

Animal Architectures: An Introduction

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This semester in HMS220B (Advanced Literary and Critical Studies for Architects I), all of our reading and writing assignments were bound together by a theme: Animal Architectures. As a learning community, we studied how animals and their habitats are constructed and reconstructed in culture and media. Our interdisciplinary approach encompassed literature, film, visual art, new media, critical theory, and architecture. We paid particular attention to 1) the ways in which animal representations intersect with gender, race, class, sexuality and ethnicity; and 2) 21st century design practices that take the needs and desires of other animals into consideration. One goal of the course was to complicate the meanings of “human” and “animal” in order to decenter the humanist perspective and more responsibly take into account cross-species cohabitation and design. As such, students were encouraged to draw connections between this seminar and their design studio.

In particular, our study emphasized two forms of architecture that affect animals: zoos and slaughterhouses. Embracing political scientist and ethnographer Timothy Pachirat’s notion that academics should “[immerse] themselves in the lived experiences of those they [claim] authority over,” we took an experiential approach to our studies¹. On a cold Saturday in October, we removed “physical, social, [and] linguistic distances” and took a field trip to the Bronx Zoo, where we further considered enclosures, breeding, conservation, and species prejudice (Pachirat 240). Drawing on inquiries from moral philosopher Dale Jamieson’s “Against Zoos,” we asked: If the zoo’s mission is to conserve species that might otherwise die in the wild, is its architecture ethical? Is it effective or successful in terms of the zoo’s mission? Does the zoo’s rhetoric foster critical thinking, and if not, how might it revise its educational approaches? What do the zoo’s physical and linguistic structures reveal to us about species prejudice²? Following our visit, we considered recent projects by architects Bernard Tschumi³ and Bjarke Ingels, whose respective Paris and Copenhagen zoo redesigns purport to remove enclosures entirely.

In 2013, 9.1 billion animals were slaughtered in the United States alone (Humane Society via USDA).⁴ This industrialized killing is dependent on “mechanisms of distance and concealment,” or what Timothy Pachirat calls *the politics of sight* (ix). As Pachirat acknowledges, “the violence of industrialized killing also cuts against humans,” including those who work on the kill floor, a space segregated by gender and race⁵ (ix). As Cary Wolfe points out, “Violence against other humans (and particularly racially

¹ For the purpose of this presentation brief, I invoke Pachirat’s language regarding experiential scholarship. However, as my friend Timothy Terhaar—a critical animal studies scholar who attended the trip with us—points out: “A visit to the zoo is very unlike Pachirat’s employment at the slaughterhouse, not only because of the brevity of the trip, but also because the politics of sight at the zoo are the inverse of the slaughterhouse’s: The zoo promises us access to the spectacle of exotic animals!”

² For example, we found that the rhetoric of nuisance and scavenging used to describe grizzly bears drew a parallel between them and indigent populations.

³ On November 24, 2014, we attended Bernard Tschumi’s talk at The Cooper Union, where he discussed his Paris Zoo design in relation to his recent Centre Pompidou exhibition.

⁴ Not counting rabbits, fish, crustaceans, etc. (Humane Society)

⁵ For more on this topic, see page 73 in Pachirat’s *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, along with Charlie LeDuff’s article “At the Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die,” originally published in *The New York Times*.

marked others) has often operated by means of a double movement that animalizes them for the purposes of domination, oppression, or even genocide" (567). Indeed, there is a sociology that goes hand-in-hand with the architecture of slaughterhouses: a sociology that assumes "violence against the animal"—the other—"is ethically permissible" (Wolfe 567). This sociology is entwined with other forms of oppression, from the assassinations of young black men across the United States, to cases of sexual assault at universities, to the persecution of LGBTQ people.

While studying challenging texts by thinkers including Cary Wolfe ("Human, All Too Human"), Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), Georges Franju (*Le Sang des Bêtes*), Julio Cortázar ("Axotol"), Philip K. Dick ("Beyond Lies the Wub"), Gabrielle Cowperthwaite (*Blackfish*), Carol J. Adams (*The Sexual Politics of Meat*), Miru Kim (*The Pig That Therefore I Am*) and J.M. Coetzee (*The Lives of Animals*), we considered the practical, ethical, cross-cultural and local implications of our studies. How can *Gender Trouble* elucidate the sexual politics of meat, and how do these politics reveal themselves in advertisements for Carl's Jr., Hummer, and Brooklyn's own Fleisher's Meat? Can ethical eating destabilize the gender politics of meat, and if so, what spaces in Brooklyn support this practice? If the Bronx Zoo folded, how might an architect repurpose the space? Next semester, we will travel to the Woodstock Farm Animal Sanctuary to consider its architecture and hybrid program.

Animal Architectures germinated from the optimistic notion that the classroom can reflect a better world, and "that power operates through the creation of distance and concealment, and that our understandings of 'progress' and 'civilization' are inseparable from, and perhaps even synonymous with, the concealment (but not elimination) of what is increasingly rendered physically and morally repugnant" (Pachirat 14). One aim of the class—and of today's presentation—is to open a field of ethical inquiry by bringing the invisible to light via our own collective practice of reading, writing, and thinking. We remain committed to serious play, to one another, and to all beings everywhere. As co-investigators in this study, Andy, Brandon, Elizabeth and Nick's sense of energy, empathy and enthusiasm consistently inspire me: I am grateful for them and have no doubt that, as future architects, they will consider the social and political implications of their lives and work, and work to build a better world.

Works Cited

Pachirat, Timothy. *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Print.

Wolfe, Cary. "Human, All Too Human: 'Animal Studies' and the Humanities." *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 564-575. Print.