

# Wilding Practices Through Design: Playful Encounters for Reframing Control in Multispecies Cohabitation

**How to cite this article:**

Andersson, E., Ávila, M., & Mäekivi, N. (2026). Wilding Practices Through Design: Playful Encounters for Reframing Control in Multispecies Cohabitation. *Diseña*, (28), Article.1.  
<https://doi.org/10.7764/disena.28.Article.1>

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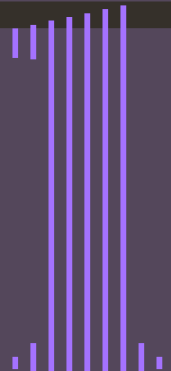
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DISEÑA | 28 | January 2026

ISSN: 0718-8447 (print); 2452-4298 (electronic)

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**Original Research Article**Reception: *June 21, 2025*Acceptance: *November 19, 2025*[🔗 Traducción al español aquí](#)

This article explores how design can reintroduce elements of wildness into urban environments through artifacts that foster multispecies interaction. Wildness is not defined as a return to nature, but as a relational and semiotic rupture of control. It is an opportunity for nonhuman agency to emerge within human-managed spaces. Drawing on theories of affordances, play, cultural heritage, and metacommunication, we investigate how artifacts can function as semiotic prompts for interspecies encounters, and how cultural familiarity can afford ecological disruption. We use design interventions in a Stockholm allotment garden as our example, where prototypes created as habitat elements for newts also provoked human curiosity, connections to gardening traditions, and multispecies activity. We argue that design should prioritize attunement, ambiguity, and divergence over mastery or harmony, thus supporting new forms of cohabitation within the constraints of urban life.

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**Keywords**


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 design for biodiversity

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 heritage and memory

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 management regimes

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 wilding

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 play
 

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# Wilding Practices Through Design: Playful Encounters for Reframing Control in Multispecies Cohabitation

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## INTRODUCTION: WILDING DESIGN FOR MULTISPECIES ENCOUNTERS

Contemporary urban environments are structured by regimes of control, such as zoning, maintenance, surveillance, and extensive management, that prioritize human safety, functionality, and order. In these settings, wildness is often considered a problem to be managed or an aesthetic to be curated (Lobo, 2023). Yet wildness can also serve as a creative and ethical force, disrupting anthropocentric norms and opening up new possibilities for multispecies cohabitation. Wildness is the disorder of things, a latent potential that frames every attempt to impose order (Halberstam, 2020). It manifests through disruption, ambiguity, and divergence.

This article explores how design practices can break a problematic tradition of attempted command and control (Holling & Meffe, 1996) and introduce elements of wildness into urban environments, not by rejecting human presence, but by crafting artifacts that loosen control and invite playful, open-ended interactions between species. Wildness is understood here not as the absence of structure, but as a relative and emergent quality—that is, a momentary disruption of established orders that can lead to new ways of being (Halberstam, 2020).

Central to our approach is the concept of play, an open-ended mode of interaction where meaning and behavior emerge through improvisation rather than utility (Caillois, 1958/2004; Jerolmack, 2009). Drawing on theories of metacommunication (Bateson, 1955, 1972/2000) and semiotic affordances (Gibson, 1979/2015), we consider how design can foster relations between individuals and species, in what has been described as compatible projects (Jerolmack, 2009), without requiring full mutual understanding. Our work also responds to what has been described as affective ecological impoverishment, which is the diminishing frequency and richness of everyday interactions with more-than-human life (Soga & Gaston, 2016; see also Monbiot, 2014).

We explore this proposition through design interventions developed to support cohabitation. By inserting new elements into everyday gardening practices that hold cultural and affective significance, the artifacts become both familiar and disruptive. This situates our inquiry within a broader reflection on *habitus*, heritage, and ossified rituals of land use. At the same time, our approach has an ecosemiotic orientation in the sense that we attend to the allotment garden as a more-than-human environment, shaped by signs, material arrangements, routines, and the presence of other species (Kohn, 2013; Maran, 2020). Traditions are not static: they are active forces that shape perception and action (Kalman, 2014). Design can engage with these forces not by erasing them, but by working diffractively with them (Barad, 2007)—that is, by redirecting and re-patterning existing differences rather than seeking a clean break.

Our inquiry addresses three guiding questions: (a) How can artifacts afford multispecies behaviors? (b) How can design challenge dominant control regimes? (c) How might artifacts act as semiotic scaffolds for interspecies cohabitation?

Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, this paper presents a set of reflections oriented toward crafting artifacts that reconsider control, invite play, and support situated, relational cohabitation. By engaging with both tradition and disruption, these design experiments open space for wilding—not as a nostalgic return to “nature,” but as a continuous practice of attunement and divergence within the everyday (Andersson & Barthel, 2016; Ávila, 2022).

## RETHINKING WILDNESS AND CONTROL

Historically, the category of “wild” has been deeply entangled with colonial and civilizing narratives, used to mark lands, species, and peoples as lacking order or value. This genealogy continues to inform urban planning

and environmental management, where “wildness” is often equated with risk or failure. The term “wild” typically evokes its binary opposite: the tame, the domesticated, the controlled. Wild denotes that which is unrestrained, undisciplined, and beyond human imposition. Yet wildness, as we use it here, should not be equated with an untouched or mythic wilderness. Rather, it signifies a relational and disruptive force; a disorder of things (Halberstam, 2020), and an element that unsettles expectations and momentarily dislocates established orders. Wildness is not a quality of a place or organism *per se*, but an occurrence, an emergent condition perceived relative to systems of control. It may arise from an unexpected encounter, a misalignment of intentions and lifeworlds, or a moment of spontaneous improvisation. Wildness is experienced through the rupture of cultural order, not through separation from culture. It is thus inherently semiotic and situated.

Importantly, we do not propose that design should aim to erase control or restore a romanticized natural state. Rather, design can operate by modulating control to allow difference to emerge, by embracing that which exceeds meaning (Halberstam, 2020). The garden, which is so often a symbol of cultivation, order, and propriety, becomes a site of tension. It is both a material practice and a memory structure, enacting a *habitus* of control. Yet it often offers latent affordances for improvisation, decay, and cross-species entanglement. Wildness, thus, serves as an opening for negotiation, improvisation, and shared presence.

Artifacts, then, become a powerful medium for this shift. When they are introduced into culturally embedded practices, such as gardening, they can operate as interventions that partly disrupt the smooth continuity of habit and open up space for other-than-human participation. The challenge lies in finding the balance: how to graft novelty onto legacy without collapsing into instrumentalism or rejection (see Rotarangi & Stephenson, 2014). We propose this balance lies in a form of agreeable disruption, in a mode of design that invites curiosity without alienation, that suggests difference without demanding a particular reading. In this way, wildness becomes something to be cultivated not in opposition to culture, but within and through it. Design can invite co-formation: a process of engaging other species not as objects of control, but as unpredictable agents who help shape the shared environment. This is a call for a kind of attuned looseness, in consideration of multispecies worlds.

### ARTIFACTS, AFFORDANCES, AND CULTURAL FRAMES

Semiotically-oriented accounts of more-than-human worlds position landscapes and habitats as constellations of sign relations in which human and nonhuman ways of life co-constitute places and exceed

human-centered perspectives (Kohn, 2013; Maran, 2020). From this perspective, designed artifacts have long favored a structuring of the environment in accordance with human needs and human aesthetic preferences, without acknowledging that they also function as semiotic interfaces that mediate interactions and reconfigure relationships between species. Through their placement, form, and materiality, artifacts can afford both continuity and disruption, grounding new practices in familiar contexts.

Affordances, as theorized by Gibson (1979/2015), describe the actionable possibilities that environments offer to particular organisms. These are not static properties but relational potentials, emerging from the fit between a body and its surroundings. A surface or cavity may shelter an insect, yet it may not afford shelter to larger species. In this framework, artifacts that appear passive from a human perspective may act as behavioral prompts for other species (Hoffmeyer, 2008). Yet affordances are not only biological but also cultural. A raised bed, a fence, or a pallet collar afford particular uses not just through their materiality but through embedded meanings and habitual practices. This is where tradition becomes critical: artifacts carry affective weight and are embedded in systems of memory, authority, and legitimacy. Designing for multispecies affordances involves working with these asymmetries. Artifacts may be interpreted differently across species. This semiotic ambiguity (von Uexküll, 1934/2010) allows artifacts to operate across overlapping lifeworlds without requiring shared understanding.

To ease uptake, artifacts may be grafted onto existing cultural practices such as allotment gardening. Cultural practices are often rich in tradition, associated identities, and symbolic meaning. Artifacts that speak to, but do not conform to these traditions, gain immediate relevance when introducing new values and behaviors. As Kalman (2014) argues, heritage is not a static repository but a set of ongoing practices shaped by continuity and change. This approach resonates with what Rotarangi and Stephenson (2014) frame as resilience pivots: a central, consistent, or continuous value or practice that anchors cultural identity while enabling adaptation or transformation.

Artifacts that align with such pivots are more likely to be accepted and maintained, even when they subtly disrupt established norms. They become both memory carriers and diffraction points by supporting stewardship while challenging anthropocentric assumptions (Andersson & Barthel, 2016). Ambiguity also generates tension: it may stimulate one gardener's curiosity while another may see disorder or risk. These divergent readings are part of the artifact's semiotic power; that is, they expose friction points between control and cohabitation. Designs that afford wildness do not impose a fixed function. Instead, they offer triggers and prompts for interaction, attunement,

consideration, and play. In this sense, they are about relational potential: what they invite, afford, or make possible, through their form, across species lines.

### FRAMING PLAY AS A MULTISPECIES PRACTICE

Play is central to this article as a semiotic and relational frame that invites unpredictable emergence, curiosity, and co-creation. Following Bateson (1955, 1972/2000), we see play as a type of metacommunication, as a signal that “this is play,” creating a shared space distinct from ordinary behavior. It suspends literal meanings and invites engagement where outcomes emerge through interpretation, improvisation, and embodied response. Goffman (1974/1986) extends this to everyday life, describing frames as schemata that shape how we perceive and act. Gardens, for instance, cue repetitive behaviors unless the frame is shifted. If reframed as play rather than utility, the situation transforms: the garden is no longer only a site for cultivation, but instead a shared arena for encounters. Play is an interactional frame rather than a claim about subjective states. We use it for low-stakes, under-specified invitations to explore, where meanings and actions can be tried out, deferred, or ignored by different species and at different times (Caillois, 1958/2004; Jerolmack, 2009).

Frames also matter for nonhumans. They structure what is legible, permitted, and responded to. By introducing ambiguity and openings that afford curiosity, design can make space for nonhuman interpretation. In multispecies contexts, frame alignment is not always symmetrical. As Jerolmack (2009) notes, humans may frame an encounter as play even when other species do not reciprocate. Yet play still occurs as a semiotic opportunity, encouraging responsiveness without full mutuality. Unlike direct interspecies play (e.g., between dogs and humans), design allows for asynchronous encounters: a dog marking a tree communicates with another dog hours later—an interaction mediated by the environment. Similarly, designed artifacts can store and transmit meaning over time, enabling indirect but affective multispecies connections (Hoffmeyer, 2008; von Uexküll, 2010). In this sense, what matters empirically is the presence of conditions for exploratory uptake rather than demonstrations of mutual play.

This form of playful association relies on affordances and material ambiguity, forms that suggest more than one use, that reward curiosity. As manifested in our final proposition for the collars (Figures 6–8), ambiguity is the condition that allows (asymmetric) play to be shared across species. The collars signal that something is out of the ordinary in the garden without prescribing a single correct response, so that both gardeners and other animals can probe them, ignore them, or fold them into their own routines.

These artifacts invite new readings each time a body, human or otherwise, encounters them. Gardening, traditionally framed as work or leisure, becomes a reframed practice when artifacts introduce play. The insertion of cues, such as openings, cavities, and ambiguous forms, can invite other-than-human beings to engage the space differently, even momentarily. These artifacts thus become mediators of encounters, fostering ecological awareness and relational experimentation.

Play aligns with design for multispecies cohabitation through its intrinsic motivation (performed for its own sake), unpredictability (which invites improvisation and responsiveness), and open-endedness (allowing engagement without fixed interpretations) (Caillois, 1958/2004; Jerolmack, 2009). Through these qualities, play becomes a methodological lens for rethinking design: not as an instruction, but an invitation. It allows artifacts to participate in processes of cohabitation that recognize the ethical, affective, and situated in ongoing negotiation.

### PROTOTYPING FOR MULTISPECIES COHABITATION

While exploring how artifacts can support multispecies cohabitation, we carried out design interventions in an allotment area in Kyrksjölöten, located in Bromma, a neighborhood in western Stockholm, Sweden. Allotment gardens are cultural landscapes; they have been shaped by a long and strong presence of human care and control, blending both tradition and improvisation. Under the managed surface, they are ecologically entangled (Andersson et al., 2007), with many opportunities to re-center the more-than-human use. The allotment area in Kyrksjölöten is embedded in a mixed suburban landscape (gardens, grassland, forest patches, and a lake fringed by wetlands), partly protected as a nature reserve, which defines the ecological boundary conditions for the kind of encounters the site could host and the different place meanings that coexist.

Our focus was on two species of newts: the European or Smooth newt (*Lissotriton vulgaris*) and the Great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*), both protected and under increasing pressure from habitat loss and landscape fragmentation. Stockholm has had a long-term program for restoring ponds to support not least the newts, and some of these ponds are located near allotment gardens, as in Kyrksjölöten in Bromma. However, ponds are only one of many habitat elements that newts need, and our prototypes were designed to provide a complementary resource—suitable winter shelters. Newts survive winters by finding shelter that keeps them above zero degrees (Langton et al., 2004). Shelters close to the ponds reduce the risk of traffic mortality while crossing roads.

<sup>1</sup> The designs and prototypes presented here were developed by Martín Ávila together with designer Jonathan Berglund.

<sup>2</sup> First, we prototyped this idea with three types of cavities made of rammed earth, 3D-printed PLA, and extruded clay. These prototypes were placed at Kyrksjölöten's allotment garden in December 2023 and monitored to measure their insulating capacities. Understanding that the locally-sourced waste wool insulation that we provided was not sufficient, we prototyped a second version (Figures 2–4), this time with hosting paths made of local wood and insulated with reed, also common in the Stockholm region.

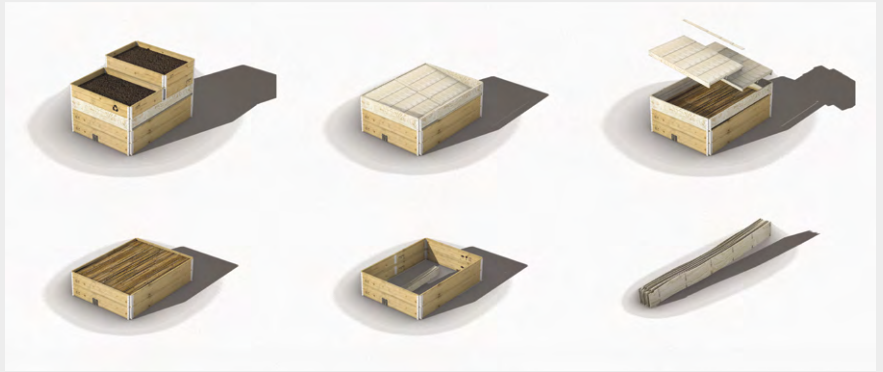
Within this context, we designed five artifacts to provide winter shelter for newts, aiming at ecological functionality and cultural legibility.<sup>1</sup> These five prototypes were primarily intended to test temperature differences:<sup>2</sup> three were tested during the 2023–2024 winter, one during the 2024–2025 winter, and one is being tested during the 2025–2026 winter. At the same time, the five propositions explored different strategies and expressions that would help us find appropriate qualities that would afford multi-species coexistence. Only one of the five propositions was located at a private allotment and used to grow plants (depicted in Figure 2; situated in Figures 4 and 5). The others were placed in common spaces and were not used for plant growing, although this would have been possible. The ambition was to enable new affordances rooted in familiar practices, by introducing artifacts that disrupt anthropocentric patterns while resonating within existing cultural frames.

Our design propositions involved stacking pallet collars: the lower level included entry points for newts, and the upper level supported plant growth (Figures 1–3). The design process was iterative and situated. Early sketches and prototypes tested different configurations of internal hosting paths, insulation, and side openings, as well as how visible and orderly the artifacts would appear within the plots. The final collars embody a series of small negotiations between ecological requirements (insulation, proximity to ponds), design ambitions (ambiguity, play), and the constraints of routine gardening with pallet collars.

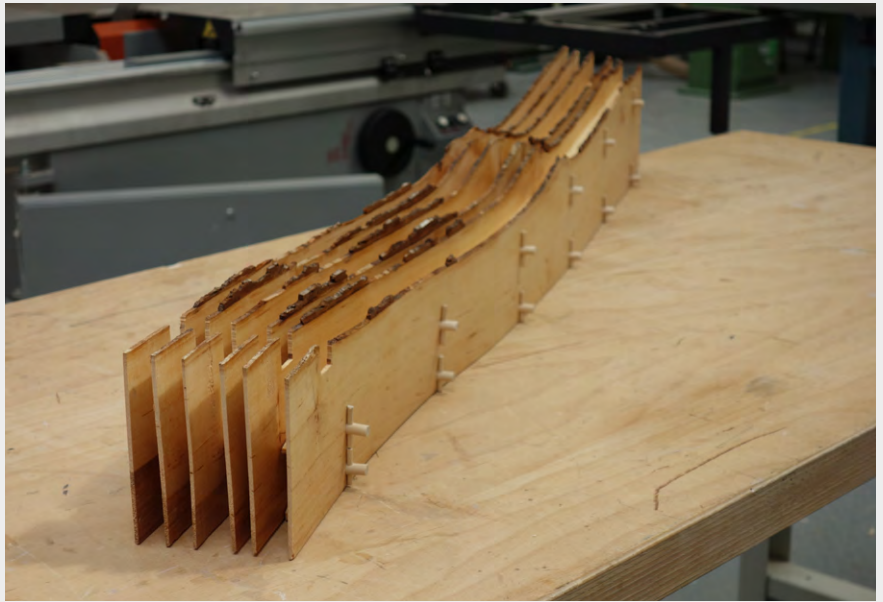


**Figure 4:** Pallet collars are commonly used to grow plants in allotment gardens. This project connects to and amplifies this existing practice. Photograph: Martín Ávila.

**Figure 2:** Parts of the proposal to test insulation for winters in Stockholm (see prototype in Figure 4). Bottom-right image of the "hosting paths" (see prototype in Figure 3). Drawing: Jonathan Berglund.



**Figure 3:** Prototype of wooden hosting paths for newts (to be inserted and insulated within pallet collar frames). Each prototype is made of wooden planks locally sourced and "layered" to create space for cavities. No glue or materials other than wood are used. Photograph: Martín Ávila.



**Figure 4:** Monitoring temperature inside and movement into and around adapted pallet collars. Photograph: Martín Ávila.



**Figure 5:** Foxes, cats, mice, and snails as visitors to the adapted collar (Motion-activated camera captures recorded between June 28 and September 4, 2024).



We have been monitoring internal temperatures and activity (Figures 4 and 5) since the installation of the prototype in June 2024. Despite the extra insulation, temperatures remained above zero beneath the hosting path but not within it, exposing the difficulty of finding winter shelter at these latitudes. Observing a range of non-newt visitors (Figure 5), such as foxes, domestic cats, mice, and snails, we shifted away from narrow “hosting paths” toward more ecologically active, open-ended artifacts (Figures 6–8) that speak to the needs of multiple species. Rather than narrowly defining artifacts as “newt shelters,” we reframed them as openings that support shelter, passage, and interpretation across species.

This semiotic ambiguity, where artifacts “mean” different things to different species, is a design strength. It aligns with our interest in play, affordances, and semiotic scaffolding (Ávila, 2022; Hoffmeyer, 2008). Rather than delivering “solutions,” the artifacts function as propositions—that is, open invitations to reimagine gardens as spaces of shared meaning. This aligns with designing for divergence rather than harmony, enabling overlaps in behavior that support resilient urban ecologies (Biggs et al., 2015; Rotarangi & Stephenson, 2014).

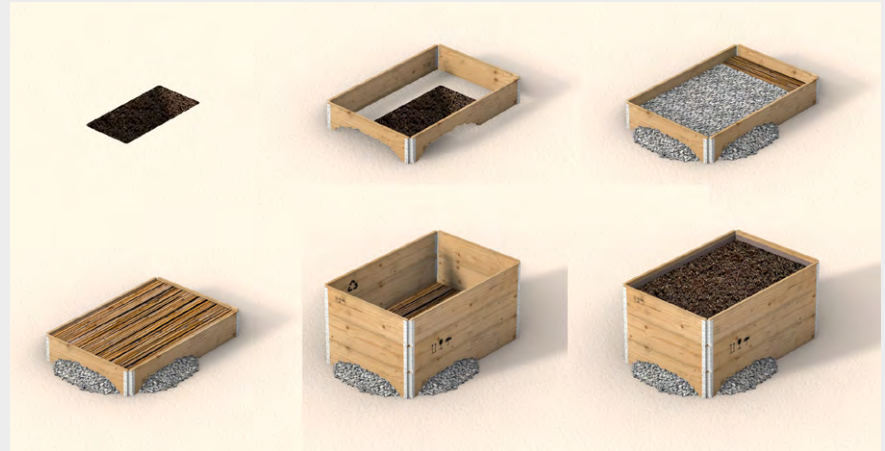
The inhabitable pallet collar-raised bed design has several ecological affordances, from short- and long-term shelter to foraging and sign-posting. Although most recorded visits were brief crossings, some sequences show individuals pausing at the opening, sniffing the edges, or walking over the opening, suggesting that the collar is already folded into the movement routes of several species. More importantly, the raised beds also signal physical and

metaphorical openness to human use and users, attuning them to the possibility of playful multispecies associations. This was evident in the gardeners who interacted with the collar: they inspired the creation of a pond for amphibians in the allotment area and prompted discussions among garden users about newts, frogs, and many other species (some of them recorded by our monitoring cameras).

→ **Figure 6:** Parts of the proposal to test insulation for winters in Stockholm (see prototype in Figures 7 and 8). Drawing: Jonathan Berglund.

↓ **Figure 7:** Newly installed prototype, June 7, 2025. Photograph: Martín Ávila.

↘ **Figure 8:** Detail. Random cavities formed by stones and bricks through the side openings. Photograph: Martín Ávila.



One defining feature of play is unpredictability, because we cannot fully anticipate outcomes (Caillois, 1958/2001). Newts may ignore these artifacts, while other species may inhabit them. And this may change over time. This uncertainty is what makes the designed proposition playful from a human perspective, as unexpected visitors contribute to an evolving, dynamic space. Taking a temporary perspective, the artifacts are grafted into

practices already rich in tradition and ecological memory. These span people-people relations, human-nonhuman interactions, and indirect ecological entanglements. Practices capture the continuum of valued cultural activities and natural/human processes of the landscape (e.g., Stephenson, 2008). These artifacts extend that continuum, carrying memory, inviting meaning, and adapting to established values (Andersson & Barthel, 2016).

### **DISCUSSION: ARTIFACTS, AFFORDANCES, AND DIVERGENCES FOR PLAY**

This article has explored how designed artifacts can mediate multispecies encounters by loosening regimes of control and reframing shared spaces through play. The project is still in progress, and although we have not been able to confirm the presence of newts in the shelters provided by the adapted pallet collars so far, these interventions have become semiotic tools that provoke interpretation and multispecies interaction. These artifacts show how affordances can emerge across species boundaries. Play, in this context, is both method and metaphor: it is a generative frame that embraces unpredictability, emergent behavior, and nonlinear outcomes. Artifacts that embody play afford behaviors neither fully human-centric nor fully determined, enabling partial connections between species—what Jerolmack calls compatible projects (2009). They challenge tidy, anthropocentric norms, proposing a design that invites, rather than dictates, multispecies agency.

This reframing turns artifacts into dynamic prompts for ecological awareness, interaction, and affective engagement. In the Kyrksjölöten garden, this meant that a collar designed as a newt shelter could simultaneously be read as a raised bed, a curious object to ask about, or a convenient route or cover for passing animals. The under-specified, ambiguous character of the artifact is therefore what makes play possible: it leaves room for different species to test how they might engage with it without reducing those engagements into a single, predetermined function.

By grafting these artifacts into familiar cultural practices like allotment gardening, the interventions gain both resonance and friction. Thus, they function as semiotic scaffolds that support interaction without enforcing a single interpretation. By aligning with tradition yet introducing mild disruption, these artifacts act as resilience pivots (Rotarangi & Stephenson, 2014), nudging habitual practices toward greater ecological sensitivity. This careful balance of continuity and novelty supports their uptake and long-term presence.

Designing for difference acknowledges that multispecies cohabitation involves tension. These designs do not erase conflict but surface and work with it, allowing ecological ethics to be enacted in situated, pragmatic

ways. In this setting, care can take modest forms of accommodation and restraint: leaving parts of an artifact undisturbed, accepting partial disorder around openings, and reading the collars as shared infrastructure. Coexistence here does not imply harmony, but the maintenance of shared space through intermittent presence and flexible boundaries, supported by artifacts that act as both memory carriers and prompts (Andersson & Barthel, 2016; Hoffmeyer, 2008). Artifacts become part of a semiotic scaffolding (Hoffmeyer, 2008), shaping interactions and becoming, potentially, memory repositories. As artifacts enter public and semi-public spaces, they become part of a contested landscape.

Framing design through play also opens educational possibilities. The artifacts serve as pedagogical prompts, especially for younger users, fostering ecological literacy through direct, embodied interaction. They counteract ecological boredom (Monbiot, 2014) by making nonhuman presence visible and emotionally resonant. Gardeners, children, and passersby encounter unfamiliar forms and wonder: “Who is this for?” This curiosity invites attention not through spectacle, but through ambiguity. By enabling indirect, partial, and asynchronous encounters, these artifacts foster an affective mode of cohabitation not built on control or even recognition, but on the possibility of shared presence and responsiveness.

## CONCLUSION

Designing for wildness does not require abandoning structure, but calls for loosening anthropocentric frames that suppress the vitality of other beings. Through play, affordances, and ambiguous artifacts, we can foster unpredictable, affective, and ethically situated relationships with nonhuman life. The interventions described here demonstrate that any artifact, when thoughtfully designed and contextually embedded, can reframe urban spaces as spaces of shared inhabitation. By inviting multispecies presence, resisting rigid control, and foregrounding ambiguity, these designs support a form of wilding that is attuned to both tradition and transformation.

Our case hints at three orientations for wilding-oriented design in managed urban environments: start from existing artifacts and routines, and adapt them for other species; favor relational ambiguity over fixed functions, so artifacts may serve as shelter, pathway, or prompt; and treat interventions as provisional propositions that change with human and nonhuman uptake, rather than as settled solutions.

We argue for a recalibration of design's role from problem-solver to sense-maker. It invites us to design not for certainty, but for curiosity; not for control, but for connection. The artifacts presented are not blueprints or

solutions, but propositions. They do not tell us how to live together; they ask if we can. They hold space for difference, for tension, and for stories we have yet to notice. In doing so, they sketch a mode of ecological practice rooted not in mastery but in co-formation and cohabitation.

As we face accelerating ecological breakdown and increasing urbanization, these alternative design modes become ever more urgent. They propose a design philosophy not driven by prediction and control, but by responsiveness, care, and attunement. Ultimately, the work presented here is an invitation to continue experimenting with the ecosemiotic and ethical dimensions of design in the Anthropocene. What does it mean to share space, not only physically but semiotically, with other forms of life? This question demands further play and exploration across fields, practices, and ways of being in the world. □

### Funding

The information provided in this article is the result of the project “Material Cultures for Interspecies Cohabitation” (2023–2026), financed by the Swedish Research Council.

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