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Eating Architecture
Edited by Jamie Horwitz and Paulette Singley
Cambridge, ma: mtt Press, 2004
385 pp. Illustrations. $39.95 (cloth)

Eating Architecture, an attractive book with a clever title, is like many books of essays: some choices are terrific, and others, less enticing. As coeditors Jamie Horwitz and Paulette Singley explain, the book’s purpose is “to interrogate the boundary between the culinary and design arts and linger over the sensational and inspirational properties of cookery” (p.6). The result is a book that brings together twenty essays, including a prologue by the late art historian Phyllis Bober, the well-known author of Art, Culture, and Cuisine: Ancient and Modern Gastronomy. Essentially, it’s a book of ideas about food and culture rather than something concrete about design, kitchens, recipes, or restaurants.

Such a collection of essays could be terribly dull in presentation, but this book’s appearance is enlivened by a series of creative color photographs by Laura Letinsky of the
remains after eating and visual/verbal projects by contemporary architects. Described as a “Gallery of Recipes,” these contributions are a mixture of commentaries on food, popular culture, the implements of cooking, and even the rationale for a new ecological museum by architect Greg Lynn. It was a smart idea to include them.

The book’s essays are on a wide range of intriguing historical and theoretical architecture-related topics. Who wouldn’t be fascinated by the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, hospitality, how Cubans cope with a lack of resources, the industrialization of the picnic, Salvador Dali, eating spaces, the meat market district in Manhattan, or the transition from Victorian to modern views on food science? Most of the authors, however, assume that the reader has an avid interest in and, even more, a significant understanding of architectural theory and cultural studies—not subjects that are a part of everyone’s general education.

The editors, Singley and Horwitz, have backgrounds in architecture, not food studies, which given the content of their book makes sense. All the writers come from either the academic or the professional worlds of architecture, art history, or the visual arts; in the capsule biographies found at the back of the book, only Allen Weiss and John C. Welchman are noted as having other publications related to food. The MIT Press, however, did the prepublication cataloging, putting the first subject category of the book as food, the second as food presentation, and the last as space or architecture. In truth, while Cornell University, for example, shelves the book in the School of Hotel Administration’s library, it more properly belongs in the library of the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning, as it would be a challenging project to read this book without a knowledge of Siegfried Giedion, Michel de Certeau, and Le Corbusier, at a minimum. The reader’s enjoyment would also be enhanced by a familiarity with the writings of Norman Bryson, Kenneth Frampton, and Mark Wigley, as their works are referenced in several essays.

The best contributions reach out to readers whose backgrounds do not lie only in architecture and offer a way into the subject through good, clear writing and a smart, thoughtful presentation of the context of the ideas. David Leatherbarrow on tabletops, for example, offers enough general information so that most readers can follow his arguments, as does Rodolphe El-Khoury in his discussion of Jean-François de Bastide’s *La Petite Maison*. Daniel Freedman’s chapter on the setting in the film *Babette’s Feast* sent me running out to rent the movie and watch it again. The cover photograph by Laura Letinsky and her essay about the series of images “Morning, and Melancholia” is truly wonderful.

For someone with the right background and the interest, *Eating Architecture* is thus worthwhile reading, but certainly not light reading, as its attractive appearance—the book looks nice on a coffee table or a kitchen counter—hides a book of essays that require serious thinking and often a second read to get the most out of them. And a slap on the wrist goes to the copyeditors at MIT who let some errors and, even worse, some confusing (and confounding) references slip through. Without a reproduction or credit citing the collection, the reader is unlikely to follow Mikesch Muecke’s argument about Claude Monet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, in his essay “Food to Go,” and will think instead of Édouard Manet’s more well-known painting with the same title from the same era. In a book that seeks to cross disciplines, an editor needs to remember that every reader may not have the books at hand to look up the reference. The overuse of food metaphors also gets tiresome if you are reading more than one essay at a sitting.

The intersection of food and architecture is intriguing to many of us, and many more topics remain to be explored. Put in its proper place, this book can be viewed as a worthwhile addition and—dare I say it?—an appetizer for those who want to begin to get to know the work of certain writers in architecture and cultural studies.

—Gwendolyn Owens, Canadian Centre for Architecture