49 The Architecture of (Hu)man Exceptionalism. Redrawing our Relationships to Other Species

Eva Perez de Vega

Abstract

Architecture and human-built structures are embedded with speciesist practices of domination over the environment, where humans are considered special and superior to other species. This (hu)man exceptionalism has driven architecture and the built environment to be conceived in opposition to 'nature', dominating natural terrains and consequently displacing or instrumentalizing the many other species that are given little to no ethical consideration. This way of intervening in the world is leading to the existential questions that must be posed given our global climate crisis. A reframing of human intervention as 'built environment' placed in opposition to the 'natural environment' of supposedly passive nature, is urgently needed. The motivation for this paper is rooted in a deep concern for the role of humans in the climate crisis and a realization that architecture as a discipline is complicit in elevating the human category above all other beings in nature. There are biases embedded in the practices and teaching of architecture that need to be interrogated and reflected upon, starting with the role models and ideals that we unwittingly operate within. To contextualize the idea of human exceptionalism in architecture, we will explore deep-seeded ideals in architecture linked to the concept of *Rectitude* as a form of 'rightness' -or correct- mode of intervening in the world, conceptualized by Western men as a human-centric practice distinct from nature-made. Supported by Ecofeminist thought, the aim is to open alternative models for world-building and housing humans on earth living in its sixth extinction.

Keywords

Human exceptionalism · Ecofeminism · Nature · Feminist materialism · More-than-human · Nonhuman · Posthuman · Animal ethics

49.1 Speciesism and the Human Category

While most of us claim to know what it is to be a human and see it as a self-evident biological category, this term is far from uncontroversial. Most unjust-inhuman-actions by humans have taken place under the umbrella of the human as dominant species over other animals. There is a deep-seeded assumption that humans are cognitively and morally superior to other animals, which has been fundamental to the legitimization

E. Perez de Vega (✉)
e+i Studio, New York City, USA
e-mail: pereze@newschool.edu; eva@eistudio.net

Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY, United States

The New School, New York City, USA

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of atrocities inflicted not only to nonhuman animals but also to members of our own humankind. Thinkers like Rosi Braidotti have long argued that the category of 'the human' is never a neutral one, but rather one always linked to power and privilege. The opening to her publication *The Posthuman* points to the problematic nature of the category of human:

> Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history. Not if by 'human' we mean that creature familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy: The Cartesian subject of the cogito, the Kantian "community of reasonable beings". (Braidotti 2013, 1)

These words reveal how Western societies have historically conceived of the human as a rational being with mind, culture and political will, in contrast to those who are not considered to be "fully human". In her work, Braidotti elaborates on how women, people of color and people of low income, have been historically associated, not with the 'human' category, but with the 'nature' category, which has been historically used as a tool for injustice. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, whom Braidotti references, famously wrote about how humans are ends in themselves but that nonhumans are means to an end and can be treated and disposed of by humans at will: "altogether different in rank and dignity from things, such as irrational animals, with which one may deal and dispose at one's discretion." Implicitly, one has moral obligations towards humans but not towards nonhumans, or humans categorized as "irrational animals" which are part of the 'nature' category. In this view, making a distinction between what is human and what isn't has serious moral implications.

Thinking in terms of one large group 'Man' versus the nonhuman world of 'animals' or 'nature' entrenches the divide between us and them, as well as giving a false sense of power that legitimizes instrumentalizing the nonhuman world. It also negates how different humans are vulnerable in different ways to climate change. Yet it is important to hold on to the term 'nature' rather than aim to find ways in which ecology can exist without it.[1] As the work of Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva has shown (Shiva 2014), wishing away the category of 'nature' will not erase the injustices that are done in her name.

Braidotti uses the notion of the posthuman as a mode of reconceptualization -what she calls a navigational tool—that aims to move us away from the Eurocentric and anthropocentric conception of the human, inviting us to move "beyond the sexualized and racialized others that were excluded from humanity". In a similar line of inquiry, Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality reframes the notion of opposition between the humans and nature by illustrating how our bodies are already enmeshed with the environment[2] and Chiara Bottici's development of the concept of transindividuality sees the human body existing as a consequence of its relations with other individual things. These contemporary feminist thinkers are part of a growing movement of feminist thought that aims to reconceptualize materiality, the body and environment, which has been the domain of Materialist theories put forth mostly by Western men, without giving up on 'nature'. These outlooks, on which the work presented here rests and grows from, depart from a (hu)man-centric, account of matter by understanding our bodily enmeshment with the physical material world. This way of thinking about interconnectedness of humans and environment is, of course not new, indigenous cultures have operated this way from the start, but in the West, we have lost this knowledge: it has been supplanted and these voices have been suppressed and subjugated. As dominant and dominating species, humans have the mandate to question the effects of our exceptionalism.

49.2 (Hu)Man Rectitude in Architecture

49.2.1 Human Ideals in the Vitruvian Man [The Body Ideal]

> At the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of 'Man', formulated first by Protagoras as 'the measure of all things'. Later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model and represented in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. (Braidotti 2013 [13])

At the start of architectural thought in the West, there is Vitruvius' influential treatise on architecture, *De Architectura*. A first in its attempt to systematize the practice of building for humans, *The Ten Books on Architecture* penned by the first century BC Roman architect was largely a forgotten text until rediscovered by Renaissance architects such as Leon Battista Alberti, Sebastiano Serlio, and Andrea Palladio, who all had a go at authoring their own versions of the cannon. Interestingly, the new treatises also entailed the emergence of new images intended to illustrate Vitruvius' words while actually embodying agendas specific to the time of their own production.

Vitruvius' text covered a wide range of topics related to the built environment, emphasizing the 'optimal proportions' of architectural elements and the design of temples, most of which are based on a perceived ideal of the (hu)man body. At the epicenter of Western thought, Architecture was emerging as a unified body, ordered through an appreciation of the human body as its regulating system. The presence of the body reaches its emblematic moment in the first chapter of Book Three, when Vitruvius articulates the geometric links between architecture and the body: the role of the circle and the square geometry as organizers of architectural proportions made analogous to those of a perfectly proportioned male body. Vitruvius' description is directed at providing a template that can be instrumental to the architect who is designing temples, and who must do so according to strict rules of symmetry and proportion governed by the (hu)man body.[3] That we know of, the original text was not accompanied by an illustration[4] and yet it is most known through its imaginal translation drawn by Leonardo da Vinci over a millennium afterwards: the *Vitruvian Man*. As masterful and emblematic as this image is and has become—with its many different variations-it is worth paying close attention to Vitruvius' words in describing this diagram, as the man is "placed flat on his back" (Vitruvius, 1914, 73) illustrating the geometric proportions described in a more passive disposition: he is a man with no thickness, a two-dimensional geometric figure used to illustrate proportion and symmetry.

Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man drawing (Fig. 49.1) and the subsequent versions which have been reproduced so exhaustingly, invariably show a *standing* naked man actively illustrating the ideal proportions between the (hu)man body and geometrical figures of a circle and a square. The change which provoked illustrating the Vitruvian man as standing instead of lying down is an indication of a conceptual shift, that emphasizes the *homo erectus* or 'upright man'. What might obscure the intent of Vitruvius is in fact illuminating the Renaissance humanistic concepts of *Rectitude*:

> The "upright man" of which the tradition speaks, more than an abused metaphor, is literally a subject who conforms to a vertical axis, which in turn functions as a principle and norm for its ethical posture. (Cavarero 2016, 6)

The uprightness of the human body is also a marker of difference between humans and non-human animals. While humans were given their official separate Homo species status until the eighteenth century,[5] this separation was already active in the Renaissance. The category of homo erectus marked the official death of the animal in the human; now an upright being distinguishing (him)self from the rest of the animal kingdom.

This upright postural figuration epitomizes the moral *righteousness* of depictions of the (hu)man as an upright figure, providing ideals for all of humanity to follow, as eloquently analyzed by Italian Feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero in *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*. Indeed, the

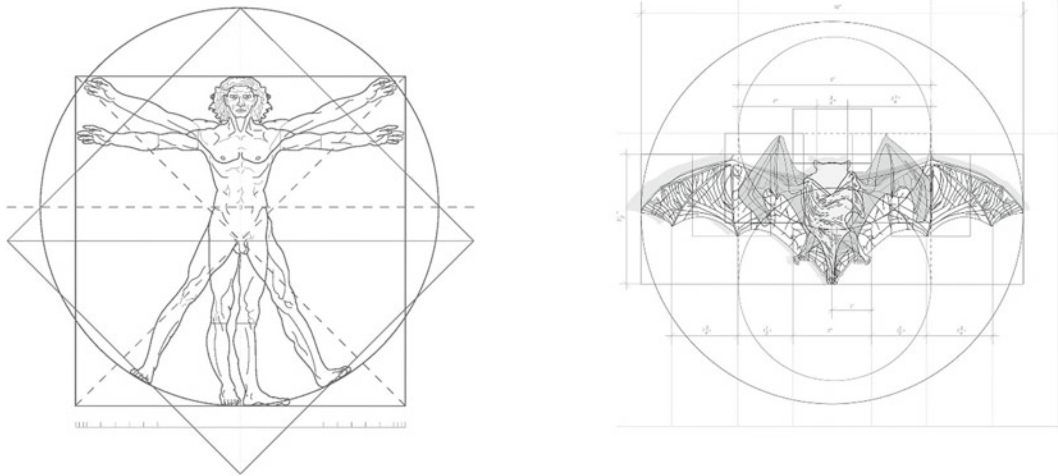

Fig. 49.1 Drawing based on the Vitruvian Man by Leonardo Da Vinci, redrawn by author, joined by a Vitruvian Bat

uprightness of the Vitruvian man can be placed in dialogue with Da Vinci's other depictions such as 'The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne' insightfully analyzed by Cavarero in a chapter called "Leonardo and Maternal Inclination". Her book is an eloquent critique of the concept of Rectitude as a model of the 'rightness' or 'correctness' of Man depicted in the upright disposition. Cavarero provides a feminist critique of the long-standing set of assumptions in moral philosophy by contesting this classical figure of the homo erectus and providing an alternative model that relies on the concept of *inclination*. An open and altruistic model, inclination is what has characterized the depiction of women, as a subject that inclines, altruistically, towards others.[6]

The Vitruvian Man ideal as evocative of the uprightness of *humanitas* emerges again in Western canon in full force with the work of Le Corbusier. Despite his proclamations of cutting ties with the past, the image which glorifies the male body as a measure of all things is enthusiastically re-adopted and repackaged in the *Modulor*—his own version of the Vitruvian Man. Here, we see a 'modern man' who nonetheless follows the footsteps of the humanistic Vitruvian Man by proposing ideal proportions of architecture based on idealized proportions of a man created with his own proportions. Notably the term "modulor" also refers to the goals of it being an example to follow, a "model" to be repeated (as a "module"). This *Modulor* provided a modernized methodology of regulating lines that would dictate certain proportions of built spaces: it intensified the humanistic idea of the primacy of Man and further entrenched the idea of [hu]man exceptionalism in architecture.

One might ask, why do we question these dated images that no contemporary architect follows anyways? Drawings are the tools with which as architects we communicate our ideas: they are our language and as such have -and have had- a transformative role in our conception of architecture itself.[7] The bodies we draw to represent what is "right" have not only a historical significance but a role in upholding inequalities and ways of being in the world that is at odds with its flourishing. What happens to our imagination if we were to draw a radically different ideal: a Vitruvian Man that is no longer a male body but rather a…woman or a bat?[8] (Fig. 49.2) Just as our language holds biases that need to be interrogated in order to debunk the bias, so too as architects we need to question the bodies that dominate our representations. Redrawing our ideals matters!

Fig. 49.2 Speculative scenario for a project by e + i studio: it imagines an alternative life, where the now near-extinct Eastern Cougar and short-eared owl would return to what was their region, in a city no longer dominated by human presence

49.2.2 The Rightness of Right Angles [The Building Ideal]

In *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition*, architecture critic and theorist Catherine Ingraham writes about the asymmetries between human histories in architecture and nonhuman histories or animal life. Ingraham connects the project of Modernism to the Renaissance by its continued centering and "rightness" of the human:

> Le Corbusier's claim that the existence of right angles and straight lines are the primary evidence for the "rightness" of the human mind, particularly the "uprightness," i.e. propriety of the architectural mind." (Ingraham 2005, 13)

Modernism in architecture continues the Renaissance project of glorifying Man, explicitly emphasizing 'his' production and what distinguishes it from 'nature'. The humanistic ideas of 'rightness' extend to the aesthetic of the right angle, separating humans from nonhuman nature. It may seem paradoxical to elevate the ideal body of a Modulor Man, to also deny the body as "nature", but this is in favor of the abstraction of the body, steps removed from its "animal-ness" in order to emphasize the move towards an abstracted *machine aesthetic*.

Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier is a building which embodies these ideals: it is conceived as an object, lifted above ground on its piloti barely touches the natural terrain. Nature is not excluded entirely, but it is treated as a painting to be hung in the architecture: it is framed by the architecture forming a precise rectangle of green with a stripe of blue of the sky. Nature is thus something *out there* distinct from humans and distinct from architecture. The materiality of the

walls also fades away in favor of abstract white stucco, or colored surfaces that do not resonate with materials "in nature". They are a form of abstraction – of removal from the human- that makes domination more acceptable, in fact, enticing: "Man undermines and hacks at Nature. He opposes himself to her, he fights with her, he digs himself in." (Le Corbusier 1987, 5).

Like painting, architecture too was moving towards abstraction, and separating itself from the material resources that make it possible. Textures and textiles which are perceived as the more 'feminine' or 'natural/ bodily' aspects of the domestic space are emphatically criticized and devalued. The work of Eileen Gray, for example, did not follow the dogmas of Le Corbusier's modernism, so it was cast aside and subsumed under the figure of Le Corbusier. A self-taught architect, Gray designed the famous house E1027 that was often attributed to Le Corbusier, possibly because he became so obsessed by it and infamously painted murals in its interior. Only recently has Eileen Gray been recognized as a Modernist architect in her own right, with the restoration of E1027, possibly saved from ruin due to Le Corbusier's "gift" which was deemed worth preserving. Her work did follow these precepts so was cast aside and seen as threatening to Le Corbusier and his ideals.[9]

Abstraction achieved through the use of right angles and straight lines is a tool to further separate architecture from nature—to claim that they are distinct in kind. It is also more generally used as the defining factor for architecture to qualify as 'modern'. Architects such as Alvar and Aina Aalto, for instance, while contemporary in chronology to Le Corbusier, do not fit into the modern movement because they defied the rule-base precepts dictated by Modernism that hailed abstraction and a separation from nature as a defining feature. The work is not bound by an excessive use of the right angle, or by an abstraction of materials used to make it up, it is in continuity with nature- an extension of it.

Epitomized by the right angle and orthogonal geometry, Modernism strives to separate the human from nature, to dominate it and change it from 'chaotic and unhygienic' into 'ordered and pure.' These precepts have extended into the way architecture is taught and practiced in the West today: architecture still identifies itself with a clear separation between *human* and everything other as *nonhuman*, proclaiming superiority of the human category over other species. To be human for modern architects means to have finally separated oneself from animals. With its abstracted lines and orthogonal geometry, Modern Architecture becomes the fuel for the disappearing animal inside the human -it is an instrument of its erasure.

49.2.3 Donkey Urbanism and the Colonizing Grid [The City Ideal]

In *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning,* Le Corbusier opposes old city urbanism with his conception of a hygienic *Radiant City* which would be planned with straight lines and right angles. There was a keen and deliberate attempt by Le Corbusier to advocate for a holistic aesthetic vision, from the scale of city planning to that of the domestic space that relied on orthogonal geometries used with the moralizing purposes characteristic of modernism. Indeed, his book on urban planning opens with a chapter called: *The Pack-Donkey's Way and Man's Way*, where he makes his ethical position about human exceptionalism quite clear:

> Man walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going; he has made up his mind to reach some particular place and he goes straight to it. The pack-donkey meanders along, meditates a little in his scatter-brained and distracted fashion, he zigzags in order to avoid the larger stones, or to ease the climb, or to gain a little shade… The Pack-Donkey's Way is responsible for the plan of every continental city. (Le Corbusier 1987, 5)

Le Corbusier juxtaposes the "scatter-brained" movement of nonhuman animals with the 'straightness' -or *rectitude-* of lines and paths with which humans make their mark on the world. Ancient cities according to Le Corbusier

are problematic because of their connection to nonhuman animals with their meandering paths that become the loci of disease and moral depravity. The notion of *rectitude* in city planning with straight orthogonal lines is juxtaposed to the meandering paths made by other nonhuman animals, such as a donkey, in order to affirm human superiority and moral status. The 'rightness' of the grid-city is based on Western standards of moral and morphological correctness, versus the chaotic unplanned ancient city.

Catherine Ingraham writes about the asymmetries she sees between human histories in architecture and nonhuman histories /animal life. Of particular interest is her emphasizing the obsession Le Corbusier had with the image of a donkey and the meandering paths, with the term she coined "donkey urbanism". This expression describes what Le Corbusier finds problematic about European cities of the past that have developed without planning, as a result of "animal paths". Ingraham writes about how the modern movement espoused the superiority of human endeavors over anything generated by nonhuman animals:

> Why, or how, a trivial, typically comical animal such as a donkey came to oppose the right angle, held as one of the most significant abstract productions of the human mind, the deep mathematical heart of Western architecture itself, is one aspect of a set of complex issues. (Ingraham 2005, 14)

The use of straight lines and right angles as a way to claim superiority and organize the occupation of land is not new to the modern movement. The Romans used it very deliberately as a strategy to colonize territory with what is called in Latin the Cardo and Decumanus: a north–south and east–west axis that is traced on occupied territory as a way to start new city planning. But in the modern movement, straight lines and right angles have an added importance because of the aesthetic agenda tied to a moralizing dimension of hygiene; of them (animals) versus us (humans). They materialize control, precision, and the man–machine-made, further entrenching the dualities between (hu)man and nature.

The moralizing dimension of the use of right angles in modernism is used to advocate for a holistic aesthetic vision, from the scale of the body in domestic spaces to the scale of city planning. Indeed, it extends into dictums of how one should live: "We are to be pitied for living in unworthy houses, since they ruin our health and our morale." (Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 14) This goes hand in hand with the adopted aesthetic of the machine that sees the house as "a machine for living". The concept of the machine is also invigorated by the invention of the automobile that gains primacy in the design of cities as well as allowing humans to use man-made transport instead of animal-based transport. Indeed, machines in general and automobiles in particular were seen as a symbol of progress and power.

With modernism came a fundamental questioning of what it is to be human. What is at stake is our fundamental understanding of our role on earth, and architecture is seen as an avenue to further entrench human superiority over other species, who -as exemplified by Le Corbusier's donkey—are seen as unhygienic, lacking culture, or agency. The fascination with machine aesthetics was instrumental to further wedge the human-nonhuman divide, as a way to continue to assert our superiority and separation from nature and other species. Even more explicitly, the colonizing power of the grid fueled the dualism between the grid-city of Western urban planning-let's call it "enlightened urbanism", and the more emergent morphology of unplanned ancient cities still connected to animal life "donkey urbanism".

The grid is used in the practice and teaching of architecture as a default organizational tool, often oblivious to the roots of its colonizing goals. The prevailing ideology enforced the use of the grid as a 'corrective' tool for the chaotic lack of planning of indigenous peoples. Importantly, however, it is not the intent to assume that anything non-western and non-male is by default better or more righteous. Rather, to provide the context from which one can question the practices we have inherited and consider counterpoints to the *human-all-too-human* western

typologies we continue to rehash, teach, and proliferate on this side of the hemisphere. As Cavarero puts it:

> The geometry intrinsic to Homo erectus adapts itself to all the realms of meaning in which the human manifests its condition, it is in fact philosophically even more urgent to ask what consequences this geometry produces for our discourses on subjects, human relations, and community (Cavarero 2016, 128).

Geometry holds meaning and memory. Architecture expresses itself through, among other things, geometry. Yet the geometries used by architects to house humans are embedded with unacknowledged biases. Cavarero asks us to put attention to the effects that "the geometry intrinsic to Homo erectus" has on the discourse of subjectivity and community. Similarly, one should pay attention to the geometries that pervade our built environment, used as innocent defaults that nevertheless embody centuries of exclusion and domination.

This text asks how architecture and the built environment can adopt a multi-species approach, that acknowledges the histories and biases embedded in building typologies, which have privileged a very narrow conception of 'the (hu)man'. Given the climate crisis, we have a mandate to question our exceptionalism, and realize that true ecological thinking must disturb the human-animal divide. This work, and the illustrations herein are part of that disturbance (Fig. 49.2): to question the assumption that architecture is only for humans, and to re-introduce bodies that have been excluded from their own habitats.

This work is part of a (self)reflection on the practice and teaching of architecture in the West that aims to understand how we got to the status quo in architectural practices. Exploring the inherited biases of thought can allow us to reframe speciesist attitudes which see architecture as a practice of domination over the environment and its other species.

The catastrophic predicament we are in as humans demand action but also thought. We are all complicit in internalizing and replicating human exceptionalist practices of domination over the environment. It is through a self-reflection of one's own practices that we can open a dialogue on how to engage with a different kind of world-building. The act of re-drawing our spaces and acknowledging the presence of non-human life, is part of this effort. (Fig. 49.3) to recognize the interconnectedness between humans and nonhumans, so that we can be critical of our role as in a changing world that demands radically different ways of intervening in it.

Notes

1. Some thinkers, such as Timothy Morton, have rejecting the use of the term "nature" altogether, claiming that the chief stumbling block to environmental thinking is the idea of nature itself and that paradoxically, in order to have a proper ecological view, one must relinquish the 'idea' of nature. (Morton 2007).
2. As this text is a critique of human exceptionalism in the West, it will work within that framework, while also aiming not to fall into what Intuit scholar Zoe Todd reminds us: that indigenous knowledge is all too often unreferenced. (Todd 2016).
3. As with the title, the brackets in (hu)man are being used to make explicit how human category is by default male in all the visual and textual representations being referenced.
4. Kagis McEwan details how Vitruvius favored words over drawing claiming that he was "writing the body of architecture" (Kagis McEwan 2003, 17).
5. Given by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in 1730's, despite his not wanting to claim a separation between human and animal, this is the effect (and deliberately intended by certain theologies) of the taxonomic classification we use today.
6. In the Forward Paul Kottman synthesizes one of the main goals of the book: "Cavarero is interested, rather, in tallying the costs of depicting the human being as upright when it comes to our view of

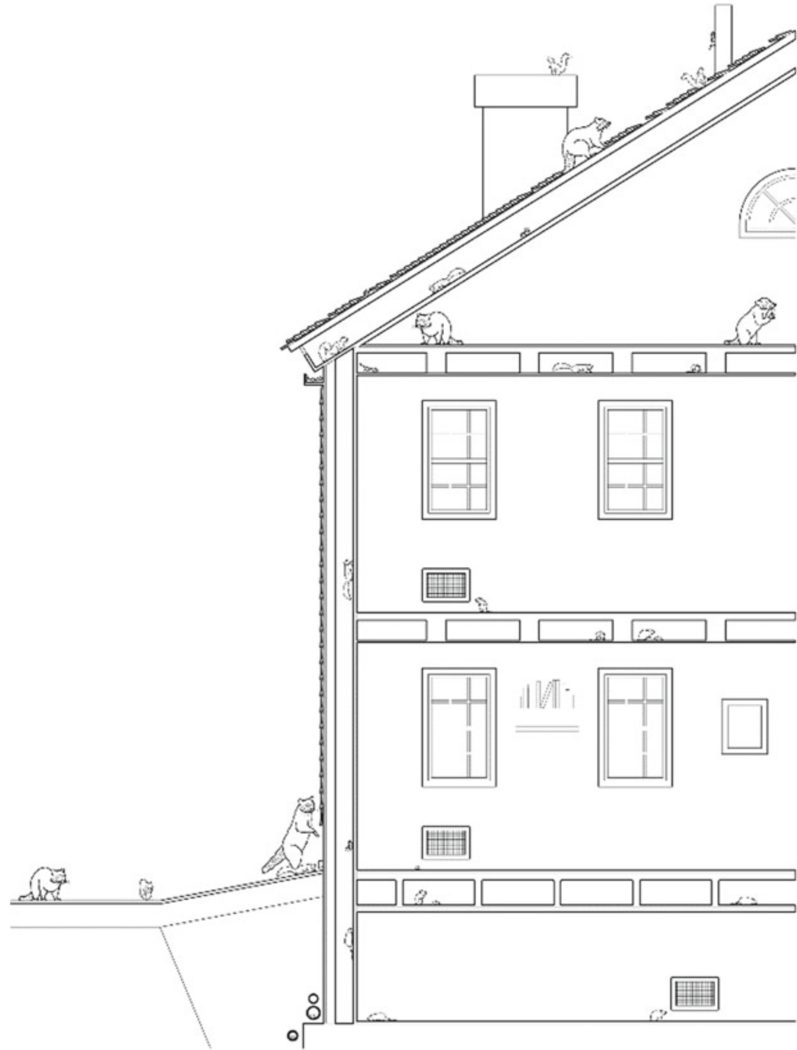

Fig. 49.3 Section drawing of a suburban home, exploring animal life in and around human habitation. By author with Daniella Tero

women, our overall understanding and collective self-conception.”.

7. For example, the life-long work of Piranesi, which exists in drawings only.
8. This is an exercise we do with thesis students at the start of a semester to have them question the human exceptionalist ideals that are taken for granted in architectural education.
9. This house was given the status of “subversive aesthetic” and threatening to Le Corbusier, to that point that he developed a life-long obsession with it. For more on this see *Occupying E.1027*, an illuminating piece by Jasmine Rault.

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