

# ‘Architecture and Macaroni:’ Digesting knowledge through ingesting food

Lisa Hsieh remembers the Japan Institute of Architect’s 1995 exhibition

In 1995, The Japan Institute of Architecture (JIA) hosted an atypical architectural show, ‘Architecture and Macaroni’, in Tokyo, with the aim of conveying architectural creativity to the general Japanese public. ‘Architecture and Macaroni’ showcased twenty eminent Japanese architects’ macaroni designs, and furthermore, invited the visitors to eat ‘architecture on a plate’ in the gallery [1]. Accordingly, the show consisted of two parts: display (for the eyes) and dinner (for the palate) and each part took place in half of the gallery. On display were macaroni models in fibre-reinforced plastic (FRP)<sup>1</sup> at a 1:20 scale on the pedestals. Spotlights were projected

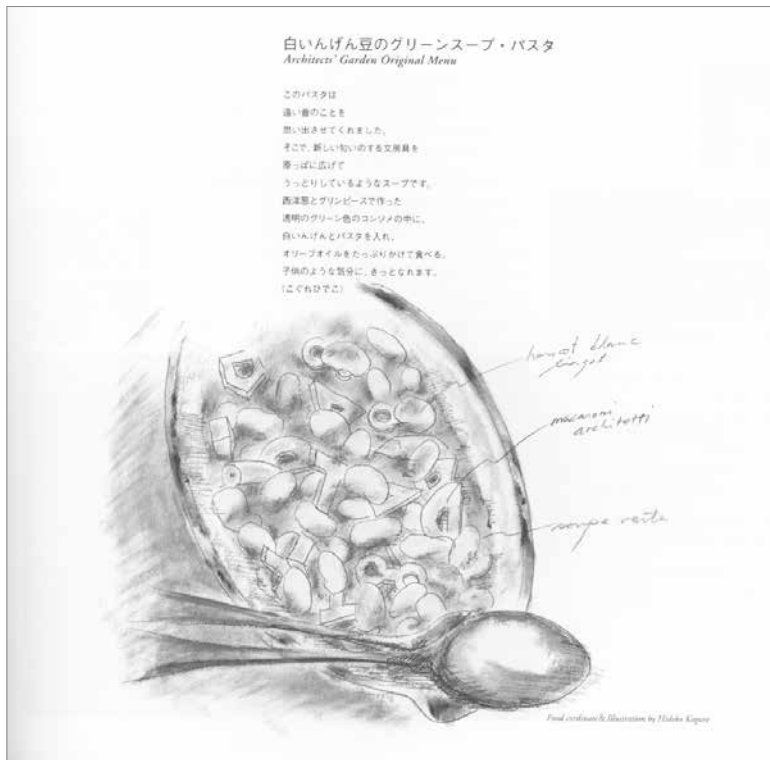
directly onto the models, with the rest of the space contrastingly pitch black. The dining area was set like a typical Japanese noodle shop, with rows of tables in shiny black lacquer and chairs of the same material, facing each other in pairs. The pasta dishes were prepared following Japanese food critic Hideko Kogure’s recipes, specially concocted for each macaroni design. They were cooked in a cafeteria kitchen on the premises and brought to the tables for sampling. Between the display and the dinner, imaginably, a deictic shift took place. Descending from their pedestals, the macaroni-architecture softened, swelled, blistered, melted, contorted, and deformed, and was finally consumed for gustatory pleasure. Meanwhile, the visitors were asked to learn architecture as they ate it. ‘Architecture and Macaroni’ thereby proposed a curious pedagogical model [2].

In conjunction with the show, JIA published an exhibition catalogue, ‘Architecture and Macaroni’,<sup>2</sup> which features the edible designs in detail, including the architects’ notes, sketches, technical drawings, photographs, and Kogure’s recipes composed in poems.

Formal metaphors abound in the Japanese macaroni designs. Edward Suzuki’s ‘Macaroni Architectti – the Magnificent Seven’ introduces a full set of architectural drafting tools: a pencil, an eraser, a t-square, a triangle, an arc, plus a pair of master architect Le Corbusier’s glasses and a monopoly house [3]. Atsushi Kitagawara’s ‘Le paste di Madame Edwarda’ shows a luscious trio: a pair of lips, an ear, and a breast. In the shape of a slightly



1 Architecture and Macaroni’, the catalogue



2 'Architecture and Macaroni', the menu

curved strip covered with sharp-edged holes, Shoji Hayashi's 'Puncture' is reminiscent of a cheese or vegetable grater. Akio Okumura's 'i flutte' looks like a whistle, Kaoru Kasai's 'Ottoco' an organ (or a *noh* mask), and Kenya Hara's 'Tateroni' a castle. Some visual comparisons are culturally coded, such as Kanji Hayashi's 'Serie Macchel'occhi', which may seem like a pretzel to the Westerners – purportedly the shape of the pretzel mimics a praying monk – but any literate Japanese would identify it with the Japanese character 'め'.

The metaphor of 'Magnificent Seven' is especially didactic, as it not only communicates the architect's working method but also gives spatial lessons. This set of macaroni has the capacity to transport the viewer into other spaces and time. In presenting instruments of the past (presently eclipsed by digital devices) on the pedestal, the FRP t-square, the arc, and so on bring to mind the display of antique stationery on an old study desk in a museum of history. These analogue drafting tools make one nostalgic: sending one to the past, but being devoid of details, they dissociate themselves from reality at once past or future.

Indeed, the FRP models of 'Magnificent Seven' appear more fantastical than historical. The macaroni rejects the look of real

food by looking instead like a pencil, an eraser, a t-square, etc. In a reductive manner, the pieces show perfectly straight edges, perfectly round circles, perfectly smooth surfaces. The ruler has no measurement marks; the pair of glasses has no temple although they have a bridge. Their forms are angular and manifestly harsh. The sharp tools in FRP simply look indigestible.

Therefore departing from the reality of food, 'Magnificent Seven' sends the viewer into the space of fiction. Juxtaposing a mini monopoly house with a big pencil, this tool set recalls the literary device of 'miniature' (as conceptualised by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*) as a means to lead the reader across reality into fantasy. In the fantastic realm of 'Magnificent Seven', the cohort of instruments not only triumphs over the mini house by size, but each one of them stands tall and proud. Unlike the common compact macaroni – such as the hollow tubes (*penne*), the spirals/screws (*fusilli*), the ribbons/butterflies (*farfalle*), and the shells (*conchiglie*) – content with a recumbent position, the architect's design insists on reaching upward. In fact, this desire to erect a vertical structure is expressed across the board in 'Architecture and Macaroni'. For example, in 'Tateroni', Kenya Hara builds a mini

food tower; in 'Semi Constructive', Kengo Kuma bends and turns a string of pasta upward, which then coils back down, terminating in a closed knot. In reality, made of dough, not FRP, these mini-structures would no sooner stand than go limp. But these fantastic macaroni designs exemplify architectural integrity – a building must stand out against gravity (among other natural forces, such as wind and seismic load, to be considered).

Collectively, these fantastical FRP models serve a practical function; they form a concrete visual menu. The visitors 'read' them and then sat down at the tables to eat the real stuff. This procedure and setup smacked of the idiosyncratic Japanese culture of *sampuru* ('sample'), the fake food models used across restaurants in Japan. The industry of *sampuru* emerged in 1932 when Western cuisines flooded into Japan and baffled the Japanese customers – even with a Japanese translation of the menu. Gifu entrepreneur Takizo Iwasaki saw the business opportunity (his very first *sampuru*, a fluffy rice omelette with a drop of thick red ketchup on top, was inspired by the wax fruit and vegetables used in his nutrition classes at school). Aimed at realistic representation, Iwasaki created food replicas true to life – *true* in the sense that they even faked natural imperfections: engineering bruises in a banana sample, copying the patterns of the fibres and tendons in a beef strip, etc. *Sampuru* captures every complex detail without slacking or loosening. Iwasaki eventually streamlined his manufacturing technology.<sup>3</sup> In Japan today, from eateries to *izakaya* (bars), restaurateurs arrange *sampuru* in the display windows at the front of their shops; from sushi, sashimi, *tempura*, *gyoza* (pan-fried dumplings) and *sukiyaki* (hot pot) to sandwiches, pizza, hamburgers and beers, their fake models encompass both Japanese-style and Western-style food.

Journalist Yasunobu Nose theorises *sampuru* in connection with visual appreciation of food. He argues that 'Japanese people eat with their eyes' (*me de taberu Nihonjin*); they tend to 'first "taste" dishes by sight, then eat with their mouths and stomachs.'<sup>4</sup> Although the fantastic macaroni designs are antithetical to *sampuru*'s formal conception, which is grounded in realism, their FRP models on show

similarly enticed the visitors to eat with their eyes. But beyond *sampuru's* role to verily represent food, the architects' macaroni must also reflect architectural creativity. In fact, that was its primary job. Their designs were under no obligation to look real or delicious. 'Architecture on a plate' references itself, inwardly. The visitors read the food to learn architecture, and only later they consumed it to complete this special lesson.

But like *sampuru*, the macaroni designs exercise precision, be it of an abstract, geometrical exactitude rather than an imitation of real food. Every line, curve, surface, is measured and calculated to demonstrate architectural finesse. There is no room for ambiguity. If *sampuru* reflects the Japanese business ethos of perfectionism, the macaroni models' exactness epitomises the architect's creativity

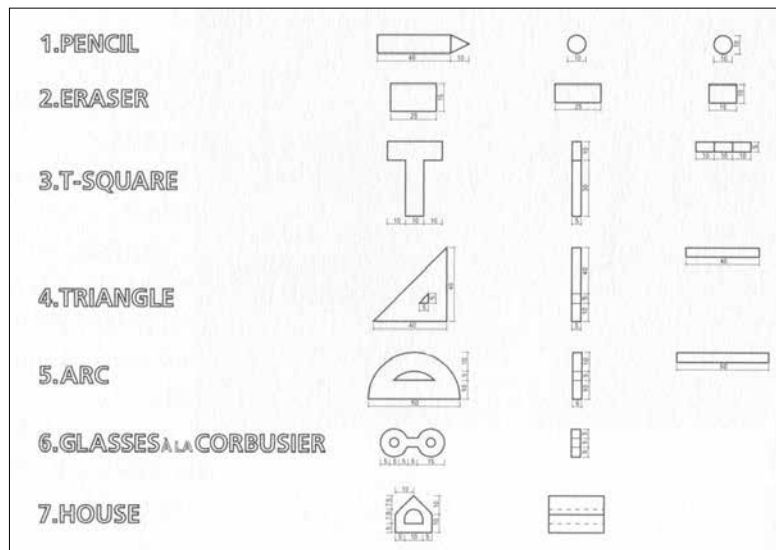
solidified in FRP on the pedestal.

Conceivably, the exactitude of the macaroni designs and the verisimilitude of *sampuru* would extend to their sites of production, the kitchen. In the case of the latter, German director Wim Wenders' documentary *Tokyo-Ga* (1985) affords a glimpse into the exotic behind-the-scenes activity of making *sampuru*.<sup>5</sup> The 'kitchen', which is a factory in actuality, has all the normal commercial kitchen equipment: sinks, ovens, etc., but the productive activities within are strangely shut off. A man crouches on the floor, pouring a clear liquid over (real) sushi and sashimi placed in a large metal tray – fake food actually begins with real food. The man is making a mould. Next he pours liquid wax into the mould, lets it cool and solidify. Near him, another man is making a sandwich. He piles (fake) lettuce leaves, ham,

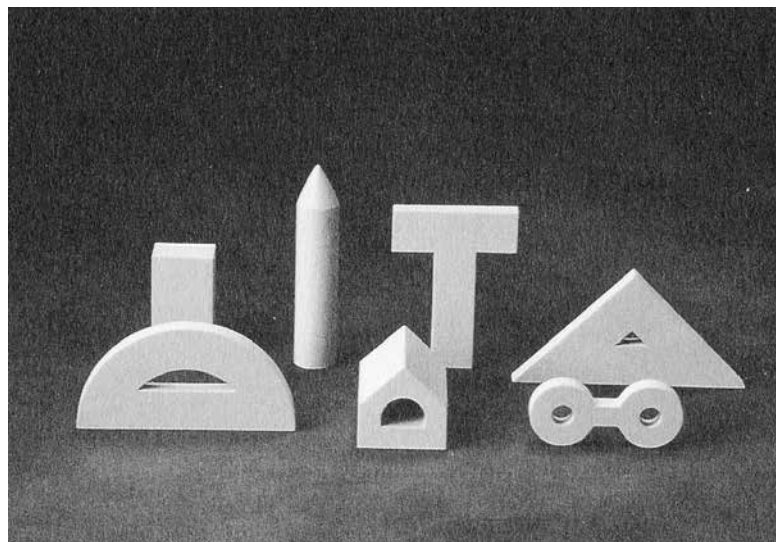
cheese, and toast and then shaves off their uneven edges. Working directly on the stainless-steel surface shows that, in this kitchen, there is no concern for hygiene. The workers grab sushi with their dirty hands. They leave tools, not generally used for cooking, on the floor. They even paint food to correct its colours. On top of the visual blunders, there is likely a false smell as well (though not captured by the film); rather than the tantalising aroma of food, the smell of wax fills the kitchen. Despite the verisimilitude lent to *sampuru's* 'kitchen' by its setting and equipment, the production within belies its authenticity.

In contrast, 'Architecture and Macaroni' 'borrowed a real kitchen to create its feast. Though cooking and preparation went on behind the scenes, imaginably the architects must have brought their rulers along with them into the kitchen. Their technical/construction drawings (that is, cooking instructions) show painstaking exactitude. For example, 'Magnificent Seven's' pencil is 10 mm in diameter, and 40 mm (the unsharpened part) plus 10 mm (the sharpened part) in length; its eraser is 10 x 15 x 25 cubic mm, and so on. Even more exact is Jun Harada's 'Macala'. Harada engineered an intricate geometrical object, representing a ball-flower – a popular architectural ornament for cathedral design in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, essentially a ball inserted in the cup of a flower. 'Macala' comprises a hollow ellipsoidal (50 mm in diameter in plan) of extraordinarily thin surface (1 mm thick) punctured by a rounded X-cross on the top. Their fanlike blades (flower pedals) curve up slightly (5 mm); in tandem, the bottom surface incurvates upward. Governed by precise mathematical measurement of the ruler and the compass, the macaroni evinces no ambiguity; no anomalies can be found. Everything is precise and intelligible. 'Macala' represents a paragon of geometrical perfection in a vegetal-floral motif.

Whether 'Macala' or 'Magnificent Seven', the Japanese spirit of precision percolates through the macaroni designs to the minute measurement of 1 mm – especially in contrast to American artist Claes Oldenburg's messy, pop food art. In terms of subject matter, 'Magnificent Seven' with the



3 'Architecture and Macaroni', the drawing schedule



4 'Architecture and Macaroni', the models

architect's tools displayed on a plate finds an intriguing paradox in Oldenburg's 'False Food Selection' (1966) with food – two fried eggs, a strip of bacon, hamburger, a tomato, a pickle, a chocolate doughnut, and three wafers – contained in a tool box.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the Japanese macaroni of perfect geometries, the false food (of rubber and/or plastic) shows organic cooked forms commonly seen in real life. For example, the egg whites are amorphous and uneven, especially when compared to their round egg yolks. They glow with greasiness. They are adorned with traces of burst bubbles, as if incurred from the process of frying with cooking oil. (But unlike *sampuru's* built-in flaws of nature, *false food* is sloppy imitation.) In their ostensive glow and unnatural colours they reveal their falsehood. They are anything but faithful copies of their original counterparts, and stay imperishable in their encasement.

In contrast, the Japanese macaroni models moved on to their edible counterparts. In the case of 'Magnificent Seven', the visitors were served with a bowl of 'White Bean Green Soup'. The architect's pencils, erasers, t-squares, arcs, Le Corbusier's glasses, and the miniature monopoly houses swam in the hot soup. Their metaphors became literal food to be actually eaten. But here ingestion was a didactically loaded activity. The visitors continued to learn with their eyes and mind, now assisted by their hands, mouths, and stomachs. One spooned up, say, a t-square, and identified it much as one plays toy alphabetic blocks to learn letters [4]. One could further connect this bite-sized carbohydrate lump with its enlarged FRP other seen earlier on display. After mindfully gazing at the piece awhile, he/she popped it into his/her mouth.

What loomed behind the thinking of 'architecture on a plate' was, perhaps, the psychology of 'you are what you eat'. That is, by making something part of your body, literally taking it in, the properties of what is ingested would be imparted to the body. In theory, Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies* that 'whoever partakes of [beefsteak] assimilates a bull-like strength'.<sup>7</sup> In practice, 'you are what you eat' in the sense of acquiring the attributes of the food ingested is visibly evident as in consuming large amounts of fat,

one grows fatter, and in ingesting large amounts of carotene (carrots, tomatoes, papayas, etc.), one gets an orangey skin pigmentation. So within this frame of mind, 'architecture on the plate' served JIA's didactic aim to impart architectural creativity. By ingesting 'Magnificent Seven', the visitors would acquire a set of architectural skills – becoming even as masterful as Le Corbusier!

'Architecture and Macaroni' spawned unprecedented novel macaroni forms from a fantastical set of the architect's tools to a delicate ball-flower. The food was its media and the feast, its means. At display, one read food; at dinner, one ate architecture. One fantastical steamy 'architecture on a plate' after another, architectural creativity was at last digested at the gut level.

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#### Notes

1. FRP is a material for precision engineering, commonly used in the aerospace, automotive, marine, and construction industries.
2. *Architecture and Macaroni*, Tokyo: TOTO Shuppan, 1997.
3. His company Iwasaki Be-I still owns the largest market share in Japan, and since 1975 it has extended business to America. See: <<http://www.iwasaki-bei.co.jp/>>.
4. Quoted in Yoko Hani, 'A Feast for the Eyes', *The Japan Times* (24 November 2002).
5. The documentary *Tokyo-Ga* is essentially about Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. But its subjects widely include scenes of contemporary Tokyo, such as pachinko and plastic food displays. *Tokyo-Ga* was screened in the 1985 Cannes Film Festival.
6. 'False Food Selection' is a prototype for proposed Fluxus Edition. See: *Fluxus, etc. Addenda 1: the Gilbert and Lila Silverman collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, c1983), p. 56.
7. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957).

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