Food +
Architecture
Cuisine and Architecture: A Recipe for a Wholesome Diet

Architects, like chefs, turn the raw into the cooked, transforming basic materials into an end product. Sarah Wigglesworth pursues the analogy between cooking and construction through food preparation and building to vernacular traditions and globalisation.

In building we refer to one type of cladding as a sandwich panel – two outside layers buttered with a filling. In the kitchen, a 'doorstep' is a very thick slice of bread, and we often refer to frivolous ornament as 'icing'. Recipes often begin with cutting, grinding, stirring or mixing, and so does building construction, which in both cases, requires ingredients to be measured out and combined; emulsions, suspensions, evaporation and chemical reactions are ways by which different materials unite. Concrete work resembles cake making, the only difference being the process of curing/baking.

Cuisine and architecture have more in common than cooking. At the simplest level, architecture and cookery are both cultural processes: cookery, like construction, takes nature and makes it into culture. At a very basic level, culture refers to the medium in which simple organisms (bacterial, fungal) can grow. Foodstuffs are a part of this world: yoghurt, yeast, cheese. But culture also refers to the more sophisticated ways in which techniques are employed and elements are combined to create a unique artefact. There is something which is chemical, and alchemical, in this transformation. In both cuisine and architecture, a sensory and social world opens up from the perfect combination of elements brought together in time and space. The two practices answer the same needs of life, shelter and food, but both can transcend the prosaic to reach a higher level of culture. All building is like cookery in the sense that it makes use of raw ingredients and combines them in particular and acceptable combinations, synthesising them into a product greater than the sum of the individual parts. In cooking we call this a meal, in architecture a building. Historically, architecture has extracted materials formed geologically or agriculturally and has worked them into something capable of construction – sheet metal, timber planks, glass panels, mineral fibre, slates. Food is grown – also extracting nutrients from the soil – and transformed from the raw ingredient into something appetitive and recognisably edible.

These two techniques manipulate the basic raw ingredient into other forms capable of recognition as building/food. Indeed, the very same product can constitute an edible and a building product: hemp and corn are just two examples. So, in a straw-bale building, corn iswinnowed to extract the seed for making into bread and the remaining straws are baled up to become walling/insulation.

In preparing a potatoula sauce, we take oil, garlic, tomatoes, anchovies, capers and olives and combine them in a particular sequence over the stove. The traditions of regional, even local, cooking techniques influence the character and development of historically vernacular cuisines. In this way, the plant and equipment used, the special culinary know-how shared within a community and the ingredients specific to a climatic region unite to produce the unique flavour, colour and texture of a region's gastronomy.

The same could be said of building. Locally available materials were extracted and combined in ways which were developed over a long period of time, giving regional character to particular forms of construction. At the moment when techniques and styles are sufficiently identifiable they can be codified through their adherence to their unique characteristics. The shift from vernacular know-how to a codified record (recipe/specification) signifies a solidification – from an organic live art to a predetermined standard. It also implies a shift from control of knowledge transmitted orally and demonstrably by women (who by convention have prepared food) to the control, through rationalisation and codification of procedures, by men.

It is through this method that we have come to codify great cuisines – as we do great architectures – by their identification with such classificatory systems. The status of a great world cuisine/great world architecture is the highest accolade this value system can confer. In reality, such classifications are historically and economically determined, subject to shifting influences and social conditions. The introduction of tomatoes from the New World into Europe was to revolutionise the diet of an entire continent. Likewise, Marco Polo's trip to China brought back the noodle, something which we now associate first and foremost with Italy. Absorbed into the native cuisine, these external influences led to a redefinition of the country's culinary arts.

Similar events have taken place in the world of architecture, yet until recently, culturally specific ways of building have not been readily transplanted. This has changed with the advent of global industrialisation, which has seen the mass production and distribution of standardised building components. Building products are now made by international companies, and the same products are now to be found in builders' merchants and DIY supermarkets throughout the world. This has become the modern building vernacular.

Similarly, the ready-made meal or takeaway is surely the equivalent of the flat-pack or the mobile home, delivered in a form ready to consume.

Global capitalism is having a profound effect on the nature of both food and architecture. Increasingly, food in the West is being grown genetically and is manipulated, modified or manufactures into sophisticated, value-added products for home consumption. Determined by the requirements of transportation, shelf life and visual appeal, fresh supermarket vegetables are selectively cultivated to a perfect shape and colour, are prewashed, presorted, chopped and bagged up so that they no longer resemble the raw ingredient from which they were derived. From brewing and preserving to meat, vegetables and fruit, our choice is being limited and standardised in the name of consumer demand. Research shows that children in inner cities have little idea of where their food comes from or how it is produced. (Where does milk come from? – bette, of course.) The rise in sales of pre-cooked 'convenience' foods is producing a generation of people who don't know how to cook, and is spawning a variety of cookery manuals returning to the basics.

As the building world too has been increasingly dominated by industrialised production, we have witnessed new methods of construction ranging from system building and prefabrication to the development of large components which come with full design specifications, subcontracting skills (supply and fix) and a lifetime guarantee. Typically this sort of operation takes place on an multinational scale. Such global blanding (sic) permits scant room for local specificity or respect for the traditions developed over centuries which ground building to its place. From windows to steel sheet, from bricks to cast stone, someone in a factory somewhere, usually distant from us, is preparing a product for incorporation into our next design. Like the work of the short-order cook, the designer's role now essentially consists in combining products in different ways: design freedom is limited to choosing colours or finishes. Skill is measured by the freshness and novelty of these juxtapositions within the canon of accepted good taste.
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Cuisine and architecture have more in common than we would like to believe. At the simplest level, architecture and cookery are both cultural processes. Cookery, like construction, takes nature and makes it into culture. At a very basic level, culture refers to the medium in which simple organisms (bacterial, fungal) can grow. Foodstuffs are a part of this world: yoghurt, yeast, cheese. But culture also refers to the more sophisticated ways in which techniques are employed and elements are combined to create a unique artefact. There is something which is chemical, and alchimical, in this transformation.

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These two techniques manipulate the basic raw ingredient into other forms capable of recognition as building/food. Indeed, the very same product can constitute an edible and a building product: hemp and corn are just two examples. So, in a straw-bale building, corn is winnowed to extract the seed for making into bread and the remaining straw is baled up to become walling/insulation.

In preparing a puttanesca sauce, we take oil, garlic, tomatoes, anchovies, capers and olives and combine them in a particular sequence over the stove. The traditions of regional, even local, cooking techniques influence the character and development of historically vernacular cuisines. In this way, the plant and equipment used, the special culinary know-how shared within a community and the ingredients specific to a climatic region unite to produce the unique flavour, colour and texture of a region’s gastronomy.

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Similar events have taken place in the world of architecture, yet until recently, culturally specific ways of building have not been readily transplanted. This has changed with the advent of global industrialisation, which has seen the mass production and distribution of standardised building components. Building products are now made by international companies, and the same products are now to be found in builders’ merchants and DIY superstores throughout the world. This has become the modern building vernacular.

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As the building world too has been increasingly dominated by industrialised production, we have witnessed new methods of construction ranging from system building and prefabrication to the development of large components which come with full design specification, subcontracting skills (supply and sale) and a lifetime guarantee. Typically this sort of operation takes place on an multinational scale. Such global branding (is) permits scant room for local specificity or respect for the traditions developed over centuries which ground building to its place. From windows to sheet metal, from bricks to cast stone, someone in a factory somewhere, usually distant from us, is preparing a product for incorporation into our design. Like the work of the short-order cook, the designer’s rule now essentially consists in combining products in different ways; design freedom is limited to choosing colours or finishes. Skill is measured by the freshness and novelty of these juxtapositions within the canon of accepted good taste.
Similarly, in the world of haute cuisine, it now takes millions of pounds to establish a restaurant which aims to play on the international stage, achieving those coveted Michelin rossettes, so successful chefs increasingly need financial backers. Since a large investment is required, risks are high and the winners are frequently those acquired by larger conglomerates - umbrella organisations that own several brand identities. At the highest end in both cooking and building, brand identity is reinforced by the superstar chef/architect. Long, hard apprenticeships, sometimes in dull pubs and catering schools, are the equivalent of the design charrettes and night-time toil that make up the average architecture student's educational experience. The engine for this sacrifice is the belief in the possibility of becoming an Albert Roux or a Norman Foster. Interestingly, virtually without exception these superstars are male. The cook/architect women are the unsung heroines working quietly in the background.

Between globalising tendencies on the one hand and branded high-art chef/architect genius on the other, there is nonetheless a middle way. A "dod-chaef" like Jamie Oliver - very different from the didactic Delia - treats recipes with irreverence, using approximate measures and altering them according to available ingredients and his personal fancy. Pleasure, resourcefulness, invention and opportunism are the characteristics of this relaxed cuisine. The key feature of this approach is that the cook/leater is a participant in the making of the meal, amending and adjusting the recipe according to taste or budget. He or she is not mystified by technique or in thrall to the superstar chef.

By analogy, there is a kind of architecture which does not slavishly adhere to predetermined specifications, materials or techniques; rather, it uses these as a base from which to invent, and is similarly opportunistic, irreverent, organic and approximate. In the case of such a participatory or approximate architecture, the user and architect blur, and standard methods become productive arenas where invention and convention clash to create new and unexpected possibilities.

An important distinction exists in the relationship between the production of a meal/building and its consumption. While architects often resemble chefs, the diner is more likely to resemble the user of a building. In the same way that a chef relinquishes control once the meal is delivered to the table, so an architect can no longer control the reception of his or her work after handover. The rituals of dining resonate in the codified behaviour of people performing their roles in public places. But the reception of a meal, as with the reception of a building, depends on many other factors, not all of which lie within the control of the maker or social convention.

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In many ways the direct and unmediated cooking process helps to clarify intentions (the chef probably administrators his or her kitchen, and may even prepare his or her own dishes), yet building is almost always mediated through the hands of a contractor, producing another level of separation between designer and consumer. These dishes touched by the hand of the famous chef deserve reverence, so much so that some chefs are known to abuse diners who fail to display sufficient piety. By corollary, the punishment meted out by their architectural equivalent is to suffer the oppressively Willisful and overdeterministic inventions of the egotistical architect.

Such a thesis feeds into the thinking behind a project recently completed by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects: the Straw House. The narrative of the house was derived from an awareness of how the rituals of eating played out on the plane of the dining table are similar to the rituals of domestic life as depicted in the plan of a dwelling. The manner in which the guests sitting round a table interact during the course of a meal can be compared to the way in which people interact in the space of a house. Everyone around a table obeys social rules, just as we do in life, and the movement of props during the dinner—plates, glasses, cutlery, serving dishes, napkins, crust set—all describe particular relationships and events in time. So it is with the space of architecture.

Furniture, walls, columns and stairs frame our physical and social movement, and act as markers for the rituals we perform every day. The drawings of the table top describe how similar these ideas are, in space and time, and link the table top with the plan form of the Straw House.

Extending the analogy, the house has walls of straw, something which makes explicit the architecture’s connection with food production. It has been argued above that the working of metals extracted from the ground, the growing, felling and sawing of timber for the floors, walls and roof, even the burning and skaling of lime and the mixing of it with sand to form render, are processes in a productive continuum, and differ from cookery merely in respect of their edibility. Only the chemically engineered components begin to depart from this rule.

At a more microscopic level the house itself is productive and exists in a productive landscape. The roof, with its garden, is the host to mustard and wild strawberries, while the garden combines edible and ornamental species indiscernibly. Apple and damson trees are espaliered against an old south wall (they form a sort of woven textile), while lettuces, carrots and beetroot are planted among alliums, poppies and roses. Potatoes are grown not just for their tubers but for their dark green foliage and white flowers. Not much here is edible. Kitchen waste is composted and the dry toilet does the same with the human variety. The mantra that results from both processes can be used to fertilise the garden, completing the cycle.

The Straw House is an example of an approximate architecture. In this project the form of contract was reinvented, using a productive, partnering (non-adversarial) method of collaboration. We used the project to expand the palette of conventionally available materials, extending them into organic and local productive arenas, and invented new recipes for combining those ingredients. Much of this work consisted in taking available handed-down knowledge and reworking it into methods suited to the UK Climate and regulatory framework. In such a process, materials become reclassified and traditional know-how combines with new technologies to form delicious new formulations. We have found that at our premises in Stock Orchard Street, the relationship between hearth, the traditional cooking site, and home are unexpectedly and refreshingly reappraised.