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EXHIBITING ENVIRONMENTS IN ARCHITECTURE

DISPLAY

Exhibiting Environments in Architecture

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Exhibiting Livestock Environments: Health, Colonialism, Bodies, and Labor

BY

Sofia Nannini

Livestock farming is a pervasive maker of the Anthropocene environment: it warms the atmosphere, pollutes waterways and territories, and poses severe ethical questions regarding the human-animal relationship. Yet, livestock is often invisible, concealed by politics of sight[1] and regarded as unworthy of historical agency.[2]
Despite the billions of domesticated animals farmed worldwide, the spaces in which farming occurs are still little known and have been largely overlooked by architecture historiography. Nevertheless, the environmental turn within architectural history and culture has promoted a new awareness of livestock infrastructure and its controversial features. This shift is particularly evident in a series of recent architectural and artistic exhibitions, which I explore in this essay.

More precisely, I look into the following exhibitions: *Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture*, curated by Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardini at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (Montréal, October 2011–April 2012); *Land. Milk. Honey. Animal Stories in Imagined Landscapes*, curated by Dan Hasson, Iddo Ginat, Rachel Gottesman, Yonatan Cohen, and Tamar Novick (*Venice Biennale of Architecture 2021*); Víctor Muñoz Sanz's contribution to the exhibition *From Raster to Vector: The Netherlands as Profit Landscape* (Radius Center for Contemporary Art and Ecology, Delft, May–August 2024); and finally, *Unleash Your Herd Potential*, an artistic project curated by Dániel Szalai and exhibited in various locations in 2022 and 2023. Dealing with bodies, health concerns, colonial projects, automated labor, and technologies, these exhibitions fostered new visions of livestock as actors with historical and space-making agency, and they may help us reconsider our relationship with the industrial production of animal bodies.

1. T. Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2013.
2. V. Settele, *History of Agriculture*, in M. Roscher, A. Krebber, B. Mizelle, (eds.), *Handbook of Historical Animal Studies*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2022, pp. 525-37.



Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture, curated by Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi, Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2011–12. Photo by Michel Legendre. © CCA



Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture, curated by Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi, Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2011–12. Photo by Michel Legendre. © CCA

Livestock as Health Threat

Inaugurated in October 2011, the *Imperfect Health* exhibition showed a quote placed on the wall in the main galleries of the Canadian Centre for Architecture: "We live in an era of food production, antibiotic resistance, and increasingly widespread contagion." The word *contagion* was encircled with neon light. The whole exhibition revolved around the contemporary concept of health, the anxiety it provokes, and the multifaceted answers coming from architectural practice. *Imperfect Health* was an exhibition of bodies – sick and healthy, human and non-human – and of possible therapies deriving from architecture and urban design. Employing different narrative strategies, it complicated the notion of environment by describing the interconnections between health, disease, and fear.

Including a specific section on livestock and industrial farming, *Imperfect Health* was one of the first exhibitions to explore the agency of farmed animal bodies in the making of medicalized environments. Below the quote on contagion, the exhibition featured three life-size cardboard sculptures of a cow, a chicken, and a pig. They were placed in front of a continuous glass wall that connected the gallery rooms and contributed to the perception that the animals had been placed in a laboratory. The sculptures were commissioned to US artist Andy Byers, who described his work in an interview of particular interest. Byers claimed that the animals he represented were somehow "terrifying" to him – especially the cow, because he is lactose intolerant – and, in general, to the people who consume them, because they are the origins of many zoonotic diseases, such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) and avian flu. At the same time, he commented that it was hard "to make them feel really scary."[3]

3. "Presentation by Andy Byers," Canadian Centre for Architecture, https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/events/3178/imperfect-health-the-medicalization-of-architecture. Accessed November 13, 2024. I have commented Byers' sculptures in the introduction of my latest book project, titled *Is there a known gate size for the dual control of cattle and sheep?,* Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal 2025. The book is dedicated to Cedric Price's

Although devoid of flesh and smells, the sculptures by Byers contributed to making visible the bodies of animals that are usually concealed from ordinary eyes. Their life-size dimensions confronted visitors and perhaps encouraged the understanding that it is not the animals who are scary, but it is the conditions in which livestock is industrially farmed that are frightening and dangerous to both animal and human health. The room where the sculptures were located also included a specific section of a selection of design proposals addressing livestock production. The curators selected drawings of Westpen, a livestock handling unit by Cedric Price (1977–1979),[4] the controversial *Basic Forcing Pen Plan* by Temple Grandin for a "humane" slaughtering of cows (2003), as well as the dystopian visions of *Pig City* by MVRDV (2000-2001) and the *Instantly Quarantinable Farm* by David Garcia Studio (2010).[5]

The curators' choice to include Grandin's *Forcing Pen* introduced a slippery idea of ethics into the exhibition: can design provide an architectural solution to humane slaughter? Grandin's work has been frequently criticized by pro-animal authors, such as Federica Timeto[6] and Dinesh Wadiwel, who writes that "pursuing clean techniques of domination under the guise of welfare demobilises the political efficacy of pro-animal advocacy."[7] On an architectural and territorial scale, *Pig City* and the *Instantly Quarantinable Farm* proposed two provocative answers to the pandemic threats deriving from factory farming – threats inscribed in the very nature of intensive animal farming, due to the high density of bodies enclosed together for production purposes.[8]

Westpen project and an excerpt can be found in: Sofia Nannini, "Westpen is conceived as a diagram," https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/95807/westpen-is-conceived-as-a-diagram. Accessed November 20, 2024.

4. M. Zardini, G. Borasi (eds.), *Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture*, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal; Lars Müller, Zürich 2012, pp. 214-17.

5. *Ibid*., pp. 218-23.

6. F. Timeto, *Animali si diventa. Femminismi e liberazione animale*, Tamu, Napoli 2024, pp. 138-39.

7. D.J. Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2023, p. 283, footnote no. 97.



Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture, curated by Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi, Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2011–12. Photo by Michel Legendre. © CCA

8. See: M. Davis, *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu*, The New Press, New York-London 2005. See also: M. Davis M., *The Monster Enters: COVID-19, Avian Flu and the Plagues of Capitalism,* Verso, New York-London, 2022. On the architecture of animal farming as a paradox, see: S. Nannini, *I luoghi dell'allevamento intensivo: Storia di un'architettura invisibile*, in "Liberazioni. Rivista di critica antispecista," no. 57, June 2024, pp. 53-61.

While these two solutions were discussed by the curators as critical and dystopic paradoxes, today the verticality of factory farming – as seen in the high-rise hog farms built in China in recent years – has become a tangible reality.[9]

Livestock as Colonial Instrumentality

Historiography convenes on the fact that livestock has been largely used as an active instrument in the colonial project. From the United States to Libya, colonial expansions were often made possible by controlling the land through animal husbandry.[10] This was also the focus of *Land. Milk. Honey. Animal Stories in Imagined Landscapes*, curated by Dan Hasson, Iddo Ginat, Rachel Gottesman, Yonatan Cohen, and Tamar Novick for the Israel pavilion at the 2021 Venice Biennale of Architecture.[11] The pavilion focused on the metaphor of Palestine as a (holy) *land of milk and honey* – a pivotal image of the Zionist project – and on the making of such plenitude through cattle farming, genetic breeding, and massive destruction of wildlife. According to the curators, "Zionism is a feeding plant aimed at supporting the unprecedented demographic growth that took place

9. "China's 26-storey pig skyscraper ready to slaughter 1 milion pigs a year," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/25/chinas-26-storey-pig-skyscraper-ready-to-produce-1-million-pigs-a-year. Accessed November 21, 2024.
10. See, for example: J.R. Fischer, *Cattle Colonialism: An Environmental History of the Conquest of California and Hawai'i*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2015; T. Saraiva, *Fascist Pigs: Technoscientific Organisms and the History of Fascism*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2018; J. Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2019.
11. On the pavilion, see: https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2021/israel. Accessed November 20, 2024. The catalogue is: D. Hasson, I. Ginat, R. Gottesman, Y. Cohen, T. Novick, (eds.) *Land. Milk. Honey. Animal Stories in Imagined Landscapes*, Nine Lives Press, Tel Haviv; Park Books, Zürich 2021. The pavilion was based on Novick's doctoral dissertation, recently published as: T. Novick, *Milk and Honey: Technologies of Plenty in the Making of a Holy Land*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2023.

throughout the 20th century" and which "took heavy tolls" not only on the local population, but also on the land and the non-human animals living on it.[12] The installation included a steel morgue displaying extinct animal species from the Hula Valley, a reminder of the environmental consequences of the draining process that took place in the 1950s. Among all livestock, cattle played a major role in the making of Zionist plenitude, as settlers positioned "the dairy industry at the spearhead of the agricultural economy."[13] This led to experiments on crossbreeding Middle Eastern cows with European bulls, resulting in the "Hebrew Cow," able to produce massive quantities of milk each year.

The Hebrew Cow was followed by the emergence of a specific typology: an open-air cowshed where cows live year-round, which acts as a "climatic project" for the animals.[14] A maquette of the cowshed was featured in the pavilion: both the cows and the architectural elements were made of metal, somehow blurring the distinction between animals and technologies, and echoing Kenneth Fish's analysis of livestock as "living factories."[15] With other animal case studies, such as bees, goats, and water buffaloes, the pavilion explored how settler politics and technology changed both the animal bodies and the indigenous ecologies and societies.

Livestock as an Object of Labor and Design

The conceptualization of livestock as a genetic and design object was also at the core of *Cowborgs in* the *Polder: True Type,* a contribution

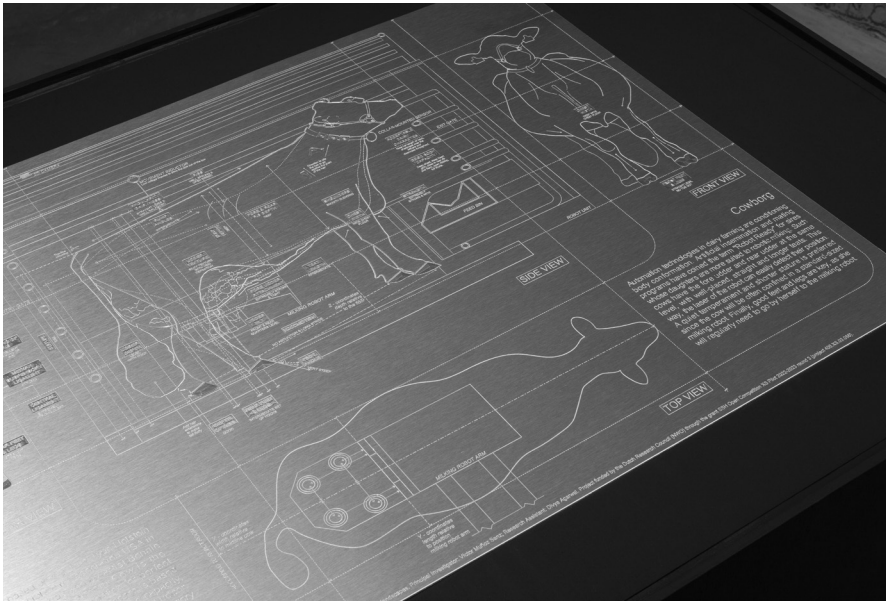
12. D. Hasson, I. Ginat, R. Gottesman, Y. Cohen, T. Novick, pp. 28-29. Regarding the politics of violence on more-than-human forms of life in colonial settings, see also: J. Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence,* Duke University Press, Durham; London 2020.
13. *Ibid*., p. 122.
14. *Ibid*., pp. 172-74.
15. K. Fish, *Living Factories: Biotechnology and the Unique Nature of Capitalism*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montréal 2013.

by Víctor Muñoz Sanz to the group exhibition titled *From Raster to Vector: The Netherlands as Profit Landscape*, held at the Radius Center for Contemporary Art and Ecology in Delft (May – August 2024).[16] The scope of the exhibition was to portray and discuss "the malleability and profitability of the Dutch landscape through global and advanced capitalism."[17] Within this framework, Muñoz Sanz focused on the Holstein Friesian cow as an influential and embedded actor in the Dutch economic landscape. The contribution centred on the cow as a replicable specimen, shaped through genetic selection and environmental design.

Muñoz Sanz's contribution featured a video essay on the Holland Holstein Show and the *Ideal True Type Holstein Cow*, "a painting commissioned by the Holstein Association USA and the internationally recognized yardstick for perfect body proportions."[18] Muñoz Sanz transformed the painting into an analytical drawing of the cow, whose body has been made "robot ready" to render it more suitable to robot milking and automated handling.[19] The drawing, showing the cow from top, side, and front view, fostered the uncanny feeling that the animal body could be designed using CAD software, as if it were a piece of industrial furniture or an architectural object. It thus conceptualizes the many design layers that constitute the modern cow: qualities like *strength* and *acceptable dairy temperament*, as well as physical properties like a *wide chest floor* and an *extremely strong & tight fore udder attachment*. Monitored through sensors outside and inside her flesh, designed down to her very details, the

16. "The Limits to Growth Chapter 2. From Raster to Vector: The Netherlands as Profit Landscape," http://www.radius-cca.org/en/exhibitions/from-raster-to-vector-the-netherlands-as-profit-landscape. Accessed November 13, 2024. The contribution *Cowborgs in the Polder: True Type* was authored by Víctor Muñoz Sanz, Assistant Professor of Urban Design at TU Delft, in collaboration with Divya Agarwal.
17. *From Raster to Vector: The Netherlands as Profit Landscape*, exhibition brochure, downloadable from the exhibition website.
18. *From Raster to Vector*, exhibition brochure.
19. See also Muñoz Sanz's talk at the *Cowborgs in the Polder: Symposium*, Rotterdam, September 12, 2024: "True Type," https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ot9jtRsqclM. Accessed November 13, 2024.

cow has now become a *cowborg* operating in a robotic landscape, where farmers themselves resemble tech managers operating via remote apps and screens.[20] The automated landscapes of labor have been a research focus for Muñoz Sanz in the previous years.[21] He has particularly explored the reality of the automated dairy barns in the Netherlands, which have drastically changed the animal bodies, as well as the labor processes, the ecologies, and the environments surrounding them.[22] With his work, Muñoz Sanz shows that the



Víctor Muñoz Sanz, *Cowborgs in the Polder: True Type*. Photo by Gunnar Meier. © Radius CCA.

20. The idea of the *cowborg* is also echoed in: N. Nova, disnovation.org., *A Bestiary of the Anthropocene,* Onomatopee, Eindhoven 2021.
21. M. Bedir, L. Groen, M. Kuijpers, V. Muñoz Sanz, M. Otero Verzier, (eds.), *Automated Landscapes*. Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam 2023.
22. V. Muñoz Sanz, *Genes, Robots, and Toxicity: The Haunted Landscapes of Milk Production*, in "Solitude Journal," no. 1, 2020, pp. 58-67. https://www.akademie-solitude.de/de/solitude-journal/collective-care-response-ability/genes-robots-and-toxicity-the-haunted-landscapes-of-milk-production/.

activities of factory farming imply an entangled network of technologies, labor practices, and design strategies over the animal's body.



Dániel Szalai, *Unleash Your Herd's Potential*, Trapéz Gallery, Budapest, Hungary, 2022. Photo by Dávid Biró.

Livestock as Data

Taking to the extreme the idea that a cow can be made "robot ready" for better handling of the animal's body by robots, Hungarian visual artist Dániel Szalai launched a show titled *Unleash Your Herd Potential*, which revolves around the notion that dairy cows produce not only milk, but also data.[23] The title of Szalai's exhibition derives from the marketing slogan by CattleEye, a company producing monitoring platforms for livestock.[24] Dairy herds are now the target of digital monitoring activities that employ facial recognition systems, reinforcing the idea that the farm is a controlled environment addressed at extracting value from animal bodies.

Szalai responded to this hyper-technological environment of the robotized and digitized farm through photogrammetry, moving beyond the plain photographic image to suggest that cows can be visualized as data clouds. According to Szalai, the farm has become an environment where humans no longer belong – a space shaped around the necessities of technologies and cows only.[25]

Through his work, Szalai also explores the role of livestock in technocapitalism: do cows classify as workers? The unclear role of livestock in capitalist economies – whether animals are labor, commodities, or capital – is a subject of current theoretical reflections and explorations for many scholars today.[26] Szalai turns to Rosi Braidotti's *posthumanism*, which claims that "advanced capitalism both invests and profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives" and "unifies all species under

23. Dániel Szalai is a visual artist and researcher who has been exploring the human-animal relationship, especially within factory farming. This specific exhibition was featured in: M. Seirou, ed. *On the Verge*, Void, Reykjavík 2022; J. Gelezova, ed. *Bite the Hand that Feeds you*, PhotoIreland, Dublin 2023.
24. "Unleash your herd's potential with autonomous video monitoring," https://cattleeye.com/. Accessed November 14, 2024.
25. See Dániel Szalai's talk at the *Cowborgs in the Polder: Symposium*, Rotterdam, September 12, 2024: "Technobiopolitics," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zR6N9BwIWc. Accessed November 14, 2024.
26. See for example: Fish, *Living Factories*; Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*.

the imperative of the market."[27] Along with the photogrammetric images, Szalai also exhibits a series of salt licks that originate from mineral cubic blocks given to the cows for enriching their diet. An essential part of cattle farming, these licks are shaped into smooth and organic forms by the cows themselves, and, according to Szalai, they are the "symbols of the rebellion against our endeavour to turn living beings into parameterised commodities."[28] His reflection echoes the conclusions of Italian philosopher and historian Benedetta Piazzesi's book *Del governo degli animali*, where the cage becomes the "negative symbol" of animal resistance against human exploitation.[29]

Szalai's exhibition of salt licks somehow attests to the cows' agency of transforming their surroundings and resisting against the increasingly robotized and controlled environment in which they are forced to produce commodities and reproduce themselves as commodities. Paired with the cold screens showing the digital cow images, the salt licks remind viewers of the grounded materiality of factory farming and the very little leeway allowed to animals during their lifetime.

Exhibiting as Critique

More than ten years after the *Imperfect Health* exhibition and in a world that is more than ever dependent on – and threatened by – industrial farming, livestock environments have become an object of reflection shared by many researchers worldwide. This growing interest goes hand in hand with an increasing engagement with animal history and its intersections with architectural and urban

27. R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 59 and p. 63.
28. "Unleash Your Herd's Potential," https://danielszalai.com/Unleash-Your-Herd-s-Potential. Accessed November 14, 2024.
29. B. Piazzesi, *Del governo degli animali. Allevamento e biopolitica*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2023, pp. 232-33.

histories, alongside proliferating debates on the possibility of multispecies cohabitation.[30]

Given the concealment and social distance which usually render the spaces of factory farming invisible to the public eye, I believe that the possibility of exhibiting both livestock environments and bodies is a radical act that pushes us to unveil and confront the uncanny and violent reality of industrial farming. Historically, this has always been a reality of zoonotic dangers and colonial expansion, as shown by *Imperfect Health* and by the curators of *Land. Milk. Honey.* Today, factory farming is a network of obscure technologies and robotized machineries, which often hide their extractive violence under a thin and hypocritical veneer of animal welfare.[31] Paired with critical theory – particularly from the field of critical animal studies – exhibitions have become a powerful tool for unpacking livestock environments and criticizing the controversial and dangerous effects of industrial capitalism as applied onto both animal and human bodies.

30. See for example the exhibition *Lo Animal en España*, curated by Lluis Alexandre Casanovas in 2024, https://fundacioncerezalesantoninoycinia.org/actividad/lo-animal-en-espana/. Accessed November 20, 2024. See also *Paris Animal. Histoire et récits d'une ville vivante*, curated by Henri Bony and Léa Mosconi in 2023, https://www.pavillon-arsenal.com/fr/expositions/12687-paris-animal.html. Accessed November 20, 2024. See the 2023 exhibition on wool, *Oltre Terra,* by Formafantasma: https://formafantasma.com/work/oltre-terra. Accessed April 24, 2025. See the recent exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Arts in Athens, *"Why Look at Animals?" A Case for the Rights of Non-Human Lives*, curated by Curated by Katerina Gregos (2025-26). Finally, see the forthcoming exhibition *Convivium: Food Systems at the Limit* at the Architekturmuseum der TUM in Munich, curated by Andjelka Badnjar and Andres Lepik (2026)

31. See Sofia Nannini, *Nurture the Nurturer: The Design of Comfort in Animal Farming*, in "Lava Journal," Chapter 3: Nurture, Entry 07 (2025), https://isola-studio.com/Nurture-the-Nurturer. Accessed January 12, 2026.

In the context of climate change, the architectural exhibition expands beyond the display of discrete objects to the staging of artificial environments. Bringing together diverse perspectives, this volume explores how temporary settings, pavilions, and installations engage with nature, climate, atmosphere, and weather, becoming sites of critique that address the entanglements between the natural and the manmade, as well as between design agency and indeterminacy.

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