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Dinner Parti

Evangeline Soileau
Syracuse University

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Dinner Parti

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Evangeline M. Soileau

Candidate for Bachelor of Architecture
and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Architecture

Capstone Project Advisor: Amber Bartosh, Assistant Professor

Capstone Project Reader: Dr. Eileen Schell, Associate Professor

Honors Director: Chris Johnson, Interim Director

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Abstract

This capstone is a body of work that investigates the architectural relationships among event, documentation, material production, and user interaction through the lens of social dining. A Picnic, Thanksgiving, and Solo dining are the three dining scenarios that are the subject of these analytical and design investigations. The architectural design process is a part of the creative nonfiction narrative through the design of three corresponding artifacts that perform as the events' spatial and material analogs: The Picnic Mound, The Thanksgiving Tables, and the Solo Couch. These artifacts aim to create new readings of user interactions with the social dining event as it is understood, misunderstood, or taken for granted in the contemporary context. Subsequent testing through an exhibition of those artifacts sought to both access design possibilities of an architectural-social interface and qualify the capacity for these thesis investigations to create spatial conditions that reinforce the communicative possibilities of the architectural surface and promote social sustenance. The conclusion is that each artifact interfaced with the user in different ways with varying degrees of success. However, each spurred basic sets of responses, relating back to aspects of the original events themselves and preconceived ideas of how one should act in each situation. The more "casual" events of picnic and solo were met with actions like lying down, and these were also the only two that a toddler was allowed to play with by her parents. The thanksgiving table, on the other hand, remained a space of more reserved allure rather than playfulness. Whiel it gathered people together within the exhibition space, its separate surfaces of differing heights created separations and distinctions in groups as well as hierarchy. A creative nonfiction narrative is the architectural capstone supplement. It is divided into four parts, the first three about the Picnic, Thanksgiving, and Solo

dining events, while the fourth is based on the exhibition comprised of artifacts designed from the previous three events.

Executive Summary

Framework

This thesis explores a contemporary narrative of fabricated, occupiable landscapes in miniature, partis at full-scale with food as the programmatic locus. Dinner Parti pushes a dining-referential architecture of textile, furniture, and vessels to depict spatial conditions, reinforce the communicative possibilities of the architectural surface, and promote interaction. Dining is a constructed and manipulated landscape of tradition, memory, function, and delight. Dining is the layering of materials, both physical and abstract: from the physicality of the table surface to the people present to the food itself, as well as the implications present in these choices.

This thesis referenced a quotidien event as source material for a feedback loop of design inquiry rooted in the ambivalence and contradiction inherent to the social mechanism of dining which is both a particular and ubiquitous practice. The site of these translations has become the horizontal surface of dining, which has taken on a narrative role.

Artifacts

Each artifact takes cues from architectural questions of structure to infill relationships, layering as surface, organizational systems at the human scale, and the relationship between program/function and pattern/texture/materiality. By their manifestation as fabricated full-scale objects, their design development requires reconciliation of multiple parties to produce a final output. These artifacts are subjects of fabrication. They are either professionally outsourced or

not so professionally crafted in-house, but each requires a level of translation and expertise in their ability to scale up.

Though these artifacts are more occupiable surfaces rather than tables, they are all different kinds of tables to stretch the traditional notion of one. These artifacts are unified by their interest in the production of a horizontal surface to produce thickness in low relief, loosely constrained by functional requirements of a dining surface. They play to a language of grids, a manifestation of the unit-based conditions of dining pre-prescribed by table settings, standard sizes, and means of production, embedded devices of social measure. They are each square-ish, each a flexible 36 square feet of dining surface intervention. They understand the occupied surface to be one of porosity, a *mélange* of materials recalled from images of traditional domestic surfaces like marble, wood, ceramic tile, carpet, gingham, upholstery, vinyl. They are mutable, producing an interactive relationship among the user, the artifact, space, and material to play to the variable conditions of dining.

Creative Nonfiction as Architecture

Each one of these studies is an event either hosted or attended and subsequently documented and analyzed through the lens of architecture to abstract some of the spatial and material qualities that defined that event. Each study is a process of constructing an architectural narrative of that dining event through a built artifact, which speaks to traditional elements that build up the space of each dining condition. A picnic, a thanksgiving meal, and eating alone are all familiar situations, ranging from the habitual to the ritual.

Michael Pollan drew on the idea of “the perfect meal” in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* to construct a creative nonfiction narrative of four meals. He explores the question of “what should

we eat?” and conducts immersive research into the processes and cultures that surround each of these meals. A supplementary exploration of this thesis research takes cues from Pollan’s writing through the development of three creative nonfiction narratives to bring to the surface ideas about the social and physical constructions of each disparate dining event.

Exhibition

This exhibition is the penultimate event of a two-semester long thesis exploration, the prequel to the final thesis review as well as a fourth dining event. The exhibition is the summation of the previous three dining event investigations through the interaction and exhibition of full-scale architectural artifacts.

The food at the exhibition is catered by Sarah Robin, an immigrant from Pakistan, talented chef, and burgeoning entrepreneur. Characterized by aromatics, vibrant color, and high-impact flavor, her cooking brings its own culinary narrative through its role as cultural artifact. By placing these dishes distributed throughout the Marble Room on their own pedestals, the food interweaves with the narrative of the exhibition, creating another layer to the event narrative.

The setting in the Marble Room of Slocum Hall is important part of the exhibition context. The Marble Room used to be Slocum Hall’s threshold, bridging the interior to the rest of the university. With matchbooked marble panels, wooden doors, green marble baseboards, stucco crown molding, red and white marble tiles, the Marble Room is one of the most ornate rooms of the building. Today, it is often program-less, a dark side room. However, as the site for exhibition, the Marble Room becomes a kind of central space, one of activity and display. These table landscape artifacts become objects of exhibition, occupation, manipulation, and critique,

the creation of an open platform of discussion; they are surfaces as thresholds of exchange and architectural manifestations of narrative.

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Dinner Parti: Four Meals

“Instances of table redesign can be located along the food axis as consequences of the everyday-where macroeconomic and political structures intersect with what the anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as habitus: the “habitual and improvisatory, the rote and novel.”¹

A Windy Meal on a Hilltop

“So, this is architecture?” a friend asks, picking up a donut from the box in the center of the picnic blanket. I casually shrug and gesture with open arms, suggesting a broad reference to the grass, the trees, the sky, the people, the food, the blanket on which we sit.

“Isn’t it?”

On Sunday, October 23, 2016 at 1p.m., my friends and I are having a picnic in Thornden Park. Past the cusp of summer’s end, the typical picnicking season has already seen its end. The past few days were cold and rainy: a pessimistic sign that fall has arrived and is here to stay. Yet with Syracuse’s fluctuating weather, anything is possible, and on Sunday, the rain clouds parted, leaving a bright sun and crisp wind in its wake. From the top of the hill on a vivid green lawn, next to the abandoned observatory, the view of trees tinged yellow at their tops and outer edges pop against a cerulean sky.

I’m seeking out a picnic in order to test out and experience a “minimal” dining event, where the architecture was basically reduced to the natural setting, perhaps a thin blanket, people

¹ Horwitz, Jamie, and Paulette Singley. 2006. *Eating Architecture*. 1st ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.

united by food in nature. A “temporary, rational, and minimalist territory”² is the idea behind a picnic architecture, or so I have read, with the meal as a moment of stasis and order in an otherwise wild terrain. Edouard Manet’s 1860s oil painting, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, is a study in contrasts: a deep, dark green forest enshrines four figures--two men and two women--having a picnic. The clothed male figures contrast with the naked female figure in the foreground, staring at the viewer, while a second bather recedes into the background. A dreamy portrait of a scandalous take on an otherwise familiar subject matter, Manet creates a hedonistic interaction of bodies and food in raw nature. While I do not intend to recreate Manet’s picnic in all its sybaritic, nude splendour, the idea of the picnic itself—not quotidian, not quite extraordinary—is the starting point for first-hand exploration and documentation. What are the spatial qualities of a picnic, and how can they translate into built form? What does it mean *to picnic*? What is a *picnic architecture*? These are questions I would ask later. At this point, all I know is to have a picnic with a group of friends who may or may not show up.

With tote bags slung over both of my shoulders and my roommate Celeste with her dog Quogue in tow, we make the five-minute walk up the hill from our apartment to the top of the hill. A 76-acre park adjacent to the Syracuse University campus, Thornden contains an outdoor 9-lane swimming pool, an amphitheater, playing fields, playgrounds, and a rose garden. At the top of the hill is a brick, circular water tower, surrounded by a cul-de-sac parking lot with a view of the surrounding treetops. We fight the wind while cresting the hill, treading through the expansive lawn to find a decent place for a picnic. The wind and the rain patterns from the

² Muecke, Mikesh. 2006. "Food To Go: The Industrialization Of The Picnic". In *Eating Architecture*, 1st ed., 230. Cambridge: MIT.

previous days had scared off other potential park-goers for the moment. I set down my bags near the biggest tree and unfold a square of sunflower-print oilcloth onto the grass. The hilltop is ours.

When the wind buffets the blankets, we grab spare water bottles, anchoring the edges. To the side of the blanket, a camera on a tripod records our actions—a reminder that this is *thesis* and not pure play— as we chat and reach over each other for another donut or cookie. In the center, tossed haphazardly upon one another, sit a Tupperware full of chocolate chip cookies, a plastic tray of cheese and crackers, a box of cider and sweet potato donuts, a gallon of apple cider, two loaves of homemade challah. I trace the sunflower print on the oilcloth beneath me. The wind calms and then picks up again, tossing our stack of napkins fifteen feet from our spot, littering the bright green grass with squares of white.

The movement of clouds overhead casts shadows over us, a chill ascending when the sky temporarily darkens, alleviated when the sun shines through again. When the clouds come over again, two friends pick up the Frisbee and run, tossing the bright red disk. A stray gust soon tosses the hopeless disk aside. They run around some more and then circle back to the blanket for another snack.

The blanket is a haphazard puzzle of three or four separate blankets with different owners. The sunflower print oilcloth square is leftover material from when Celeste and I recovered our “breakfast nook” table in our apartment. Celeste’s army green wool blanket is her dad’s from the Navy. Ridvan’s contribution is a red and white floral patterned tablecloth. My old purple fleece blanket with tassles is an extra blanket, never completely unfolded out, half-sat-upon.

A picnic architecture? An architecture of an event or an experience? That translation process is tricky, but not unnatural. Architecture is the built reconciliation of needs and wants:

programmatic, material, structural, cultural, budgetary, social, political. Architecture arises out of these tensions. A picnic architecture warrants mutability, lightness, put-together-or-pulled-apartness, creating picnic-like situations. Picnics depend on the environment in which they exist, and reside in the freedom that an open, outdoor environment imparts. A blanket—the architecture—is the light surface that creates this distinction between just sitting in the grass and having a picnic.

The Luxuries of Loneliness

The cushions of the desaturated blue corduroy couch deform a bit beneath my weight as I tuck my feet beneath me, folding my legs as I adjust my white earbuds.

“Can you hear me?”

The soft yellow of a single suspended bulb encased in a paper Ikea shade casts a shadow across my face as my figure appears in the frame on the screen. Across from me, my boyfriend Michael’s frame is up, his figure neatly centered in a rectangular room. I examine the contents of my Skype mirror: a wooden closet door, fragments of blue from the couch, a map of Washington State tacked to the wall, its edges curling.

“One sec.”

I leave the couch to refill my glass of water in the kitchen, leaving Michael with a still of the couch and wall. Before returning to the couch, I pick up my glass bowl of salad before sitting back down in view of the laptop camera.

“What are you eating?” I ask, adjusting myself in the foam edges of the couch cushion.

“Some steak and potatoes. I’m still eating on that meat package my company sent us interns for Christmas. Did I tell you about that?”

My face is quizzical.

“Yeah, they gave us all like these hundred dollar...meat packages... for Christmas,” he laughs, disparaging the random perks of his no-perks job. He lifts the plate into view of the camera to show me the gifted company steak and sets it down again. “What kind of salad you got there?” he asks.

“Leftover quinoa and roasted asparagus on spinach, with olives, a hard boiled egg, and parm. And cheese and crackers on the side,” I say, tilting the laptop screen down to bring the salad into view. We take turns talking and chewing as I ignore the visibility of my vigorous salad chewing on screen. “Is my chewing really loud?” I ask, suddenly aware of the proximity of the microphone to the massive crunch of masticated leftover greens in my mouth.

“You’re fine,” he reassures. “Wait, can you hear my chewing?” In an instant, a two-sided self-consciousness waxes and wanes.

At home, eating alone can be a state of non-reflection, a moment of apathy to the world, including what we put in our mouths. Eyes rest not on food but on a two-dimensional lens to elsewhere. I gaze at my mirrored self in the Skype window, taking aim at my mouth with a forkful of salad, next to the frame of my friend 375 miles away. The crunch of too-big pieces of spinach fills my earbud-plugged ears, my eyes blind to my own physicality, and I look on, adjusting my balance on the couch.

One late Tuesday morning in the Slocum Hall café, snatches of conversation float and bounce throughout the sunlit room. An untidy grid of white square tables fill the dining area, white molded plastic chairs imprecisely tucked at their sides. Early lunch-goers are scattered about the tables, some engaged in deep conversations, others silently perusing a newspaper. But

most often, a solo diner eats absentmindedly, blindly inching his mouth closer to a sandwich in his left hand, transfixed by a phone in his right hand. Snaps of talk bubble up softly against the background clatter of the kitchen.

I am here to draw people eating for an assignment in my drawing class, but the exercise soon turns into how many people I can capture on paper as they eat alone before they stand up, crumpling their waxy white sandwich paper and walk away. A young Indian woman with a bony face keeps her winter jacket on as she eats, staring at a phone screen in her left hand, poking at a salad with a fork in the right.

Tamar Adler, famed chef and food writer, writes of eating alone as an oft overlooked opportunity. Learning to savor and set aside time for solitary meals are not only the antithesis of loneliness but also teach a “lesson in being happy at more crowded tables.” Through seductive imagery of food and setting, Adler reveals the freedom of a solitary meal in relation to the opportunity to better attune oneself to one’s own life and surroundings. Eating alone is not lonely but rather an opportunity for creation, flexibility, and exploration. Adler writes:

“My most straightforward and happiest involve only basic cooking and arranging of elements that, because I don’t have to seek consensus at the table, can be as irreverent as my tastes are. It feels strange to truly accept that, for once, you can listen to no one, making combinations that are right for only you. But once you get used to it, it’s shockingly freeing.”³

³ Adler, Tamar. 2014. "Elevating Dinner for One". *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/magazine/elevating-dinner-for-one.html>.

As I sit here, eating breakfast and drinking coffee in my favorite cafe in Syracuse, I am eating alone. I am alone with the woman sitting at the café table next to me, typing away at a laptop, crumbs of a bagel sandwich on a white plate at her side. I am alone with the sleepy man in a grey sweatshirt, slunk down in his chair, looking up shampoo on Amazon.com. I am alone with the man with neat black spectacles, diligently referring to a stack of papers as he types away. I am alone with the Tina Turner song blasting from the speaker in the corner and the man who is whistling to it.

Here, the idea that we eat alone is almost a myth. Rather, it is a frame of mind that can be molded to accommodate a desire that is created through an aversion to our own circumstances. Perhaps not an aversion, but rather apathy towards where we are. Eating alone in public is an encapsulation of space made possible largely through a digital surface. Before the laptop or smart phone, people would take the city coffee house as a third space to receive information--news and gossip--between domestic and work life. The space of the coffee house formed this space between the privacy of the home and the more or less public realm of the work sphere. It forms a programmatic and typological in-between that allows people to both reside within the anonymity of their single-person table and also relish in the realm of the public. Eating alone in our contemporary times is quite a complex experience, residing in between being alone and being with others, and it comes down to a matter of choice and the spatial arrangement that is preordained by the space in which we reside. It is also a public realm where eating alone is socially acceptable. In a restaurant, the solo diner is still quite an outlier, uncomfortable, not quite understood. However, in a café, where the programmatic functions accommodate a range from meeting place to workplace to hang out place, the solo diner can blend in seamlessly. A crowd of solo diners and coffee sippers form a general detached public to form a whole based on

repetition and variation. The coffee shop architecture of 30” x 20” tabletops and laptops reinforces this state of mediated privacy that waxes and wanes with the rhythm of the day’s passing.

Individual spaces are breached constantly, as the coffee shop fills up and tables are shared, a questioning glance met with a nod of approval. This question to share a table-- “Excuse me, can I sit here?”-- applies pressure to individual realms as papers and pens and plates are tidied and quickly brought in closer. The indulgence of individual space is a fleeting one, often misunderstood as loneliness before the swift return of an audience whisks it away.

The couch is that iconic piece of domesticity that we relate back to an idea of eating alone. It’s the three-seater that gets occupied by one, a space created for multiples but often overtaken by one. Rigid or sagging, cushioned or tufted, leather or cloth, full of blankets and throw pillows or neat and spare: the couch is a canvas for domestic life’s necessities, for show or for comfort. Eating alone at home is one of those occurrences when we can either release ourselves from social constraints and codes we assign ourselves when eating in public with others or we can enjoy them ourselves.

Today, that same cafe has undergone a renovation. In place of half of the individually sized tables, a continuous upholstered couch lines the perimeter of the cozy room. This isn’t a couch for one, and from one person to the next, boundaries are kept in check, tread, trespassed, enmeshed.

Queens of Excess

My mother really dislikes being late to any sort of Soileau family function, so after a harried morning of loading the car and last-minute outfit remedies, my stepdad guns the

accelerator and we shoot out of New Orleans like a stray bullet. Sitting next to me, my brother cradles a crystalline cake stand between his legs in the backseat, staring at the November fog over Lake Pontchartrain.

We arrive just on time for Thanksgiving lunch at my grandparents' house, built two years ago in a neighborhood development off I-12. After walking in, I set down my purse on a wooden pew near the foyer, salvaged from an old church in South Louisiana. Nobody ever sits there since it is really made for a congregation who would rather stand or kneel, and so it holds an embroidered throw and a smattering of guests' belongings.

In the sitting room next to the kitchen, the old vegetable-print couch is gone. In its place is a pink imposter, low-slung, no arms, tufted. This hot hued find from the consignment shop replaces the old high-back sofa with rough woven fabric that I would nap on as a child during languid summer days. One time, I woke up from a nap to my grandma's shy cat Alvin curled up next to me, so I pretended I was still sleeping to relish his rare moment of friendliness. In my grandmother's new house, on Thanksgiving Day, the vegetable couch is missing, so I sit somewhere else.

There are certain themes to Thanksgiving that repeat themselves each year. Perhaps a more apt term would be motif or pattern. It varies in place, people, festivities, food, but the tradition--or the elevation of the Thanksgiving meal--is always relatively special. A certain set of ideals enshrine the idea of Thanksgiving as a kind of harvest meal to mark the close of summer's bounty and a segue into the fall and winter months. Today, the Thanksgiving meal is typically a shared meal, its tradition as a family meal morphing to include friends in a supposedly less stressful version of the typical holiday as "Friendsgiving." The commercialization of Thanksgiving is inherently tied into the very DNA of the holiday itself through its food. Much of

the typical Thanksgiving fare is a dressed up mash up of processed foods: canned sweet potato mash topped with marshmallows, canned green beans and cream of mushroom soup come together as green bean casserole topped with processed fried onions. Some families have a large gathering, others do a simple meal with immediate family because that's all there is. But there is a consensus that the meal is the real holiday. The dining table is set, the silver broken out of its dusty drawer, nearby, cans are opened, turkeys thawed, a beautiful re-plating of contrasting processed contents.

Six women are sitting on the back porch as we wait for the neighbors to arrive and food to be ready. The air is saturated with a kind of late-November humidity that one would only get this far south of the Mason-Dixon line. Each woman situates herself on a turquoise chair. I sit next to my grandma; she reaches her hand over mine and says, "Love ya, girl," flashing a grin, her brown eyes alight. Her pixie cut of grey hair is slightly moussed as always, and she wears a purple leopard print top and purple leggings. Large earrings dangle from her earlobes, and shift slightly when she moves her head.

The dining room walls are light, luminous grey, but that's not what you notice. The room sits at the front of the house, close to the foyer. The dark oak dining table's rounded edges stand on the legs, its wooden paws heavy on the silver mauve carpet. On the walls, the room bursts into acrylic flames. Filled with canvases alight with color swaths, the twenty-foot wall serves as a constantly rotating display of my grandma's recent paintings. In one corner, a stack of painted canvases props neatly against the wall, ready for their rotation. In the opposite corner, a woman's bust sits on a pedestal. The Miss Moi series started when my grandma happened upon a discarded mannequin bust in an old consignment shop in Opelousas, Louisiana. She wanted it. The shopkeepers were amused so they gave it to her. She took it home and covered it in bright

acrylics, fabric and found objects, turquoise paint and glass beads swirl on her breasts and converge on the porcelain tea pot lid nipples, while at her back is a wired in paintbrush for her spine. This time, a couple strings of red Mardi Gras beads are draped on her neck. And there she is, on a rotating pedestal to touch and turn for those who notice her, and notice her they do. But she is not the only one; she is the instigator. Miss Moi women continue to populate around the house, the walls occupied by women's torsos, flamboyantly nude and bedazzled and over the top, the Queens of Excess.

The ritual of family meals at my grandparents' house has always been to serve from the island. Whether it's a leftovers smorgasbord on paper plates or here at Thanksgiving with the pewter platters and cloth napkins, there's always the kitchen island. But between the dining room and its wooden claw foot dining table and the kitchen with its island, there is a counter top that holds open the threshold between formality and informality. On it, I set two pecan pies, two pumpkin cheesecakes, apple pie, sweet potato cheesecake, chocolate orange pecan pie, gingerbread, cream sherry cake, a can of whipped cream.

The Thanksgiving meal is one of those moments that is both familiar and unfamiliar. My grandmother has always been a person who is a center of activity in the family, hosting dinners and holidays extensively. This Thanksgiving is not altogether different from ones in years past, though held in her new(ish) house that she and my grandfather built about two years ago. There is the standard Thanksgiving/Christmas fare, at least for my family: dirty rice, corn, coleslaw, green beans with bacon, ham, turkey, cranberry sauce, mashed sweet potatoes. Very traditional, very southern.

Thanksgiving dinner is usually a study in processed foods at the dinner table, doctored up in comfort and tradition, repetition with variation. For my grandmother's green beans, she begins

with bacon. In a heavy stock pot, the bacon sizzles and pops, and then she opens up three cans of cut green beans and pours them into the pot, over the bacon and drippings, bringing them to a simmer, then turning off the heat with the lid on—warm til mealtime. For coleslaw, she begins with a bag of coleslaw mix. This should include shredded carrots, green and red cabbage. Add a cup of raisins and a cup of pecans and a bottle of Vidalia onion salad dressing. Mix well.

There are fifteen guests, but the dining room table only seats eight. More leaves can expand the table by over three extra feet, but they remain clasped inside the oak surface. Instead, the guests overflow to the kitchen island, which is bejeweled in four place settings, and the old wooden side table, where my grandma and paw usually eat their everyday meals, is set for three.

The cowhide stools at the kitchen island stand beneath four place settings with square plates. I glance over to the dining room, and many plates are still on the table—there's room. But I go back to the kitchen island and take a plate, claiming a place in the lesser dining area, unmistakably resigning myself. My brother grabs the one next to me. As my brother goes to set down his plate, full from his first round of food, my grandma comes over.

“Look,” my grandma says, reaching around him and slips a round orange placemat between his plate and the white granite countertop.

My brother and I eat our Thanksgiving meal in relative quietness, perched on the cowhide stools at the kitchen island. Uncle Bobby and Michelle sit next to my brother. Every once in a while, Michelle leans back to speak around Bobby's mass to engage in polite conversation with my brother and me. I relish the quiche, the tartness of the goat cheese and the buttery crust. Later, Bobby stops by me on his way back from a second helping of turkey and ham.

“I didn’t know you were a *vegetarian*,” he says. When I don’t give a sufficiently drawn out answer, he continues. “How long have you...been doing that?” he treads gingerly. We definitely have had this conversation every time I see him, and I have heard the way Bobby talks about vegans and vegetarians before. I wonder why this is all we end up talking about, how our only common ground is the repetition of a similar subject matter that we disagree upon that he somehow always forgets my answer. I say something polite, and allow my eye to travel to the granite countertop, its gleam reflecting back the entirety of the kitchen, the woven placemat, its concentric ridges drawing closer to the center towards the plate where a smattering of cranberry sauce and buttered corn remain.

Thanksgiving never really changes, as the customs are understood, universal, expected. Every year, though the food remains relatively the same, the guest list changes, the conversation topics sway based on current events, the tensions lessen and tighten. The tabletop surfaces that flow through the public areas of the house become the stage sets for the drama of Thanksgiving, props for the food and people and conversations that become the meal itself. The tables become spatial dividers and unifiers, centers of gravity. The table can become a welcome distraction: centerpieces as new conversation starters when the talk becomes a little too political, the textures and ridges as tactile reminders of place. So the tables themselves become characters by order of the people and food that they contain at their helms. Tables, plural, not table, singular, because the multiplicity of a large family meal is characterized by its ebb and flow throughout multiple rooms in a house throughout the day. Is Thanksgiving just as much about finding one’s own place as it is about coming together?

An Exhibition

It is 6:15 on a Tuesday evening in Slocum Hall. The event started at 6, and I have a growing crowd roaming the Marble Room. I had involuntarily invited everyone I saw that day to come to the opening out of fear that no one would come. But here is a hungry crowd of thirty people already, with more people coming. Panic arises in my throat, as I imagine everyone—peers, faculty—leaving early in a hungry, unsatisfied, disappointed horde. I promised food. There is no food. What’s a dinner party without food? Perhaps a dinner *parti* could get away without food.

The caterer calls, and I answer before the first ring ends.

“Hi, hello?” unsuccessfully feigning calm. “Where are you?”

“Um, I’m by Crouse Hospital, but we are going around and around in circles...”

I step out of the Marble Room, we figure out what is the problem (a wrong address), and step back in to watch the spectacle of people interacting with each full-size *parti*: Picnic Mound, Thanksgiving Tables, Solo Couch. Curiosity arises, but the promise of food brings impatience. The food being late allows people to test out each of the articles, play with the accompanying study models on the pedestals. Also atop the pedestals are feedback cards, asking the participants for first impressions, how the artifact influences their dining experience, and a two word description.

The pink and white checkered mound, six feet by six feet, faces the entrance of the Marble Room at an angle, low-slung corrugated plastic frames punctuated by foam at their surfaces.

“Fluffy and modular.”



“I want to take you apart! But recline first.”

“Can I sit?? I can sit right?”

A group of students sits down at the perimeter, hands touching the foam and looking at each other in surprise. Comfortable and strong, unexpectedly, is the consensus. Someone begins to take one of the cubes apart. Others follow suit, and the mound begins to disintegrate into individual seats.

“Very much a picnic.”

One student, who helped to put together the mound, takes a perimeter cube away, sits, and then reclines, lying down as others mill around the exhibition.

Three tables, two on wheels and one immobile, occupy the center of the room: a table topography in pink, three variations, nested and staggered atop each other in thin white frames.



“Baroque, a little grotesque but beautiful.”

People walk around them and, apprehensively at first, touch the surfaces. From “beautiful and intriguing” to “bumpy”, “fleshy and unsettling,” these tables elicit a variety of responses.

Someone walks around stood in the middle of the three tables, paging through my thesis prep book, then tentatively moves a table. Another person takes the other edge, and angles it outward, surprised by their lightness, their instability.

“Are you a couch?”

Five squat white blocks at various heights sit on a bright pink mat at the far end of the marble room. Conceived as high relief corduroy, foam striates their surfaces and vinyl blankets and ties these ridges together, creating the connection points from one block to another. Conceived as a high relief corduroy, each block’s surface character resides in its ability to form



with another to create a cohesive whole, larger than the unit. Sitting is audibly loud but physically soft. The unit is for one but can handle more, the whole forming an ambivalent series of material juxtapositions.

“It would have been great if there weren’t other people sitting on it.”

When the food arrives, everything shifts. A weight lifts.

The tables pull apart. Chairs appear and tuck into the table at dining height, while two picnic mounds stand in for supplementary chairs. The middle-height table holds diners seated on studio stools. The highest surface creates its own dining table, drawn away from the others, creating a standing room only space. People write, read, and chat as they eat

At the picnic mound, where there is no solid surface, laps become impromptu tables out of necessity. Interactions heighten as each person picks up a tuft and turns it towards a friend.

The “solo” couch seats four people at a time. People perch on their own block with plate in hand, facing one person, unintentionally with backs to another. They would leave; another group would start to populate it again.

Each one of these artifacts is the product of a sincere inquiry into the meaning of what each of those events meant as a product of spatial and material shaping. Coming from the discipline of architecture, I approach the narrative through architecture, through event, through the physicality and reactability of tangible, built space. The fact that these are dining artifacts have mostly to do with the intimacy and familiarity with the daily act of eating.

During the exhibition, people plopped down on the solo couch, sitting on every horizontal surface available, spreading out. A person lying down is joined by another, who sits at their head. Another joined at their side. A baby, her mother with her arms at a distance at her side, clamored at the edges of the couch on the soft mat, touching with curious abandon. The couch for one seemed to be, rather, a couch for two, three, four, or even five. The design produced almost an opposite reaction than its intended one, clustering multiple people, gathering them closer, rather than sequestering one.

The picnic mounds were not obviously for sitting, yet upon sitting, surprised reactions abounded. They required a level of taking a risk and trying it out. The softness of the picnic mounds contrasted with the rigidity of their frame, and, after an initial surprise about their solidity and comfort, inspired picking up and moving around. The element of surprise was probably the most substantial reaction. Taking a risk, staking out new ground, and being pleasantly surprised, was the overall effect—just like the unexpected pleasantness of taking a meal outdoors.

When the food arrived, people picked up the picnic mounds and brought them over to the Thanksgiving tables. These tables inspired hierarchy and formality, a restrained curiosity. At the exhibition, they were, on one hand, the central space of gathering and eating, and on the other, the spaces of most restraint. The intricacy of the table surfaces (and their not being flat) created disorientation. Yet because of the destabilization of these surfaces –bumpy, clear, textured, marbled—people paid attention. There was a detailed intricacy and tactile appeal to these tables, like a dressed table with centerpieces or a beautiful surface material. Like the story of Thanksgiving as I had experienced it from my own perspective, there were different spaces to choose from, creating the hierarchies that naturally occur when separation is possible.

The Thanksgiving Tables created an easy relationship between user and spatial conditions through the ability to move them around. While they did not really produce a spatial marbling per sé, the tables were moved around quite a bit, partially out of curiosity, partially to accommodate eating. By having three separate operations of an idea of “marbling” at each table, there were enough variations to keep it interesting while maintaining a cohesive whole. With the audience being mostly architecture students, ideas of hierarchy and layering were picked up. The most prevalent responses were “pink” and “beautiful”, tending to an idea that their visual impacts were just as important as their spatial ones. While they didn’t spur any ideas of Thanksgiving specifically, they inspired collaborative dining, becoming the foci of the exhibition and spurring conversation through their tactile seductiveness.

We are going to eat no matter what, and we will eat in a given space, adjusting accordingly. It is through subtle architectural cues that start to trigger these adjustments and accommodations, to pause and ask the user to respond.

The ability for the translation from event, real-life, to its physical manifestation is an act of architecture. By allowing these events, these creative nonfiction narratives, becoming physical, in turn create their own narratives—their own translations of these cultural functions—and suggest the creation of active, rather than passive, architectural characters to influence the arc of daily life.

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