Creating New Forms of Urban Experience. The case study “Neighborfood”

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Abstract
All over the world, public concern about issues of access to food and food safety is increasing as the planet’s population grows. Awareness of the real distance between systems of production and those of consumption systems is becoming clearer.

Globalization, urbanization and the development of society are creating new forms of urban experience and contexts of transformation where information technology and different cultural communities are the true protagonists of change.

Food experiences, eating patterns and person-food relationships, respond to a complex system of situational factors and choices which individuals must make, and are grounded in logical considerations that are neither tangible nor easily understood (let us take a look at workday eating habits, with food cooked in the microwave and compare it with the weekend, when time and resources are devoted to preparing elaborate dishes and/or cooking them following recipes).

The aim of this paper is to provide a critique of the evolution and role of digital technology as far as the food experience is concerned. Food here, has been

studied as both an object and as an instrument (tool), from a theoretical and empirical point of view to generate a series of concepts, capable of delineating a number of trends to subject to the appraisal of the community (and the hybrid city).

One concept/case study will be presented in detail: Neighborfood.

Author Keywords

Food systems, community development, urban experience design, ICT, HCI, food chain.

Introduction

Technology has always changed the relationship between human beings and food in that it has impacted on the value people attribute to food itself. From the detailed examination carried out here, it emerges that digital technology (like all previous technology) has penetrated the field of nutrition, modifying the food experience, especially as far as activities associated with providing, choosing (buying) and transforming food are concerned. The aspect of the food experience, which to date has been less influenced by digital technology appears to be that of fruition, whether individual or collective.

Well-being needs to become an increasingly more tangible aspect and therefore definable dimension of life; the object of investigation and community pleasure, not only through networks but, in particular, through proximity, diversity, and discovery, the co-construction of a culture for the communities in which people live.

Networks and digital technology are capable of uniting people located in distant places and at different times. Here we propose a different approach, that of viewing the network as a source of stimulation and aggregation for people who live at short distances, and who, perhaps because of increasingly fragmented and individualistic lifestyle, tend not to see, know, touch, or share in a positive, productive manner, the space in which they live.

NEIGHBORFOOD case study and concept reveals the need people have to re-define their private, domestic and family milieus.

Well- being through food: space and time

Neighborfood is a scenario addressed to recuperating the human facet of the human– food binomial.

This is an ICT application, which permits users to buy fresh and homemade meals from their own neighbors. The added value is that of being able to eat meals made ‘at home’, every day without cooking, of trying out different cuisines, tasting and evaluating the different versions of the same recipe, provided by different people (a legacy of family practice). Another added value is that of encouraging people to get to know their neighbors, to build connections and relationships, not simply online, but offline.

In this case, food acts not only as a medium of exchange, but also as an instrument of knowledge and aggregation. The ‘exchange’ process also includes restitution of the pots, pans and other implements provided by the cook. The online feedback, shared with other network users, is complementary to the offline feedback between those who cook and those who enjoy the meals.

Fig1 Basic formula

Compared to the basic formula, the Neighborfood concept has been enriched by the following functions:
- **Real-time learning**. The preparation and cooking of the dishes can be followed online. A camera placed in the kitchen permits users to monitor procedures, but also to understand how dishes are made.
- **The time function** permits the user to become acquainted with customs belonging to other cultures and families. Meals are prepared in fact, following the 'meal timing' of the host family and not the needs of the user.

Fig 2 Enriched formula

From Research to Emergent Behaviors.

From focus group surveys it has emerged that people, for instance, tend to prefer an invitation to dinner at home, to dinner at a restaurant. The home environment, in terms of food consumption, continues to be the foodscape preferred by people due to the comfort, intimacy and relaxation offered. Thanks to this scenario, users are encouraged to consume meals in the comfort of their homes, without renouncing the freshness, taste and flavor of a home-cooked meal prepared instantly (vaguely akin to the use of ready-made meals).
On the other hand, Neighborfood is a medium where networks and the web serve to reinforce a sense of belonging to a place and a community, an urban neighbourhood. The case of Neighborfood changes users' perceptions of their district of the significance given to food, where a dish prepared in a home (the neighbor's) helping to transmit culture and tradition. Thanks to the comfort of browsing (which the application permits), to proximity, the transmission and delivery of knowledge "in person" to neighbors, as well as the variety of dishes from different cultural and family traditions and memories it provides, Neighborfood is an excellent tool for the discovery of food. As Harper and Grimes say in their study (2008) real changes in terms of custom and eating habits are formed and structured in specific geographical places [1]
The emergent level is that one often referred as "creative design". In this context, design is viewed as completely unrelated to problem solving. It applies techniques to "envision" human activities that could not exist without the artefact or system being designed. The emergent level addresses uncertain situations but

definitely the more charming and challenging for the designer. [2]

In this sense we cannot predict *a priori* or in a comprehensive way what behavior the use of Neighborfood may produce, but we can hypothesize that it will impact both directly and indirectly on social practices related to nutrition. According to this logic, Neighborfood might also lead to new, first-time socialization and aggregation dynamics in a district. This is a good example of when ubiquitous computing helps bridge the gaps existing between difference temporal and spatial dimensions (urban life: work, travel, entertainment) and makes many of the currently strategies used for managing time and space, unnecessary. With ubiquitous computing individual space and social space tend to overlap, like the time devoted to work and devoted to leisure. The interface tends to dissolve boundaries, and digital devices create bodily closeness, as they grow increasingly popular in the interactive environments where people live. [3]

Conclusion

The digital and network technologies available to date have focused predominantly on exploration and selection, providing powerful human media and information sharing possibilities.

They also impact heavily on food-purchasing decisions and customer-orientation. With regard to the experience of food processing, in recent years, new technologies have been introduced (via home automation and digital home appliances and networks) providing the user quick and user-friendly tools.

Harper and Grimes (2008) call these technologies "corrective", i.e., able to support users in the most difficult tasks, and which require only a minimum of effort to understand. The food experience that currently seems to be less affected by the use of digital technology is that of eating, the daily use of the food (the only exceptions are restaurants and cutting edge food and wine events).

Only recently, some scholars have considered this area of research, proposing a number of solutions (currently still at the concept or prototype stage).

Different disciplines (culinary arts, food design, System Design, critical design...) are approaching the question of food in a new way, based on trans-disciplinary design criteria.

In this paper, we used the Interaction Design method to design and identify some of the potential scenarios where digital and network technologies are a part of the experience of food consumption (both individual and collective).

The concept presented here shares the view that technologies, even digital ones, can favor the food experience enhancing the meanings of existing food and/or enriching it with new meaning: technology can affect the relationships between man and food. The question is: whether the digital and network technologies may also be included in the enjoyment of food? Might this be a field of research on which to focus? In what way might the association of digital technologies with the food-enjoyment experience affect and change the relationship between humans and food? And how might they change habits and steer people towards more healthy and sustainable habits? We cannot say, to date, how the technologies (examined in this project, and by international research on this subject still in progress), may change and affect the experience of human food consumption.

What emerges from the analysis presented here, is the fact that a technology, a new artefact, changes the

activities of people in some way. Only in some cases, however, the consolidated habits of an individual are subject to change. What is interesting and should be studied is the reason why this happens: how the dual nature of food, with which humans interact constantly during an entire lifetime, witnesses and produces differences, not only of a micro-genetic, but also of an ontogenetic and cultural types (different communities) associated with food. The progressive and growing "love" user experience can reach can even place food itself (nourishment and subsistence) into the background.

The concept proposed here Neighborfood derives from positive human food experiences, and identify some emerging behavior patterns. In some cases it emerges that digital technology affects human values, the family, health and relaxation, profoundly and can change attitudes towards the food experience: by increasing user awareness of what food means to individual and social wellbeing, by encouraging and supporting communications networks and collaborative areas (not global), making meals a dimension where the user can express their creativity and co-construct knowledge in collaboration with others [4]

Acknowledgements

I shall begin by thanking prof. Antonio Rizzo, who gave me the opportunity of leaving academia and venturing out to address new challenges, of undertaking a quest.

I also thank prof. Alice Julier, who was and is an amazing mentor to me, although we stand on two different sides of the Atlantic.

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