

THE TABLE IN SPACE : A PLANNING PERSPECTIVE

A talk to the Australian Symposium of Gastronomy

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I began thinking about this paper because I noticed more and more how cramped and constrained are our own pleasures of the table by virtue of the design of our cities.

I'm not talking here just about the physical nature of the city although that's crucial but about the attitudes that shape our perceptions of what's appropriate in urban life - limiting the location and manner of dining.

It seems trite but, if it's true that destruction of language can teach us to unknow or unsay - so too can the constraints of city design lessen our chances of a variety of experiences, conversations, thoughts and ideas most excited by the process of sharing food.

What I wanted to find out was why we don't habitually take over the streets for meals together - and I'd like to talk about Gouger Street in relation to this later - why for example planners have designed corner-shops and cafes "out" of residential areas, why we allow our best productive viticultural and horticultural land to be subsumed by housing development, why we've never had much of a culture of outdoor cafes, arcaded streets, the promenade ... things which seem to be adjuncts to a rich intellectual and gastronomic life.

The short answer I was told by a number of people is very simple - flies.

But I don't think this is a good enough explanation. I want to argue that while public dining is good - a socialising and sociable act - we have a long tradition of dualist conceptions of the city where dining has been firmly situated and central to the private domestic sphere. Our construction of the physical city has reflected this symbolic dichotomy or doubleness in urban life.

We have divided and understood the city as a series of opposites; public/private, urban/suburban, work/home, production/consumption, labour/reproduction of labour, market/domestic and assigned roles to men and women which reflect and perpetuate this duality.

Women have represented the domestic sphere - kitchens their natural home, love and comfort through food preparation their expression of self-abnegation but also fulfillment. Kitchens and cooking occupy a somewhat contradictory position in many women's lives - on the one hand this is the centre of never ending consumption

mystified as love rather than labour - on the other this very private space is one they control.

Kitchens have very often been badly designed, ill lit, cramped and poorly oriented while cooking remains one of the more pleasant creative parts of the domestic routine.

Eminent architect and planner Raymond Unwin expressly designed kitchens to be too small to allow the worryingly "working class" tendency of dining and receiving visitors in the kitchen to be possible. Of course Unwin was wrong but people still have to live in his houses and many others like them.

Around the same time other European social theorists, mostly Utopian socialist, were arguing that domestic labour was unnecessarily duplicated in private houses and should be socialised to cut down needless work which sapped women's time and energy. To this end schemes were produced for housing arranged around communal facilities for dining and laundry. The prescient planner Ebenezer Howard had earlier suggested similarly innovative schemes - the reality fell well short.

In any case ideas about communal dining were taken up in broad way during WWII with the stolidly patriotic "British Restaurants" established to provide wholesome food for war workers. These were closed down against some resistance post war as a threat to domesticity. Private dining was recognised as a mainstay of traditional family values and roles.

Many urban designers and architects have understood the centrality of kitchens for family life however this notion of family is conceived. The authors of one design manual A Pattern Language boldly suggest that "without communal eating, no human group can hold together". They go on to say that "there are almost no important human events or institutions which are not given their power to bind, their sacral character, by food and drink".

The meaning of communal eating is summarised as follows:

"A feast is of such a nature that it draws people to itself, and makes them leave everything else in order to participate in its joys. the mere act of eating together, quite apart from a banquet or some other festival occasion is by its very nature a sign of friendship and of "communion"... the table is in a certain sense the centre of family life, the expression of family life".

It follows that kitchens must allow physical space for this sharing to occur.

"The isolated kitchen, separate from the family and considered as an efficient but unpleasant factory for food is a hangover from the days of servants; and from more recent days where women willingly took over the servants' role". As long as we maintain the hidden supposition that cooking is a chore and eating a pleasure each woman is a kind of servant.

If you look at most modern house plans you'll see they still half separate the kitchen from social areas.

What's needed - and if it seems to be stating the obvious think of all those house plans - is to make the kitchen bigger, big enough to include the family room space, near the centre of the house, with a big table in the middle and lots of chairs, soft and hard, stove, counters, sink round the edge.

The eating atmosphere is also important. It's obvious that some rooms invite people to eat leisurely and comfortably while others force people to eat as quickly as possible so they can go somewhere else to relax. This is partly to do with light. If there's the same level of light over the whole space the light doesn't hold people together - intensity of feeling is dissolved and the sense of gathering is dissipated. The basic thing needed is a heavy table in the centre of the eating space - large enough for the people using it - with a light which creates a pool over the people - the space is enclosed with surrounding walls and darkness..

This issue of enclosure of space is in its way, as crucial and is related to, the dualist conceptions of the city where dining is so privatised. We have understood inside/outside, private/public somewhat inflexibly; using solid walls to demarcate the private and public worlds. In some other cultures space isn't so clearly defined by walls but is a scene of "fluid change an constant transformation like that of the human relationship to nature". There is a picture in one design book I have of a temporary restaurant built on wooden platforms over a Japanese river in summer, that I think expresses this fluidity or transformation very clearly. Here physical design relates to the seasons, the natural world closely and flexibly.

Our restaurants tend to replicate the conditions of private houses - to be enclosed from the surrounding natural or urban world or provide some alienated fantasy that denies

the real conditions of the city as these are often rightly viewed as alienating and unpleasant. Dining expresses retreat from rather than celebration of urbanity.

When we do sit outside to eat however we tend to do so only in our own backyards and gardens which we have developed as lavishly detailed private worlds. This outside dining can be curiously discomfiting - often there is no central table but a collection of disparate chairs without a focus - plates on laps, plastic cups all over the grass, all inducing in me anyway a kind of conversational inertia and dislocation utterly at odds with the eating place atmosphere I described earlier.

One of the main reasons for this privatisation of open space - and this has a lot to do with why we don't dine in the streets - is the physical design and purpose of modern roads.

An Italian designer called Camillo Sitte wrote extensively in the late 19th Century about positive outdoor space - which is also sometimes described as the outdoor room. In this conception the road is the floor and the trees and the buildings are the walls. You can (as Sitte did) work out a mathematical relationship between the two - a ratio of height to width which defines the space - within a certain ratio the space feels good to be in - outside this ratio the space feels bad - either too closed or too open. Getting the ratio right is absolutely fundamental to good street and square design. In Australia our roads and squares tend to be much too big and too wide and they just don't work as comfortable, usable, positive space for pedestrians. This has immense ramifications for dining.

One key problem is cars. Streets really went wrong - got too wide when their basic use changed from pedestrian space to vehicular carriageway. When vehicles became motorised and their relative power and volume grew to such huge proportions the streets as a place for people was on the way out.

It's been suggested that cars have god like status in Australia. Urban form is predicated on their pre-eminence as a transport form but it's most unlikely that people will stop using cars unless forced to do so. You can see why - our density of people and houses is so low that people really do need cars to get around. The suburbs were built on the (false) assumption that everyone would have cars - so who needs a corner shop? You don't grow your own veggies anymore - you buy them at one of a hierarchy of centre zones - they've been packaged, stored and shipped there regardless of season or distance for purchase on a weekly basis and separate consumption in private houses.

Meanwhile those suburbs at low densities move ever outwards, encroaching on land once used for agricultural production of fresh local, seasonally available produce - or so the romantics would have it.

Not only do our streets suffer from their primary role as paths for cars and trucks but they offer little in the way of pedestrian pleasure and comfort. Urban designers suggest that in one sense "the edge of the space is the space" - detailed attention to the edges is crucial to good pedestrian space.

You have to treat the edge of a building as a thing, a place, a zone with volume to it not a line which has no thickness. "There should be places that have depth and a covering, places to sit, lean and walk; particularly at points along the building perimeter which look onto interesting outdoor life". The argument is that people prefer being at the edges of open spaces - people will usually place themselves near something - a facade, pillar, furniture if these are provided.

This is why arcades, galleries, porches and terraces are good structures for the edge of the street space. The example of Bologna springs to mind with its miles of porticoed streets but there are many other cities too where canopied space has helped support street life. It seems an obvious idea for our climate as well. This kind of environmental and psychological protection for the pedestrian is a useful physical support to the presence of outdoor cafes.

I wondered why we have so few good cafes of the Al fresco or Flash variety. Is it because we are as has been said of Americans in the 50's by temperament and upbringing, indifferent if not hostile to everything the cafe stands for - scorning the state of mind it induces - the mixture of contemplativeness and introspection or is it because our streets are so poorly designed?

An important point is the need for a fairly high density or concentration of people to provide a cafe with enough clientele.

It's imperative that there be a lot of customers. People like the physical closeness to others the cafe allows - and the chance to listen to interesting conversations as well as the dangerous and exciting opportunity to meet someone unknown. Various designers have discussed this risky aspect of cafes with a fair amount of approval - they feel especially pleased to think they are counteracting the alienating and lonely quality of urban life.

The design conditions which are required for a good cafe are that it be within easy walking distance of home, open to the street, serve simple food and drink (some of it alcoholic). With these in place, talk, lectures, debate and controversy are all possible. This opportunity to sit at a table, eat, drink and converse is very limited in our cities. For one thing public space, where cafes are situated, has been in the past very much a male domain.

Although this is changing in Australia, traditionally lacking a well-developed culture of local cafes the effect has been very pronounced. Some men may have a local pub, just about everyone else has nowhere local to go to meet, eat, drink and talk to people.

In addition, almost the only place where we get a high enough density of people to make cafes work is in and around the centre of the city. Our City of Adelaide Plan and its urban design guidelines stress the need for lots of this kind of cafe with outdoor sitting places but with unsympathetic building and road design and too low a density of people it just won't happen despite the best of intentions.

I was intrigued by reading accounts of whole streets taken over in various places - the examples I saw were Italian, Spanish and Greek - of local restaurants and communities who just rope off the road and set up tables for their patrons or themselves. Tables and chairs are set up in front of the premises under a canopy of plane trees or palms, or in a miniature park across the street, or sometimes on a traffic island... One picture I saw showed a group of working class families who'd taken over the space in front of a cathedral in Trastevere for a feast of mussels and of suckling pig - they looked as if they were having a really good time.

Rudofsky points out that some people find eating in public akin to indecent exposure - eating in front of non-eaters is somewhat offensive. He suggests that eating should be table bound - a dining table makes the sight of masticating bearable.

This business of expanding a restaurant onto the greater part of the street is apparently organised at the owner's discretion and with the authorities' connivance. I was skeptical about how keen Adelaide's authorities would be about such a suggestion and asked Michael how the Symposium had arranged the Gouger Street event. It turned out that the charisma of the festival had something to do with it. I suppose the positive point is that special occasions allow such blurring of public/private space to occur. Once seen the example can be repeated with greater frequency.

The Gouger Street experience on Saturday is anyway a useful illustration of much of what I've been saying in this paper.

Given the opportunity, there seems to be lots of evidence that people really like eating together in the street. On the other hand the space itself doesn't always work all that well in a physical design sense. In Gouger Street the ratio of building height to road width is too big to get a sense of enclosure. There is too little shelter in the heat and glare of the sun - and the impetus for the project came from without.

What I'd like to see is this repeated at a smaller scale, much more often, with less officialdom and sense of external control and more spontaneity and local impetus. What I've tried to show is how the arrangement of private space and of street space in terms of scale, treatment of edges, density of people, presence or absence of cars affects the chances of increasing the number and diversity of dining experiences - and how this is linked to our ideas about the public and private domain.

Stemming from all this my final point is quite a simple one and this is that good gastronomers need to be good urban designers too.