

Housing the Urban Animal

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The topic of housing design, interpreted in the broadest sense, could be conceived of as any space that hosts a living creature. Thus, in this entry-level design studio, students began by designing a dwelling space for an animal client. Animals were selected because our cohabitation with them improves, supports, and sustains not only human life, but also our biosphere. These clients provide a range of productive services, such as their ability to pollinate, or to provide food, clothing, pest control, or fertilizer.

The intention of this project was not to replicate the shelter that a client would build for themselves but, rather, to use the otherness of a different species as a prompt to critically think about dwelling. In so doing, students were required to shed preconceived notions that might accompany the design for a human client as well as to intensely investigate geometries, morphologies, materials, and methods to create a module for animal living. Freed from relying on their own lived experience and typical professional norms, the students could grapple with the notions of idealized structure, necessary utility, and the contingencies of site, territory, and available material. Importantly, students considered how a “designed” shelter might differ from one produced by the client or natural forces.

At the center of this inquiry was the question: Might an intentionally designed module repair or remediate an urban condition?

While it would be hubris to think that humans could design habitation for creatures that surpass those they produce for themselves, the intention of this design inquiry was to humbly pursue multiple pedagogical objectives. By exploring the geometries, materials, and methods of other creatures’ habitats, students began to view human architectural precedents with a more finely tuned tectonic lens. The diversity of responses is evidence that the strategy successfully challenged students to shed the derivative architectural forms that haunt many studio projects and develop a shared bank of design generators more relevant to their future design investigations.

We structured the project by pairing students with animal clients, which were randomly assigned at the very beginning of the assignment. The species offered included bees, bats, birds, oysters, tilapia, ducks, guinea pigs, and rabbits. In part these animals were selected for study because they have much to offer humans---but they also were chosen because, unlike typical household pets, they represent an otherness that requires students to

move beyond their existing knowledge base. Students performed initial research on their animal client, using the unique characteristics of that species to stretch their design language and repertoire.

Through this 2-week process, students sought to repair or remediate environmental conditions, address habitat loss, and educate humans about their animal client. Heightened environmental awareness formed a natural learning outcome, as the project exploration prompted students to consider the impacts of urban development on animal habitat, to gain empathy for our planets’ co-inhabitants, and to become advocates for other living creatures.



HOUSING

the URBAN ANIMAL

A housing design and research project that explores the practical and poetic expression of materials and construction for cross-species cohabitation

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