



# Food in the Hood

*Debra Solomon: Gastrosexuals & More*

The socio-political ingredients that go into our food economy are sustaining a network of crossover creatives to come up with edible projects that use the tools of art, design and architecture to make an impact on local and global communities. The Dutch seem to have a particular handle on this trend, and Debra Solomon's doughy or bubbling experiments take utopia for a walk down reality street.

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Giant glass jars exploding with colour but neatly stacked in rows. Apple, sauerkraut, carrots; white handwriting on the jars explains the content but leaves the visitor to the City Eco Lab at the International Design Biennial in Saint-Étienne last November with questions. Lucky Mi Fortune Cooking showcased a working model of a community-based food system. 'The fermented vegetable demonstration is inspired by places in Asia where pickled vegetables are stored in beautiful ceramic vats in the public space, ready for when you need it,' says food fetishist Debra Solomon. 'Designing community food storage into our cities has enormous potential to reduce waste, shorten supply chains and enrich the community on a socio-cultural level.' Start imagining public food storage as part of urban master plans, how it could look (and smell) and what it would mean in terms of activity and focus for the community. In Europe, our back-up food supply is most often stored in trucks on the road. Supplies will last for only four days maximum. Our food is under lock and key and totally oil dependant. 'We need to change to flexible systems and create infrastructure that is resilient,' says Solomon. 'And we need to do it now. It's peak oil, peak copper, peak patience and peak money. I have a very

positive view of what the economic crash will do to our communities and our world.'

Before you start thinking Solomon is a sauer eco-activist, you have to realise design is her way, food is her tool and stimulation of local business is the goal. Designing a platform for communities to optimise their food chain as a business is the main idea behind Lucky Mi Fortune Cooking. In Rotterdam's multicultural Afrikaanderbuurt the ongoing project translates into a mobile snack platform that turns neighbourhood food flows into snacks. By connecting local food entrepreneurs, it is possible to transform this food flow by using under-used local cooking facilities. 'In my dream we would find a suitable cooking studio that could deal with the surplus material of the market and get a food flow going for all the surrounding shops. It would add a different kind of food snack and raise their profits. The baker produces dough, this kind, that kind, it doesn't matter to him. They're sold out at the end of the day anyway. The difference is in using the product made by a person near you instead of by some multinational. We should keep food around us. It's about developing your own economy.'

'As an experiment for Baby Bakery, the two-and-a-half year old daughter of a friend prepared lunch for me and her mother. We provided her with some dough and ingredients and then ignored her, did not tell her anything. Let her do her thing. She made two pizzas. You could totally sell those. Every neighbourhood has a crèche, every neighbourhood has a bakery there's no reason why this can't work out.'



**Bubbling Experiments**

For the last four or five years there's been a place in the design world for non-pretentious food projects like Recycled Food by 2012 Architects or Rest by Martijn Engelbregt. These people come from architecture, urban planning and design and see food as a platform. As Solomon sees it 'the future role of designers has to do with creating resilient systems, not with creating more things. This is not a time for industrial design. New platforms, new actors, new configurations are what we should design (...) People connections are going to make you feel rich, not the latest chair by Marcel Wanders. I really believe in extreme minimalism. Austerity is the new richesse.' As such, Solomon's Amsterdam apartment lacks furniture. It is filled though, with bubbling experiments in preserving and fermenting (a natural preservation process that creates lactic acid in sour foods) fruits and vegetables from her city based gardens into the Korean side dish Kimchi. One third of the year she lives in the French Languedoc, a different climate for growing food. California, where she was born is not home anymore. 'I grew up in my Jewish family where we grew our own food and where cooking was most important. I considered high level cooking as normal. It was never part of my professional life.'

The Internet was just coming into its own when Debra Solomon graduated in 1996. She started to work with communities online, imagining a utopian future. In The Living she was a real life avatar. 'I swim underwater with a laptop while chatting with viewers, inspired by worklurks who are always online and can be followed everywhere. It had to do with imagining a future that would now be quite normal.' Her food projects were more ambiguously received and sometimes ended in

questions like: 'Can you cater my event?' It was Recipes for Geese and People that proved pivotal and saw the conceptual artist using food in her work. Australian techno artist Natalie Jeremijenko knew about her food fetish and asked Solomon to do a culinary interface for Ooz, a zoo without cages where animals and people come together voluntarily. Her response to this social safari was food. '(...) I made 42 recipes for geese and people to enjoy together. The foods look really beautiful. Pasta di Larvea imitates a species of larvae that tries to camouflage itself with leaves and pebbles, now translated into cheese and vegetables on worm-like pasta. The carpaccio salad Vegetable Matter Underfoot visually references the trampled vegetation at the sides of ponds and lakes. It worked well, the geese came. After all the art projects I've done, the first things I learned in life are now part of my professional life. It's a complete accident.'

Cementing her Internet presence, Solomon launched the website culiblog.org in 2004 as a personal filing cabinet, a research hub to collect food bookmarks or admired work. Social networks have always influenced her work. 'People started to read culiblog, (...) and I decided food was the better way. I am still about the future and definitely about utopia, but now it is about real things like cooking.'

**Baby Bakery**

This reality is not ageist. In a crèche children learn to sit in a circle, potty train, do some things with clay and yarn. What if all the activities babies do are about gardening or baking? Instead of using their muscles modelling clay, let them make dough. The output of that crèche would be baked food. 'Wouldn't it be cool, the





bread is going to look like nothing you know, with a yarn in it maybe, but some of them will be edible and sellable. Why should you waste their activity? Baby Bakery will be part of Foodscape Masterplan in October in The Hague, where Solomon will describe 12 different typologies of urban agriculture that depend on a connection to cultural entities. 'I'll be mapping the area Schilderswijk searching for potential actors, needs, resources and typical land. I want to see if we can plug in these typologies to what will be beautiful, landscaped agriculture, connected to cultural and social institutions like crèches.'

The issue in these multicultural neighbourhoods is not simply low income, as is often assumed, but has more to do with the uprooting experience of immigration, which brings challenges that are different to those faced by the urban poor who are native to the Netherlands. 'The food entrepreneurs I work with turned out to be completely cosmopolitan. Maybe they were an engineer in Iraq or a land developer in Morocco; here they are a butcher. They have businesses in many countries, read three languages and are Internet adepts. Although right now they live in a not so glamorous neighbourhood, all their kids go to university. (...) It's a different poor than white poverty. The

problem in both Afrikaanderbuurt and Schilderswijk is brain drain. The children move on and away, not interested in the valuable knowledge of their parents or in taking over their businesses. They could be interested to pump up the volume of the thing their parents have already made. I spend my energy on developing multi-generational multi-layered businesses where someone with a marketing degree is valuable.' Another social institution to connect to is the playgrounds. 'Streetcorner youth are very useful people because they occupy an area. They have a vast network, which makes them ideal, but they need facilities. Instead of eliminating the locations where the youths hang out, they should have ovens. In this Kitchen Playground they could impress their girlfriends like a gastrosexual, a man who learns how to cook to seduce women. If you're selling drugs, you can certainly make focaccia.'

*Freehouse/Vakmanstad with architect Jeanne van Heeswijk and artist Dennis Kaspori can be visited in June 2009 in Rotterdam's Afrikaanderbuurt. Foodscape Masterplan including Baby Bakery and Kitchen Playground is set for October in The Hague's Schilderswijk.*

*www.culiblog.org  
www.therest.nl  
www.2012architecten.nl*