

REWILDING CHILDHOOD

Challenging Human-Centred Interior Design Through Ecological Learning

'In our bones we need the natural curves of hills, the scent of chapparral, the whisper of pines, the possibility of wildness. We require these patches of nature for our mental health and our spiritual resilience. Future generations, regardless of whatever recreation or sports is in vogue, will need nature all the more.'

- Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*.



Challenging Human-Centred Space Through Co-Existence

As biodiversity declines, children are becoming increasingly disconnected from the natural world. This project challenges the anthropocentric view of nature as a resource, instead positioning wildlife, plants and people as co-inhabitants of a shared environment. Through reading, observation, storytelling and making, the library fosters ecological awareness and encourages children to develop empathy, responsibility and care for the living systems around them.

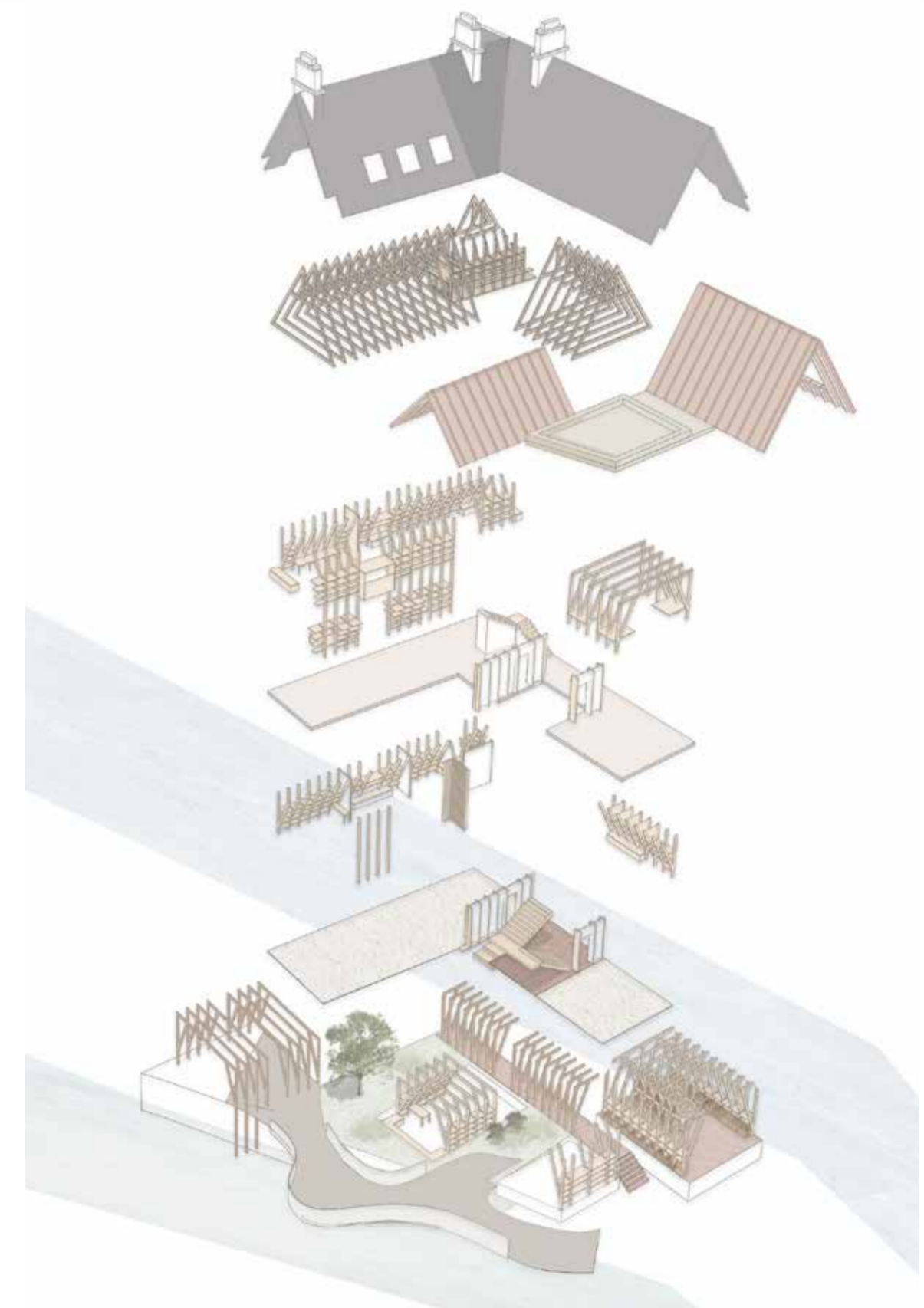
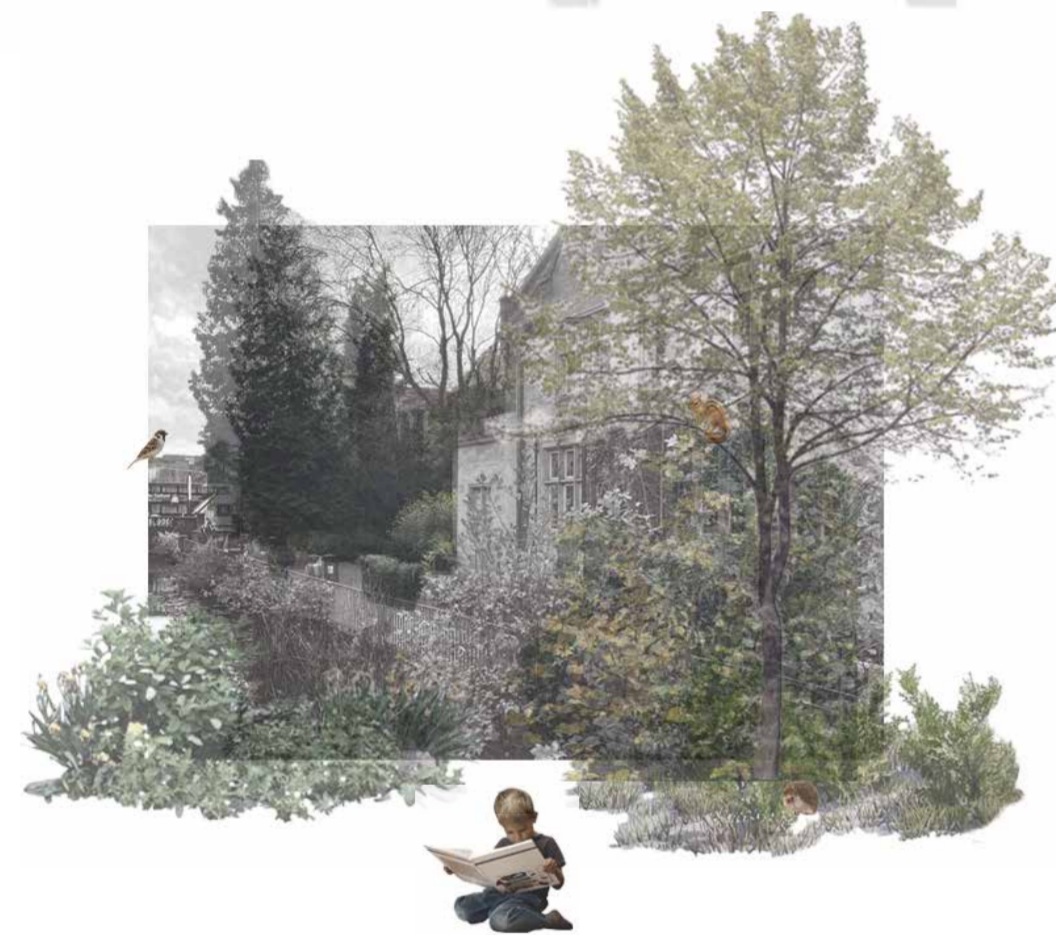
Extending 'Interiority' Beyond the Building

The building is conceived as a framework that supports the site's true interior: the landscape itself. Shaped by the river, street and existing ecology, outdoor spaces become primary learning environments where reading, growing, making and observation unfold. Rather than separating inside and outside, the project treats the entire site as an interconnected learning ecosystem.

A Shared Backgarden

Rewilding in this project is about giving children everyday contact with nature in a city where many grow up without gardens or outdoor space. For children living in flats, the natural world is often something distant or unknown, which can lead to a lack of care or understanding of its importance.

The library therefore acts as a shared 'back garden' within the city, where plants, insects and animals are part of daily routines of reading, play and learning. By spending time in these spaces, children begin to see nature as something familiar rather than separate, and something they have a role in looking after. This regular contact helps build emotional connection and responsibility, encouraging more thoughtful attitudes towards the environment as they grow up.



Pre-Industrial Oxford 1800's

A city shaped by Wetlands and Woodlands

Before enclosure and industrialisation, Oxford's landscape was a patchwork of wetlands, common pastures, and woodlands teeming with native species, otters along the Isis, red kites, skylarks, and wildflower meadows. Nature was inseparable from daily life; the rivers were transport routes and ecosystems, and children grew up embedded in a living landscape.



Industrialisation and the Canal 1790s-1900

Nature engineered, contained, and controlled

The construction of the Oxford Canal (1790) and the expansion of the railway in the 19th century reshaped the city's relationship with nature. Wetlands were drained, floodplains built upon, and the river channelised for trade. Pollution and urbanisation fragmented habitats. Wildlife populations plummeted, and nature was pushed to the city's edges.



Early Conservation Awareness 1900-1970

Science begins to speak for Nature

The 20th century brought the first glimmers of awareness. The Oxford Ornithological Society (1920s) and Wildlife Trusts (post-WWII) began documenting species loss. Botanists from the University of Oxford's Department of Plant Sciences recorded declines in meadow flora as agriculture intensified. Yet, education and architecture remained largely separate from ecological ethics.



The Conservation Movement 1970-2000
Protection, preservation, and the beginning of ecological ethics

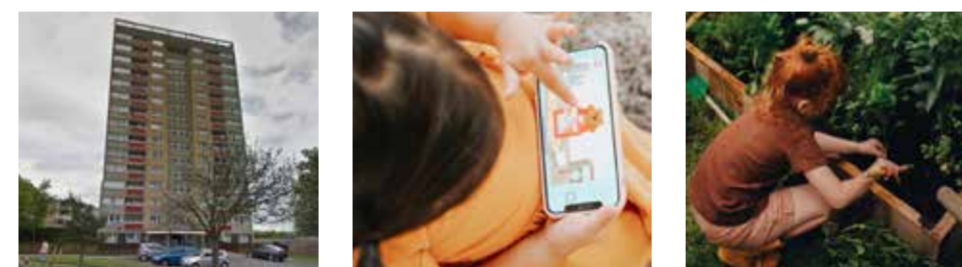
By the 1970s, global environmentalism influenced local policy. The creation of SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) in Oxfordshire protected Port Meadow and Shotover. Community groups began restoring local ponds and hedgerows.



Urban Rewilding 2000-Present

From preservation to active renewal

As biodiversity collapse became undeniable, conservation evolved into rewilding, restoring ecosystems and allowing natural processes to return. The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (2006), Oxford City Rewilding Projects (2020s), and local canal restorations aim to stitch habitats back together.



FROM READING TO ECOLOGICAL ACTION

Developing a Cyclical Learning Methodology

Discover - The Library

Children are introduced to ecological ideas through curated books, shaping curiosity about specific species, seasons or systems. Learning begins through the imagination. The book establishes the focus that guides the learning programme.

Understand - Group Reading/ Workshop Pavillion

Children discuss and translate stories into simple ecological understanding. Key ideas from the book are discussed and clarified, identifying what conditions, materials or species are needed.



Prepare - Potting Shed

Seeds, soil and tools are selected based on what has been read (e.g. pollinator friendly plants or seasonal growth).



Make & Grow - The Greenhouse

Children plant and cultivate species referenced in the book, directly applying learned ecological relationships.



Ecological Response - Garden

Plants mature and attract insects and wildlife as anticipated through the book's guidance. The outcomes of reading become visible within the landscape.



Build/ Repair Habitats - Making Pavilion

Habitats are designed and built in response to the needs of species encountered in the book. Understanding from reading is extended to supporting non-human life.



Reflect - Journaling Pavilion

Children record and interpret what they have observed, linking their actions to environmental change. Reflection enables them to process their impact, reinforcing understanding and long-term ecological awareness.



Observe - Observation Pavilion

Children observe how their actions influence the environment, as plants grow and habitats attract insects and wildlife. Recognising cause and effect fosters a sense of responsibility to nurture and protect the natural world.



CONNECT with wildlife

The Library creates everyday opportunities for children to encounter wildlife through integrated planting, habitats and framed views into the landscape. By reading about species and then seeing them appear within the garden, children form direct, personal connections to non-human life. This repeated exposure fosters curiosity and familiarity, making wildlife a visible and valued part of their daily environment.



CARE for wildlife

Children are encouraged to actively care for wildlife through planting, growing and habitat-making activities. Guided by what they read, they select species and create environments that support insects and animals. Through these hands on experiences, children develop a sense of responsibility, understanding that their actions contribute to the wellbeing of living species.



PROTECT wildlife

By observing the outcomes of their actions and reflecting on ecological relationships, children begin to understand the importance of protecting wildlife. The design supports this through spaces for observation and reflection, where children can recognise the impact of environmental change. This awareness builds a deeper sense of responsibility, encouraging long-term care and protection of the natural world.



'Literature, nature and dreams are forever linked.'

- Richard Louv, Last Child in the Woods



THE LIBRARY AS AN ECOLOGICAL NETWORK

Connecting Children, Wildlife and Landscape Through Interior Architecture

Multi-Species and How They Co-Exist

The site demonstrates that many species can inhabit the same space if their needs are understood and respected. Children learn how birds, insects, mammals, and humans use different layers of the environment and how each species depends on others. By creating and caring for habitats tailored to specific animals, children recognise that coexistence is a practical and moral responsibility. The library becomes the place where they see daily that humans are one species among many.



Key:

1- The Library

Children read and explore curated books, forming ideas that initiate the learning cycle.

2- Group Reading and Workshop Pavillion

Children discuss and interpret what they have read, shaping understanding, and beginning physical learning programme.

3- The Greenhouse

Children plant and nurture plantspecies they have read about, applying learning through growth and care.

4- Making Pavilion

Children design and build habitats, supporting insects and wildlife introduced through reading.

5- Observation Pavilion

Children observe ecological activity, recognising the impact of their actions.

6- Jounalling/ Reflection Pavilion

Children record and reflect on their experiences, processing their impact on the environment.

The Site - The Oxford Retreat

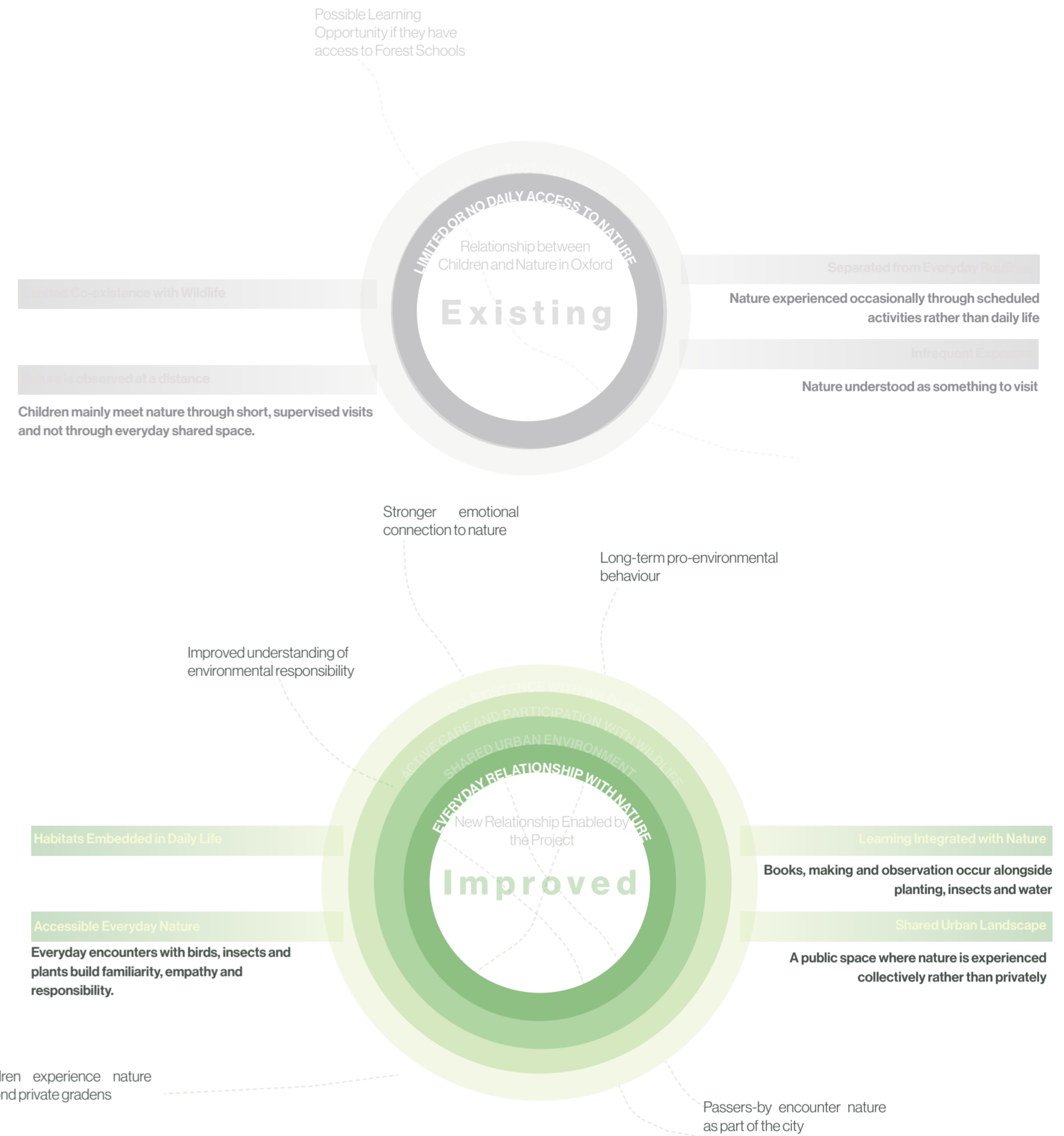


Reconnecting Children to Oxford's Living Landscapes

The library sits within Oxford's wider ecological network of Port Meadow, canal corridors, and urban wetlands. By connecting children directly to these landscapes through reading, observation, and environmental action, the project transforms the library into a gateway for ecological learning. Planting and habitats reflect local ecosystems, ensuring every learning experience is rooted in the natural world.

Rewilding Within the City

The project supports rewilding by extending Oxford's network of canals, wetlands, and green spaces into the site. Through integrated planting and wildlife habitats, the library creates micro-ecosystems that support biodiversity and species movement. Rather than functioning as an isolated building, it becomes an active part of the city's living ecological infrastructure, demonstrating how interior architecture can support and protect urban nature.



Street



Bridge



Library



Landscape



Transition between the public domain and accessible garden

The sequence from street to library to garden is designed to naturally draw children outward. Activities typically found outside, such as planting and growing, begin within the building, making nature present before reaching the garden. This encourages movement through the space, where the boundary between inside and outside is less defined. Through the programme, planting and growing increase biodiversity on site, while children are encouraged to take this learning home, extending the rewilding agenda into their everyday environments.

DESIGNING FOR MULTI - SPECIES

Interior Architecture as Shared Ecology



Learning through Co-Existence

As Nathalie Pettorelli writes in *Rewilding*, conservation today requires more than preservation, it requires restoration and coexistence. Cities, often thought of as separate from nature, can become vital ecosystems. Urban wildlife provides pollination, temperature regulation, and mental wellbeing, but more importantly, it gives children daily access to life beyond the human. Early exposure to nature builds emotional resilience, compassion, and moral awareness, shaping how future generations respond to the climate and biodiversity crises.

Encouraging Mutual - Habitation

The programme and spatial design actively encourage interaction and mutual habitation between children and non-human species. Through integrated planting, habitat creation and spaces for observation, the architecture supports everyday encounters with wildlife.

Rewilding through Fauna

The space brings the outside landscape into the interior, allowing for extensive planting. This environment teaches children about rewilding, the relationship between buildings and nature, and the importance of protecting endangered plant species.

The Pavillions



The Greenhouse



native (or formerly native) species in England/UK that are threatened, and potentially suitable for carefully managed reintroduction efforts.

-  Small Flowered Catchfly
 -  Early Geranium
 -  Wild Cotoneaster
 -  Pale Dog-violet
 -  Butterfly Bush
 -  Stonecrop
 -  Coneflower
- Flowering and nectar / pollen-rich plants for pollinators that can be propagated or started in a greenhouse or pots



Section B-B



DESIGNING FOR MULTI - SPECIES

Interior Architecture as Shared Ecology



Winter - Hibernation

Books: Adaptation, survival, hidden ecosystems
 Activities: Repairing habitats, indoor growing, planning for spring
 Observation: Subtle environmental changes and reduced wildlife activity



Spring - Growth and Beginning

Books: Pollination, insects, seeds, plant life cycles
 Activities: Planting flowers, starting crops, building insect habitats
 Observation: Bees, butterflies and early plant growth



Summer - Activity and Biodiversity

Books: Ecosystems, biodiversity, food chains
 Activities: Maintaining planting, harvesting, expanding habitats
 Observation: High insect activity and increased wildlife interaction



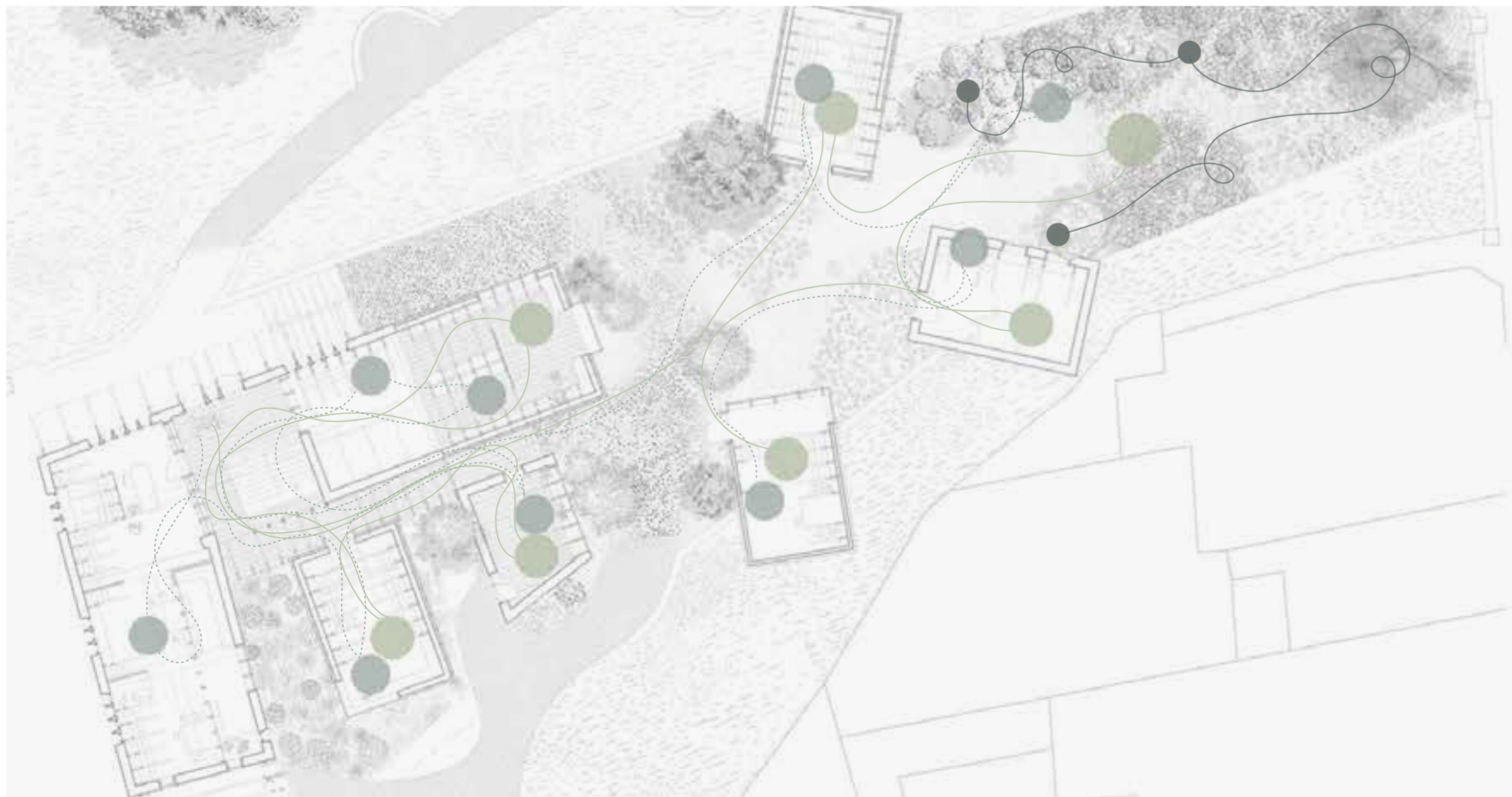
Autumn - Change and Decay

Books: Migration, decomposition, seasonal cycles
 Activities: Seed collection, composting, preparing habitats for winter
 Observation: Falling leaves, ecological change and animal preparation



Reinforcing Ecological Engagement and Encouraging Reading

The pavilions extend learning activities from the library, creating dedicated spaces for making, observation and reflection within the landscape. Each pavilion supports a different stage of the ecological learning cycle, encouraging children to actively engage with nature through hands on activity, focused observation and recording. Positioned throughout the garden, they strengthen the relationship between children, books and environment, allowing learning to happen through direct interaction with the natural world.



Urban Wildlife

Would inhabit the planting, water edges and integrated habitats throughout the site. The building and landscape provide shelter, food and connectivity, allowing wildlife to coexist alongside human activity within the urban environment.

Local Volunteers

use the space to host storytelling sessions, reading groups and outreach programmes both indoors and outdoors. They help connect children with local wildlife, seasonal change and environmental stewardship, fostering a stronger relationship between the community and the surrounding landscape.

Local Children (living in nearby flats and neighbourhoods)

Use the library as a shared indoor-outdoor space for reading, play and social interaction, particularly where access to private gardens is limited. The site offers an everyday place to spend time together, allowing children to encounter nature as part of routine life rather than as a special visit.



Make / Repair Pavillion

Children build habitats and work on practical ecological projects informed by what they have read.



Observation Pavillion

Children observe insects, wildlife and seasonal change impacted by their actions through framed views into the garden and landscape.



Reflection Pavillion

Children draw, journal and reflect on their experiences, processing what they have learned and experienced through the books programme.