

COOP
DESIGN
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M.S.C.
PROGRAM

ON FOOD

HOW DOES A MEAL LINK OUR TABLE TO
THE BIOREGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS?

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Author: Gabriela Aquije Zegarra

ABSTRACT

In the Practice-based Design Research Thesis **On food**, I looked into the gap “of nuanced research on consumer behavior” [1] that exists at the intersection between Food cultural studies and Food System research. In order to understand this specific behavior, I chose to qualitatively analyze cultural forms of food exchange, through the lenses of Speculative Design and the Transition design framework. Moreover, I recounted the unexpected change of venue of our urban eating practices due to the COVID -19 pandemic. For that, the narrative of this thesis articulates theoretical and design portfolios review, journalistic information, analysis of qualitative data, and personal quarantine diaries.

From a spatial design perspective, food is a complex study subject: it’s a nutritional material as well as an ‘affective medium’ [2]. On one hand, from a quantitative Food System gaze, this material can be economically analyzed by its ecological impact and its consumption spaces and demand. On the other hand, taking food as a medium, one becomes part of the analyzed material during its transformation (cooking) and its consumption (eating). Consequently, this complex character can be perceived while sharing the table with others: food as nutritional material becomes a cultural one through the act of ‘commensality’ [3]. For this thesis case study, I looked into this socio-spatial exchange with food through Latin American ‘gastro-politics’ [5]: an interweaving of the care and economy during the whole food cycle – “de la chacra a la olla” [6] (from farm to casserole).

Therefore, within the pandemic context, I analyzed the speculative design challenge of adapting a Sobremesa – a familiar dining ritual from Latin American culture – into a digital platform. In the early weeks of global lockdown, this started as an eating support system between friends overseas. Then, during the course of 3 months, Quarantined Sobremesa resulted in a digital commensality format that brought together international strangers. Taking this interface as a “designerly public engagement” [7] process, I was able to investigate and create within the spatial and social structures of different actors and contrasting foodways. In doing so, a meal became a joyful but rather critical medium to reassess our everyday eating habits.

While prototyping digital Sobremesa, as a critical commensality medium, I could explore the food cultural constellations and urban food systems of households around the globe. As we transition to the post-COVID-19 world, how can designers evidence the link between our tables and ‘bioregional Food Systems’ [8]? The writer John Thackara urged practitioners to create platforms that give priority to human-nature knowledge exchange, for “the practice of ecology is the forging of relationships.” [9]

Conclusively, design as a critical practice needs to speculate an urban-rural reconnection and transdisciplinary – even decolonized – exchange between diverse actors inside the Food Systems, both human and non-human. Hence this thesis depicts a ‘vision for transition’ [10] that requires a re-evaluation of what has been normalized within our urban eating cultures until these uncertain times, thus it proposes new ways of designing mediums to learn by eating with others.

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- [1] Food Systems Dashboard, Components of Food Systems.
 - [2] Sadowski, **Digital Intimacies**.
 - [3] Kerner et al., **Commensality**
 - [4] Ibid.
 - [5] Appadurai, **Gastropolitics**, 2.
 - [6] Matta et al., **Culinary Politics in Peru**
 - [7] Lindström and Ståhl, **Inviting to co-articulations**,184
 - [8] Thackara, **Bioregioning: Urban-Rural Reconnection**
 - [9] Ibid.
 - [10] Irwin et al., **Transition Design**, 2