

The unseen architecture of the animal world

Before I knew how to fly, I jumped

Im Nadia Riley—an architect, conservationist, and animal activist.

Eight years ago, I founded Hazkoba, a studio dedicated to animal architecture and the reconnection of humans to nature through responsible design.

My journey didn't begin with a plan—but with a calling. After graduating with a diploma project on a quarantine center for animals, I unexpectedly stepped into a profession most people don't even know exists: architecture for animals. I took the leap—and over the past eight years, I've built an architectural practice where design meets conservation, science meets intuition, and every choice carries a vibration.

My work has taken me across continents, designing for zoological institutions, wildlife sanctuaries, rewilding parks, veterinary clinics, safaris, and private facilities—especially for high-profile clients in the Emirates. And while it was rewarding, it was also exhausting. The pace, the pressure, the constant availability, and the demand for fast, flawless design took a toll.

I reached a crossroads. I had lost touch with myself and with the reason of why I design. I needed to reconnect—with my creativity, intuition, and with the essence of what my architecture could offer this planet.

IN A WORLD WHERE
ARCHITECTURE FOCUSES ON
HUMANS, THERE IS A QUIET
REVOLUTION TAKING PLACE—
ONE THAT HONORS ANIMALS,
RESPECTS LANDSCAPES, AND
CONSIDERS THE UNSEEN
ENERGIES THAT PULSE IN EVERY
LIVING BEING.



"I didn't plan to enter the niche of animal architecture, but I dived in and built a distinctive career as a woman in this profession"

That disconnection became a turning point. I paused. I learned to listen—truly listen—to the animals, the landscapes, and to my own silence.

That break in my work was also a breath of fresh air. For the first time in years, I had the time and space to broaden my knowledge. I immersed myself in courses, webinars, and literature that allowed me to explore the deeper dimensions I wanted to integrate into my designs. It was also a chance to ground Hazkoba more intentionally—I went through a full rebranding, gathered and presented my broad portfolio, and finally began engaging with social media, something I simply didn't have space for during the intense years of nonstop project work.

Looking back, I now see that architecture was never just a service for me. It has always been a calling to create from a place of care and consciousness. And through challenges, lessons, and deep reflection, I've come to understand how I can truly contribute to this planet as an architect.

Out of that shift, Hazkoba evolved as an architectural studio—not just of animal architecture, but of remembrance and reconnection of humans to nature.

A methodology beyond species

“Architecture for animals begins when we truly see them—not just as species, but as individuals with needs, emotions, and soul”

Many of my early projects were for zoos belonging or collaborating with EAZA (European Association of Zoos and Aquaria), designing habitats and holding facilities in line with the EEP housing standards. From gorillas, big cats, to polar bears, each project was approved for building, fulfilling all the technical requirements.

But it wasn't enough. Something essential was missing. Even with all the right design elements, the spaces felt lifeless. The same crisis we face in human architecture—where buildings ignore health, soul, and sustainability. Toxic materials, overdesign, destroyed natural ecosystem and its vegetation—architecture had become detached from life.

That discomfort pushed me to rethink my entire approach creating a methodology that isn't a fixed formula. It's a living process—guided by intuition, rooted in science, and shaped by experience.

REWILDING, PRESERVING LANDSCAPES, AND CREATING SPACES WHERE ANIMALS AND HUMANS COEXIST IN BALANCE IS THE FUTURE OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM. THIS IS WHERE A VISIONARY APPROACH MEETS RESPONSIBILITY AND DEEP CONNECTION TO THE PLANET.



“When you see the invisible you can do the impossible”

I started investigating fields like neuroarchitecture, epigenetics, quantum biology, zoopharmacognosy, and energy sensitivity.

Drawing on this knowledge—combined with the practical and technical experience gained through past projects—I now focus on several interconnected aspects that bring habitats to life.

My functional layouts, master plans, and animal facilities—whether for zoos, sanctuaries, wildlife parks or veterinary facilities—are always developed through a holistic lens. Each design integrates animals, humans, and landscape into a living, interdependent system. This approach forms design layers—from animal well-being to public engagement to ecological function.

ARCHITECTURE FOR INSTINCT

Animal habitats must support natural behaviour, movement, curiosity etc. Elements like climbing structures, water features, feeding poles, herbal gardens and scent trails are functional tools that stimulate physical health and cognitive engagement.

LIVING LANDSCAPES

Planting is purposeful. I select native, non-toxic species that regulate temperature, offer shelter, and attract pollinators—creating microclimates that evolve and sustain biodiversity.

DESIGNING FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

Every animal is unique. I shape environments around their personality, history, and preferences—considering light, acoustics, materials, and protection from external stressors.

HUMAN INTERFACE

Spaces for keepers, visitors, and educators are designed with the same care. I apply neuroarchitecture to create calm, intuitive zones where movement flows, materials invite interaction, and folklore connects people with the natural world.

The future of animal architecture

"I believe that the future of architecture—for all species—depends on how deeply we remember: that we're part of one ecosystem. That design isn't about control, but about communion"

I believe the future of architecture must integrate biodiversity directly into both urban and natural landscapes. Instead of isolated enclosures, we must create connected habitats that support native species and regenerate ecosystems. This approach restores balance and honours the land's natural vitality.

Public spaces will evolve into environments where humans and wildlife coexist more meaningfully. These places will offer sensory experiences that invite people to disconnect from technology and reconnect with nature's rhythms. Through thoughtful design and storytelling, they will cultivate awareness of the deep interconnection between animal, plant, and human well-being.

Companion and domestic animal environments must also be reimagined. I advocate for spaces that respect the individuality and instincts of each species—environments that incorporate natural materials, textures, and sensory layers to promote emotional security and physical health.

This future calls for architecture rooted in nature-based solutions: learning from organic forms and processes, and designing in harmony with the land. Every decision must be guided by the long-term health of the living being that is our planet.

Technology will continue to play a supporting role—creating adaptive, responsive systems—but real transformation will come from aligning science with intuition and ethical responsibility. The question remains: is our civilisation mature enough to embrace this change?

Leading this shift means redefining architecture to prioritize animals and ecosystems, offering more than shelter—a place of true protection and connection. This vision is the path I am committed to building for our shared future.

Building on everything we've explored—past breakthroughs, present methodology, and future possibilities—I see animal architecture moving toward a quiet, yet transformative power: one that shapes our world without demanding attention, allowing life itself to take center stage.

I envision landscapes and interiors where every detail responds to the land's natural rhythms—its forms, textures, energy, and intelligence. From city streets to remote safari lodges, these are not monuments, but living stages for authentic encounters. Places where animals move with freedom, vegetation draws its own lines, and people are gently guided back into relationship with the world they belong to.

This is the architecture I stand for—subtle, intentional, and alive. Not for display, but for restoration. Not to be admired, but to be felt. It is a commitment to build not for the sake of building, but to heal the space between species, and shape a future where design becomes a bridge—quietly powerful, deeply rooted, and unapologetically wild.

by Nadia Riley

"And throughout it all, I remain committed to invisible architecture. I don't build monuments. I build backdrops. My goal isn't to be seen but to let the animals, the vegetation, and the experience take center stage"

