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Review: Food & Architecture

James Edward Malin

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Samantha L. Martin-McAuliffe (editor). *Food and Architecture: At the Table*. Bloomsbury Press, 2016. xx, 278 pp.

Samantha L. Martin-McAuliffe's edited *Food and Architecture: At the Table* lays the foundation for a new way of interconnecting these two disciplines. Although architecture has at times appeared as an aspect of food scholarship (usually in discussing kitchens or restaurants), these thirteen original essays show a wider relationship through the modalities of regionalism, sustainability, craft, and authenticity. These four themes are split into their own chapters, and are each introduced by short explanatory statements. These assertions, together with her preface and Ken Albala's and Lisa Cooperman's introductory essay, expose the work's nonlinear framework for conjoining two disparate disciplines within the same binding. The four themes by no means exhaust the connections between the two fields, but invite further scholarship.

Within each chapter is a further nonlinear structure joining the essays together. Just as the themes were chosen for their interpretability, the essays "clarify points of connection, analogies and also, importantly, questions of difference," not in a definitive interpretation, but in a "spectrum of meaning" (xix). Part One considers regionalism as a function of materiality, origin, practice, and heritage through essays on terroir, Vermont maple syrup, Greek traditions of pig slaughter, and Dublin's urban history. Part Two discusses sustainability in terms of sustenance and social equity in home and restaurant kitchens, institutional dining settings, and Irish literature. In discussing craft, Part Three touches upon technology, form, and temporality, pitting cheese making and bread baking against construction sites and an architectural design photo essay. The final essays discuss the pervasive question of postmodern authenticity in American food, furniture, and fascist traditions.

Food and Architecture: At the Table continues a scholarly legacy of connecting food and architecture that goes as far back as Fernand Braudel's seminal social history *The Structures of Everyday Life* (1979). Though marking both as "parahistoric languages," Braudel saw food and architecture as foundational to history of the everyday.^[1] *The Structures of Everyday Life* includes two chapters on food and one on architecture, but does not discuss connections between them. More recently, scholarly publications have emerged that show how food culture interconnects with its setting. Restaurant histories, such as Paul Freedman's *Ten Restaurants that Changed America* (2016), or Rebecca Spang's *The Invention of the Restaurant* (2001) have widely explored eating environments. Feminist inspired kitchen histories, like Elizabeth Cromley's *The Food Axis* (2010), have drawn even closer, showing how domesticity and cooking has shaped residential architecture. Even trade journals, such as *Architectural Design's* thematic *Food + Architecture* (2002) and *Food + the City* (2005), have shown interest in the undeniable interconnectedness of these two worlds.

By discussing the two worlds thematically, Martin-McAuliffe, however, succeeds in doing so in a different way. Her work posits a semiotic relationship, as “practitioners from both food studies and architecture employ similar lexica to describe and characterize their work,” (xiii) prompting the reader to wonder if the reason why we use similar vocabulary to discuss food and architecture is simply a matter of coincidence, or if there is some more fundamental connection to explore. In the field of linguistics, Roland Barthes observed that creating meaning by associating a meal with a “set of foodstuffs which have affinities or difference” is similar to the style of meaning we create when associating architecture to “variations in style of a single element or in a building.”^[2] Martin-McAuliffe plays off the associations we have with food and architecture respectively (what Barthes calls “System meaning”) by grouping them together. None of the chapters’ themes have an exclusive discrete or synecdochic relationship with gastronomic or architectural contexts. Instead, Martin-McAuliffe asks the reader to connect how regionalism, sustainability, craft, and authenticity permute in both food and architecture.

Although Martin-McAuliffe’s System-style organization succeeds in challenging traditional differences between the two disciplines, her own explanations are somewhat lacking. For instance, she explains why Amy Trubek’s essay about quality and sensory mapping of maple syrup belongs within the regionalism chapter due to:

“the description of the sugarhouses in Vermont [whose] simple wooden structures directly respond to the process of turning sap into syrup, and yet they are also so much more: **for sugarmakers, they confirm a connectedness to place**” (19).

True, the reader may be able to draw this connection for themselves, perhaps in the importance of such a system of regional industry, but Martin-McAuliffe doesn’t discuss the content of the work itself.

This lack of proper explanation makes it hard for further scholarship to respond to the work; if her reason for including the essay greatly differs from that of the essay itself, to which thesis should the reader respond? Furthermore, there is little explanation of her curatorial choices in chapter themes, making the categorization of the essays unclear. Even if the themes were chosen at random, the book would benefit from an explanation. Without understanding the organization of information it is difficult to know how to proceed in this subfield. Ultimately *Food and Architecture: At the Table* creates a novel grouping of vantages on this subject from which new insight can be achieved, but leaves much work still to do.

Biography

James Edward Malin is a Science Reference Associate at NYU Bobst Library's Coles Science Center and a Masters Student earning a dual MA/MSLIS degree in Food Studies and Library and Information Science at the Steinhardt School of of Culture, Education, and Human Development and Long Island University's Palmer School of Library and Information Science. James also holds the position of Secretary for NYU's Food Studies Graduate Society. His academic interests lie in the role of information and scholarship in Food Studies, and the connection of science, engineering, and architecture in Food History.

Citations

1. Fernand Braudel. *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*. Cambridge: Harper & Row: 1981. [↗](#)
2. Roland Barthes. *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, 63. [↗](#)