

## **Gastronomic Architecture: The Cafe and Beyond**

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In discussion of the architectural merits of new cafes and restaurants, not much tends to be said about the context or implications of these spaces, but their urban backdrops are important in food as well as architectural terms. Good links between food and architecture increase the overall sustainability of the city and the capacity for richer human interconnection in urban space.

### Cafe Society and its Detractors

The inner city is often criticised for an elitism supposedly revealed in a preference for "cafe society". And established centres do have increasingly complex problems relating to architecture and food. Trends include the commodification of leisure and the privileging of the needs of tourists over those of residents (Troy, 1996: 51), the "events mania" gripping public administrations as cities vie for investment dollars (Searle, 1996), the loss of connection by urban dwellers to food region and season reflected in abandoned central produce markets and parodic restaurant architecture (Parham, 1994).

In addition, as Finkelstein (1989) has suggested, much restaurant dining in the city may be "uncivil" because diners are playing out roles of conspicuous consumption which reinforce a lack of reflection about, or questioning of, conservative social norms. A casual look around any smart bistro or brasserie would seem to bear this out. At the same time, the architecture of what we might loosely call cafe society continues to express multiple design connections to the public domain, (for instance, in no particular order, connections between inside and outside space, human scale, inventive use of materials, tables on the street, location near other cultural, work and housing areas). Through its creation of spaces for convivial exchange, which blur the boundaries of public and private realm, architecture plays an important role in keeping alive the city's heart.

### "Post Urban" Regions and Architectural Manipulation

On the edges of cities, meanwhile, a new kind of architectural withdrawal from the public domain is occurring that reflects profound social and economic transformations in urban space. Already, it's estimated that up to 86% of the population of the USA lives in "post urban" regions (Gottdiener, 1994). The demography that drives this drift from the centre is evident in Australia too, as the growth of the conurbation of greater Sydney makes clear. Developing edge cities without traditional centres or urban functions (Garreau, 1991), are increasingly also residential enclaves, guarded by design intent. In a context of global economic restructuring and spatial resorting (Soja, 1989, Davis, 1990, Hall, 1994) this new landscape is also one of marginalisation for those who can't afford to buy in.

As the post urban region develops into a megalopolis, with sharp locational separation between the affluent and those left out of the information city,

architectural and food arrangements shift too. Megamalls designed as megalumps replace the incremental architecture of traditional city centres as the locus for activity. Consumption provides the primary basis for social interactions in vast, privatised, internal spaces architecturally contrived to suggest certain places and food relationships while masking the loss of actual connections to the cultural and ecological exigencies of location.

In this car based and dependent "post-modern kitschscape" (Wilson, 1991), megamall cafes, food courts, market plazas, fast food outlets and "road pantries" are key elements of the architectural theme park. Architecture in this context is exploited in order to excise the unexpected, the mysterious and the convivial; in particular, to disallow the anarchic element of relating to others in the zone between public and private in which cafes have excelled. And unlike the mall, or the service station, where management surveillance underlines the imperative to buy or move on, at a cafe the possibility to be both part of the city and contemplative of it is available. And it might be possible to walk rather than drive there.

The architectural expression of the post-urban region, especially in its styling of food retailing and consumption spaces, is exploited in the struggle for status by both middle class "retreaters" in their peripheral enclaves and "gentrifiers" in refurbished inner areas. Both are benefiting economically and socially from the forces reshaping cities and both are involved in choosing the right architecture and the right places to dine as a way of signifying this success. "A central issue...is how, in the scramble for social distinction, to avoid being caught in a compromising position with declassÉ people, objects and places" (Knox, 1992: 223).

In other words, packaged architectural settings are important backdrops for this stylish materialism (Knox, 1992, Bourdieu, 1984). The architecture of the restaurant, cafe, megamall or festival market of the post-modern city isn't created as a value free practice confined to a specific site but is the "product of stage craft, proscenia for the enactment of consumption-oriented lifestyles" (Knox, 1992: 208) conducted primarily within privatised space. If architectural arrangements of food spaces provide no more than a framework for consumption, the level of sophistication apparent in a food related cultural life, previously defined by a rich civic realm, is also very likely to diminish.

### Food Conscious Architecture

There are plenty of alternative architectural visions responding to the inexorable spread of cities that could contribute to more culturally sustaining relationships between cities and food. But even in those visionary projects where there is an attempt to define a total urban habitat, food doesn't seem to be on the agenda (see for example most recently Norman Foster's 840 metre Millennium Tower, proposed for Tokyo Bay in L"Arca 100, January 1996).

A more food conscious architecture would be both integrative and contextual. This architecture would be interested in ecological and design issues at a broader level than individual sites. It would see no automatic separation between natural and

urban space but would consider regional ecology, and the ecological footprint of urban space, the relationship between development projects and the loss of agricultural land, the need to green its architectural responses. It would be aware of the potential to incorporate markets, bars, cafes, food shops and productive plants as part of infill projects, be concerned with fine grain, with combatting the polarising consequences of gentrification and with the protection of cultural and ethnic diversity at a variety of scales.

It would appreciate how apparently separate architectural interventions have a cumulative affect on the urban "food fabric" of vegetable gardens, shops, streets, markets, suburbs and regions. It would be cautious about involvement in megascale projects driven by "events mania". Such architecture would acknowledge that architectural and city design models of the past still have many useful things to say in food terms. After all, fundamental cultural and urban form connections are already expressed in Australian cities through migration, built form and shared sources of knowledge about urbanism. It would be concerned with the loss of public space in cities and it would look to the multiplicity of urban design theorists and practitioners as much as to the creative power of individual architecture for at least some of its design inspiration.

Food conscious architecture would be concerned with challenging the dominance of streets by cars that undercut conviviality, with the use of arcading and other shading and space defining urban design techniques for pedestrians at the edge of streets and squares (especially given greenhouse effect), and a focus on maintaining public space (waterfronts are an obvious example), to design connections to season and region, and adaptive reuse of buildings to emphasise comfort and delight.

To localise things a little: in terms of specific architectural projects, "gastronomic" architects might be interested in the possibilities for increasing local, regional and seasonal Sydney basin produce in Sydney cafes, perhaps even acting as cultural brokers for the design of spaces to connect "boutique" (that is very high quality, ecologically conscious) producers, with investors and potential consumers in places such as city tasting rooms, wine bars, cafes and restaurants.

### Architectural Opportunities

The explosion of interest in design for dining within Sydney and elsewhere provides a greatly expanding set of opportunities to harness architecture to the service of gastronomy and thus to the richness of urban life - in ways which don't necessarily increase the gap between the privileged and the marginalised in urban space. As the conurbation of greater Sydney expands and the megalopolitan region of the eastern seaboard continues to envelope the NSW coastline we may become better acquainted with the reasons why retreat from public space is bad for us gastronomically, ecologically and socially. Equally, these urban transformations present possibilities for combining architectural practice and food which can and should be creatively explored.