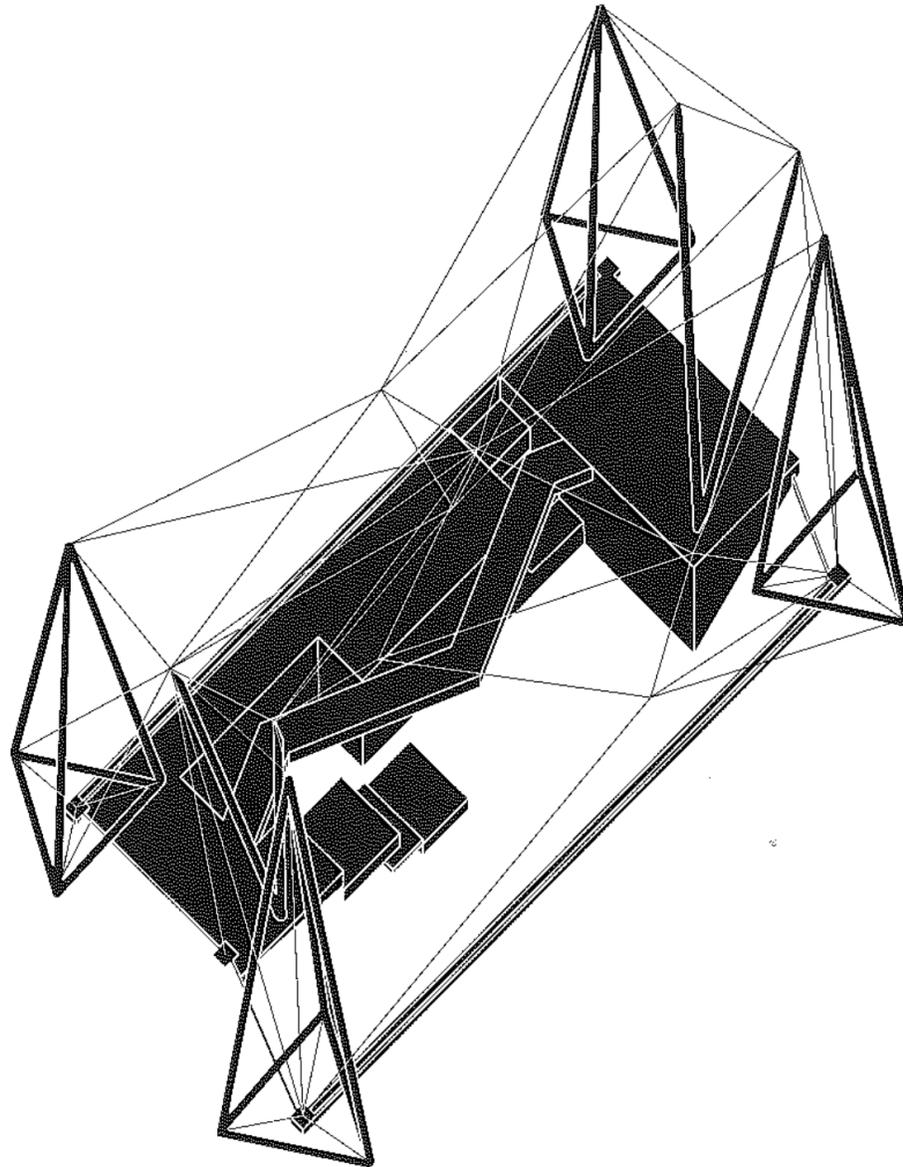


# A LETTER TO THE ZOOLOGIST

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pictures by Alessandro Sambini



Professor Sir Patrick Bateson  
President of the Zoological Society of London  
Outer Circle  
Regent's Park  
London NW1 4RY

London, December 2009

Dear Professor Sir Patrick Bateson,

## A LETTER TO THE ZOOLOGISTS

In all innocence and a healthy interest on the Northern (Snowdon) Aviary, I address this letter to you. It follows an investigation on the architectural culture of the London Zoo and relates to the idea that the ornithological pavilion, walk-through aviary from 1961-64, was designed with the welded aluminium mesh enclosure only as temporary feature, to be there as long as the community of birds need to establish, or achieve permanent acceptance of the area as habitat and therefore not leave.

For the birds that inhabit the structure, as for the practice and the interest of zoology and the life and work of the architect that signed the aviary, I wonder if the idea was to be considered. So many times mentioned as hostile to flight or of difficult cleaning the mesh accommodates little ingenuity but respects an aesthetic socio-technological construction like show window, promoted as focal point for bird keeping. Once temporary rather than utilitarian, it is to be recognized the progress its removal seems to entail and how admirable it would be to open that aviary to the sky.

Architecturally speaking, in between the trees, the four corners marked by tetrahedral held in mid-air would frame the bird's territorial behaviour as the only physical manifestation of the aviary. In addition, once surpassed the state of grow and their protective apparatus, the tensistructure gripped by cables anchored into the ground by two V-shaped welded aluminium columns 80ft high, to serve as impressive perching positions. Settled in place at the service of "the lightweight dream in which people, and animals, were to be liberated from the constrains of shelter and the dynamic forms in which free-flight was, by necessity, tethered to the boundaries of freedom" (Steiner, 2003: 21).

To the purpose of the grand design, the mesh removal would certainly certify the possibility of the Northern (Snowdon) Aviary's nesting boxes, as once recognized by Reyner Baham, a prolific architectural critic, to prove "the difference between a great building of the twentieth century and a major building of the nineteen sixties" (Reyner, 1996: 121). By other words, to prove the difference between a great modernistic building and a major building of a time and from a generation of architects committed to the future and sustained by confidence in rational debate and action to help and to create encouraging ambience for the seeding and development of architectural ideas. Probable reason for the choice Antony Armstrong-Jones made for Cedric Price and that Price extended to Frank Newby, the investigative structural engineer, member of the Team X.

Both highly inspired, creative and adventurous in the approach to design, their proposal had been consulted together with Peter Scott, the celebrated ornithologist and conservationist formerly Fellow of the Zoological Society of London and one of the founders of the World Wide Fund for Nature, in the past World Wildlife Fund. Despite no documentation or certified description being released, to leave the aviary indefinite follows Price's known belief in indeterminacy. Moreover if birds become spaced, confined to the neighbourhood of their nest as defence reaction and/or method of ensuring that food supply is neither wasted nor exhausted, as is thought since Aristotle (ABC) and confirmed by Henri Howard in 1920, "because the territory is the property of the animal and leaving it is to venture" (Deleuze, 1988: A for animals), why should one aviary not give maximum free-flight space?

On the condition of the correct housing of birds, and since it is a subject as complex as the birds themselves, present-day techniques to be perfectly reasonable, responsible and humane in practices of conservation of species, especially of keeping certain birds, are still to be improved, as your contemporaries willingly admit. For as much we are proud of the great advances that wept through your profession, cleaning old-fashioned ideas and prejudices reverberating from the old ethical issue normally directed to the zoos, or to its predecessor's reasoning, much value and scientific worth may at the same time be gained from simple experiments and informed technical scientific awareness.

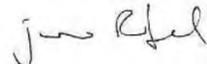
However, in front of such a respectful career you have in ethology, I must confess certain inexperience, especially as regard the proposition I am posing to the zoological society you preside. It may be that the relationship between architecture and animal behaviour is not limited to strategies of territoriality. Or that, territoriality is not limited to spatial or epistemological arrangements.

I know or I believe to know that, since late summer 1965, date of the aviary's opening, a variety of birds, approximately 150 of 45 species, most Asian and African had been housed in the aviary Cedric Price signed, and that the birds currently housed, nomadic or partially migratory are part of the effort your society maintains to integrate the IUCN Red List Endangered Species, the world's main authority on the conservation Status of species. Such a jurisdiction must, by definition correspond to certain duties and obligations on efforts to preserve zoological species but, in light of today's increase of interest in natural resources and on benefits for threatened species, used as regard as conservation tools, those should cohere with methods to perpetuate zoological facilities.

Nevertheless, listed as historical monument or architectural notable construction commissioned to truly "display the natural characteristics of the animals", as László Moholy-Nagy stated in *The New Architecture of the London Zoo* for Peter Chalmers Mitchell and John James Joss's (1913-114) *Mappin Terraces*, and Berthold Lubetkin's (1932) *Penguin Pool*, the Northern (Snowdon) Aviary is effectively a glorious birdcage, whose challenge stands to serve this brief eulogy.

Looking forward for your opinion.

Yours sincerely,



Joana Rafael  
Mrs, Ma, Dip Arch



