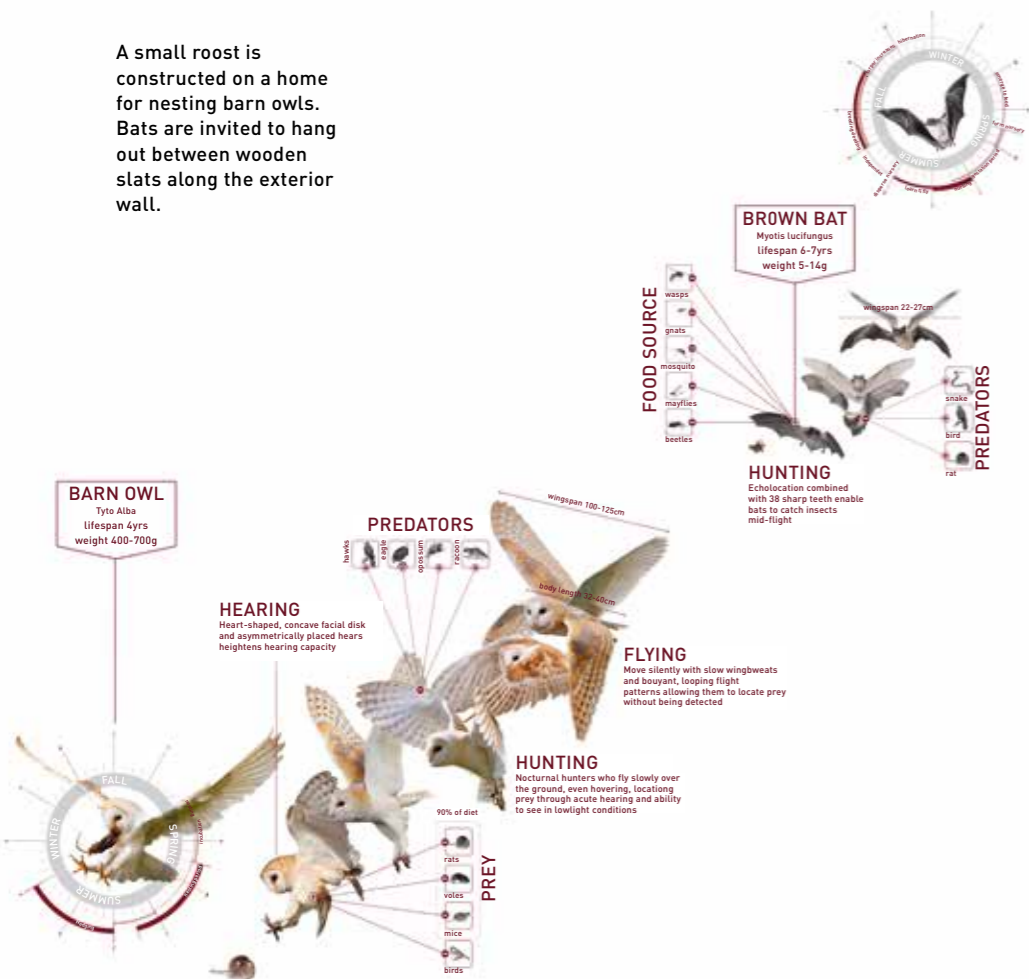
Living with animals is not a new idea. Though today our animal cohabitants are generally limited to our pets, scarcely 100 years ago, we lived with more animals in more shared spaces, more frequently. Where did they go, and why has this changed? And moreover, what would a return to greater cohabitation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

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Illustration: Brandon Youngt

A small roost is constructed on a home for nesting barn owls. Bats are invited to hang out between wooden slats along the exterior wall.



There are numerous benefits to living with pets: decreased stress, decreased blood pressure (...) as well as decreased feelings of loneliness.

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. Second – we are also already multiple 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 Gumanwan