

Empathy, Architecture, and the Anthropocene

Designing spaces that cultivate empathy between humans and the nonhuman other

Priyanka Bista QUESTIONS

The history of architecture is deeply rooted in anthropocentrism and speciesism, resulting in an ongoing exclusion of nonhumans. The biodiversity crisis inherent in the Anthropocene also stems from this superiority complex that views humans as separate and superior to other species. So, how do we disrupt this anthropocentric narrative and bridge this disconnect by designing spaces that enable humans to learn, engage, and cultivate empathy towards the “nonhuman other?”

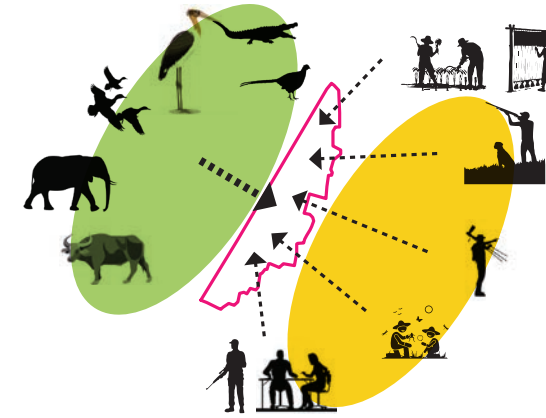
PROMPT

Although humans are only one species within an estimated 10-13 million species inhabiting this planet, we continue to occupy and design our landscapes with a predominantly anthropocentric frame of reference. The current dialogue on sustainability or sustainable design is also fundamentally anthropocentric and, therefore, doesn't integrate species beyond humans. In the article, “Biodiversity: the new challenge for architecture,” Dr. Brian Edwards acknowledges this critical problem. The Green Building movement that started in the 1970s has evolved extensively with numerous certifications. Still, today, the criteria for biodiversity conservation have been marginally addressed.

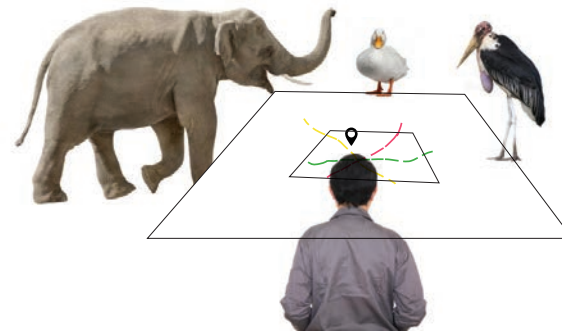
Within this context, it is essential to understand the role of architecture and design in assisting biodiversity conservation and rethinking a new form of architecture that considers all living beings equal stakeholders or users of the spaces.

CONTEXT

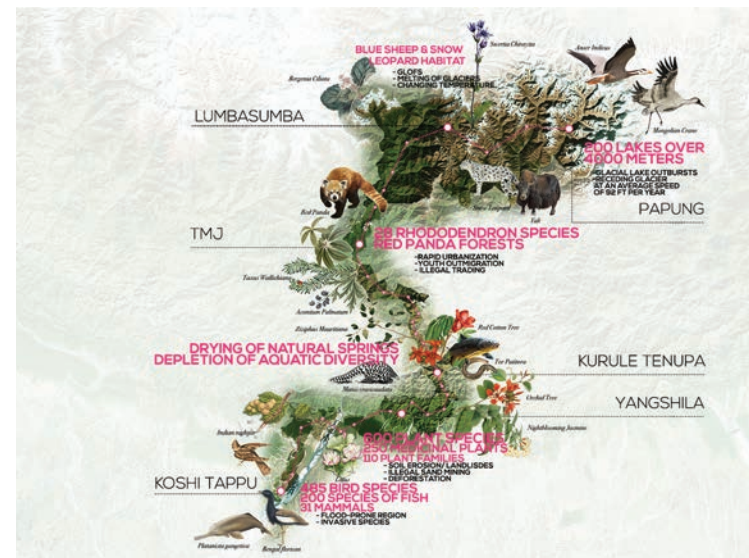
The studio will be situated within the context of a project initiated by the instructor, the “Vertical University,” based in the Eastern Region of Nepal. The project emerged from an interest in working with local communities and activating the learning potential inherent in biodiversity-rich landscapes found in the vertical gradient of Eastern Nepal. The project begins from the lowland Terai region to the high Himalayas. The studio will focus on the lowest node in Koshi Tappu adjacent to the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR), the first RAMSAR wetland site of 173sq km of Nepal situated on the Sapta Koshi River floodplains.



Koshi Tappu site concept (Source: instructor)



Multispecies design concept (Source: instructor)



The Vertical university concept (Source: KTK-BELT studio)

The Koshi region is also considered an Important Bird Area (IBA), providing a vital habitat for 526 bird species, 670 vascular plants, 32 mammal species, 45 herpetofauna species, 127 fish species, and 77 butterfly species. Currently, the region is undergoing many social and ecological problems with increasing urbanization pressures, the proliferation of invasive species, and human-wildlife conflicts, leading to the destruction of bird habitats.

In collaboration with the local community organization, we've acquired a parcel of land to turn into a living biodiversity classroom for the community. The studio will focus on designing a series of biodiversity portals or interventions connecting the local communities to the multiple species within site, whether a bird, a bee, or an elephant. As a part of a live project, students will be able to contribute to an ongoing dialogue on how to support biodiversity conservation through architectural interventions.

PROGRAM

The studio will aim to rethink the traditional design process that takes a checklist approach to work with species to find ways to integrate species requirements from the initial stages to detailing. From selecting species to understanding species requirements, a lengthy process needs to be undertaken to understand the nonhuman stakeholder. The design methodology will merge methods, tools, and representation techniques from various fields. The research and design process will include dialogue with multiple experts, ornithologists, landscape architects, and community leaders. The studio's output will generate a multispecies design intervention that will help connect the local communities with their nonhuman neighbors.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

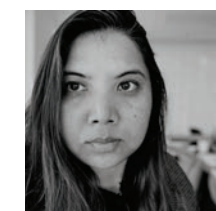
On successful completion of this studio, you should be able;

- to identify, and understand biodiversity crisis, utilize key terms related to the course topic- e.g., biodiversity, multispecies design, empathy, experiential design, nonhuman, umwelt.
- to understand and utilize multispecies design methodologies and tools to develop designs that integrate human and nonhuman species.
- to understand and explore the role of architecture in mitigating biodiversity crisis, drawing upon case studies.
- to identify target nonhuman species through a species selection method and to understand and map the spatial requirements of the selected species.
- to understand and design drawing on experiential architecture case studies and phenomenological theories.

The material that will be covered in class can be challenging. Therefore, as empathetic as we need to be towards the various species we'll encounter in the studio, we must also direct that empathy towards ourselves.

The class will also incorporate views, feedback, and voices from the community members living and working in Nepal.

We'll establish an inclusive classroom environment that is respectful and supportive of engaging many voices.



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