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'Foodprint'

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While "food for the city" becomes a hot topic with rising attention toward food, an interesting event is taking place from June 26th. It is "Foodprint" organized by the The Hague-based art and design institute "Stroom." The event, taking on the challenges of food in the city in our contemporary society has started off with a symposium where many specialists from different countries have been invited. "Foodprint" is not just a one-time event, but a long-term project that will be held over the course of two years.

As attention toward food increases, various issues such as food safety, food self-sufficiency, securement of food supply, and increased efficiency of agricultural production have become topics of debate. New ideas for food that can be integrated into urban life and space are called for. In response to this, there was much reference to concepts such as "perm culture" (coined from "permanent" and "agriculture") and "intensive micro farming" at the symposium rather than to large farm projects. "Foodprint" provides new approaches to break away, albeit partly from the current food situation led mainly by larger corporations and import, and to increase food self-sufficiency in the city by reconsidering the city as a place for food production, all the while involving the general public.

While envisaging the future of agriculture and the food production cycle, these approaches also characteristically call attention to their high economic efficiency. The ultimate goal is to explore ways that enable us to coexist with nature in our modern society. Naturally these measures should be taken from a long-term perspective. Yet in our current society, people, especially city-dwellers tend to expect quick results. This tendency is also present in the world of food production. Needless to say, we must wait patiently for good sprouts to come out. In this sense, coexistence with nature may also mean coexistence with time. The last speaker at the symposium was the Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Ms. Verburg. Her presence was also part of a national campaign.

Photo 1: Foodprint logo

Photo 2: Scene before the symposium

Photo 3: Exhibits

Photo 4: Speech by Minister Verburg

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The actual planning of the symposium was commissioned to the organization Het Portaal. People in various fields - designers, artists, consultants, government officials, and researchers, all with positive attitudes and approaches toward agriculture gathered at the symposium which proceeded in a warm atmosphere. I am sure this occasion has given birth to seeds of new businesses and I had a very good time being with people engaged in (various aspects of) food. I felt their lives were full of pleasant moments involving food, and that nourished their strong enthusiasm. The place was filled with smiles and laughter.

Many guest speakers were invited to the symposium. I attended lectures and presentations given in English such as the ones on American farmers, and about the revitalization of local communities through food in Africa. Organizations such as MVRDV were participating in the lectures held in Dutch.

One of the participants I met, Mr. Will Allen is the leader of the organization Growing Power. This 60-year-old former professional basket ball player is now a star figure in the agricultural world. The word he kept on repeating was "Soil, soil, soil." To produce good, dense fruit and vegetables, he always starts from making good soil. Contaminated soil is not a problem for him; he just piles healthy soil on top and starts growing vegetables. This way, he can ameliorate the quality of soil while producing vegetables. It is much more cost effective than digging up contaminated soil and replacing it with new soil. I am sure Growing Power will keep on making new contributions to the society.

The day after the symposium, Will went to Rotterdam where he was invited as the main guest speaker at a lecture on food for the city, co-hosted by Wageningen University and Eetbaar Rotterdam. The theme of Stroom's "Foodprint" is actually a subject that cities all across the Netherlands are interested in.

Photo 5: Scene from the lectures

Photo 6: Mr. Will Allen and Mr. Jan Willem van der Schans of Wageningen University

Photo 7: Will is 2 meters tall; when I crouch down to a small Japanese height, he towers over me like the former pro wrestler, Giant Baba

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A system I found interesting was SPIN-Farming from Canada. SPIN-Farming aims to create a farming system easy for anyone to implement – high efficiency cultivation on small plots of land. It is “the ultimate vegetable garden.” The lecturer Ms. Paula Sobie recommended using electric tools wherever you can. Second hand tools are good enough; use something readily available and keep your costs low. She explained that urban areas are actually well-suited for cultivation owing to the fresh water supply. According to the presentation, annual crop sales on half a hectare in the city comes up to around 1.5 million yen, an income one can get by on. We shouldn't underestimate the potential of those empty lots in the city.

The architect Ms. Carolyn Steel who has published the book “Hungry City” gave a presentation on her studies on food culture. Taking the City of London as an example she examined the relationship between the history of western food culture and contemporary society. For instance, the Cheapside area in London maintains its name from the older days when it used to be a lower-end market place. Her original views were very interesting.

Another great speaker was Mr. John Thackara. He had gathered an enormous amount of data with his extraordinary research skills. But it was his persuasive presentation method with a strong narrative that truly amazed me. For instance, in this slide “Food = Water” he explains how water is necessary for any kind of food production with concrete figures. Did you know that we need 15,500 liters of water to produce one kilogram of beef, and 24,000 liters of water for one kilogram of chocolate?

Photo 8: The five “holy appliances” for SPIN-Farming

Photo 9: Ms. Carolyn Steel

Photo 10: Slide “Food = Water”

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Works by MVRDV and van Bergen Kolpa Architecten, two groups that have been involved in food-related design projects were presented as well. In the past, MVRDV has created “Pig City,” an (urban design) proposal focusing on pig farming. This time, they presented “City Pig.” The method is similar with more emphasis on connecting livestock production to our urban lifestyle. It is based on thoroughly investigated data, and is more like a research project. The work has been developed by The Why Factory, a research group led by MVRDV’s Winy Maas together with the Delft University of Technology.

The City of The Hague would need 65 pig farms with an average of 4,300 pigs in each (to be self-sufficient, but “City Pig” suggests that by changing the dietary habits of the inhabitants, 12 farms could be enough. Of course there is not enough space for 65 farms in the city, and the only solution would be to build high-rise farms (as in “Pig City.”) Such far-from-utopian solutions receive various responses; at times, the public opinion may insist on pursuing utopian ideas and oppose to the solution (precisely because of its practicality). The proposed dietary habit that would reduce the number of farms to 12 was the Japanese diet. This seemed fitting, and the audience showed much interest. At the same time, there were perceptive comments on points such as the excessive packaging culture in Japan.

The work from van Bergen Kolpa Architecten proposes innovative ways of agriculture from an architectural perspective. Their previous research on food and landscape “Food Graffiti” is well-known in the Dutch architectural world. This time they presented “Park Supermarket”, a dream park plan that integrates ideas for food and public spaces with eco-friendly approaches. Using the landscape skillfully, the park has tilapia breeding sites, and tropical fruits can be harvested all year round. “Park Supermarket” is developed with the cooperation of Wageningen University’s research institute Alterra, and the approaches seem highly reliable and realistic while being like a dream.

“Foodprint,” the program providing broad perspectives on food also includes various art projects in collaboration with local artists and workshops such as cooking classes for kids. Actually, I am teaching at this cooking class. Through introducing “cute” recipes like “teddy bear sandwiches,” I hope I can nurture the children’s interest toward food.

Photo 11: “City Pig,” an evolutionary version of “Pig City”

Photo 12: Landscape approach by “Park Supermarket”

Photo 13: The cooking class I took part in; kids are always so sweet