

# The Architect's Dilemma: Searching for an Architecture of Pleasure + Sustenance

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## INTRODUCTION

Architect Donald Kunze writes, "Because food and architecture are superficially very different but really closely connected, the method that explores connections has to cover a broad and discontinuous ground."<sup>1</sup> Architecture and the culinary arts are both practiced and appreciated by people who seek to improve the ways in which our most basic physiological needs are met. The two disciplines, as the sublimation of mere food and shelter are creative solutions that have the ability to provide pleasure and therefore sustain and enrich our everyday lives. I would argue that the culinary arts have been much more widely successful than architecture at accomplishing this charge. This paper surveys a selection of connections between the two fields as a means of discovering what might be learned in the field of architecture from gastronomic pursuits.

## THE GASTRONOMIC ANALOGY

Architectural theoretician Peter Collins pointed out this possibility in 1967's *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, when he wrote of the "gastronomic analogy," suggesting that gastronomic arts held a unique connection with architecture. Both architecture and the culinary arts are "a necessity rather than a luxury" and are each equally concerned with both science and art.<sup>2</sup> In addition each discipline, writes Collins, "requires intuition, imagination, enthusiasm and an immense

amount of organizational skill."<sup>3</sup> Where architecture and the culinary arts diverge, as indicated by Collins, is due to the fact that architects have forgotten to judge their work with "degrees of excellence" and have become overly concerned with "being 'contemporary' or 'reactionary,' instead of whether their work was good or bad."<sup>4</sup> The concept of good versus bad helps shape the way humans biologically and psychologically perceive their environment.

Architect Marco Frascari critiques mainstream contemporary architecture by comparing the built products of Modern and Post-Modern theories to fast food. Fast food is here being used as something that is generally recognized as unhealthy or "bad for us." Frascari contends that these theories' ultimate goals are to "produce buildings that 'look good' over a predetermined life span" and goes on to state that "these look like the real thing, but they have been designed to be gulped down...there is no possibility, no reason, to take the time and pleasure to taste them."<sup>5</sup>

## FOOD + ARCHITECTURE AS ONE

One of my favorite childhood television shows, *Fraggle Rock*, represents a moment where food and architecture are one in the same. The show's main characters, humanoid creatures, called Fraggles love to eat. Not only do they love to eat, but they love to eat buildings. The tiniest inhabitants of Fraggles

Rock, the Doozers, who love to build just as much as the Fraggles love to eat, construct the buildings the Fraggles so passionately devour. They're relationship is symbiotic. The Doozers build so much and so often that if the Fraggles didn't eat these constructions (made from primarily radish dust) they would surely run out of room to build in the cavernous underground world that is Fraggles Rock. The Doozers, as tiny 'archichefs', spend much of their energy coming up with ways to make sure the Fraggles continue to consume their buildings, so they can continue to build.



Figure 1: Jim Henson's Fraggles, Doozers and constructions.

A recurring character in *Fraggle Rock* is Uncle Traveling Matt, who has ventured into "Outer Space" a place inhabited by the "silly creatures" who of course are humans and "outer space" is our everyday world. In one episode, Uncle Traveling Matt stumbles upon what he sees as "the ultimate Doozer construction" (in reality the Seattle Space Needle, built for the 1962 World's Fair).<sup>6</sup> He writes in a postcard to his nephew, Gobo, that "it looked absolutely delicious" then after attempting to take a large bite out of the base concludes that it "tasted terrible."<sup>7</sup> As he gazes at the image of the Space Needle on the postcard, one discouraged Fraggles says "too bad...it looks so delicious," as another corrects, "Looks aren't everything."<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the standard Doozer buildings may not look like much (See Fig. 2) but they provide pleasure not only to the Fraggles who consume them, but also to the Doozers who build them and thusly keep an entire way of

life in balance. Shouldn't we architects take a cue from the Doozers and focus on pleasing those who will ultimately consume our buildings? And shouldn't we make sure to do so in such a way that doesn't overrun our precious environment with creations that no one wants to eat?

## FOODIE NATION

Food is a topic that has in recent years left the confines of the kitchen and the occasional restaurant and found its way into the minds of the masses. We have come far from the days when "The Galloping Gourmet" and Julia Child's "The French Chef" were the lone television programs dedicated to cooking and eating well. The inception of *The Food Network* nearly 15 years ago gave aspiring chefs and foodies<sup>9</sup> alike 24/7/365 access to the culinary world. A world that was previously contained in their mother's dusty cookbooks and in the lifestyle sections of the Sunday paper. According to their website, *The Food Network*, is "committed to exploring new and different ways to approach food - through pop culture, competition, adventure, and travel-while also expanding its repertoire of technique-based information."<sup>10</sup> And while *The Food Network* may be the only network completely dedicated to food, it is not the only one to recognize the growing interests in all things culinary. Every major national network (ABC, NBC, CBS, etc.) has at least one show devoted to cooking, or has regular food segments on their most popular shows. Three of the *Travel Channel's* most popular shows *Anthony Bourdain's No Reservations*, *Food Paradise* and *Bizarre Foods* specifically feature food, but many of their other programs include pieces on distinctive regional foods and must-haves while traveling.

There are upwards of sixty print magazines all completely concerned with food, wine and cooking and numerous other health and fitness related ones that have running columns on eating. The world-wide-web is an arena for exploring the culinary world as well, whether it is through the official pages of any of the television or print sources above or the countless blogs maintained by chefs, foodies,

and even architects. The point is that eating is something we have to do in order to live, but it is something that we take pure pleasure in as well. In the words of the late Luciano Pavarotti, "One of the very nicest things about life is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is we are doing and devote our attention to eating."<sup>11</sup>

### ARCHITECTURE'S GROWING POPULARITY

To have a roof (of any sort) over one's head as protection from the elements is the fundamental basis of architecture. It is something that, like food, has been taken for granted by the masses until recently. For perhaps the first time since the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, architecture too has become of interest to the masses, thanks primarily to the buildings constructed for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China.<sup>12</sup> From Herzog and De Meuron's National Stadium (or "Bird's Nest") to PTW Architect's National Aquatic Center (or "Water Cube") the fifteen new, fourteen renovated, seven temporary and five related buildings showcased before and during the 2008 games managed to turn the world's attention from the games themselves to the venues they were held in. These structures not only provided the physical space for the games, but also tempted the world to reconsider architecture as a venue for pure delight. Unfortunately, while the Bird's Nest, Watercube and other Olympic structures were instrumental in giving architecture a place in water cooler conversations, their lasting effect on how the general public views and appreciates architecture is doubtful. Though we are a more globally mobile society today than ever before, the number of people outside of China who will actually experience these works first hand is small. The number of Chinese citizens who will benefit from their creation, post August 2008 is probably even smaller. These are buildings designed to be "gulped down". Perhaps though they can be viewed in a more positive light than Frascari's equation to fast food, it may be more accurate to describe these buildings as appetizers, whetting our palates for a meal to come.



Figure 2: Herzog + De Meuron's Bird's Nest.

### ARCHITECTURE + PLEASURE

In her essay "Architecture and Pleasure", Parisian architect, Odile Decq wonders if architecture can "anticipate and shape new directions through so-called avant-garde forms".<sup>13</sup> She also notes a trend that architects in the beginning of the twenty first century are "turning to the notion of pleasure" having dealt with function and social needs *ad nauseum* throughout the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

First pointing out the complexity of desires and pleasures, she reminds us of what we already instinctively know when she writes:

...Our desires are always evolving. They cannot be controlled and predefined. They are always personal and only sometimes collective. They are absolutely contingent and dependent on external influences—global, political, economic, and climatic—as well as on internal conditions such as one's last lunch, health or love.<sup>15</sup>

However, in agreement with and at the same time in contrast to Frascari, Decq writes that in spite of contemporary architecture's increasingly ephemeral nature "its duration is longer than the time of fashion" and in as much we need to understand that "there is no such thing as a general or universal response to a program or site...everything is specific."<sup>16</sup>

## EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY + THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA

An epicure is someone who takes a notable pleasure in food and drink. The word comes from the Greek philosopher Epicurus whose teachings were centered upon attaining a happy, tranquil life, that was self-sufficient, free of pain and fear, and included a close group of friends. Epicurus measured good and bad through pleasure and pain. To him, that which provides pleasure is good, and that which causes pain is bad. In true Epicurean spirit, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, tells us that in general, nutritious/alimentary/"good for us" foods don't taste or smell bad. Poisonous and harmful foods, things that will give us indigestion usually have horrible odors and bitter tastes.<sup>17</sup> Where taste is concerned author Michael Pollan discusses our predilection for sweetness (good) and avoidance of bitterness (bad) in his 2007 bestseller, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Natural sweetness is an indication of carbohydrate energy, which is broken down quickly and easily by our bodies. Not only are naturally sweet foods helpful, but we have found great pleasure in them as well. In contrast, natural bitterness is oftentimes a result of plant toxins that can be harmful to us.<sup>18,19</sup> Pollan takes the title of his work and its premise from University of Pennsylvania research psychologist, Paul Rozin, who coined the phrase nearly thirty years ago. Rozin's work compared the eating habits of omnivores, specifically humans and rats, to those of the koala, a species whose dinner choices are more specialized. Koalas eat eucalyptus leaves exclusively after weaning off of their mothers' milk. In contrast, rats and humans enjoy a great variety of food choices, which has allowed us both to inhabit just about every place imaginable on earth. However, a key difference between rats and humans is that rats have to work out individually what foods are good or bad for them and then remember in order to survive.<sup>20</sup> Humans have the added advantage of culture, customs, taboos and rituals. These advantages, however helpful they may have once proved, have begun to break down and lose their influence on us.



Figure 3: A customer scrutinizes a label in the sauce aisle.

Today, the abundance of foodstuffs, loss of rituals, denial of taboos and the rejection of traditions has led to what Pollan calls America's "national eating disorder." He writes "the cornucopia of the American supermarket has thrown us back on a bewildering food landscape where we once again have to worry that some of those tasty looking morsels might kill us."<sup>21</sup>

At the core of the omnivore's plight are the ideas of neophilia and neophobia, which are most plainly stated as a positive or negative bias towards a particular food. Pollan points out that humans have gone far beyond "simple sensory responses to food (sweet, bitter, etc.)" which has "afford[ed] us aesthetic pleasures undreamed of by the koala."<sup>22</sup> In the words of Brillat-Savarin, "The Creator, in making man eat in order to live, persuaded him by appetite and rewarded with by pleasure."<sup>23</sup> Uncle Traveling Matt was undoubtedly tempted by appetite when he decided to literally taste the Space Needle. Unfortunately for him, he was not rewarded with pleasure or nourishment. Too often our creations are perhaps visually pleasing, but fail to nourish us in anyway. Such may be the case with the 2008 Olympic facilities in Beijing, in spite of their admirable attempts at sustainability. The greatest lasting good this writer sees is their role in getting the masses talking about architecture.

Though they may be talking more frequently about design, and more and more people are aware of what tastes good and what good

taste might be, the general public is not always apt at savoring their environment. We truly have grown accustomed to "gulping down" our world. Whether or not that emanates from within the culture or has as Frascari suggests has something to do with the built environment itself not being worth our time, I am not completely sure. It seems to be a combination of both factors. In any case, there is currently a need and opportunity within architecture to tempt the public back to eating our creations, and likewise for our creations to please, nourish and sustain the public.

### YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT/BUILD

Brillat-Savarin's most famous aphorism, "*Dis-moi ce que tu manges et je te dirais ce que tu es*" ("Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are") is the root of the common saying "you are what you eat".<sup>24</sup> When this work was published in early nineteenth century France, the food one ate revealed class, wealth and ethnicity rather than any sort of purposeful expression of self. However, in the twenty-first century, the saying is more or less associated with health and a choice one makes. Pollan observes, "The way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds".<sup>25</sup>

Architecture and the culinary arts can both be perceived in detail or holistically. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote of the built environment saying that when "devouring a work of art or architecture...we both chew it into pieces and swallow it whole".<sup>26</sup> This is of course when said architecture is worth chewing and swallowing. When we do choose to consume architecture we are making that decision consciously and unconsciously all at once. For Sartre,

To eat is to appropriate by destruction; it is at the same time to be filled up with a certain being, and this being is given a synthesis of temperature, density and flavor proper...by

tasting them we appropriate them. Taste is assimilation...it reveals to me the being which I am going to make my flesh.<sup>27</sup>

Man's unique ability to choose his values and to thereby make himself is at the core of Sartre's philosophy. In architecture as well as in eating habits, what you build or what you eat has an effect on who you are. German philosopher, Ernst Bloch, writes, "not only does the man make his world, but the world makes the man. *Homo faber* and also *homo fabricatus*—both are equally true; they are dialectically interrelated".<sup>28</sup> Bloch uses the example of chair design to illustrate his point, that while man physically makes the chair, the chair directly influences the way man sits and his posture and thereby literally makes the man. In terms of architecture, the effect of *homo faber* extends beyond the Self to those around us. In the age of globalization, we are more apt than ever to venture outside of our own eating habits and cultures and try others'. We literally and figuratively take in these new foods and experiences and are changed by them. Architects have a social and environmental responsibility to build in a manner that is healthy for both the earth and for our fellow inhabitants. Our constructions should be healthy, but they need to taste good and look appetizing as well—these are the keys to a sustained and pleasurable life on earth.

### THE GREEN FACTOR

Sustainability has been an underlying theme in this paper thus far, and I would like to expand on that now. Just as the 2008 Beijing Olympic facilities have been the Columbian Exhibition of the twenty-first century, the "green movement" can be likened to the International Style and modernity of the early twentieth century. "Going green" is something that we're all doing, at least in the US, and I'm not just talking architecture. The clothing industry, entertainment industry and of course the food industry are all into greening themselves.



Figure 4: Greenwashing explained by Tom Fishburne.

Unfortunately, many businesses, large and small, that claim to be “going green” make misleading statements regarding their environmental friendliness in order to push a product or service. This is called “greenwashing.” In much the same way as the International Style was imported into the US devoid of its original social program, the basic premise of the green movement has been nearly forgotten. It has become fashionable to buy the greenest products a person can find, never mind if the products actually are or not, so long as they have the appearance of being so. *The New York Times* published an article in the summer of 2007 entitled “At Home Depot, How Green is that Chainsaw?” that illustrates just how ridiculous the situation has become. Clifford Kraus writes that at Home Depot, “Plastic-handled paint brushes were touted as nature-friendly because they were not made of wood. Wood-handled paint brushes were promoted as better for the planet because they were not made of plastic.”<sup>29</sup> The packaging and advertising that could and should be used to educate the public is instead causing undue confusion and spreading much avoidable misinformation. Previously, this paper mentions a similar

tendency in the food industry, which Pollan refers to as America’s national eating disorder. A major source of our anxiety where food is concerned is a result of information that was originally conceived and propagated to help us decide what and how much to eat. I’m referring to the nutrition facts printed on the packaging of nearly every item available for purchase and consumption by Americans today.

According to Michael Pollan’s 2008 bestseller, *In Defense of Food*, even though the ideas and vocabulary surrounding nutrients have been around since the early nineteenth century, the real trouble began in the 1980s when foods were swapped for nutrients. He writes,

...an ideology of nutritionism that, among other things, has convinced us...that what matters most is not the food but the “nutrient” and that because nutrients are invisible and incomprehensible to everyone but scientists, we need expert help in deciding what to eat.<sup>30</sup>

The bulk of the first section of *In Defense of Food*, Pollan argues that most of the expert advice we’ve gotten in the past 50 years has hurt us more than helped us. In late 2007, the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) introduced “LEED Facts” based off of the mandatory nutrition fact labels found on our foods (or rather, on our nutrients). Architect Michelle Kaufmann utilized a similar graphic strategy to compare her SunsetBreeze House to a so-called traditional home in an energy - consumption study. She writes, “By quantifying the advantages of a sustainably designed home we can express that information in universal, easy to understand terms using something as simple as a label in the same way the advantages and disadvantages of food are expressed through nutrition labels”.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 5: Michelle Kaufmann's SunsetBreeze House as a matter of 'fact'.

Unfortunately, this deceptively simple method is in practice no less confusing and no less susceptible to the stain of misinformation our foods are subject to. In both the food and architecture models, the whole is broken into parts that when separated and reconfigured don't necessarily lead to better sustenance or sustainability. LEED points and our current food labeling systems are equally detrimental to our physical and environmental health, when they are used as merely quantifiers of good and bad and no qualitative considerations are taken. To paraphrase Pollan, this reductive method of breaking nutrients and sustainable considerations into component parts that can be looked at individually ignores their interactions and contexts. We are more or less guilty into eating essentially tasteless foods with greater concentrations of 'good' nutrients and less 'bad' ones, just as we pick and choose from the most easily attained LEED points rather than designing holistically as a matter of pleasure and principle.

## CONCLUSION

Italian Architect Marco Frascari eloquently states his view of the importance of the two subjects as he writes,

Gastronomic and architectural creations are mutually enhancing and mutually inspiring in their common pursuit of beauty. Exemplifying the values of sustainability and sustenance in the culture of architecture and cuisine, eating,

drinking and building considered on the same plate contributes to finer, richer understanding by shedding a cross-cultural light on the study of traditional architecture and contemporary searches for sustainable architecture.<sup>32</sup>

This paper has explored a number of connections between the culinary arts/food and architecture, but by no means is it an exhaustive survey. The number of relationships is potentially infinite and has become somewhat of a hobby for me. Because of their biological, cultural, social, experiential and perpetual nature food and architecture are more interwoven than I ever could have imagined upon undertaking this research. Frascari's statement beautifully summarizes what we all can hope to learn and gain from a more careful consideration of the two. It is my hope that this paper will inspire and tempt architects and architecture students into exploring the delicious combination of food and architecture in their own work.

<sup>1</sup> Donald Kunze, "The Missing Guest: The Twisted Typology of Hospitality," in *Eating Architecture*, ed. Jaime Horwitz and Paulette Singley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 170.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967), 168.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* 171.

<sup>5</sup> Marco Frascari, "'Semiotica Ab Edendo,' Taste in Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 40, no. 1 (Autumn, 1986), 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1424841>.

<sup>6</sup> *Fraggle Rock: Complete Second Season-Disc 2; Episode 212: The Doozer Contest*, DVD, directed by George Bloomfield HIT Entertainment & Jim Henson Home Entertainment, 1984 (Original); 2005 (DVD Release)) (accessed 18 March 2008)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "Foodie" is a term used to describe any person who has an extreme love and curiosity for food, cooking and its many avenues. It is distinguished from a gourmet or epicure in that it implies a more informal relationship with the culinary world.

<sup>10</sup> The Food Network, Official Website. "About Us: Food Network." [http://www.foodnetwork.com/food/about\\_us/](http://www.foodnetwork.com/food/about_us/) (accessed 31 August 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Pavarotti, Luciano. "Quotations about Food." May 10, 2008. <http://www.quotegarden.com/food.html> (accessed March 13 2008).

<sup>12</sup> This comment is not meant to take anything away from previous Olympic-architectural endeavors, i.e. Günter Behnisch and Frei Otto's Munich stadium (1972) or Pier Luigi Nervi's "floating" concrete dome for Rome in 1960. It is simply the author's opinion that the sheer number and audacity of Beijing's Olympic facilities, partnered with the availability and ease of communication in the year 2008 creates this unique climate in which architecture is being seen and pondered by the masses.

<sup>13</sup> Odile Decq, "Architecture and Pleasure," in *The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century* ed. Bernard Tschumi and Irene Cheng (New York: Monacelli Press, 2003), 55.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* 54.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* 55.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> M.F.K. Fisher, trans. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste; Or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* [Physiologie du goût]. (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1949), [http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk\\_files=13178](http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=13178) (accessed 8 March 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Bitterness can also be a deceitful sensation, and is not altogether an accurate measurement to gauge what we can and cannot eat. According to Pollan, "it turns out that some of the bitterest [plants] contain valuable nutrients, even useful medicines...early humans developed various other tools to unlock their usefulness...by overcoming their defenses or overcoming our own aversion to how they taste."

<sup>19</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma : A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 292

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* 288.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* 295.

<sup>23</sup> M.F.K. Fisher, trans. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste*. (Online)

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma : A Natural History of Four Meals*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Paulette Singley, "Mortified Geometry and Abject Form," *Eating Architecture*, ed. Jaime Horwitz and Paulette Singley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 351.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* 351-352.

<sup>28</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Formative Education, Engineering Form, Ornament," *Rethinking Architecture : A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Neil Leach, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 43.

<sup>29</sup> Clifford Krauss, "At Home Depot, How Green is that Chainsaw?" *New York Times*, June 25, 2007, Business section, Online edition. (accessed 5 Sept 2008)

<sup>30</sup> Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Kaufmann, Michelle. "nutrition labels for our homes?." April 7, 2008. <http://blog.michellekaufmann.com/?p=529> (accessed September 6, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Frascari, Marco. "ZIBALDONE : A realm of architectural delight:." March 7, 2008. <http://marcozibaldone.blogspot.com/2008/03/zibaldone-realm-of-architectural.html> (accessed March 13, 2008).

Image Credits:

Figure 1: Jim Henson's Fraggles, Doozers and constructions.

Henson, Jim. "Fraggle Rock Image Gallery."  
<http://www.henson.com/family.php> (accessed August 15, 2008).

Figure 2: Herzog + De Meuron's Bird's Nest

Beijing Municipal Commission of Urban Planning, "Presentation of Competition for the Architecture Design of National Stadium." 2002.  
<http://www.bjghw.gov.cn/forNationalStadium/indexeng.asp> (accessed August 15, 2008).

Figure 3: A customer scrutinizes a label in the sauce aisle.

Lander, Jess. "checking the sauces." August 17, 2008.  
<http://flickr.com/photos/pancakejess/2770207926/in/set-72157594195781159> (accessed September 8, 2008).

Figure 4: Greenwashing explained by Tom Fishburne.

Fishburne, Tom. "070702.greenwash." February 3, 2008.  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/brandcamp/2240147646/> (accessed September 8, 2008).

Figure 5: Michelle Kaufmann's SunsetBreeze House as a matter of 'fact.'

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