

How multispecies-friendly is your habitat?

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Growing up in Cape Town, architect Catherine du Toit was fascinated by the natural world. “My grandfather was president of the Botanical Society of South Africa,” she says. “He always collected rainwater, composted and grew vegetables; there were chameleons in the hedges and little underground rain frogs you’d uncover while digging for potatoes.” Even though du Toit is now based in London, her studio, 51 Architecture, has a team dedicated to building for animal species. They’ve made insect gardens, beehives and nest boxes for public spaces and private clients; the Hrōst roost was exhibited at the Royal Academy last summer. “Humans have designed for and with animals for millennia,” she says. “We share food, shelter, intelligence and compost – our futures are mutually bound together.” While a new interest in multispecies design has recently emerged in architecture and urban planning, it harks back to 10th-century BC clay beehives in the Jordan Valley and 4,000-year-old dovecotes in the Middle East; from the 1664 menagerie at Versailles to Mexican architect Luis Barragán’s 1968 La Cuadra San Cristóbal stables. The focus, though, has typically been on containing animals and eliminating pests from our ecosystems.



Habi-sabi Phonotherm 200 hedgehog house, £185



Frogs in Search of Wetlands by Martino De Grandis and Ailyn Pieyre, at Alcova Milano, 2026

American architect [Joyce Hwang](#) became interested in multispecies design after experiencing “a kind of dismay” at deterrent devices used in construction. “I was shocked by the things we’ve designed to keep animals away, such as deterrents that electrocute birds.” She set up the studio [Ants of the Prairie](#) in 2010 and has since worked on projects including sculptural bat towers and a “pollinator lounge”. One of her favourite examples of architecture being used to benefit animals is the Christmas Island crab bridge in Australia: a simple metal structure built by park rangers to help migrating red crabs cross a major road, which has now become a tourist attraction.

Homeowners too are increasingly encouraging wildlife into their gardens, installing everything from earwig pots to duck baskets. For homes being built now, there are bird and bee bricks, tubes for bats and roosting eaves for swallows (architectural features that potentially suit the UK’s biodiversity laws to halt species decline by 2030).



Bat tower by Joyce Hwang for Ants of the Prairie © Joyce Hwang



Habi-Sabi oak, cedar, wool and steel hröst multispecies roost, POA, 51architecture.com © Peter Thomas

Milan Design Week in April reflected the growing focus on supporting local fauna. Lifestyle brand Flamingo Estate, for example, showed a bathhouse for humans alongside brutalist cast-iron baths for birds and insects, decorated with geometric patterns that mimic natural environments. At Alcova, the show [*No One Sees Them Like We Do: Notes on Animal Interiors*](#) featured wetlands for frogs and garden furniture for dogs created by students at Geneva School of Art and Design.

In June, the subject of architecture's impact on wildlife was theatrically highlighted at Milan City Hall when the "[Parliament of Living Species](#)" invited mask-clad students of the Urban Planning Laboratory at the Polytechnic University of Milan to present the viewpoints of the city's animal inhabitants – from parrots to foxes. The aim, said architect and professor Stefano Boeri, was to "recognise the multitude of non-human life present in the urban space" and encourage "a more informed approach to the major decisions that affect the future of our cities".



Some Animals Hide to Die by Diana Escalante and Karol Szmigielski, at Alcova Milano, 2026 © Head – Genève. Piergiorgio Sorgetti



The Flamingo Estate Bathhouse by Kohler at Milan Design Week 2026 © Kohler

For British architect [Stuart Piercy](#), a farmland estate he is currently working on in Oxfordshire is a shining example of cohabitation. “Architecture for animals is as much a part of the brief as buildings for humans,” he says. “There will be totem-like dovecotes – each digitally fabricated in natural stone or hardwood, but the form is the consequence of ventilation, nesting behaviour and, above all, protection from predators, rather than a stylistic choice. Function gives rise to sculpture, not the other way around.”

Du Toit's advice to anyone who wants to embrace other species is to consider the wider ecosystem. "In the UK, woodland birds such as blue tits need 1,000 caterpillars a day to feed their brood," she says. "Those caterpillars will need tree shoots and shrubs to eat, and the blue tits will also eat aphids, spiders and other insects."

Design can not only make space for animals but also play a role in changing mindsets. "I don't think this architecture will credibly reverse habitat decline, but it creates places where wildlife and people can coexist – making animals' presence visible, even in the heart of cities," says Piercy. "A dovecote becomes less an ornament than an invitation: an object that fosters ecological relationships while enriching the spaces we share."

Homing instinct



Esschert Design terracotta earwig pot, £19.99, bloomling.uk



Habi-Sabi Phonotherm 200 bat box, £32.99, habi-sabi.com



Toast terracotta bird nester, £28, toa.st