

The Nourishing Art

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Abstract: *Cooking is regarded as one of the most basic characteristics of civilised existence, almost as critical as shelter in defining and reading the human condition. Frascari (2002) used cooking as an analogy for design suggesting that ‘to build and cook are a necessity, but to build and cook intelligently is the chief obligation of architecture and cuisine’ (p. 3). What is it about this ordinary activity that invites comparison? Is it that the everyday acts of cooking are primary generators of spatial practices and material culture? Or is it that the production of food bears numerous parallels with the production of built space – each following a recipe or plan to manipulate elements into an entity definitively judged by the physical senses?*

This paper builds upon a companion work titled, ‘Eating Australian Architecture’ (Hurst & Lawrence, 2003), which investigated a pedagogical approach based on parallels between food and design for teaching first year architectural students. In this paper, the focus is on a detailed application of this method to typological analyses of contemporary domestic architecture. It uses three examples of influential Australian design practices, selecting from each a paradigm with which they are associated. Food metaphors of raw, medium and well-done are used to explore emergent characteristics and experiential qualities within the current architectural climate. The apparent extremes between raw and cooked, like those between excess and austerity, are re-evaluated not as simple oppositions or measures of success, but as equally rich modes of approach to design. The argument is made for gastronomy as a persuasive interrogatory tool for the sensory and holistic examination of the built environment.

Keywords: *food and design; Australian domestic Interior Architecture; design pedagogy.*

Introduction

In her introduction to the anthology *Food and Architecture*, Helen Castle (2002) suggested that ‘the art of the chef and the architect both exceed human requirements and are to be enjoyed and savoured – very often conspicuously so’ (p. 4). The collection of essays that follow the introduction is an exploration of urbane eating spaces, state of the art interior design, and the composed aesthetics of the plated food of haute cuisine. It makes apparent the sophisticated levels reached in contemporary culture in relation to interior space and gastronomy, where the pleasures of the table (Brillat-Savarin, 1949, p. 3) are elegantly set between cultivated appreciation and sensory indulgence. This careful positioning of the

excesses of consumption amidst the conscious austerity of much contemporary interior architecture is one reading of how food and space can be related.

Elsewhere in the book, Sarah Wigglesworth (2002) stated 'architects, like chefs, turn the raw into the cooked, transforming basic material into the end product...synthesising them into a product greater than the sum of the individual parts...in cooking we call this a meal, in architecture, a building' (p. 102). Here, Wigglesworth is drawing on Levi-Strauss' (1970) seminal work that used food practices and beliefs as the basis for sociological inquiry. Levi-Strauss (1970) identified as a primary binary opposition 'nature' and 'culture', and further suggested this as analogous to raw and cooked, and food and non-food. According to Levi-Strauss, cooked food is the cultural transformation of the raw and 'the ways in which this transformation is carried out as part of everyday life serve to define cultures' (Lupton, 1996, p. 9).

Italian architect and academic, Marco Frascari used cooking to discuss 'the undisciplined discipline of architecture' (Frascari, 2002, p. 3). He argued that architecture, like cooking, needs to engage with a certain sensuality in the process of making in order to conceive works (or dishes) properly. This suggests that 'The art of architecture, as with the arts of alchemy and cuisine is thinking with things rather than thinking about things (Frascari, 2001, p. 1). de Certeau et al (1998) also used the process of cooking, rather than its products, to observe and describe the subversive spatial practices of everyday life. In an analysis that looks at the gestures of cooking, the laying of the table and the recipe, they commented on 'doing-cooking' (p. 151–153) as both a repository of knowledge and site of resistance to the more visible societal structures.

Although gastronomic associations have been explored to a limited degree in the area of spatial research, they have rarely been exploited pedagogically. This paper describes an innovative technique for teaching first year design studio in Australia that uses the analogy of food as a starting point to think about design. It is critical for novice students to acquire a vocabulary or typology of tectonic and spatial responses, and the methodology discussed here recognises this by embedding within it typological analyses of contemporary Australian interior design. The paper will outline the overall nature of this teaching practice and as a demonstration of its application focus on three influential directions in Australian residential design which are paralleled with gastronomic analogies. The examples chosen represent a predominant typology in contemporary Australian design; that being the beach house or rural haven. This building type is significant as a demonstration of the predilection to 'get away', to retreat from the excesses of urban life to an austere idyll. These places intensify the act of

domestic dwelling. The paper will conclude with a discussion of how the use of the selected metaphors of raw, medium and well done are analogous with ideas of excess and austerity, including the fact that they are not mutually exclusive states of being.

Food as a metaphor

The use of metaphors, or borrowings from other spheres of cultural expression in the description, conception and teaching of design is a common and well-documented tactic. Architectural theorists have analysed this strategy and observed how an alliance between the design process and an analogous entity informs and shapes design discourse (Snodgrass et al, 1994, p. 113–125); that is, how the choice of metaphor influences the nature of the solution. Food, unlike many other metaphors, conveys an indisputable inclusiveness, being central to the everyday life of most people. To use it therefore as a parallel field of inquiry with interior architecture tacitly foregrounds issues of communality, cultural heritage, ritual and the everyday, site and climate, commodity and comfort. Furthermore, the history of food *ab ova* and its indispensable role in human existence, mean that it operates as both a vehicle for, and demonstration of, sociological, economical, political and environmental constructs.

Associations can be made quite effortlessly between architecture/place and food/place. Climate, available materials, technology, human needs and cultural expression are obvious factors in what can be built – and also in what can be grown and eaten. Perceptual characteristics of light, texture, colour, austerity and economy easily correlate to gastronomic qualities – such as taste, pungency, excess and balance. In addition, the alchemic processes associated with food and cooking can be paralleled to materials and building. A further productive analogy can be made between typological readings of gastronomy and design, as exercises in frugality or luxury. Just as there are many universal dishes based on essentially the same ingredients and processes, (eg. consider the various interpretations of the omelette/tortilla/frittata which paradoxically relate not only to a country but specifically to a region), there are also recurrent design responses to material and place.

dine®: A first year project

These gastronomic analogies informed a first year project called **dine®** which used food types to help students design a compact residence and eating-place by the sea. To operate as metaphors underpinning the students' proposals, initial connections were made between types of food and types of places. In particular, students were asked to use these links to consider the experience of place and cultural identity. The class of over a hundred students was divided into five groups with each adopting a particular food type, which they used

firstly to create a compositional model, secondly to study contemporary examples of idiosyncratically designed Australian houses, and finally to conceive and resolve their own schemes for a similarly scaled residence. For example, *fast food* can suggest places of instant gratification and immediate sensory stimulation, whereas *one-pot* meals can readily be paralleled to multi-culturalism and diversity. *Regional cuisine* was used as an analogy for the search for an Australian design identity, while *delicacies* were likened to the intense and rich elements in design. Students were able to relate easily to these analogies and were intrigued by the connections. They were made aware that things they instinctively understand about food, its sensory quality, its everydayness, its communality and its cultural significance, are quite obvious starting points for thinking about design. Students explored their schemes principally through making and modelling in a series of four courses, reinforcing a sense of play, experimentation and investigation. In aligning food and design, the process became more comprehensible to students and enabled them to overcome the particular difficulty novices have in finding a comfortable starting point from which to proceed.

Typologies

In the typological component, specific examples were discussed in terms of food types to make tangible to students the way design and food deals with similar concerns. An overarching analogy employed to contextualise diverse approaches to place, aesthetic quality, manner of production and use, was the notion of *raw, medium and well-done*. This analogy differs from that used by Levi-Strauss (1970) in that it does not imply a sequential state of development or sophistication from the raw to the cooked, but instead examines different states of material and spatial expression. Because Australia is a vast continent with extreme variations in climate, topography and demographics, contemporary Australian design demonstrates a potentially bewildering array of approaches and manifestations. This richness can be exploited and commented on via grouping these into three basic gastronomic types. It is a means of classifying that gives experiential accessibility to underlying themes, yet because of the looseness of this typing and the extensive and open-ended nature of the referent, does not oversimplify possibilities.

For example, raw food can be considered as the most direct and unprocessed nourishment, highly linked to the temporal and regional. Raw can also refer to food that is in the process of preparation, incomplete in its evolution or journey to the table. It carries connotations of simplicity and wholesomeness but can concurrently be a sophisticated and refined composition of elements. It appears in cuisines around the globe, often, but not exclusively, as a response to hot climates or seasons.

raw: Stutchbury and Pape

The Kangaroo Valley Pavilion (1998) in rural New South Wales designed by Stutchbury and Pape, illustrates a pared back design aesthetic that might be described as raw for its use of expressive structure, lightweight construction of ostensibly unadulterated materials. The house – or ‘rural shed’ (Goad, 2001, p. 193) – typifies their search for simple solutions which are ‘without fuss and subservient to the bush room it occupies’ (*Architecture Australia*, 1999, p. 50). It is characteristic of the most recognised direction in contemporary Australian architecture ‘which touches the earth lightly’ (Drew, 1985, p. 54), and arguably in danger of becoming stereotypical.

The informal openness of spatial planning in the Kangaroo Valley Pavilion encourages ambiguous occupation and activities. Interior spaces are defined broadly for sleeping or sitting separated only by the hearth, while the amenities form the backbone of what is essentially a single outdoor room. The house is more veranda and transitional space than conventional containment, and has direct connection with the environment and seasonal change. Like a well-composed salad, which uses raw and fresh ingredients, it suggests immediacy and simplicity, both of materials and assemblage. There are no hidden elements or processes and the success of the whole relies on its clarity and ‘matter of fact materials palette’ (Goad, 2001, p. 193). In the making of both, the cook and the designer create as they go, recognising their conceptions are dependent upon a technical understanding exercised with a light handed sensibility. The appeal lies in the fabrication of the detail for example, the method employed in manipulating the elements; the angle and thickness of the cut edge, the fineness of the julienne and the piquancy of the dressing are critical to the final composition. Essential qualities textures and ingredients make up the classic salad, however recipes for them are typically loose in prescriptive direction, open to adaptation and are generally assembled last minute. One of Australia’s great contemporary cooks, Stephanie Alexander, composes salads ‘with a definite artist’s eye. I decide on my background first...I next decide on the crunch...the next important part is the ‘fat’ in the salad...I then move on to consider the juices...The shape, the skeleton must come first and then the delicate touches’ (Alexander, 1985, p. 211–212). They should be characterised with ‘lightness and a certain air of spontaneity’ (p. 213). The approach bears comparison with that of Peter Stutchbury who has been described as a lyrical technologist. He invents while building (Goad, 2001, p. 194), aiming to design places that are occupied with the same sense of impromptu and temporality.

Principally the ground plane of the stepped timber floor, and the hinged overhead plane of the roof, flexed as if to take flight, define the spaces in the Kangaroo Valley Pavilion. These 'platforms + parasols' (Goad, 2001, p. 194), liberate the spaces within and to the surrounding terrain and umbrella sky. Similarly salads can be a liberation from more processed food, both in the making for the cook, and for the diner in the way it evokes close connections with nature's garden. In contemporary food culture, and in an increasingly health conscious society, the salad is gradually altering its status from a side dish or accompaniment to a stand-alone course. The Kangaroo Valley Pavilion, in a similar manner has its origins in the primitive hut, but through intellectual refinement has been elevated to a built entity that is no way peripheral or subservient. Each is characterised by an austerity of means.

In gastronomy, the term *medium* clearly refers to the state between raw and well-done, but also to a moderate or average condition, for example, of heat, size or viscosity; a constant and predictable condition with minor variation. Additionally, *medium* can also refer to a matrix that carries more intense flavours. In design terms, this notion of *medium* is almost pejorative in a realm where designers seek continually to create the extraordinary. Yet as an evocation of a balance between two extremes, it has currency for designs which are attempting to respond to the typical binaries of inside/outside, private/public, tradition/innovation and simplicity/complexity.

***medium*: John Wardle**

The work of John Wardle Architects, an innovative and award winning Melbourne based practice, serves as a persuasive illustration of this middle ground. Wardle's architecture exploits opportunities to exalt the everyday. He laces spatial devices frequently borrowed from civic scaled and monumental precedents with highly crafted details and meticulous joinery elements in the way antipasto dishes incorporate varied concentrated ingredients into the base of many of its components.

The considered composition of the parts allows each to be enjoyed as separate works, or cumulatively as a whole. Like abundant platters of antipasto, each element has its own appeal and genesis, which provides distinct texture and taste. Gathered in a single conception however, they acquire additional potency as an array of contrasting flavours, which can be sampled and selected to heighten sensory pleasure. '...it's always the little things' (Oliver, 2001, p. 91) that Wardle agonises over. In the houses he designs, each part or fragment is a separate entity with its own layers of meaning. Like an appetiser, the detached asymmetrical concrete steps marking the entrance to the Isaacson/Davis House (1997) in Balnarring Victoria, were 'modelled on an unrealised non-residential commission for the same client'

(Goad, 1997, p. 43). The extensive use of folding and packing in both the detail and the whole, is an intentional reference to the occasional nature of the weekender which in the architect's words 'can be unpacked on arrival and repacked on departure'(p. 43). Apart from the exquisite mechanics of the interior elements which pivot, fold and sheath to accommodate, the entire space appears as a pulling apart of opposites, and coming together of activities. In the constructed elements of an antipasto platter the food is presented as a play of section, layer and surface. It elicits comparison with the stratified sectioning of frittata; the folding and wrapping of vine leaves to form dolmades, and the textured surface of wood fired bread, all of which are consciously composed and assembled to heighten sensual experience. John Wardle crafts and manipulates joinery and building elements in a similarly expressive array of material and structure.

Usually the term 'well-done' fundamentally praises, however in gastronomy its use can be more ambiguous. Many fresh ingredients, such as meat, fish and vegetables, are valued for their closeness to the natural state. To cook them thoroughly is to overcook them and risk detracting from their texture and taste. In choosing something to be 'well-done', an acquired taste is suggested, a preference for food that is well removed from its raw origins and been substantially changed through the process of cooking. As an analogy for interior architecture, one might question whether a 'well-done' building can be seen as 'overcooked'. Undeniably though, there are directions in architecture and design, which rely on highly processed materials and methods to achieve their ends, where the finished work is sophisticated, technologically dependent and far removed from basic notions of shelter. Another productive reading of the term 'well-done' provides associations with time-consuming processes that transform very ordinary ingredients, refining them into a concentrated state. A good example is the making of stock, where the outcome of an intensely flavoured liquid is realised through reduction, distilling many different components into one new homogenous state. The apparent simplicity belies the complexity of the production. This basic ingredient forms the foundation of many dishes, and can be used as a conspicuous flourish or as an invisible foundation.

***well-done:* Nik Karalis**

In Australian contemporary design there is an identifiable group of designers whose work demonstrates similar tendencies of technical refinement and austere aesthetic. Nik Karalis' background in award winning corporate interior design and urban practice typifies a neo-modernist attitude, which aspires to intellectual as well as physical sustenance.

In the Karalis Beach House (2000) on the Mornington Peninsular, Nik Karalis has created a weekend retreat that employs a rectilinear and spartan aesthetic. Almost 'schizophrenic' (*Australian Style*, 2000, p. 61) in external appearance, one side is a robust timber box backing onto rugged sand dunes, while the other is a glazed curtain facing seaward reflecting the surroundings and disappearing into the environment. 'The concept was that it mirrored the landscape and the clouds, so that the house didn't have a presence at all on the south' (p. 63). Like a great cooking stock, it succeeds by blending and dissolving rather than by being conspicuous. It elicits comparisons with Karalis' cultivated approach to design – the distillation of many into one new state, the foundation of various dishes. The creation of stock is a time consuming process resulting in a homogenous product that has come from enduring and fundamental ingredients, essentialising, and elevating the status of basic components. Like the modernist interiors he produces, it is reductionist in its nature and its apparent simplicity belies the complexity of its production. A basic stock's definitive status in the realms of gastronomy also has parallels with Karalis' clear debt to the iconic houses of the twentieth century. While there are obvious visual allusions to the pavilions, pilotis and ramps of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, the more profound aspiration is to continue their work as a redefinition of daily life by stripping away the superfluous in pursuit of the ideal.

The design of the house is schizophrenic in more than one way. Its relationship to the landscape is both confronting and comforting. Karalis described this effect as one that makes 'you feel quite close and vulnerable to the environment...it's like you're camping amongst nature in a glass pavilion' (*Australian Style*, 2000, p. 61). However the connection to the outside world is in fact highly controlled, possessed through the filter of an ultimately sophisticated house. The appropriation of this landscape bears similarities with modern commercial food production – the scientifically engineered practices that produce genetically perfect food, or the cultivated agricultural environments modified by demand.

'The kitchen is designed to look like a non-kitchen, in the sense of a separate room' (p. 63). Appliances are hidden behind seamlessly detailed fittings fused into the space. The intention is that the kitchen is part of a general living area where events happen, rather than a separately housed activity. The living spaces are amalgamated into one realm that ubiquitously supports a variety of activities. Similarly stock supports other dishes, but is rarely offered as a separate entity. It forms the basis of historical, contemporary and cultural dishes which are produced in a similar way, amalgamating the stock while framing separate ingredients, for example, stock is infused into the dishes of osso bucco, bouillabaisse, and risotto which bolsters the key ingredients.

Like his experiences in designing controlled corporate interiors, the Karalis Beach House employs a minimal palette of high quality materials in a polished composition of glass, marble, stainless steel, and contrasting walls of panelled timber and seamless white plasterboard. The effect is refulgent, almost transcendental, and in its control of the normal clutter of everyday life and careful arrangement of signature pieces of furniture, suggests a meditative and disembodied version of domesticity, 'a sophisticated escape from sophistication' (p. 63). It is a contemplative comment on the act of retreat, ethereal nourishment rather than comfort food.

It would be misleading to suggest that Australian architecture and design be categorised into these three discrete areas. If one broadens the gastronomic reading, blurring the boundaries set up by this selective analogy of raw, medium and well-done, one can make wider design comparisons. For example, the recurrent 'staple' of the outdoor room, from the precipitous platform of the Kangaroo Valley Pavilion House to the 'carved' deck of the Isaacson/Davis House and the urbane 'central loggia' of the Karalis Beach House, the indoor/outdoor room seems to be a defining characteristic of Australian domestic architecture. The significant finishing touches that flavour each of these examples – the dual profiled corrugated steel claddings of the Kangaroo Valley Pavilion House, the articulate plywood joinery of the Isaacson/Davis House, and the masculine marble bench top of the Karalis House – are composed to be intense and memorable 'garnishes'. One could speculate what might be revealed in each of these studies if another food analogy is included – the entrée, main course and dessert – where the sequential nature of patterns of consumption are paralleled with spatial journeys.

Indulging in the metaphor

As there is no clear or singular picture of Australian architecture, the gastronomic analogy offers a useful way for beginning design students to get a better understanding of how multiple endeavours can coexist. While students in their daily lives are used to an array of food and choose quite spontaneously whether to eat modern Australian cuisine, East-West fusion, Chinese or McDonalds, they often cannot exercise the same uncomplicated decision making when faced with the multiplicity of design directions they perceive to be on offer. The food analogy provides a way through, giving an anchor in the sensory appreciation of experience, a connection to the everyday and an accessible vocabulary to analyse and address design, regardless of cultural or demographic backgrounds. It works because the unexpectedness of the alliance is provocative and invites comment, and also because it teases out associations and memories of time and place in a Proustian manner. Frascari (2001)

advocated that 'Architectural as culinary thinking makes thinking 'begin to live' by shaping and regulating conceptual development where the illusory impressions of subjective qualities are as important as the objective qualities such as size, shape, temperature and weight' (Frasconi, 2002, p. 3).

Parallels can be made between the recipe and the plan. Like a recipe which is continually adjusted, recontextualised or appropriated, so too can students consider and apply multiple variations, subtleties and infusions into plans. Furthermore they can distinguish how conventional means of communication and description, whether verbal or written recipes or orthographic drawings, are open to interpretation and can themselves be expressive condensers of much more than basic assembly instructions. The degree of resolution in both can be anything from notional and conceptual to highly detailed and prescriptive, depending on the experience and skills of the recipients.

For novice students there can be a disparity between the excesses of choice and an austerity of means. The use of metaphors to infuse their designs can only be mined to the depths of one's knowledge of it as a referent. For those who are apathetic or unsophisticated in their cooking and eating habits, the metaphor is limited. Yet it still operates with a predictable universality and adaptability where other metaphorical analogies, such as music and literature, tend to rely on specialist knowledge.

Although the formulaic processes of cooking and designing may appear to be at the root of the coupling between recipe and plan, it is the use and transformation of material, and its testing ground of physical bodily sensation, which is the essence of this methodology. In gastronomy, the experience is ultimately participatory and unreplicable, stimulated through the other senses but remaining intensely personal. The act of eating is often impossible to convey verbally – witness the difficulty describing taste and smell except as self-referential extensions of other tastes and smells. It involves, as built space does, an exterior/interior dynamic that is undeniably physical. Material and space are transformed; when one eats one is shifting space. This association is continually reinforced through each stage of the studio, from the analytical and observational through to the generation of creative ideas and manner of assembly. The alchemic example of cooking is used as a tangible reference for the transformation of raw material into something other, in this case, built form. This succeeds in reinforcing the sensory and dynamic aspects of space, as well as demonstrating the potential to transcend the ordinary while using everyday means. The realm of food, like design, is laced with the power to tempt and sustain both the body and the intellect, to taste the physical world extrinsically and intrinsically. It offers a pedagogically persuasive device where the

culinary process from raw to cooked can be revisited as an intellectual transformation as well as a physical one.

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