

## Slow Briefs

### Slow Food.....Slow Architecture

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### Abstract

We are moving too fast...fast lives, fast cars, fast food.....and fast architecture. We are caught up in a world that allows no time to stop and think; to appreciate and enjoy all the really important things in our lives. Recent responses to this seemingly unstoppable trend are the growing movements of Slow Food and Cittaslow. Both initiatives are, within their own realms, attempting to reverse speed, homogeny, expediency and globalisation, considering the values of regionality, patience, craft, skill and longevity.

The analogy between Slow Food and Slow Architecture are embraced at the Mackintosh School of Architecture where in the third year of the undergraduate programme, student design briefs are planned to address many practical issues with sustainability at the core; through a number of 'food centric' projects students are encouraged to consider how materiality and construction contribute to a sustainable architecture where craft, sensuality, and delight are explored, with consideration given in both micro and macro contexts. Working on the premise that speed driven architecture can result in a visually dominant architecture, one in which the spaces created are viewed rather than felt; the projects required a 'Slow' haptic response.

Adopting the Slow Food Movement and its principles as the metaphor for 'Slow Architecture', our aim was to design a programme to embrace these key principle and encourage students to investigate a more holistically sensual approach to their architecture, with the aim to encourage investigations of proposals that would extend beyond the 'visual'. The ambition was to test if such projects would encourage a dialogue into how architecture can respond to the wider current issues of energy and food production and produce intelligent sustainable and appropriate proposals?



Figure 1 'plan; after the feast', William Knight; 2010

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## Slow Briefs.

“Architecture has the capacity to be inspiring, engaging and life-enhancing. But why is it that architectural schemes which look good on the drawing board or the computer screen can be so disappointing ‘in the flesh’?”

Eyes of the Skin by Juhani Pallasmaa

Pallasmaa’s statement challenges the domination of the visual understanding of architecture over the other sensory experiences. His words are key to the direction and the formulation of studio design briefs for third year undergraduate students at the Mackintosh School of Architecture. The programme’s intentions are to question the prioritisation of visual experience in the conception and making of buildings through investigations into the multi-sensory realms of architecture. Pallasmaa’s book is one of the key texts on the book list alongside texts by Peter Zumthor, a known advocate of Slow Architecture. Both argue that the dominance of the visual realm in today’s culture has suppressed any thorough engagement with our other four senses. The question that Pallasmaa poses has fuelled much discussion regarding how we as teachers can encourage students to recognise that architecture is a phenomenon that extends beyond the visual. As teachers we have to impart practical information that is critical for students of architecture to acquire as they move through their training, giving both breadth and depth to their growing knowledge. The danger is that the delivery of this information can be theoretical and abstracted from reality. Our educational system does not support a slow approach that allows a ‘hands on’ course structure as class cohorts grow to groups of 100 students and more, with reduced budgets and limited time the possibility of connecting architecture and sensuality is not an easy task, knowledge of materials, their properties and aesthetics are more efficient to teach in theory rather than hands on explorations of the kinaesthetics of the materials.

Sustainability is another subject area that is more efficient to teach in the lecture theatre where, for example, passive solar gain is represented by a series of red and blue arrows flowing through a diagram, and the full integration of embedded environmental concepts do not extend beyond these figures. Our ambition was to enable these key principles to be considered and applied by the students to their own work, thus making connections and understanding theories that are no longer abstract but grounded in a level of reality, be it via a theoretical proposal.

The situation of being ‘withdrawn’ from sensory reality is aggravated when one considers the context and culture in which the majority of students entering a course of architecture live. A fast lifestyle where almost anything and everything is available 24/7.... at the push of a button. They are members of a digital and electronic era where the computers rules. Are individuals within this fast and sanitised lifestyle de-connected with the sensual aspect of life? Zumthor in his book ‘Thinking Architecture’ states:

“The strength of good design lies in ourselves and in our ability to perceive the world with both emotion and reason. A good architectural design is sensuous. A good architectural design is intelligent.”

And whilst discussing teaching and architecture he goes on to say:

“All design work starts from the premise of this physical, objective sensuousness of architecture, of its materials. To experience architecture in a concrete way means to touch, see, hear and smell it”

How can this ‘fast electronic life style’ embrace the less tangible but crucial qualities that make good design, and also consider relevant current issues? It would be foolish to imagine that removal of these digital key tools would either be possible or sensible; more appropriately, how can they help to facilitate explorations that will produce architectural

proposals that have truly considered the experiential qualities that embrace these 'fast' mediums along side a more craft driven approach. Another factor that should be considered and tapped into is our own individual experience of architecture and our memory of those experiences. This is a great resource, although one that students seem less able to access or value. The experience we have from our childhood and our youth; our memories of space, light, smell and touch that are imbedded in our psyche; the house in which we grew up, places and events that we have experienced, the special, the memorable, the stuff that we don't realise that we know...subconscious knowledge.

As well as looking back and reflecting, students are also encouraged to look to the future and carefully consider the impact of their designs in today's...and tomorrow's world and make intelligent and thoughtful proposals to engage with the needs of our society and the unsustainable demands that we are currently putting on our planet.

### **Slow Food – Slow Architecture**

"A man without memories loses his past and with that his future. He can no longer relate to his environment nor with himself"

[www.slowarchitecture.com](http://www.slowarchitecture.com)

With these questions at the forefront of our minds we embarked on writing a series of studio design briefs that would unlock experiences and allow for sensual explorations. With the inclusion of hands on workshops that gave the opportunity to explore materials and how their application might enhance the experiential qualities of proposals, alongside the practical requirements. The application of discoveries from workshops were put in place to help direct and facilitate the students through a more holistic design process and complimented the more 'traditional' tools, hand drawings, physical models and computer renders. Our starting point was food, more precisely Slow Food. Slowness being a critical response and reaction to our fast lives, fast architecture and fast food. Food is something that we can all connect with, our need for food as living beings is essential to our survival, but also an element in our lives that touches our senses so directly, gives joy and contentment and evokes memories of past experiences. The ambition for the year's work was to utilise Slow Food as our metaphor. It would help to enable students to make a direct relationship with a multi sensory proposal; cooking and eating being a thread that would continue through all the projects and provide the accessible link for students to embrace, explore and develop the more difficult concepts relating to the atmospheres of their buildings through sight, smell, touch and sound. It was also hoped that the issues raised would begin a conversation about the social, environmental and economic issues relating to food in terms of growing, eating, trading and sustainability. The connection between food and architecture is in many ways clear; proportion, form, shape and arrangement alongside selection of ingredients or materials, and thereafter composition of the parts. The result is a product that will give personal feelings and sensations. Food and cooking is a shorter and more transient art than architecture but no less sensually powerful and can be equally as memorable.

The Slow Briefs set design projects that embraced the principles of Slow Food, a movement founded in 1986 by Carlo Petrini in Italy. Slow Food strives to preserve and promote regional cuisine and food growth. This movement has initiated a slow subculture where travel, shopping and design are areas where similar considerations have been applied. Cittaslow is one such movement, with its aims to improve the quality of life in towns by resisting globalisation, homogenisation and celebrating the diversity of culture and specialities of a town and its surrounding hinterland. Engagement with the 'Slow Movements' gave further depth to our projects where the consideration of regionality and uniqueness would be considered.

Reflecting on the programmes aims and utilising the Slow Movements principles as our vehicle we devised a series of studio design briefs for the year. A sequence of projects that would embrace all that we believed would nurture the connections with sensuality and atmosphere, regionality and sense of place, sustainability and community and embed the learning outcomes of the third year within them. Two main project were designed, the first challenge was the design of a small but complex building placed sensitively and appropriately within a rural context, with both public and private elements, and specific environmental requirements. A deepening of the proposals came from the technical requirements with the design for specific environmental conditions and an understanding of construction and structure. The second project complimented this and began with the analysis of a small urban settlement located close to the first site. Following interrogation of the place, the challenge was to design a strategy for regeneration of the town, within which a small public building would be placed; programmatically linked to the proposal from the first brief. Both projects dealt with programme, context and technology at different scales. The design briefs were supported with hands on workshops and lectures by cooks, food specialists and architects, together with cooking and feasting (figure 1). A visit to Barcelona between the two main projects reinforced the importance and relevance of ‘food spaces’ by directly connecting the theory with experiences explored, investigated and enjoyed first hand.

## **The Briefs**

### *One Day in June*

The year commenced with a summer project; titled ‘One day in June’. This project was designed to act as a preamble to the design briefs and an opportunity to develop an understanding of indoor environments through a series of real world investigations. The students were asked to plan an experiment that would take place on the 21<sup>st</sup> June, the summer solstice, the longest day. The experiment required them to select an existing interior space, and by appropriate means register a salient aspect of a very particular environment that they had identified. The design of a methodology was required together with a device to measure or register the selected sense. This first foray with the sensual produced a diverse array of experiments and results, from the daily range and depth of smells within a spice shop in Morocco, to the movement of air in a cow shed in Orkney (figure 2), and drawings of sounds within Glasgow’s Kelvingrove museum.



figure 2 ‘One day in June’ Andrew Wilkinson; 2010

### *Cookhouse*

The design of a 'Cookhouse' followed. The students were introduced to the philosophy of the Slow Food Movement and Slow Architecture, where the principles; connection to place, sustainability, regionality, craft and uniqueness were discussed, and immediately they were asked to consider architecture beyond the visual - an architecture that would address all the senses. The purpose of the food metaphor was presented as an overt tool with which to aid the design of a building that would enhance and celebrate life and food in a careful, crafted and sustainable way, and also addressing all the senses. A building that would embrace and carefully respond to the uniqueness of the context in which it would be anchored.

This new building type would bring together a community of 15 individuals to live from the land for a year. The proposal for a cook house and its supporting landscape would be a place where slow food would be grown, cooked and eaten. The ambition for the building would be one in which the facility would provide a place to 'change gear', a place for its residents to jump off the treadmill and reflect holistically on their lives, an opportunity to take stock of priorities that are so often neglected due to the fast pace that many of us lead our lives.

The proposals considered the uniqueness of place and engender all the sensual qualities that the Slow Architecture/Slow Food Movement promote. Sustainability is an essential aspect of the Movement, and therefore the students were explicitly asked to address this in both architectural terms but also in terms of lifestyle and community. Proposals were 'off grid' and so had to be self sufficient in respect of energy, water, waste as well as food, transport and community. Through careful partnership of architecture and food, the house would actively facilitate the enjoyment of growing, cooking and eating and provide a positive and sensitive environment within which these activities could be enjoyed.

This brief required the consideration of how proposals would resonate with the range of senses of the inhabitants, necessitating the consideration of light, scale, materials, colour, and texture, sensing through not only the eye, but also having an awareness of temperature, smell and sound. A further requirement was to investigate modes of presenting these less tangible, but no less critical elements of the proposed buildings. This was done through experimenting with materials, working at full size, written descriptions and other modes, including recordings and film to capture, explore and communicate their ideas.

Careful selection of a site in order to support the ideas was important. Perth and Kinross was chosen, as it is Scotland's first, and currently only Cittaslow member. Perth has also adopted the Slow Food Charter. We sought a site with an historical resonance and real sense of place.

Ardoch Fort near the small settlement of Braco on the banks of the River Knaik became the project's touchstone. On the edge of the broad and fertile valley of Strathearn, 2000 years

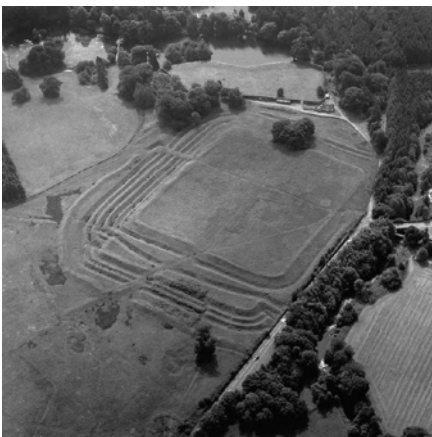


Figure 3  
Ardoch Fort

ago, Ardoch became home to one of the earliest and most northerly outpost of the Roman Empire.

The Romans selected their sites with great care. Proximity to water and good agricultural land being fundamental to the choice of place and the subsequent sustainability of the settlement in what was a hostile country. The choice for the location of the student's proposals was similar; the proximity of a watercourse and good quality arable and grazing land was fundamental to the prolonged existence of the facility (figure 3).

A thorough site analysis was undertaken with students recording both the physical and the sensual qualities of the site. Using their bodies to explore the site - walking the extent of the policies, running the ramparts, wading in the river and sheltering in the walled garden. A grasp of local farming and the seasonal nature of crops and livestock were required to gain an understanding of the agricultural possibilities that the site could provide over an annual growing cycle, thus validating proposals for growing and rearing of livestock. Students located their proposals within a selected area with care and sensitivity towards the existing marked landscape, views, topography, meteorology and orientation.



The preparation of food and the celebration of eating were the core activities to be housed. It was made clear that this was not a commercial kitchen – but a place where home grown and reared food would be carefully prepared and eaten. The spaces were to be designed to recognise and celebrate this fact. An additional area for weekend dining was also a requirement of the brief. This is where the local community would be invited to enjoy the fruits of the land and Cook House, not as a restaurant, but a place for guests to eat with the chefs in a homely environment – a response to the ‘anti-restaurant’ movement that is currently building, and in keeping with the sustainable culture of the Cook House.



Support spaces for food storage were also required to allow the building envelope to provide the desired environmental conditions, through a daily and annual cycle - stability and control of humidity and temperature were key elements. To compliment the communal spaces a residential area was to be included; a place of retreat from the busy group spaces; private bedrooms and living spaces for the residents to call home during their stay in the Cook House. Throughout the project students were encouraged to explore both the haptic and the ephemeral, utilising physical models, hand drawings and computer renders. (figures 4-9)



Figures4-9  
Explorations of atmospheres and qualitative experiences;  
Images by Nathan Cunningham, Stefano Belingardi, Jack Hudspith, & Hugo Corbett; 2010

### *‘Supra-market’*

The second major project took the students to Creiff, a near neighbour to Ardoch Fort. Creiff is a town with an embedded history of trade and local industry. The town was granted a charter in the middle ages; in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it became the centre for Scotland’s cattle trade; in later times its factories produced paper and lace, and with the development of rail links with

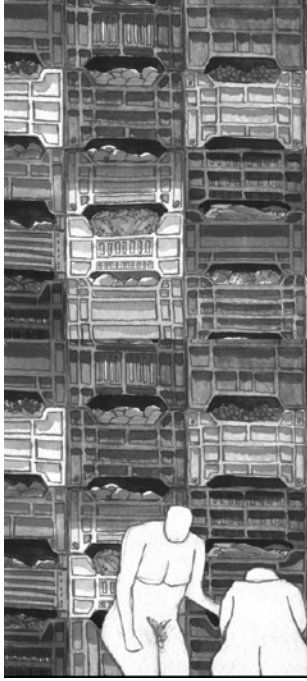


Figure 9

Central Scotland it became a thriving Victorian holiday spa town. Crieff has evolved and morphed through these various different identities and now finds itself as an ailing rural town suffering from the effects of a declining and ageing population. A new community campus school and an out of town supermarket have taken facilities and life away from the town's core; Crieff is now a town struggling to define its identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Students carried out extensive observations and analysis of the town, recording its history and growth, identifying and understanding core, periphery and morphology, becoming familiar with what has made Crieff the town it now is. Recognising the potential of markets as social and community regenerators, as discussed by Steel in *Hungry City* (2009), a market building was proposed. The project demanded students to design a strategy for new growth and further more to design a 'supra-market' and new external public space which would sit as part of this strategy. The proposed facility transcends the notion of a farmers market - becoming a permanent venue for the current and nomadic monthly market, a public foothold for the Cook House and various other

social facilities. It was also required to have a true sustainable agenda in terms of the local community, building again on the concepts of the Slow Food Movement. The establishment of such a proposal would have the ambition to act as a catalyst to revive the town's centre and reverse the current trend of deterioration. Again Slow Food was the tool for students to build their proposals upon. Supported by the Cittaslow charter that the region has embraced, students were confronted with real issues. The connection with Slow Food with this second brief utilised food as a pragmatic tool to engage students with the possibility of how a successful building within a designed framework could act as a catalyst for rehabilitation and sustainability, extending in a scale far greater than the that of the building itself. Recognising what the town had to offer; a farmers market and a range of local producers; and working within the existing built context, food was a realistic tool for solving the challenges posed to them. (figures 9-11).



Figures 9 above,10&11, a new community 'supra-market' in Crieff, images by Kugathas Kugarajah & Eu Jin Lim; 2010

## Conclusion

Each year students are confronted with design challenges that will enable them to meet the aims and objectives of the degree programme at the Mackintosh School. The 'Slow Briefs' were specifically designed to move our ambitions for the student's proposals beyond the visually dominant results that have been produced through more traditional project briefs. With food as our metaphor we hoped that all students would relate to the analogy at some level and allow engagement more easily with concepts beyond the visual. Utilising a

multitude of design tools to enrich their investigations, along side visits to kitchens and restaurants. Growing was addressed with an allotment garden established on the roof terrace of the department and this was complimented with organised group cooking and feasting (figure 12). The hands-on workshops were designed to give students the opportunity to explore the rituals and celebration of food through growing, cooking and eating; lectures by chefs, food specialists, material experts and architects engaged in the food industry all supported the briefs.



figure 12 Cooking with concrete and locally produced veg. at the Mac 2010

A study visit to Barcelona focused on markets, community buildings, and public spaces providing an opportunity to smell, touch and experience a plethora of atmospheres, the aim was to provide further richness to their proposals.

The work by the students is now complete and assessment has taken place. The resulting outcomes have been mixed, and as with an analysis of proposals presented by any student cohort there has been varying levels of success particularly relating to our ambitions for this year's work. The following comments are based on observations made of the work as scrutinised during the intensive assessment period and the degree show that followed.

Our belief that the students would embrace the concept of food with ease and allow a more immediate connection to the sensual aspects of the project than a more traditional brief might give, was not immediately evident. Work produced by some students did show an engagement with expressing atmospheres beyond the visual with experiences gained via the practical workshop clearly feeding into their design proposals. Conveying and communicating these explorations and the concluding designs with the use of the computer and physical models did result in some sophisticated outcomes with photo realistic visualisations created on the computer. These were complemented with full scale castings in concrete; knowledge of food growing, harvesting and cooking, and an understanding of integrated energy strategies. Design of objects beyond their architecture were also explored from recopies to furniture to cutlery (figure 13&14). This success was recognised with two students from the cohort being short listed for the RIBA Bronze medal 2010, and Jack Hudspith going on to be awarded this prestigious award. The judges made specific comments relating to how successfully the proposal demonstrated an awareness of the relationship of internal and external spaces and of how these spaces were inhabited.

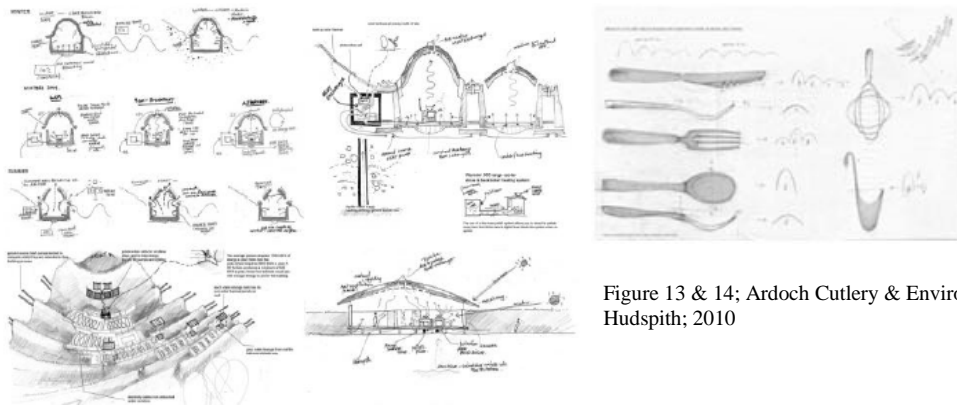


Figure 13 & 14; Ardoch Cutlery & Environmental response: Jack Hudspith; 2010



In respect of the entire year what was particularly successful and demonstrated by the majority of the students was the application of environmental and construction strategies. Embedding and testing these essentially lecture based subject into a design brief has produced some thoughtful and innovative proposals. Environmental strategies in the most part are integrated and not 'attached bells and whistles'. An understanding and application of sustainability, beyond the scientific, concerning lifestyle and community was clearly demonstrated in the majority of proposals. Careful location, orientation and efficient building envelopes were evident across the cohorts proposals. Materiality was also generally more holistically approached, utilising the experience gained from timber and concrete workshops, at which the students had worked at full scale with these materials (figure 12). The impact of a more informed material selection moved beyond a visual choice, to one that also considered the qualitative aspects of the spaces created by the materials and the resulting environmental performance.

In the Cook House project student's engagement with food and cooking was in some students work disappointing; with students defaulting to re-planning their designs and more conventional explorations rather than investigations of texture and ambience, and addressing the bigger issues relating to sustainability that we hoped would be explored. In contrast to this the 'supra-market' proposals demonstrated how students embraced the notion of utilising redundant spaces within a town 'master plan', developing appropriate strategies for community and food development and production, supporting their more formal public space and building proposals (figures 15&16).

In conclusion it is difficult to confirm if third year undergraduate students are able to grasp and explore these additional, more abstract layers of information that we so keenly desire them to become engaged with. At this relatively early stage in their training does solving the practical become the default and the more challenging and elusive qualities of their architecture remain undiscovered? At what stage should this line of enquiry sit hand in hand with the technical and practical issues that a brief poses— where a truly holistic mindfulness of their ideas is explored and communicated?

Perhaps it is akin to the development of our palette....it just takes time and lots of 'tastes' before an appreciation and enjoyment of such can be valued and experienced.



Figures 15 & 16, Creiff 'supra-market' images by Kugathas Kugarajah & Helen McCormack; 2010

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