

Welcome to Food Design: *notes for after dinner conversation*

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This essay has the spirit of a collective invitation to think and take steps towards the construction of what we want Food Design to be for us, the first generation community working on the subject at an academic, professional, cultural and business level, in addition to a personal one. These four areas of action are complementary and necessarily interdependent, and speak of the multi-actor nature of Food Design. This paper is presented as a menu of topics, ideas and proposals open to discussion, written as personal thoughts rather than academic research. It is a putting the cards on the table with the pretension that the readers can take away something useful, although there are more questions than answers in this instance.

Starting with the name "Food Design", the following reflections follow. Is this the union, summary or intersection of two "issues" up to now separated? These two issues, what character do they have, are they of the same tenor, are they two fields of work, two knowledge areas, two topics, two what? From this inquiry arises the question: why do we need this new space or thought, and why does it appear now? As a consequence of the above questions, there are different options for writing the term, including: Food Design, food design, fooddesign, fooddesign, food+design, food-design, amongst others, each with varying degrees of differentiation and connotation, all can be valid according to their contexts and intentions.

Of course there is a caveat about the use of Anglicism "Food Design" in Spanish. On the one hand I have not found to date any term in Spanish that reflects as faithfully its meaning and connotative independence as the English term "food" (*alimento* is very technical, *comida* is very artisanal). On the other hand, even in English, the term Food Design is confusing and much discussed. It is common that for the general public, Food Design evokes rather aesthetic issues such as plating or food styling, understandable but wrong. But for now the term is useful to talk about what we intend, and as a better term arises, both in Spanish and English, it will be welcomed.

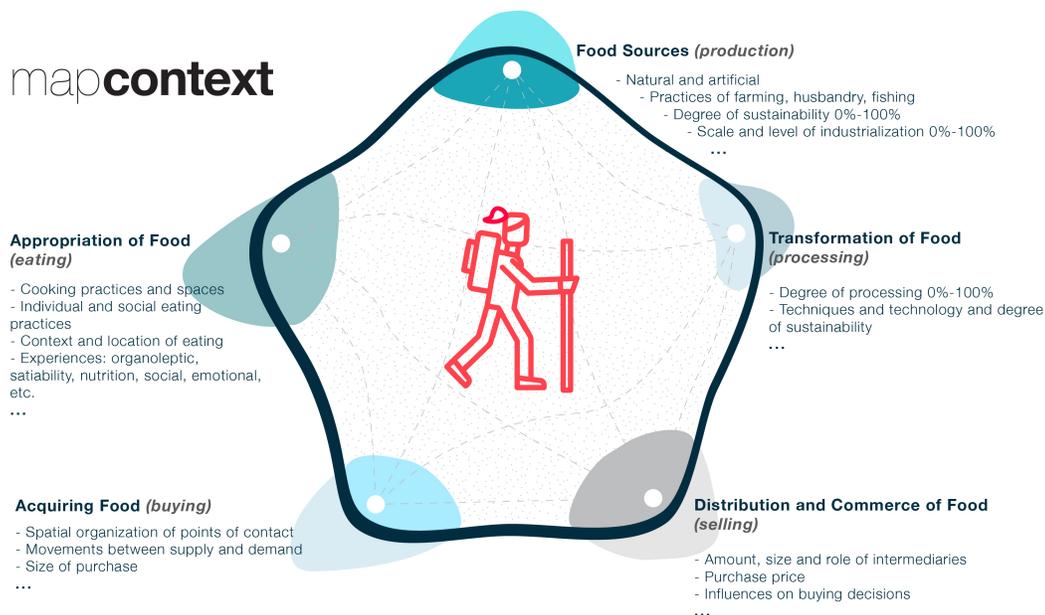


Fig. 1 - This diagram shows the 5 instances that exist in the food cycle: production-eating. It is possible to go from the first instance to the fifth directly (eating an apple directly from the branch of a tree), but generally we go through some or all of the intermediate instances. Many other external and internal considerations fit into this simplified scheme, including; geography / culture / market / technology / climate / policies / leftovers / rubbish / post and pre cycles, but what is significant about this scheme is its intent to recognize and dimension the whole context, the "food universe".

However, the working definition proposed here for Food Design (definition which forms the tannest for thinking and action of the Latin American Food Design Network) is that it includes any deliberate **action** that **improves** our **relationship** with food in the most diverse senses and instances, both individually and collectively. These actions can refer to the edible product or material itself, as well as to its context, experiences, processes, technologies, practices, environments and systems. More than categories, these are the recognition of the scope of food in all its existence. The intention of this definition is to frame a perspective and attitude based on a critical and propositive thinking. The three key words in this definition are: action, improvement and relationship.

Going step by step, the word **action** is characteristic of design, and is understood as a transformation oriented response to problem solving. This differentiates it from Food Studies, a field very close to, but not dedicated to implementing solutions directly.

The word **improvement** implies a value judgment, from which each one has to take responsibility both personally and ethically. Its presence in the definition seeks to transform our conscience and capacities to want and to be able to improve the food situations that arise. To propose that a field of action work to

improve something may sound logical and necessary in certain contexts (health for example), but can often be relativized and questioned regarding what are and who puts the measurement parameters? Anyway, since food is a totally vital aspect of our lives, it is easy to defend this position. In this sense questions arise along the lines of whether "designing a new junk product for a fast food chain is Food Design, yes or no?" Everything depends on the concept of Food Design that we are talking about, so the question it seems to be more important than the answer.

Finally, the word **relationship** in the definition is the most unusual, as it puts the focus on our interaction and feeling with food, adding yet another layer to the already complex definition of Food Design. This posture implies that however "perfect" a product, space, system, practice, etc. can be, if we do not relate happily and positively with food, there is no use improving the aspects outside of ourselves. Conversely, we can have a very good relationship with food, even without having everything perfect that is external to us. At the heart of this question is the issue of "what is a good relationship with food and eating?" The clearest answer could be: that food does not become a theme or issue, that it stays naturalized, that we do not obsess for or against, that we simply respect and enjoy it.

A relevant example in this direction is the "labeling" and the movement that has been built in order to have access (rightfully so) to complete and reliable information about what we are consuming. While it is an absolutely logical goal in itself, it is also a double-edged sword in the following sense. Taken to the extreme, "good" labeling practices would have not only the contents of the product, with its corresponding nutritional values, but a battery of warnings about allergenic inputs, provenances, expirations, productive processes, fair trade, etc. etc. The result would be an overwhelming amount of information, further removing us from what would be a more natural and trusting relationship with food. Of course this implies faith in the product / producer, and to have an intuitive and naturalized knowledge of what we like and is good for us.

The latter talks about a good relationship with food, being able to choose products easily without having to read the small print on every thing we eat. In short, thinking about having a better relationship with food is a substantially different approach and attitude compared to focusing only on the aspects external to us. A better relationship with food leads us to better connect with our bodies, tastes and health, in addition to connecting with the environment where food is produced and the culture and practices where we eat. I hope this helps to clarify the full definition proposed here for Food Design.

From this definition, Food Design is understood as a complex and comprehensive platform to put into perspective all the knowledge, actors and considerations

involved with food and our relationship with it. In this sense, Food Design is comparable to the phenomenon of ecology when it emerged half a century ago, rising from the need to see the whole, integrating fragmented knowledge in a transdisciplinary, multi-actor and participatory way, in a global context, in a systemic manner. In this transversality Food Design today offers more questions than answers, and changes the idea of consumer and user to food decider, empowering us to improve our relationship with food as people on a personal level and/or through our work, if it is in fact food related.

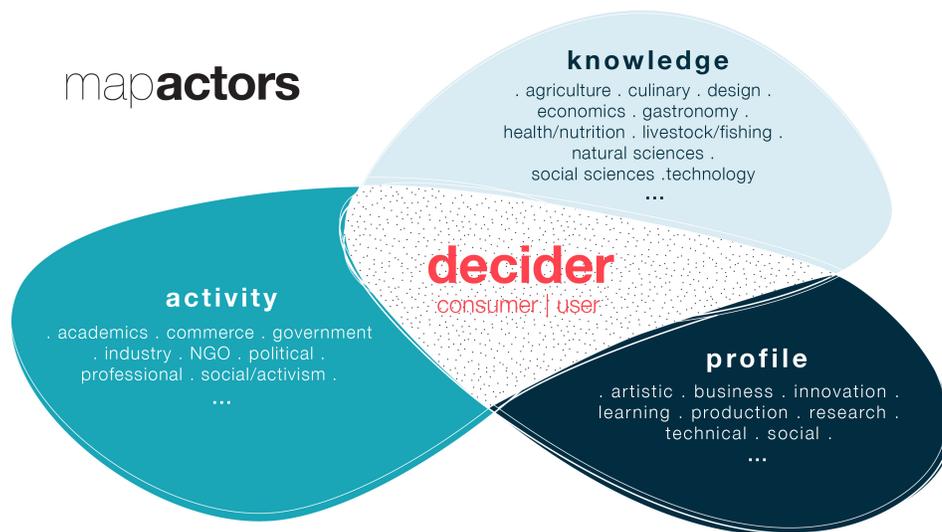


Fig. 2 - This diagram breaks down the complexity of interactions that exist at different levels between the different actors that influence and operate in our universe of food. Special mention is made of the three types of actors identified (knowledge, profile and activity) and the three versions of "us" that may co-exist (consumer and user: decision maker).

The idea of recognizing ourselves as decision makers in our relationship with food opens up a wide range of opportunities to rethink who we are and who we want to be in relation to food and eating. The meaning given to the term "decision maker" goes beyond buying decisions, public policies and personal attitudes. The broad sense of recognizing ourselves as decision-makers leads us to break down and understand the many decisions we make every day, from the smallest details to the greatest positions and paradigms of which we are part, knowingly or not, but that we necessarily exercise since we decided to have a glass of water or make and eat a barbeque. What happens is that the vast majority of decisions we put on autopilot in order to be able to function in the day to day, but it is possible to make a pause and understand the different points of contact we have with food in its various facets and scales. And maybe this can lead to change or not, but at

least the decisions we make are by choice and not by inertia. It is also true that micro-decisions are not necessarily isolated from each other, and the sum of them leads to greater implications.

This also implies making visible a large number of factors that are generally hidden, deliberately or not, but which are not literally or symbolically readable to us. The idea of "traceability" is a step in this direction, extendable to many other paths, such as the cost chain, carbon footprint, waste incidence, etc. This place of decision also implies the demystification of scientific, nutritional and cultural beliefs, as well as the recognition of our own phobias, fantasies, obsessions and other peculiarities that each one carries inside.

map**themes**



Fig. 3 - This image illustrates the wide diversity of topics that Food Design considers. Although each one has its own point of reference, Food Design puts them together on the table, seeking to understand the magnitude and complexity of the whole and how they are related to each other.

As for the specificities that make Food Design not be an "abstract or optional theme," the following realities are recognized in relation to food and eating:

- it is the raw material of our physical, biological and physiological life as living organisms, being literally **vital** to our existence, growth and continuity.
- it is part of **our instincts** at various levels, which manifests itself in various ways, such as hunger reflects, salivation and other bodily reactions.
- it is the act of ingesting organic matter that **becomes our own body**, so it is not only "fuel", it is also "production and growth".
- it is a process of chemical and biological transformation **as incredible as is concrete**, and is not usually something on which we reflect too much about.

- it is a very **intimate and personal** event, putting external matter in our mouths and ingesting it.
- it is an **intrinsic part of our daily lives**: thinking, planning, executing and enjoying eating.
- it has a **direct impact on our health**, for better or worse, implying ethical and moral considerations on a personal and social level, beyond legal, political and cultural aspects.
- it involves a **multitude and diversity of actors**, sectors, decision makers, influencers, etc.
- it involves **chains of value and transformation** of enormous dimensions at industrial, commercial and economic level, so large and complex that they are almost immeasurable.
- it organizes our **individual and collective identity** as well as derived cultural practices.

Putting in global perspective the professional areas and traditional knowledge that constitute our food universe, it is possible to mention four areas and cultures of knowledge generally fragmented from each other, and clearly installed in our society and economy. While this is an over simplification of the great complexity and size of our food universe, it is useful to see them in its most immediate and synthetic expression:

food sciences: biology, agriculture, technology, engineering, chemistry, nutrition...

food studies: gastronomy, sociology, anthropology, geography, psychology ...

food services: culinary arts, hospitality, restaurantism, institutional gastronomy ...

design services: product, packaging, POP, marketing, advertising ...

But, how do we articulate and integrate all the knowledge and practices that for decades and centuries has been developing in isolation? How is this global way of thinking and action rebuilt? Each of the areas that Food Design touches; the academic, professional, cultural, business and also the personal, seem to have different challenges, but the interaction and integration of all of them depends on the success of continuing to build a Food Design as proposed here.

On the other hand, and simultaneously to these divisions of trades or actions, it is possible to recognize the social, and by extension, political and institutional constructions of the entities that organize and/or regulate our food activities. At the government level, it is striking that in the majority, if not all countries of the world, the highest ranks that affect food refer to agricultural activity, sometimes unified with livestock and/or fisheries, but not to the food itself, rather to the production of its raw material. A notable exception is that during the Second

World War in England the Ministry of Food was created in response to the famine that was lurking at the time.

The point here is that food and eating is not usually nor easily taken as an area to take care of, it is taken for granted perhaps because it is so omnipresent, so ungraspable and immeasurable. It is also remarkable that this failure only reinforces the separation so counterproductive in the Western hemisphere between food and health, treated as "independent entities." We already see the consequences that this separation produces.

In this context, a relevant fact is that the first two causes of mortality in the USA are food based. These include certain types of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes, the latter though not one of the most deadly causes today, yet it is a major cause in a decrease in the quality of life of more and more people worldwide. Another illustrative fact is that Mexico holds the first place in the world ranking of the obesity epidemic, a data so surprising knowing that it is also a country and region of the world with high levels of hunger and basic food shortages.

To put Food Design in perspective at the international level, there are several distinct focuses, mainly:

The strategic and systemic: oriented at improving the quality of life with social interest, very present in Latin America given the particularities of being an agro-exporting continent and with many challenges still unresolved regarding basic human needs. Perhaps it also relates to the fact that it is a culture that prioritizes socialization, therefore recognizing the socializing role of food and eating (commensality). Latin America is considered a territory of great human, geographical and biological diversity, a depository of an important cultural capital for Food Design. It is one of the main regions of the world producing food. In turn, Latin American design has achieved significant institutional development with impacts in the fields of cultural industries, market and solidarity. All this contributes to the direction that Food Design is taking towards the resolution of problems as indicated above.

Product and industry: oriented to the market of consumption of industrialized food by means of technological innovations and improvements in the productive processes, a characteristic of A.S.A.P. where Food Design begins to generate interest and development as a concrete profession.

Artistic and gastronomic: personal and experiential, very present in Europe, where the term Food Design is born by designers interested in the sensitivity and influence of a highly developed gastronomic culture. There is focus on food as a

performance and symbolic bearer, blurring the boundaries between design, art and the culinary arts.

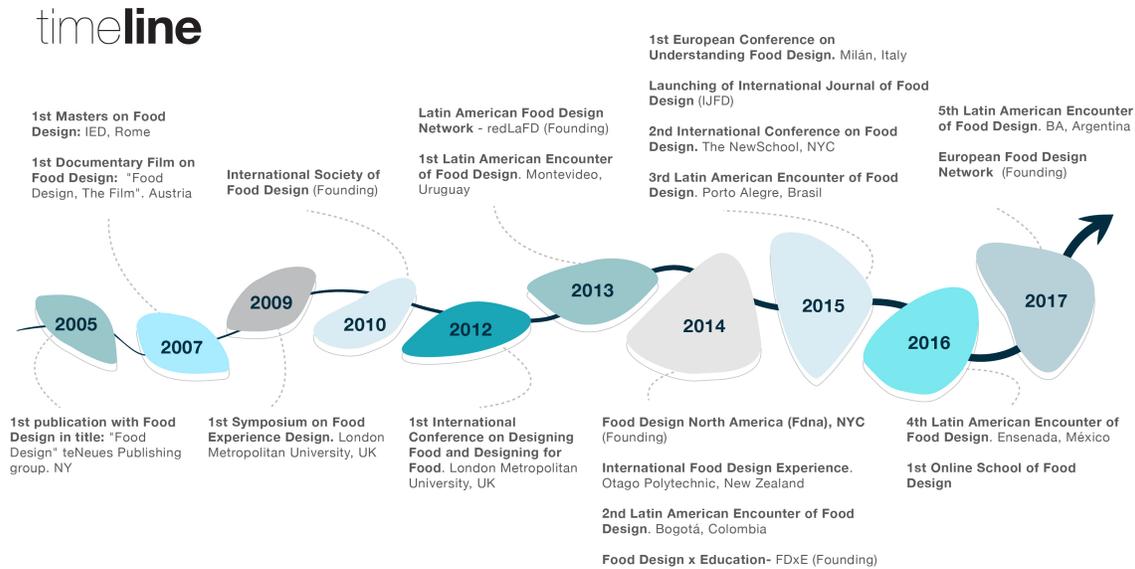


Fig. 4- Here is a synthesis of the most relevant events of the last twenty years that have given visibility to Food Design at a global level.

Considering the relatively short time that Food Design has been put on the table this transdisciplinary approaching has resulted in great interest from many areas and actors, justifying the imperative need to take its development and growth further.

As a closing comment I leave a summary expressing my understanding about Food Design: *"this is a vision built to move towards a better quality of life in relation to food and everything that it implies, from the basic and vital that our connection is to it, to the innumerable implications inherent in food and eating, such as health, culture, identity, production, economics, and so on. This definition goes beyond the intersection between food and design since we are at a critical moment worldwide with respect to many basic issues of life, especially food and food related, where current paradigms collapse alone and beg for new paths. Food Design invites us to put food into perspective and empower ourselves to connect, see and understand what is happening around us, starting with ourselves with the desired changes, extendable to the community, social, political and other areas where food is present."*

Many issues remain to be developed, which will be done in steps, but to further open the way from this essay I offer the following enumeration as a triggering of issues and questions of to follow. With this list (index) in hand, the reader can have a more complete idea of the points of interest in the global conversation of

Food Design that have not been touched upon in this essay but are on the author's mind.

Index for an Atlas of Food Design (work in progress)

FD Lexicon: proposes the construction of a vocabulary proper to food design, adding necessary words, disambiguating others whose meaning has been lost or distorted, etc.

Mouth Gastronomy: when the "cooking" takes place in the mouth by deliberate and sequential steps.

Towards a Critical Gastronomy: one can speak of the act and gastronomic situation as the construction of cooking / eating as something that we assemble based on steps and gestures. *This concept is borrowed from didactics.*

Wide Cousine: new dimension of the edible stage, putting the subject cook / diner in focus, looking around, not so much up in the sense of "haute or high cuisine".

When / where does the body eat? inquiry into the different instances and transformations that food goes through once it reaches the table, starting with the plate, hand, mouth, esophagus, stomach, small intestine and finally feces / urine. It puts into play the different places that the food inhabits and what happens once we come into direct contact. *As a footnote, a friend of mine says her young son eats in thirds: one-third goes to the floor, another third to the cloth and final third in his mouth.*

Ways to eat: a review of benchmarks to understand ourselves as diners. This considers body postures, ergonomics and interfaces with (cutlery), etc.

Eating Instances: connect with the before, during and after the meal as a continuum difficult to visualize given the atomization of our interaction with eating. Go beyond consumption itself and the oral experience, understanding what happens before and after, both in our organism and with the chain of actions that occur continuously in order to perpetually repeat the eternal cycle of production, processing, distribution, acquisition, appropriation of food and eating.

Nutritional paradigms: what are, and based on what, so many versions of nutritional recommendations and diets, who to believe, and ultimately, what to do with so much data and contradictions?

Recipes: how to create new and better resources to guide food preparations from state A to state B? On one side are cookbooks based on "recipes", starting from a list of ingredients with stipulated amounts, followed by processing processes and methodologies, to reach the final version. On the other hand are the traditions (vernacular cuisine) that are transmitted from generation to generation. It is possible to rethink our approach to food production based on strategies, similar to what is done with the design (briefs, situations, desired outcome, etc.).

Categorizing food and eating: a look at the different categories, constructions and conventions that we use to organize the following issues: the menu, the refrigerator, the table setting, supermarket aisles, catalogs of food fairs and gastronomic events, etc.

The menu: seeing the menu as interface and link between the supply, demand, desire and mutual expectations of the cook and diner. This involves new scenarios and formats for food services away from home.

Animals: their food and eating, be it our pets or animals for human consumption, how is their relationship with food, and what implications does our values and actions have on that?

Children's food: in general sweets and junk food is treated as a prize, are we infantilizing the adult food, or is this a wrong construction and projection?

The energies or waves of food: how to measure and read the good or bad "vibes" that is transmitted or transferred in the food (like love)? *What do we make of the delivery vehicles, bike or motorcycle, and the often chaotic journey the food makes to reach our doorstep?*

My favorite food: is it a Disney Land aspiration or fantasy, is it something that arises naturally, what is there behind this belief?

Transfer of knowledge: what happens with the traditions and their adaptations in the new familiar and cultural contexts? Education of or through food?

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