

Welcome to Food City

Food City is the hypothetical location of the relationships between food and various aspects of our society. Food City is a trendy place that has many descriptions although only partial images of it can be traced, ones that focus on single aspects or certain points of view. Like all contemporary cities, it has its exclusive districts and shady zones, huge disparity and masses of chaotic traffic. Anyone can move across it using the means they feel most appropriate.

The choice of a diet “style” represents a path. You soon realise it is hard to gain your bearings in the city, although you can trace countless signs on the map and identify dimensions of experience that overlap but barely touch each other. Whatever your individual choice – be it rational and informed or absent-minded and haphazard – regarding the “style” of your diet (vegetarian, vegan, organic-fanatic, bought from the nearest supermarket, sophisticated gourmet, fast food or transported at random), it is the result of unpicking a huge muddle of information, readily available but not indexed.

If we try to sum up its form, the image that is most immediately associated with Food City is, perhaps, one of a dense mesh of physical and mental spaces. These develop in multiple dimensions in which the role played by physical distance is of major importance but free from the most immediate relationships between places.

It may help to explain the structure if we superimpose some of its levels and compare the single nodes. One interesting experiment is to take the network of real places and true conditions in which food is produced, processed, sold and eaten, and to try and match it with the network that links all the “virtual” places of production and consumption created by a certain advertising image that persistently refers to supposedly traditional and wholesome production methods and lifestyles, with which almost everyone romantically identifies.

Every node in the network is a source of examples, spaces and forms that allow us to interpret Food City according to another of its essential dimensions: time, which is in turn made up of a dense weave of speeds (the growth rate of animal and vegetable organisms, the various stages in the journey that foods make from their place of origin to that of consumption, etc.), lifespan (the length of time food is edible, the inner lifecycle of its various nutrients, the stock turnover in supermarkets, the length of meals, etc.), eras (those evoked by the places where we eat and the form and packaging of foods, the memories stirred in each of us by taste sensations on the palate, etc.).

By highlighting these nodes and their relative multidimensional food-city relationships, we can discover clues as to how the city is changing, whether this means by adapting to new (food) customs and habits or being shaped by them. This process of finding evidence in the not immediately obvious is also aided by observing spaces and bodies, individual conduct and social practices, economics and the symbolic dimension.

The Food City map we have constructed results from a number of experiments held by DomusLab between September and November as part of the Venice Architecture Biennale. The aim was to investigate changes in contemporary space via the interpretation of this specific theme. Those involved in this exploration contributed with their own fields of specialisation, directly participating in discussions and events, answering our questions, submitting written works, projects and suggestions, making objects and even transforming the DomusLab space – always on the basis of seven simple initial questions:

Where does food come from? Where is food transformed? Where does food move? Where is food sold? Where is food eaten? Where is food eliminated? Where is food thought?

Videos and recordings of the events and speeches are available on the Domus website (www.domusweb.it) and on that of the workshop which dynamically gathers and presents other material present on the Internet. The “Pantrylab” blog (<http://pantrylab.blogspot.com>) contains all the material found during the research and constituted a sort of explorers’ travel log – open to contributions by the many willing. We hope it is not interrupted and refer readers wishing to further explore the subject to it.