

Pigeon Towers and Donkey Paths

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A brand-new pigeon tower stands by the river Thames; the New Tate Modern in London. A brick building with small recesses and niches, and masonry reminiscent of brick expressionism; both a modern industrial building and a medieval pigeon tower. The building was designed by Basel-based architects Herzog & de Meuron in 2007, and was planned to feature a glass façade, which one year later was converted into a perforated brick façade enclosing an ornamental glass body within. From the outside, the building looks like the ideal nesting and breeding site for city pigeons: once at home in rock faces, in latter-day city settings they need cornices and niches to survive.

The city pigeon is actually a feral domestic pigeon, a farm animal used as a messenger as well as sustenance, before the American broiler chicken challenged its spot in the food chain. Today, it is, above all, a stray cat of the air, a feral animal that found its ideal home in cities of stone, and making the most of *Gründerzeit* stucco, ornamental facades and wall crannies. Whooshing over our heads in swarms, in Venice they are to be seen on every photo, the epitome of a tourist picture trophy.

The pigeon flaunts so many connotations, good and bad, symbolic and emblematic, that you can fill entire books with it. Its excrements, said to be corrosive, are widely loathed, while in other segments of the garden market, the excrements of Antarctic penguins offer salvation for balcony fauna. Today, the pigeon is the only species in Germany to breed in and around buildings without enjoying legal protection. Bats have it better, though of course they are not feral, but dutifully tick all the boxes of the threatened wild animal worthy of protection. (Statistically, things don't look too bright for the pigeon either.)

None of which is the bat's fault. The blame lies with the hierarchical order as defined by human beings. They are the ones who have a problem with the stray dogs of Moscow, who shrewdly cross the city by subway, but also with any cats or pigeons who have escaped domestication. Current polls suggest that city dwellers associate many of their everyday troubles with fellow inhabitants such as crows and magpies, rabbits

and foxes, along with rats, of course, and show little interest in the species with which they share urban space today. Hygiene discourses, on a warpath with dirt and disease, do further disservice to those non-human city dwellers threatened with exile.

Over in London, one is not particularly pleased with the city pigeon either. The New Tate Modern's claim to be a pigeon tower is mere pretence. In fact, the architects went to great lengths to make the openings too small for pigeons to access. The openings in the outer façade refer to historical pigeon towers only symbolically; in reality, the facade does all it can to be a pigeon repellent. The New Tate Modern building, monument to contemporary art, unites everything contemporary art stands for today: global attention is garnered with enormous production budgets (the New Tate Modern boasts the biggest sponsoring project ever), and by quoting formats from a great diversity of contexts, but bereft of any genuine function. From a pigeons' perspective, the building perfectly epitomizes the gestural symbolism contemporary art and its architecture widely prefer: representing something one does not actually do.

The museum building in London is rooted in a long tradition of urban planning and architecture that expelled the animals the very moment they became obsolete. Up until the 19th century, cities were still the abode of farm animals – horse-drawn street carriages, along with backyard cows, pigs and chickens shaped the everyday image of the city, even London's. Those sheds, dragoon areas and royal stables have now become objects of land speculation and gentrification. And yet, modern city development discourses addressing the animal are of key importance to the enforcement of urban modernity itself.

As philosopher Fahim Amir points out, this exclusion was already inscribed within the Athenian definition of the polis, as a place to which neither animals, nor plants, slaves or women have access, but in which only free *anthropodes* may hang around, in that know-it-all style of theirs, while the others toil away at the margins, or are eaten wholesale. A vision not unfamiliar

to modernism, as in, for example Louis Mumford's introduction to the International Congress of Architecture; "The Heart of the City". According to Mumford, the polis, as a city ideal, is not a cluster of houses, but a meeting place and a place of public affairs, and therefore a place of government in and of itself. Mumford contrasts urban citizens with the existence of peasants, who are still subject to the cultivation of plants. According to Mumford, it is the tradition of the Greco-Roman city that has radically detached itself from the geo-botanical cosmos. Mumford's ideal of the modern city deliberately turns its back on the countryside, "to free man from the communion of plants and animals", as he puts it. (Mumford 2000: 207)

The architect Le Corbusier also banned animal life from his vision of the modern city. In his 1925 text "The City of Tomorrow", Le Corbusier describes the city dweller as a purposeful being: "The human being walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going. He has set himself the goal of reaching a certain place, and he is going there directly." (Le Corbusier 1967 [1925]: 11f). An assumption that later drove the Situationists up the wall, and had them pit "traces" and "derives" against the modernist fantasy of order. Corbusier contrasts the figure of the purposeful human being with that of a donkey, which boycotts the modernist fantasy with its supposed inertia, laziness, and stubbornness: "The pack donkey wanders along, meditates in its absent-minded manner, and meanders to evade larger stones, or to facilitate the ascent, or to gain a little shade; it takes the line of least resistance [...] The path of the pack donkey is responsible for the map of every continental city." (Le Corbusier 1967 [1925]: 11f). As a farm animal, the donkey embodies a whole range of headaches for Le Corbusier, and his urban-architectural vision of a new human being. The donkey stands for the intricate, medieval and Mediterranean urban layout, which does not follow planned grids, but organic growth patterns, and which simply sidesteps a given obstacle – instead of attempting to overcome it by any engineering means necessary.

According to Cathrine Ingraham, for Corbusier, the donkey is the "recurring figure of resistance to modernity and of decorative *froufrou* and dilatory historicism". (Ingraham 1998: 65). While according to Fahim Amir, the donkey, a disorderly pack animal, becomes the saboteur of Le Corbusier's aesthetic politics of the straight line, methodical and abstract. This imago of an orderly, purified and sanitized city, bereft of any species but the *anthropos* itself, brings with it the streamlined animal slaughterhouses, the mechanization of food production, the industrialization of agriculture and factory farming, but also the petting zoo, the zoo-at-large, the hamster wheel, the guinea pig cage and the terrarium. The violent fantasies and practices inherent to this system are mirrored in our fortified building facades, with their arsenal of quasi-military samizdat – nets, spikes, acoustics, predator dummies, dazzling mirrors and electric shocks.

The fact that the human animal has always created new habitats for non-human animals, through its buildings, houses, bridges and towers, remains an utterly subconscious, hidden reality. Think of the Norway Rats in our sewers, the sparrow colonies on our roof tiles, or modernist columns serving as fox shelters. In Hamburg's Hafencity, real estate prices are falling, as the many glass facades along the Elbe – an ever-shimmering source of light, and therefore a perfect attraction for insects – have become home to an armada of spiders which residents can no longer control. Ideal for spiders, bad for rentals.

It's astonishing that neither architectural discourse nor political theory have paid much attention to non-human animals as spacemakers and city actors – in the sense of Donna Haraway's concept of "companion species" – along the lines of an inter-species relation beyond containment and sadistic dominance.¹ This despite the introduction of animal protection laws as key leitmotifs in post-capitalist efforts and struggles. As in, for example, the Hermit Beetle leading to a short-term halt of the *Stuttgart 21* development, or the horseshoe bat – also known as "Hufi" – playing a similar role at the Dresden Waldschlösschenbrücke, or the many other construction blockades at the hands of environmental authorities, the new harbingers of investment horror and profit loss. The Hermit Beetle of Stuttgart now has its own website (eremit.net), and a reader of the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* daily demanded that the beetle be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, since it achieved what so many protesters have been unable to do. The beetle was indeed successful because it didn't only crawl around in trees, but at the very edges of our legislation (life is sweet in prime locations such as the Stuttgart palace gardens).

Studies have shown that the marked increase of wild animal migration into urban areas is due to a variety of causes. Animals are losing their habitats in the monocultures of industrialized agriculture, and food supply in the city is decent by comparison, if not better. This is not only on account of overflowing garbage cans, as is often claimed, but of the many parks, gardens, wastelands, abandoned ruins and construction sites, countless snack bars and food festivals, as well as our city architecture itself. In fact, for a variety of different species, a city is a decent habitat thanks to its nuanced spatial diversity, those many historical architectural phases and building types.

For the kestrel, a house can't be high enough. It loves the updrafts in the gorges of New York, and even

1 Donna Haraway is a biologist, science historian and feminist philosopher of science. In her writings, she questions the fixity of categories such as "human being", "nature", "technology" or "gender". Her Companion Species Manifesto deals with the implosion of nature and culture in the joint life of dogs and people who are connected through their "significant otherness". She uses the term "companion species" instead of (domestic) animals, as humans, being historical and social organisms, are affected by many species that do not fall into the animal category, such as insects and bacteria.

nests in balcony boxes. Other animals remain in the city because they are not hunted there. According to a study in Germany, deer increasingly settle on the outskirts of cities where hunters do not get to them. Sometimes, industrialization itself is the starting point for a better habitat, as in the case of the Sand Lizard, for which there could be no better place to settle than a railway track, with its hot sand, gravel beds and staggered side tracks.

But all these many examples cannot hide the fact that the very future of the wild animal is at stake: whatever doesn't go extinct is being eaten, usually by us humans. At the same time, with new urban developments and new animal protection laws, a new constellation of habitats has emerged, one that favours new forms of cohabitation. New forms of coexistence are already a reality. However, the new legal situation has also established a new hierarchy of protection, one that continues to hunt down city pigeons, even as it protects coal titmice.

Setting aside the hands-on interventions within existing habitats, the above also implies a new spatial discourse, and a new approach to building design. Both of which became noticeable on the fringes of the "Animal-Aided Design" conference January 2019. On the one hand, one noticed a problematic contrast between the idea of "target species", and a general normalisation of animal protection in building laws. On the other hand, housing cooperatives now combine post-capitalist goals with new green spaces, and with facade innovations in the name of animal protection, thereby inventing entirely new fields of activity for themselves. When an Ingoldstadt housing cooperative collaborated with immigrant tenants on hedgehog tunnels, bee hives and sparrow colonies, the euphoric applause suggested a new way of becoming human, and becoming animal at that.

Can we also think of human relations as relations between species (beyond the known concepts of ecological diversity) – as a condition without which humans ultimately cannot exist? According to Anna Löwenhaupt Tsing, human exceptionalism has blinded us to the manifold interspecies relationships from which we ourselves have emerged. Löwenhaupt Tsing critically suggests an idea of human supremacy that modern science has inherited from the great monotheistic religions, and which to this day regards human autonomy and the control of nature as a given.

One of the many limitations of this heritage is that it considers the human species as autonomous, i.e. as a constant throughout culture and history. The notion of being the dominator of all other species has been instrumentalized among social conservatives and socio-biologists in order to support the most autocratic and militaristic of tropes, from the Alpha Animal to the natural pecking order. In its place, Löwenhaupt Tsing calls for thinking and acting within and through the interdependence of species.

Relations between species have historically shifted continuously between different types of dependencies. The idea that humans can only evolve in relation to

other species – i.e. through different forms of interaction and cooperation with other species around them – may in turn lead to new forms of politics and subjectification, far from neoliberal individualism. This approach would help us understand non-human animals as spacemakers with whom we live together, and to whom we owe not only construction delays, but also the very possibility of shaping our living spaces for a diversity of users, beyond pure exploitation, speculation and utilitarianism. Solidarity with the city pigeon, and the struggle against its expulsion, could in turn suggest that other stray, precarious, grimy city dwellers equally have a right to temporary housing, to social relevance and respect. It could imply that it is indeed unacceptable that human and non-human animals are being displaced and persecuted – when all they need is protection, care and autonomous, uncontrolled places. To think of the city as an interspecies relationship is to throw the separation of nature and culture onto the garbage dump of history, and to instead think of wastelands and ruins, foxhouses and skyscrapers, as interdependent urban spaces. As Donna Haraway insists, to think and act in our present time is to turn the socioeconomic and political contradictions of the modern city on their head. Inter-species spaces are created precisely to test new modes of subjectification and solidarity; after all, we already live together anyway.

Translated by Jana Thormählen

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