# Food Systems, Design, Things: reading Heidegger

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"No design project, no interaction with things, is free of judgment. Food design could become a space of possibilities and empowerment for those Latin American communities whose voices have been silenced or distorted."

As the world is shaken by the far-reaching consequences of COVID-19, greater attention has been drawn to the structures and the flaws in our food systems and how they affect our daily lives. Food shortages, price increases, lack of resilience, and waste, have hit the whole American continent, revealing many shortcomings in the way we produce, distribute, and consume food. Many of us have shared the unsettling feeling that something we felt was solid and secure is really not so. We seem to realize how important something is (in this case the food system, an invisible infrastructure made of very tangible things) only when it does not work for us any longer, when we expect something from it and we don't get it.

Disruption generates justified anxieties, but can also offer real opportunities to implement changes that now appear urgent. Design can provide important and timely contributions to food systems in terms of systemic thinking, innovation, and interventions (Parasecoli, 2016). These have all been central aspects in the development of food design in Latin America,

which since its inception has engaged with urgent issues such as glaring inequalities, lack of access to nutritious food, the cultural reproduction of indigenous foodways, the desire to safeguard and promote the dazzling agrobiodiversity of the region, as well as the need to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience. Nowhere like in Latin America is correct to state that design is always future-making, as it projects itself into modeling, prototyping, and testing (Parasecoli & Halawa, 2019; Yelavich & Adams, 2014). Nevertheless, design does not emerge in a void: designing never starts from scratch but it always to redesign, taking stock of what is around us and taking it from there (Latour, 2008, p. 5). As Arturo Escobar observed, "we design our world, and our world designs us back—in short, design designs" (Escobar, 2018, p.4). Design forces us to acknowledge the tangible remnants of the past, how they influence us but also how they allow us to express our creativity. This is particular important in Latin American countries where the past means pride, culture, and tradition, but also trauma, war, and economic hardship.

Messeni Petruzzelli and Savino argue the use and recombination of tangible "old components" and traditions to achieve innovation in food are valid because such elements are reliable, have unexploited potential, and respond to consumers' desire to rediscover the past and make up for a sense of loss of identity (Messeni Petruzzelli & Savino, 2012). What does this mean in the Latin America food worlds, where so many components are connected with colonization, the destruction of indigenous cultures, and the forcible introduction of Old World crops and animals? At the same time, the contemporary culinary landscapes are rich of contributions from native cultures, enslaved peoples, and immigrants, even if these elements are not always in harmony. Food design can't avoid temporality, the human experience of time: we inevitably try to understand the past to evaluate it and to make sense of the present, all while selecting what we think important or necessary to build the future. Temporality is central to our interactions with the world. As philosopher Robert Valgenti (2020) observes, "design does not begin ex nihilo, but always in conversation with its own past such that its future possibilities are the result of past possibilities that have been actualized and that constitute the current reality or state of things."

Design is always steeped in context and circumstances, in the world as it already exists out there, in the way it has been shaped through history and time. If we used design approaches to plan any intervention in the food systems, it would be impossible to ignore what has already been done and what is already there, both in positive and in negative. Any change we may want to introduce has to necessarily take into consideration the raise of productivity and the expectations of always growing numbers of consumers, the recurrent economic crises, the expansion of intensive industrialized agriculture, deforestation and environmental damage, climate change, and the financialization of food commodities, just to mention some of the issues that have determined the recent development of food systems in various Latin American countries. How can we transform these elements into building blocks, or at least stepping stones, toward change?

Design can provide useful methodological and practical inputs as it is still rooted in the materiality of things and spaces, while it has also been shifting its focus towards practices, services, and systems (which nevertheless still need things to take place). Design also focuses on user experiences, showing how the material qualities of things have an impact, both practical and affective, on us. Things can make us feel happy, frustrated, or sad, depending on how they feel in our hands, how easy they are to use, how intuitive their functions and affordances are. Also the sensory characteristics of what we eat affects us: a flavor can excite us or bore us, a texture can feel consoling or upsetting (Fehérváry, 2013). Our awareness of ourselves as existing in space and as moving bodies (technically called proprioception and kinesis) also contribute to the sensory experience. Kneading dough to bake bread, it turns out, has felt comforting for many of us stuck at home during the pandemic. Think about the gestures necessary to enjoy the accoutrements for yerba mate, clay pots, tortilla presses, comales… The use of traditional objects and the routine movements connected with them can provide a sense of rootedness and embeddedness, while in other cases can generate unpleasant emotions of conflict, exploitation, or violence. The affective impact of objects and constructed environments extend to the trappings of modernity. The colors, the shape, and the sounds of industrial food wrappings may increase our desire to buy an item. The lighting and the temperature in the aisles of a supermarket can influence our shopping behavior and affect our moods. The rough surfaces of wood and stone in an organic food store can convey feelings of authenticity.

The picture accompanying this article is my own kitchen. Those things give me all sort of feelings: the reassuring weight of the Dutch oven and its bright color; the minute details of my tiny stove-top coffee pot and it's classic design that brings back tons of memories, this time tinged in an unusual red; the funny shape and the ridges of the shiny, larger coffee pot; the warm light from under the cabinets... and all that before I even start using those objects. Designers - as well as marketers and manufacturers - are well aware of these sensory, gut-level, emotional relationships with things, and they often leverage them to have us buy more (Norman, 2013). Yet, existing things can be repurposed, reused, or just used creatively in ways that can improve our lives.

As design processes involve constant interactions between designers, engineers, marketers, consumers, and critics, they need to be understood and assessed as part of broader design cultures, that is to say the messy networks of shifting and evolving connections between those human actors, design as theory and practice, production, the infrastructure that supports it, and everyday life in its cultural and material aspects (Julier et al., 2019). Such design cultures vary from place to place, which makes understanding local contexts fundamental. Latin American design

cultures – and specifically food design culture – are necessarily different from the ones in North America and Europe. Design can help us operate in assemblages that are not only made up of human actors, plants, animals, microorganisms, and soils, but also of objects, places, and the more or less visible flows of energy and materials that remind us of the thingliness of the reality we are part of. We cannot just conjure food on supermarket shelves and on our tables.

Nevertheless, at times we end up forgetting that we ultimately deal with materiality and its resistance or pliancy to our actions and goals: in other words, we inevitably bump into the (often stubborn) "thingliness" of things.This relatively scarce emphasis on materiality is particularly surprising because we often end up treating living communities of beings (yeasts, humus, a meadow, a bank of sardines, or a herd of cows) as if they were inanimate things that are valuable to us only for their practical and economic ignoring their rich context of meanings and relations. When it comes to food, are our preferences and choices exclusively ours, or are they rather shaped by circumstances, personal history, cultural context, material environment, family and communal habits, and broader ideas and values?

These considerations prompted me to read Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1966). I will be quoting the text frequently and extensively, as I think it is necessary to really soak in the author's language to get his line of thought and possibly understand what he meant. At the same time, it is also necessary to interpret his work while remaining fully conscious of its controversial history, including his involvement with Nazism. I am definitely not the first one reading his work to reflect on design. Some of his later essays, such as *Building, Dwelling, Thinking; The Origin of the Work of Art;* and *The Question Concerning Technology* have widely been discussed in art, architecture, and design theory.

*Being and Time* is mainly a reflection on what "being" is in general: not just the individual beings we may encounter, but the being of these beings. What does being mean to us, as a particular kind of beings who can ask themselves such questions? And how do we understand the way we ask those questions and investigate reality? In the book, such way of being (our way of being as humans) is called "Da-sein," which means "being there" in German (Heidegger creates his own vocabulary or gives new meaning to existing words, which complicates the reading). Not as abstract as one may think, as the "there" of being, as Valgenti suggests, seems to refer to "the fact of being enmeshed and interrelated from the start and never simply having objects simply present before us (as a scientific experiment would love to have them)" (Valgenti, 2020).

Some of the arguments in *Being and Time*, in particular the analysis of our specific way of being-in-the-world and interacting with reality within time, deserve attention because they can shed light on the complicated relationship between food, design, and the material aspects of our lives. In fact, Heidegger's attention to "average everydayness," its modalities, and its structures as the key horizon to understand the meaning of our own being can stimulate out interest in the things, the practices, the affects, and the ideas that define our relationship to food, from our sensory experiences to our links with the global food system.

A good place to start is temporality, which we have mentioned above. Right at the beginning of the book, Heidegger states that "time must be brought to light and genuinely grasped as the horizon of every understanding and interpretation of being" (15). In other words, we cannot take ourselves out of time, which determines who and what we are. In fact, Heidegger continues "Da-sein always is as and 'what' it already was. Whether explicitly or not, it is its past…. Da-sein 'is' its past in the manner of its being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion 'occurs' out of its future" (17). What we are, is how we got here. Of course, we are free to relate to our past to build on it, refuse it, or pick the bits and pieces we can reassemble to determine who we are now and, above all, who we will be. Who we are as food producers, consumers, and eaters is the result of connections between who we are and were as individuals (our stories, our choices, our preferences) and what the communities and societies of which we are part are and were. In particular, food culture is heavily influenced by the objects, practices, and discourses that are actively selected and reproduced as tradition. As Heidegger explains, "Da-sein can discover, preserve, and explicitly pursue tradition. The discovery of tradition and the disclosure of what it 'transmits,' and how it does this, can be undertaken as a task in its own right. Da-sein thus assumes the mode of being that involves historical inquiry and research" (18). In other words, we live in a world that we already find there, that has a past and determines our present opportunities to shape our future. What we do with these opportunities or hindrances is up to us. This awareness cannot but influence our relationship with the food system at various scales, from our shopping behaviors when we buy food online to the decision of purchasing Fair Trade coffee from a specific place in a specific country, which indirectly puts us in touch with a specific community of people. This world presents itself as something we can develop our own projects in, something we can intervene on. Something we can design.

Temporality, however, does not play out itself in abstract, but in the world in which we find ourselves. The German philosopher argues that "Da-sein understands itself and being in general in terms of the 'world'" (19). We cannot separate ourselves from what is around us, which can be interpreted and experienced as the "world," both in its present aspects and as tradition, that is to say as the tangible traces of history that we choose to reproduce and give particular value to.

Because of our finding ourselves in the world, Heidegger argues that our existential attitude is necessarily one of "care" (37), in the sense that we develop ourselves in our handling and producing things. By making, we associate ourselves with the world that things constitute. The German philosopher believes that for humans "being toward the world is essentially taking care" (53).

Such interactions are at first based on possible uses (and affordances, designers would observe), as Da-sein is "initially economical and practical to a large extent." "A useful thing is essentially 'something in order to'" and a reference to other useful things, which in their totality constitute "material for living" (64) and are "discovered before the individual useful thing" (64).

Here we find central elements of design as a specific way of interacting with the world. Firstly, the relationship with things is an active one, geared toward making and transforming the world. Secondly, it is a relationship of care.Thirdly, the interaction does not happen with things in isolation; even when we deal with a single thing, we are actually dealing with their totality. This is a relevant insight towards a systemic approach in design (and food design), which is also very important to understand food systems and how we can operate in them. For designers, creating a new plate or a built environment like a store should mean connecting the job at hand with its context and the envi-ronment at large, thinking about the possible unintended consequence of their choices on other components of "the world." Intervening on one element can have wide repercussions on other elements connected to it.

Even before distinguishing single things, we "dwell near" them, we are "familiar with" them as they are objectively present together, in their messy totality (51). Based on this inherent connection with the world, we develop our own "being-in-space," which does not refer simply to our physical body as just one other thing in the world, next to other things, but a fundamental characteristic of our being. "Being-in is not a 'quality' which Da-sein sometimes has and sometimes does not have, without which it could be just as well as it could with it… Da-sein is never 'initially' a sort of being which is free from being-in, but which at times is in the mood to take up a 'relation' to the world." Because of this basic participation in the world, "Da-sein can explicitly discover beings which it encounters in the environment, can know about them, can avail itself of them, can have 'world'." The world, "which does not have a primarily 'spatial' meaning" (62) is "a characteristic of Dasein itself" (60). We do not exist outside the world and our being part of it. Actually we cannot under-stand ourselves if we do not embrace this encounter with the things we are not, which are different from us but whose presence contribute to who we are. "Being-in-the-world, as taking care of things, is taken in by the world which it take care of" (57).

We realize that initially we take care of individual things because of their "handiness" and their "what-for," that is to say their usefulness and usability. Actually, things become present to us as individual objects when we cannot use them any longer because they are damaged, missing, or get in our way. As we noticed at the beginning of this reflection, we become aware of things when they do not work, when they are not convenient any longer, or when they actually turn into problems. Also, we learn about the totality and complexity of this system of relations (what Heidegger calls "worldiness") through singular interactions with individual things, rather than by acquiring abstract knowledge. In the case of our contemporary food systems, it takes more than reading or listening to fully understand its problems and their significance for us. We are dealing with a specific kind of knowledge that for Heidegger is "being in and toward the world" (56). Our relationship with the environment, with "a context of things at hand," is then not an add-on to our being but a vital part of our being humans.

However, Heidegger makes clear he is not discussing knowledge as a theoretical relation between a subject and an object. "When we just look at things 'theoretically,' we lack an understanding of handiness" (65). He then adds: "This familiarity with the world does not necessarily require a theoretical transparency of the relations constituting the world as world" (81). Our initial association with things is through work and making, an existential attitude that not only considers specific goals, but relates to the totality of useful things as the horizon of our being.

This sort of knowledge problematizes a neat separation between subject and objects, and takes away the primacy of theoretical knowledge: emotional, practical, applied, embodied types of knowledges, as well as craft, constitute the original interactions between humans and the world. "Handiness is not grasped theoretically… What everyday association is initially busy with is not tools themselves, but the work" (65). We start knowing by making, by encountering the usability of things. "The forest is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock, the river iswater power, the wind is wind 'in the sails'" (66).

This revaluation of practice-based knowledge immediately puts the wisdom of generations of cooking women, cooks, farmers, shepherds, and other people in the food system whose activities are based on craft in a different light (Curtin & Heldke, 1992). And, it goes without saying, it reconsiders the intellectual relevance of design non only as theory but also as practice. Not all the actions that humans engage in are design. As designer Ezio Manzini points out, "many of them we carry out unconsciously, routinely, within tried and tested conventions, or with reference to such a limited field of possibility that there is no freedom of choice" (Manzini, 2019, p. 39). So, not all making is design, which includes capacity of analysis, creativity, and the ability to plan, prototype, and test. Non every food-related practice is design, which increasingly requires systemic approaches, that is to say the ability to look at things in their totality, even when we are busying ourselves with one specific aspect of reality.

Heidegger seems to be proposing a way of looking at human experience that repositions man in its inherent connection with things (including food) as both inert thingliness and useful technology. It is an essential aspect of humans' being-in-the-world. This connection makes distinctions between materiality, practice, and discourse secondary, as these dimensions are always constituted together. At the same time, the projectuality, either voluntary or involuntary, which we find in human experience is inherently temporal: it reassembles selected elements of the past, which are often given new meaning as they become part of different contexts, to make sense of the present and our

projections for what's to come. Making is always remaking and future-making, which entails evaluating the past, the present, and the preferred future, choosing what we want to keep, what to change, and what to discard. For this reason, design approaches, which can applied to projects regarding food, are inherently valuation processes. No design project, no interaction with things, is free of judgment.

Furthermore, food design in Latin America often ends up being political. What fragments from the past can and should be reused? Which one should be discarded? And who decides? What if designers from indigenous, immigrant, or disadvantaged cultures had the opportunity to work on the food and objects they are familiar with, creating new interpretations that do not aim to supplant the old ones while offering a different approach? And how could they do it sustainably from the point of view of the materials they use, while respecting cultural and social values of their community and offering ways for its members (themselves included) to make some money? What if food systems were redesigned in collaboration with the communities themselves, allowing their members to participate in the process so that they can prioritize their needs and experiences? Food design would become a space of possibilities and empowerment for those Latin American communities whose voices have been silenced or distorted. These dynamics would bring into local food design the relationship of "care" that Heidegger indicates as a foundational aspect of being human.

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