

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Architecture and Cuisine

Food for Thought

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Architects often design the accessories of eating -- dishware, glasses, cutlery, dining tables and chairs -- so perhaps it was inevitable that they would eventually take on the food itself. This summer in New York, Maya Lin organized an auction of architect-designed cakes to benefit the Greyston Foundation, a Yonkers-based non-profit organization that provides community services and also operates a bakery. Participants included Frank Gehry, Rafael Viñoly, Steven Holl, and Richard Meier. While the charity event was just good fun to serve a good cause, it became yet another opportunity for celebrity architects to show off their signature styles, in this case translated into another medium -- one that happens to be edible. Gehry's sketches featured rolling waves of dough, a baker's Bilbao. Not surprisingly, Meier's submission was a "white cake." With icing substituting porcelain panels, his recipe is the gustatory equivalent of his High Museum in Atlanta.



Comparisons between architecture and food are surprisingly common, and some architects have explored them quite seriously. Gregg Lynn, for example, has found inspiration in baking by equating "folded" structures with folding batter: Betty Crocker meets the blob. British architectural historian Peter Collins dubbed the influence of cuisine on architecture "the gastronomic analogy" and linked it to mechanical and biological analogies as fundamental paradigms of modern architectural theory. In Europe eating habits were generally very coarse until the late 18th century, when the modern field of gastronomy began to emerge and the first restaurants appeared in France.

It was in this period that the word taste, which originally referred only to sensations of the palate, took on broader cultural significance as an aesthetic standard. The Enlightenment brought refinements in every discipline, and new attitudes about food inevitably influenced

architectural theory, which was seeking similar recipes for good taste. The conversion of raw ingredients into haute cuisine was deemed similar to the transformation of raw building materials into high architecture. More importantly, behind the notion of taste -- both aesthetic and sensory -- was a basic desire to please the consumer, a value that has all but disappeared in contemporary architecture, which tends to focus instead on the designer's personal agenda. As Collins put it, to focus on individual expression is like judging an omelet by the chef's passion for breaking eggs.

Using the gastronomic analogy to support personal formal preferences runs contrary to the historical relationships between architecture and cuisine. Both of these disciplines evolved directly out of local circumstances, and as a result their similarities can demonstrate strong ties between culture and place. Put simply, culture is the elevation of basic human needs. Architecture is to shelter what cuisine is to food: pleasure takes over from necessity as a simple shed transforms into a glorious cathedral, eggs into a soufflé.

The very idea of culture may come from food, for linguists believe the first spoken words were about eating. Mam, the root of many terms meaning "mother," "life," and "good" in different languages, is a simple variation on "mmm," an instinctive guttural sound expressing the pleasure of consumption. The root of culture, like cultivation, means "tilling," developing the land. Historically, the foundation of civilization began with providing a place in the earth for growing things, for the development of permanent shelter coincided with the invention of agriculture, which required people to settle in one place. A common need for food and shelter banded people together in communities, which continue to center on and celebrate these things. Vernacular houses commonly are shaped around eating habits and related social customs, such as the Chinese tradition of families dining together and the Japanese separation of the sexes during meals.

Given the importance of food in social development, such habits naturally related early cultures to their immediate setting. In a recent history of dining, *Near A Thousand Tables*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto remarks that no activity connects people to their environment more than taking a meal: "Our most intimate contact with nature occurs when we eat it." Traditions of building and cooking both evolve around local ingredients, often the same ones. The olive tree was the center of the economy and diet of the ancient Greeks, who built with its wood and ate and traded its fruit and oil. For South Pacific islanders the heart of the sago palm provided a staple starch, while its leaves served as thatching for huts. Untold generations of North American Plains Indians hunted the bison for meals, clothing, jewelry and shelter, so the trappings of an entire culture stemmed from one animal. The interior of the buffalo -- its meat -- provided nourishment, while the exterior -- its hide -- provided lodging.

For hundreds of years in Japan, the Zen emphasis on natural simplicity took on culinary and architectural expression in the studied preparation of both sushi and temples. The opposite of such restraint is the explosive animation of the Bavarian rococo. The desserts that emerged in 18th century Germany were light, swirling confections -- celebratory delicacies -- and the rich ornamentation of rocaille interiors commonly inspires comparisons to such sweets. Likewise, think of Bavarian cream pie as consumable rococo.

In the Catalan region of Spain, the phrase *mar y muntanya* – "sea and mountain" – captures the area's unique blend of flavors. Many popular dishes, such as the familiar *paella*, combine meat and fish, game from the mountains and shellfish from the sea, and the most familiar Catalan architecture is a similar mixture. Residents of Barcelona call Gaudí's *Casa Mila El Pedrera*, "the rock quarry." Layered into its undulating, cliff-like surfaces are traceries of metalwork and tile mimicking marine life – fish scales, seaweed, shells and snails – and colorful chimneystacks glisten on the roofscape like huge serpents rising from the surf. Gaudí exemplifies what has become rare among architects: the balanced mixture of regional flavor and personal taste.

The traditional bonds between culture and place have been loosened by a greater emphasis on individual architects, but those bonds are being severed altogether by a general devaluation of both buildings and food. In last year's bestseller *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser argues that the fast food industry has done to the American landscape what it has done to the American diet – that is, made it bland and uniform. The birth of the generic commercial strip during the post-war era was brought about almost single-handedly by McDonald's, the first company to apply modern assembly line techniques to restaurants.

Standardization has allowed such chains to expand exponentially, and now the top few open a new franchise every two hours – fast buildings for fast food. The largest single owner of retail property in the world, McDonald's has had an enormous impact on land use. *Newsweek* magazine recently noted that suburban housing developments now imitate fast food tactics: like inflated serving sizes meant to spur greater consumption, the average single-family dwelling has almost doubled in size over the last thirty years, although families themselves have gotten smaller.

And the "McMansion" has become as ubiquitous and predictable as the food that inspired the name. While gastronomic analogies once demonstrated the unique character of a place, now consistency, not distinction, is the measure of quality. Travelers seek out the familiar in every locale, and the comforts of home are signaled by that omnipresent landmark, the Golden Arches, an icon that according to surveys is now more recognizable than the Christian cross. The McDonald's slogan "one taste worldwide" could apply equally well to its buildings and its food, for the inescapable mansarded hut looks the same in Moscow and Helsinki, and a Big Mac in Bogotá tastes exactly like a Big Mac in Tokyo. While architects are busy chewing on their own scenery, the world is being eaten up like a Happy Meal.