

Designing with and for cohabitation

Summary

In this teaching activity, students will engage in idea generation. They will sketch cohabitation scenarios of how humans and a more-than-human (or a selection of more-than-humans) can live together. First, they choose which more-than-humans they would like to work with, and what kinds of situations and environments they would like to address. Then they imagine possible scenarios where they sketch ways of cohabitation and how they are manifested through designed objects, environments, and activities. Scenarios are presented in plenum in the end.

Learning outcomes

After the teaching activity students should be able to:

- Recognize concepts like nature-culture, cohabitation, and designing/making-with.
- Illustrate near-future cohabitation scenarios consisting of humans and more-than-humans living together.
- Imagine ways in which humans can design and make with more-than-humans over longer timespans in the illustrated cohabitation scenarios.

Outline/Content

- Introduction to nature-culture
- Introduction to cohabitation
- Introduction to designing/making with
- The exercise, step by step

Key readings

Smith, Nancy; Bardzell, Shaowen; and Bardzell, Jeffrey (2017) Designing for cohabitation: naturecultures, hybrids, and decentering the human in design. *Proceedings of the 2017 Conference on Human Factors in Computing CHI 2017*, May 6–11, Denver, CO, USA, 1714-1725.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025948>

Tarcan, Berilsu; Pettersen, Ida N.; and Edwards, Ferne. (2022). Making-with the environment through more-than-human design, in Lockton, D., Lenzi, S., Hekkert, P., Oak, A., Sádaba, J., Lloyd, P. (eds.). *Proceedings of Design Research and Society DRS2022*, 25 June - 3 July, Bilbao, Spain.
<https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2022.347>

Haraway, Donna. J. (2003) *The Companion species manifesto: dogs, people, and significant otherness*. 1st ed. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003.

Nature-culture

The nature-culture concept comes from Donna Haraway that describes the companion species manifesto: dogs, people, and significant otherness.

A nature-culture is a synthesis of nature and culture, where humans have become aware of how they are interdependent with elements in an ecosystem such as other species, water, soil etc. With this awareness, humans have over time developed a culture where they nurture their relationship with nature entities to maintain them and regenerate them.

In some cases, the elements of nature might also have developed a culture around humans, based on how humans have interacted with those elements over time. For example, a dog might have developed a certain behavior based on how humans related to it. This might also be the case with other species, even though they might not live in an as close relationship as humans and dogs.

Cohabitation

When humans and elements of nature such as other species, water, soil etc have established nature-cultures and live in a symbiotic relationship with each other, you can say that they have established different forms of cohabitation.

In vertical gardens, humans and plants develop a cohabitation relationship where they are dependent on each other: humans breathe the fresh air that the plants generate in a vertical garden, when they clean the air from CO₂. Plants are dependent on the soil that humans make available for the plants in a vertical garden. Sometimes humans also provide water for the plants in case it rains very little.

We can probably all relate to living together with a dog. In this case, humans might not change their living environment much to achieve cohabitation. In other cases, humans might need to change their living environments more drastically to create a cohabitation situation that benefits all.

Designing/making with

To create good conditions for cohabitation, humans need to consider the needs of the more-than-human(s) who they would like to live with. They need to constantly negotiate their own needs, and the needs of the more-than-human(s). This kind of negotiation process is the process of designing and making with.

Example:

Humans might start out with an unfinished piece of design, or just provide a material that the more-than-humans can adapt so that it matches their needs. For example, a human can provide a bird with some wool, but it is the bird who weaves the wool into the construction of the nest to isolate it from cold winds. If humans were to live with birds and bird nests, perhaps there would also need to be a negotiation around how the faeces from a bird nest should be treated. This could for example be considered in relation to where bird nests are placed in human environments. Or if the humans are able to modify the near surroundings around a nest in ways where there is a "faeces pick up station" underneath. This has to be done with respect for the shy birds, of course.

Assignment 1: Sketch ideas

You are now divided into groups of four in a classroom and sketch with colored markers and pens.

You should first identify what humans and more-than-humans that you would like to target.

Then the situations and environments that you would like the designs to be part of in your cohabitation scenarios.

Finally: move on sketching one or more cohabitation scenarios.

Assignment 2: Share ideas and present in class

You will be divided into single individuals where the members of each team (except from one member who stays at the table and becomes a host) move between the tables and review the other teams' sketches. They are encouraged to add to the idea generation and ask critical questions.

In the end, each team of student briefly present the highlights of heir sketches to the whole class.

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