A question of taste

Choosing to live sustainably comes down to your appetite. **Tim Waterman** takes a walk through the landscape of consumption and finds that what makes a city liveable and loveable is often an acquired taste

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Left: Jacques Tati's Monsieur Hulot in *Mon Oncle* comes face to face with sanitised, mechanised modernism in an automated kitchen. In one of the most sophisticated comedies ever made, Hulot moves uneasily through unfamiliar modernism, but crosses back with ease into his preferred milieu of the messy but liveable traditional town. This kitchen scene, where Hulot is thwarted by the 'machine for living', highlights the seemingly unbridgeable divide between tradition and modernity

The story of food weaves itself through our idea of human comfort and wellbeing, and is therefore at the heart of how we build and dwell. We want to live zestfully, build tastefully, and dwell sweetly and deliciously. We will know if the green city of the future has succeeded if it supports our very human aspiration to live deliciously forever. After all, sustainability is not just about our survival as a species, but also our ability to provide a good quality of life for our children's children's children. Supporting biodiversity, providing ecological services and ensuring a temperate climate are all part of this most savoury aspiration.

The question of taste is one that philosophers throughout history have regarded as too subjective, too shifting, too evanescent to grasp. Yet taste guides where we choose to live and how we choose to build. Ultimately, our tastes will determine whether we can design a sustainable future. The idea of taste in its largest, cultural sense cannot be divorced from our preferences for the flavours of food, and food is even more fundamental than shelter. So understanding taste seems vital if we are to understand how to shape appetites for sustainable places. Taste and place are intertwined, and it is the job of the designer to come to terms and work with all the flavours of a place.

A tasty future has not always been seen as the sustainable option. Modernism was often a love affair with the artificial and a celebration of the technocrat – design was a practical problem and a totalising vision. This became as much an underpinning theory for design as it did a moral position among modernists, which still prevails today.

The dehumanising and alienating tendencies of technocratic design are illustrated with enduring eloquence in films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* (1958). The list goes on with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), and is yet to run its course.

These tensions are still evident today, and the food and methods of eating portrayed in these films (Chaplin, for example, fed by a malfunctioning 'efficiency machine') show that the portrayal of weird, deracinated food is a visceral way of describing a tasteless place and time. It is revealing, too, that dystopian films almost always include bizarre, machinic eating as a way of getting the point across.

MODERN ARCHITECTURE was described as "tasteless" by Marco Frascari in his essay *Semiotica Ab Edendo (Taste in Architecture)*, but actually architecture strove to 'rise above' taste. However, in rising above taste, it also often rose beyond meaning – and meaning is essential to our lives. By striving for an international style, modernism sought to sidestep the whole issue of taste **/...**

by replacing it with rationalism. A sustainable future for our cities, though, is one that is not taste-less, but taste-full. The work of designing the green city is not about imposing one single set of educated tastes and appetites upon the world, but rather understanding, honouring, and sometimes managing, a wide range of tastes.

Good design, then, begins with the ability to envision scenarios; to think through patterns of everyday life in space in order to verify whether design solutions will work for people and the environment. Patterns of everyday use based around shopping, dining, growing, trading and sharing are all reflected in our spaces. Much has been written about understanding architecture and urbanism in terms of 'movement' or 'flows' and of 'typologies', but taste complicates this. Human flows and neighbourhood and building typologies are responsive to, and reflective of, human tastes, attitudes and appetites that may vary radically from one area – indeed, even one street – to the next.

My mental map of my neighbourhood, of London at large, and of the rest of the world that I have either visited or wish to visit, is constructed of complex routes between good meals, tasty drinks, and where to find the ingredients for good meals accompanied by tasty drinks. This is further complicated by innumerable calculations of price advantage and value, which can often skew trajectories through the city. Before we moved last year, my partner and I kept an allotment garden, so these navigations and calculations included such things as plants and seeds, soil and compost, and tools and techniques for feeding ourselves with our own care and labour.

The shape of the city often accommodates these movements. Sometimes because commerce answers demand, sometimes because planning and design anticipate them, and usually because urban patterns and associations have matured and developed over time and through culture. Restaurants tend to be grouped together in the city, for example, and they are usually further sorted by type, ethnicity and cost. Even supermarkets, technocratic wonders that they are, are often grouped together now, whether in their satellite sites alongside motorways or in city centres. A good city answers our appetites.

WHAT IMPELS MANY urban journeys is appetite, and what guides them or limits them is taste. Appetite connotes eagerness more than it does hunger, and the sense of the word also suggests a certain selectivity. But if one is really hungry, one will eat just about anything. If one has an appetite, it is generally an appetite for something in particular and the anticipation is a pleasurable one. To be hungry implies a lack, whereas to have an appetite implies abundance and choice. Design that only answers need and function cannot provide savour or happy expectation, instead it is concerned only with survival. Community by community, appetites differ, as do tastes, and at any economic level sustainable communities have a right to a delicious quality of life.

Because appetite and taste are both descriptors of our relationship with food, and because these terms describe so much of what motivates and guides people through the social and cultural realms of their lives, it stands to reason that understanding our relationship with food is a useful way to understand our relationship with the urban landscape. The construction of acquired taste, for example, is an important component of our social lives. Acquired taste is often part of social mobility or the result of aspirations.

It is the taste equivalent of 'working out' or 'reading up'. Urban spaces are often in themselves aspirational, and many of them are certainly acquired tastes. Though it is beautiful, how many of us would actually relish living in the splendid isolation of London's Mayfair? Clearly, it's an acquired taste, and a prestigious one, but it also serves to illustrate that most of us prefer to limit our aspirations within a certain comfort zone.

Designers may wish to refrain from stretching communities beyond their comfort zones; to give them more and better, while understanding that too much would just be 'putting on airs'. Most people want neighbourhoods that are more like comfort food than haute cuisine.

There are fundamental questions about how we design that revolve around the issue of taste. Why do we like what we like? What do clients or communities want – or, more importantly, what do they expect? Why is it that the general public so often finds what architects design distasteful? How can we design for both comfort and sustainability?

There are huge issues for the future: if our tastes don't change in many ways, we will not realise sustainable design. Little by little, we will need to change notions of taste, both within design and among the public, if we are to create a future city (and planet) that is both liveable and loveable. Let's pull our chairs up to the table and get stuck into a delicious conversation about making it happen. ●

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