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Food as a Lens: Developing Methods for Collaborative Practice and Community Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Food acts as a universal language and in its essence it is about the moment of connection between individuals and disparate elements. In this inquiry, food and the cooking process is used as a lens to examine both tools and methods for interdisciplinary collaboration. The research occurs primarily in the studio, but also engages participants through workshops. The first was held at an international bi-annual design conference, Tasmeem, Doha in March 2013. Together, with a group of five individuals we looked at the exploration of fusion food in a group dynamic. The second workshop was held at Design Inquiry in June 2013 on Vinalhaven Island in Maine. A series of kitchen tools were made for use during the weeklong conference.

KEY WORDS

Collaboration; Design Methods; Cooking; Interdisciplinary

INTRODUCTION: FOOD AS A LENS FOR COLLABORATION

All individuals have unique and complex relationships with food that encompasses choices they privilege or knowledge they have gathered through experience. Everything about eating including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it and who is at the table – is a form of communication rich with meaning. Our attitudes, practices and rituals around food are a window onto our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves. (Harris, David and McLaughlin 2005) Within that individuality food, in it's essence becomes a unifying element. No matter what an individual's relationship is with food, the act of preparing and eating is universal. Food and cooking implicates us in a whole web of social and ecological relationships: with plants and animals, with the soil, with the farmers, with the microbes both inside and outside our bodies, and, of course, with the people our cooking nourishes and delights. Above all else, what I found in the kitchen is that cooking connects." (Pollan 2013) The cooking process is a natural lens to explore and construct a common language to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration between different disciplines and working environments.

The complexity of contemporary life and scale of today's problems require many disciplines working together to provide solutions. Organizations such as Mattel, Steelcase, Boeing, Wrigley, Procter & Gamble, and the Mayo Clinic have discovered that innovation labs are powerful tools when they desire to move beyond the barriers that were formed as a result of an assembly line process. In these labs inventors from medicine, business, biology and design to name a few, gather like a swarming beehive to focus on a problem. They brainstorm and tinker with different approaches to generate innovative answers. (Weber, Holmes, Palmeri 2005) Trends towards open, interdisciplinary environments make it necessary to explore and ultimately create new sharable methods for working together creatively. Nevertheless, numerous challenges such as devising a shared working language, developing trust, having a defined design space, are all present in this process. In addition, the definition of what it means to work interdisciplinary is often debated. For the purpose of this research it is define as a working environment that integrates professionals from varying disciplines, but does not hybridize those disciplines in order to approach issues. (Bruce et al, 2004).

Interdisciplinary collaboration has a long history in design practice however, it's an activity without substantial theory or development of process in the creative practices; it happens in an ad hoc manner. (Poggenpohl 2004) This occurs most likely because much of design knowledge is characterized by a tacit understanding of the process. Design education is based on building an implied understanding of the process, tools, and materials, then demonstrating that knowledge through visual work. A tacit approach to design maintains a sense of mystery, where intuition is the foundation, and learning is based on a master-apprentice model involving close observation and imitation. (Poggenpohl 2009). Not only is industry putting emphasis on interdisciplinary practice so are the complex problems our work is facing, and so it

behooves design profession to create a sharable body of knowledge that is both interdisciplinary and disciplined. (Cross 2007).

Research Methods

To investigate this postulation, the research is first carried out in the studio, and then engages the community through workshops. The following are two cases in action where participants were asked to be co-designers, playing active roles in shaping the parameters and outcomes of the research. Elizabeth Sanders's work on generative design tools, which provide a common language to empower everyday people to generate alternatives to the current situation, was used as a framework to provoke reflection and ownership. (Sanders 2008). The researchers took audio and visual recordings and participants were asked to craft written or visual documentation of their process. All documentation was shared online with the group at the close of the event, and participants were given the option to then make information private or public. Interpretation of that data was done as field research, examining real situations rather than a controlled environment. For the two workshops the researchers' wrote the case studies.

CASES IN ACTION: TASMEEM, DOHA QATAR

The first workshop was held at Tasmeem, Doha, Qatar an international design conference on hybrid practice. Together with a group the exploration, testing, analysis and enjoyment of food functioned not only as a social cooking exercise, but also as a meta-process for collaborative strategies in art and design. Cooking together also became a means to discuss the conference theme, hybrid practice in art and design. The group was comprised of a diverse set of six participants with varying backgrounds and interests. Individual's motivations to take part in the workshop ranged from exploring medicinal properties of ingredients, cultural identity attached to cuisine, and food writing to name a few. To establish a hybrid process we used fusion cooking as a model because diverse conference participants acted as a micro migrant influx and Qatar's historic relationship to trade routes and nomadic populations, made it an ideal place to examine this type of food.

On the first day of the Tasmeem workshop each person performed an analysis of their recipe, breaking down the flavors, nutritional value, perceived context in which it would be consumed, historical significance, textural relationships, olfactory aspects, timeline, technique and methods used to cook, it's relationship with other meals or foods. Next, the group was introduced to the region with visits to the local fish, vegetable and meat markets, as well as the large supermarket for the necessary ingredients. After gathering supplies, pairs of two worked collaboratively on modifying their chosen heirloom recipes. A group analysis was then made as to the success and failure of the modified recipe. Throughout the cooking sessions extensive documentation was gathered in the form of audio recordings, images, notes and mapping processes.

Figure 1, 2: Shopping and food selection at the market in Doha, Qatar. Source: Chornyak 2013

It was through cooking, analysis, discussion and documentation we were able to scrutinize hybridity and examine hybrid practice through the lens of both familiar traditions and exotic new experiences. By creating pairs in the workshop, the participants were immersed in the new methods and materials of their partners. They were also being asked to subject their own process to focused criticism. It was evident that the established process of dialogue and dissection of each participant's altered recipe aided the transition of individual knowledge from one of tacit understanding to explicit sharable knowledge.

The rhythm of creation and critique allowed for participants to move from "active" focus on process to "passive" reflection, expansion and inquiry. Each cycle ended in a semi formal meal/critique allowing for an open conversation about specific and general successes and failures as participants continued to chew on and digest a range of notions from hybridity to their own practice well after the kitchen had been cleaned and the oven turned off. "How do you make the okra crisper? Should we become generalized or specialized practitioners? How open and fluid are you within your respective discipline? Does hybridity naturally have its own structure or can it easily disintegrate into chaos? How do we place value on food? Where is the rice?" These conversations ranged from "big" ideas to cursory commentary. This led to an appreciation and understanding of individuals in the group as well as understanding of individual perspectives, assisting in knowing not just the what and how, but also the why.

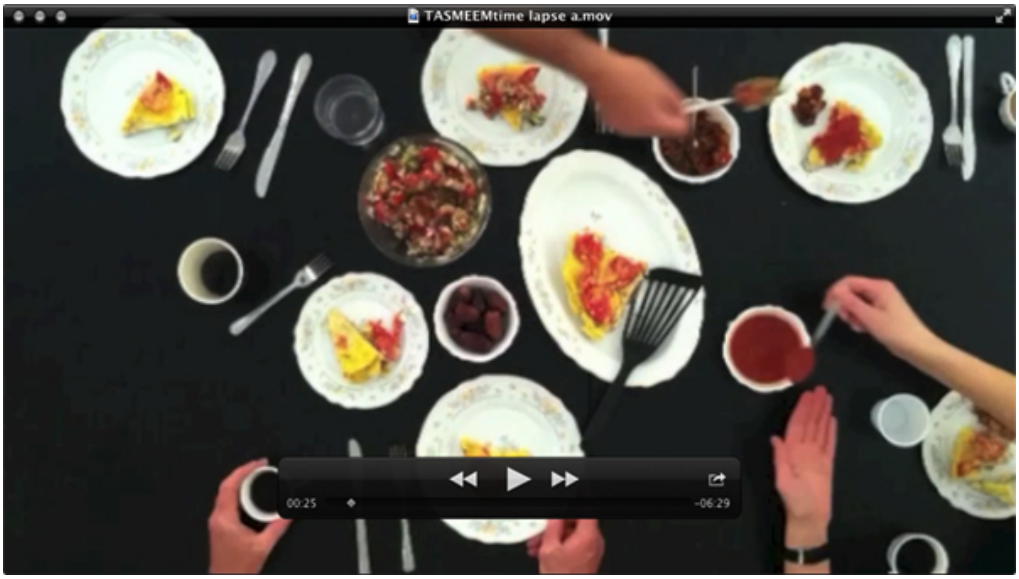

Figure 3: Film still of documentation at Tasmeem, Doha, Qatar. Source: Chornyak 2013

The endeavor demonstrated what participant Jessie Ulmer eloquently wrote, "this process of making not only has the capacity to create great tasting food, but it can also function as a powerful catalyst for conversation and thought. Our cooking and eating naturally gave rise to a collective Socratic dialogue, an ongoing, dynamic, largely inquiry-based conversation that reached far and wide but always returned to cooking and eating. This pattern suggested to me that, ultimately, cooking and eating is much more than the sum of its parts, particularly in the context of hybridity." (Ulmer, 2013).

CASES IN ACTION: DESIGN INQUIRY, VINALHAVEN ISLAND MAINE

The second workshop took place at Design Inquiry, on Vinalhaven Island in Maine. This conference asks each of the twenty-four participants to contribute content, live, work and eat together for the week. For the event we chose to shift the process from the act of cooking and discussion, to one that asked participants to build and or interact with four cooking tools. A cob oven and a ground-oven were made during the week. A wonderbag, a heat retention fabric bag designed to save fuel in third world countries, and a still for distilling alcohol were brought to the island. Those at DI were asked to bring their heirloom recipes, similar to the previous workshop, in-order to establish a constraint in which modifications of materials and practices could be made specific to the cooking tools. The tools imposed restrictions on it's users that required participants to adapt what was normally an intuitive and perhaps abstract process to one that was more concrete and could be shared with the group.

Figure 4: Dinner at Design Inquiry. Source: Chornyak 2013

Figure 5: The wonderbag in use in the barn kitchen space at Design Inquiry. Source: Chornyak 2013

For example, during the week the majority of participants were unsure of how to use the wonderbag, what to cook in it, or if to trust it's function. Left to its own devices, the bag probably would have sat on the shelf without a guide to facilitate its use. After several initial discussions between the makers and workshop participants, full control of the bag was given to the first tester. As others witnessed its use and were repeatedly surprised by how hot the spaghetti sauce was or how tender the pork roast was they were more willing to experiment with the tool. This object encouraged dialogue and catalyzed trial and error because of its unfamiliarity, and so the tool's users had to share knowledge amongst the group. Another instance of trial and error and shared process was revealed with the still. After initial education about moonshine participants were given the alcohol postproduction, which they found easily customizable. Combining 1-quart moonshine, bacon and 2 chunks of birch charcoal made Bacon birch moonshine. Spruce and orange rind moonshine was also made that week all for various cocktails. Though heirloom recipes were not used, bacon, spruce and orange rinds were prevalent in the kitchen and reconfigured for use as a result of ad-hoc group discussion and facilitation.

Figure 6, 7: Building and using the ground oven at Design Inquiry. Source: Chornyak 2013

What was most significant in the weeklong workshop was the creation of an informal, but designated space where others felt comfortable in dialogue. It was evident in the first workshop that cooking, eating and washing up created a level of trust to share ideas and thoughts on the topic. This environment quickly allowed us to know each other's skill sets and points of view. In an interview with Design Inquiry participant Sean Wilkinson, "Everyone was drawn to the hearth, and everyone cycled through that space, so I got to talk to a lot of folks in a really intimate manner. I had the best conversations of the week sitting on the granite wall and waving smoke out of my eyes. We covered all the good stuff: God, sex, food, art, money, work, school, design... and we called a lot of bullshit. People were really honest out there by the fire."

Often in collaboration knowing who you are working with, what their skills are as they related to design aids greatly in the process. (T.L. Allen, B.A.Chornyak, 2012) The cob and ground-oven both fashioned a convivial space because of the sites proximity to the barn space where people were gathering, cooking and eating. Both ovens, though only built by a select few, became an extension of the makeshift barn kitchen and as people tend to congregate around the kitchen, another gathering place was fashioned around the oven. This site created an unstructured time to ruminate on other participant's lectures and work. The conversations were not only on the lectures but family recipes, how to cook various foods, family history, religion, and the nature of design.


Figure 8, 9: Building and using the cob oven at Design Inquiry. Source: Chornyak 2013

CONCLUSION

All individuals have unique relationships with food. This relationship is contingent on numerous factors; some occurring because of physical chemistry and learned habits, others from cultural exposure or community history. Those relationships range in what choices they privilege or knowledge they have gathered through experience. Within that individuality food in its essence becomes a unifying element. No matter what an individual's relationship is with food the act of preparing and eating is universal.

Cooking is a creative, intuitive practice, and learning how to prepare food or design is the result of similar educational conditions. Students gather methods and processes in both activities through prototyping, experimentation, trial and error and critique. Through learning, an individual intuitively individualize methods, however, those methods are not often articulated or shared. This research looked at an approach to transform that intuitive knowledge into sharable methods to be used, contested or borrowed. It is with these methods that designers can begin to explain and share the design process in interdisciplinary working environments.

What this research has demonstrated is that food is so much more than a basic need for survival. The cooking tools constructed a shared space for conversation regarding the tool itself and methods for use, as well as more general topics. The food created was the thing that drew the group to the table and the act of cooking together built relationships and engendered trust. These feelings were generated through dialogue, both problem solving and conversational. Those who participated in Tasmeem and at Design Inquiry were from diverse professional backgrounds yet were able to have fruitful discussions and debates, establish working relationships throughout the conference and beyond.

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