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The neighbourhood home: An environments system from sharing to caring

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Abstract

Cities are changing. Wars, climate change and idealised better life opportunities open the doors for massive migration. Unfortunately, however, the new arrivals with their different backgrounds and lifestyles are often perceived as a threat to pre-existing culture and home. But what is ‘home’? From the results of ethnographic research and an online open survey conducted for a master’s degree final thesis in systemic design, ‘home’ is the neighbourhood that involves all the values and behaviours that everyone needs in their everyday life. This research led to the academic concept of the ‘neighbourhood home’, a system of new environments for future inclusive cities that aims to make all the inhabitants ‘feel at home’. This notion is based on the idea that inclusion is developed through empathy, creativity and know-how, discovering the cultural rituals and myths of different peoples. In every structure (like Homes of Music, Language, Clothing, etc.), new and old citizens can rediscover their common roots, which have always been, today as yesterday, interconnected through a multiplicity of cultural handicraft expressions. The pilot project designed is ‘MeetEat’, a home that promotes informal cooking classes and social eating and is ingredient-driven (chosen on a seasonal basis) and organised by volunteer citizens in the neighbourhood. With the neighbourhood home’ thesis, we aim to propose a system that can turn diffidence into curiosity, conflicts into sharing and exclusion into caring.

Keywords: City, Migration, Roots, Inclusion, Sharing

Introduction: Big cities and migrations

The world is constantly changing, and so are cities. They grow, their boundaries fade, and they change as fast as the new economic, commercial, social and political dynamics. According to the World Urbanization Prospect 2018, globally, most people live today in urban areas. Figures have radically changed from 751 million city residents in 1950 to 4.2 billion in 2018, and this is expected to increase to 8.6 billion in 2030 and 9.8 billion in 2050, more than double compared to today (UN Department of Public Information, 2018).

“Cities have been sites of incessant and most rapid change throughout their history ... The change is so profound and the pace of change so mind-bogglingly quick that we can hardly believe our eyes and find our way amidst once familiar places”. (Bauman, 2018)

While in some developing countries high walls separate the rich from the slums, generating an immovable division that does not allow for social mixing, big cities of Europe and North America see their borders widen, making space in the suburbs for new inhabitants. Cities become worlds that mirror the incessant mobility of our age, with the respective fears and anxiety. New and old inhabitants walk through their streets, with their dreams, problems, needs and different backgrounds.

“On the one hand, the world becomes a city, an immense city where the same large companies, the same products are found everywhere. On the other hand, the city, the big city, represents a world. The diversity of the Earth, the diversity between rich and poor, ethnic, cultural, origin and condition diversity: in the big city everything mixes. In it, we collide with the diversity inherent in the world”. (Augé, 2017)

Big cities of developing countries are theatres of incessant movements: today’s citizens have frenetic lives, and frenetic work and sometimes forget natural human rhythms and sociality. However, the entire world also sees every day continuous migratory movements of different people who must leave their country, and their homes and feel the loss of their roots.

“Nomads traditionally studied by ethnologists have a sense of place and territory, a sense of time and return. This nomadism is, therefore, different from what is metaphorically called as such when speaking of current mobility. ... It corresponds to the paradox of a world in which theoretically anything can be done without moving and in which nevertheless one move”. (Augé, 2010)

Literature review: Issues and opportunities for social inclusion

When we talk about ‘cities’, we are not only thinking of buildings, streets and shops but, above all, we are thinking of their inhabitants, who have to live together side by side. Migratory phenomena that have intensified in recent times (although always present in the history of humankind) have brought many new inhabitants into the world’s most flourishing cities. The Caritas XXVII Immigration Report shows that in 2017, Italy hosted 5,144,440 immigrants—speaking only of the regularly resident—or 8.5% of the total resident population and is ranked fifth in Europe and eleventh worldwide in the list of countries that hosted the largest number of international migrants. Most live in major urban centres (Caritas and Fondazione Migrantes, 2018).

A huge number of people, today and in the last decades, left their home, their motherland and their familiar places because of war (68.5 million between 2007 and 2017; UNCHR, 2018), famines, desertification and climate change. Immigration and the consequent social tensions have undoubtedly become one of the most important and urgent issues of our time. Foreigners are often perceived by citizens as ‘strangers’ or even ‘enemies’ who raise suspicion because of a poor or inexact knowledge of their culture and customs.

“Strangers tend to give anxiety precisely because they are ‘strange’ and therefore frightening in their unpredictability. ... We know too little about foreigners to be able to interpret gestures and decide on appropriate answers, understand their intentions, and guess their next move. And not knowing how to proceed, how to behave in a situation that we did not create or control, is one of the main causes of anxiety and fear”. (Bauman & Cupellaro, 2016)

The 2018 European Commission report shows that half of Europeans (46%) are ‘not very well informed’ about immigration and integration, in general, and tend to overestimate the number of immigrants in their country. Four out of ten Europeans believe that immigration is more of a problem than an opportunity for their nation, and this opinion is even more negative in Italy, the base country of this study, which is one of the countries that demonstrates major hostility towards immigrants. Most Italians do not believe that integration is taking place successfully (European Commission, 2018).

Another report, 'A fragmented Italy', demonstrates that there is a general feeling of self-loss among the citizens because of these social changes, to the degree that "half of the population reports that they have sometimes felt foreigners in their own country" and the majority fear that the national, traditional cultural identity is disappearing (More in Common & The Social Change Initiative, 2018).

Conversely, this sense of loss and these fears are perceived more by foreigners who have consciously left their territory, culture, connections and memories. The new places are foreign to them, and their condition is often of loneliness. The 'integration' we often hear about does not mean exchange, cooperation, mutual integration and organisation, but a pact of tolerance. Foreigners are asked to set aside their roots, uniqueness, traditions and knowledge to embrace those of the new country. Only by denying what makes them 'different' from us opens up the possibility of dialogue. However, dialogue is not only possible by denying the differences between peoples, but rather looking curiously at the roots we have in common because "the history of humanity is dotted with mergers of different groups ... it is a story of languages, religions, knowledge that have met and continue to meet, merging". (Giusti, 2007).

These previous themes engaged us in reflection. How can foreigners be part of a community and be viewed as an opportunity for something better? This study, a master's degree's final project that was designed from November 2018 to July 2019, addresses whether an integrated approach could be possible, considering migrants as persons with unique knowledge and wisdom. Working in cooperation with some reception centres and communities in Rome, through focus groups, co-planning activities and specific meetings that involved migrants, some concepts have been defined to mediate between the local and the migrant culture.

Methodology and research

To understand both locals' and migrants' real feelings and desires, the study started with ethnographic research through direct contact and online to collect as many insights as possible to develop a human-centred proposal. Two places in the city of Rome, rich in diversity and multiculturalism, were chosen for interviews and meetings: the Esquiline Market in Vittorio Emanuele and the peripheral district of Centocelle. These well-known landmarks for peaceful coexistence between citizens and foreigners were chosen to allow easier conversations and exchanges.

The first is a famous social gathering place, in which culinary ingredients from all over the world can be found, brought by migrants who, with their commercial activity, supply their communities. Here foreigners can find everything they need to prepare the typical dishes of their cultures and restore the sense of roots and traditions. "I miss my mother, my family, my sister. But we keep in touch, I see them online, and slowly I don't miss anything here in Italy", an Asian boy said in front of the fish counter. He said that he also slowly appreciated Italian cuisine: "I really love pasta; it is so versatile. In the early days I ate only recipes from my culture, but over time I also enjoyed the meat and fish dishes of yours". An elderly Arab man also stated:

"At the inauguration of this market, we had a great party. It was called 'Taste the world'. Everyone brought something [a dish], and every day there was a different cuisine, together with dancing, music, etc. It was the union of the world at the table, a union that brings happiness, love and peace".

Second, in the Centocelle district, small groups of Arab and Indian women stroll with their children, dressed in their traditional clothes and conversing in their languages.

“What do you miss most of your land?”

“The taste of the fruit and vegetables of our typical agriculture and the dishes that my mother cooked in my family”.

“Tell me about a good time you had in this city”.

“It was in a small market: I was telling how meat is cooked in my culture, and a person looked at me in amazement. He was a Jewish man, and he said that his family also cooks meat in a similar way. We laughed ... it was beautiful. It made me think that the world is small”.

To extend the range of interviews, an online survey was launched on social networks, which allowed people to speak more freely and anonymously. A platform like Facebook is used by both Italians and foreigners because the Internet enables them to keep in touch with their friends and family in their country. Eighty persons answered the question "What is 'home' to you?" and the results were collected, analysed and clustered in a Word Cloud map to trace the most frequent feelings, grouped with different colours, and the most frequent word pronounced, excelled with a higher dimension.



Image 1: Word cloud map of the clustered answers to the survey “What is ‘home’ to you?”.

The majority perceived ‘home’ as the place where affection and warmth can be found, where there are feelings of welcoming, appreciations and so many memories. ‘Feeling at home’ is about a sense of ‘family’ and ‘belonging’ in everyday life, a place that is familiar and well-known. At home, people can relax and be authentic and spontaneous because they feel protected like in a reassuring refuge and can express themselves. There are relationships and sociability, that sense of ‘being together’, which forms a solid community.

However, the most interesting aspect that emerged from the survey was the role of the neighbourhood, which is a perfect intersection between the overall city and the welcoming atmosphere of our own home. The neighbourhood represents an important part of daily life: in these places, everyday memories are built

and insecurity can be illuminated by progressive familiarity with its streets and shops and with the people who daily navigate them.

System concept: The 'neighbourhood home'

Setting the neighbourhood as the ground of the concept, we defined the design scope as 'inclusion', not of foreigners in a different land, but rather of all citizens, old and new, in the fabric of a city that is constantly changing all over the world. The project aims to promote the transmission of different cultural knowledge and then co-creation behaviours within the community of the neighbourhood, to build a new, unique and collective cultural heritage that is flexible and resilient and can be perceived by every inhabitant as their own. The neighbourhood home project was born: a space for socialisation, receptive to inhabitants' needs and open to neighbourhood improvement proposals.

The goal is to improve people's inclusion in the small context of the neighbourhood, encouraging people to share their roots' culture and knowledge. By understanding each other's different cultures and traditions, a sense of belonging can be created, and new values and behaviours can be built. This goal can be achieved through a common mediator of all humankind: culture. Promoting cultural activities in the neighbourhood home, citizens will be able to network, know each other, co-create and share local initiatives. Each different culture produces, today as yesterday, specific traditions, rituals and myths that are grounded as cultural roots. As anthropology and sociology teach, only by understanding cultural practices do we understand the people who are part of it.

Moreover, with a neighbourhood home in each district, an entire system of welcome, culture and creativity can be created. Each home can have a specific cultural focus: there will be a Home of Music, a Home of Costumes, a Home of Language and many others. In all its forms, from culinary to literary, artisan, musical, and so on, culture can be a link between people throughout the world.

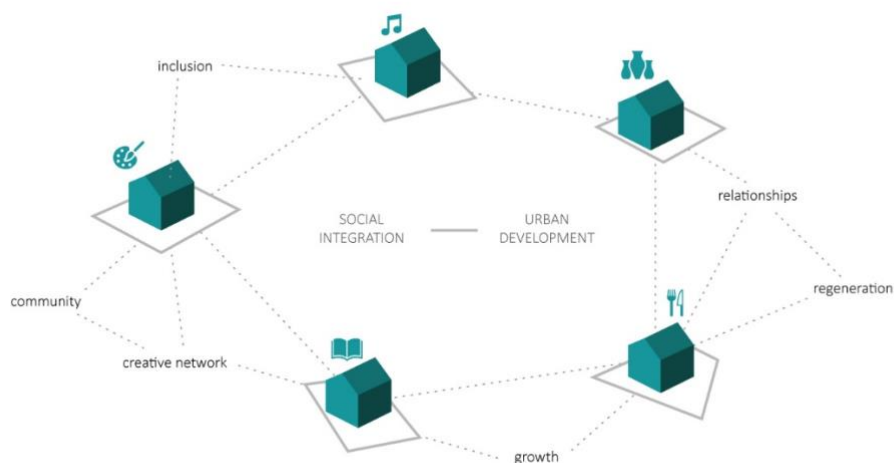


Image 2: The neighbourhood home system concept.

Each structure is imagined as a newly built pavilion with a specific shape and provides specific tools based on the cultural focus. The home buildings can be on land that needs redevelopment within the urban structure and is itself the first improvement to the district. The contents of the activities in each neighbourhood home will not be fixed but variable, as they will be spontaneously proposed and self-

managed by the neighbourhood's inhabitants, which is a flexible way to allow everyone's creativity to emerge and shine.

By creating a net of inclusion among the inhabitants, the second goal of the neighbourhood home system is to enhance and develop the neighbourhood itself and the city and to bring the restored empathy (Massari, 2020) from people to the territory in which they live. In the space perceived as their own home, inhabitants are enabled to discuss neighbourhood issues and identify solutions together, for example, to organise a petition and volunteer events for their community.

The project may interest both private and public institutions, such as municipalities, regional authorities or large companies providing goods and services that are sensitive to social issues. This system could also become supportive of municipal policies and help to manage the complexity of the problem in the neighbourhoods of Rome, as in other cities.

Case studies of neighbourhood communities

The concept of the neighbourhood home combines the scopes of citizens' inclusion with neighbourhoods' revaluation with a benefit especially for the peripheral districts who have seen their borders widen. But it is not the only initiative in the world that aims to improve neighbourhoods' conditions in a big city.

The 'School of Neighbourhoods' ('Scuola dei Quartieri', <https://www.lascuoladeiquartieri.it/>) is a project of the Municipality of Milan with two purposes: to create projects and services designed and implemented by citizens for improving the lives of neighbourhoods; and to transform the suburbs of the city, enhancing the energy, creativity and resourcefulness of their inhabitants. Through workshops, training courses, competition notices and public incentives, the school helps citizens to realise ideas and projects that are useful for the entire local community. The system includes a website and an app that present similar sections: #goodstory collects real stories of people who, through their dreams and activities, have created something good for their neighbourhood; and #goodidea tells the School about competition notices and shows the citizens projects that could win the opportunity to be realised. Moreover, by registering on the app, citizens can see the calendar of events and initiatives promoted by the school, which is a series of opportunities available to everyone to help regenerate the suburbs.

Across the ocean, in America, the artist and professor, Theaster Gates, has launched numerous projects for the redevelopment of the Greater Grand Crossing neighbourhood in the South Side of Chicago. That urban area was full of abandoned and decayed houses because of the failing housing market, buildings which people no longer knew what to do anything with. Working collectively with other artists, architects, activists, educators and entrepreneurs, Theaster started reshaping, as one of his pieces of art, how people imagined the South Side of the city. He founded the Rebuild Foundation (<https://rebuild-foundation.org/>), a non-profit organisation focused on culturally driven redevelopment in under-resourced communities. For their most celebrated work, the 'Dorchester Projects' on Dorchester Avenue, he bought two of those vacant buildings—now called the Archive House and the Listening House—and involved the local neighbourhood in the restoration. The Foundation turned the renewed buildings into cultural institutions to stage exhibitions, small dinners, lectures, book readings and workshops in the neighbourhood community. The Listening House gathers discarded books from collections and out-of-business bookstores. The Black Cinema House plays movies that are important and relevant to the black people of the neighbourhood. In the Arts Bank, there is a collection of memorabilia from people who live or have lived on the South Side, which reflect its identity and talk of its complexity.

What interested Theaster the most was not a single house or building, but rather the cooperation between that house and the local school, shops, markets, parks, etc.; connections through all these buildings can have a dialogue with each other. He was able to collect all the people passionate about their neighbourhoods and gather together the right professionals who could realise their dreams through his lens of culture and art. His purpose was to rekindle the interests of the inhabitants through culture to get them to reinvest in their place. His attention goes to the connections that can be created between one house and another and then between one neighbourhood and another.

Both these case studies demonstrate the existence of widespread social interest in the improvement of cities to adapt and react to global changes and guide new ones within their territory. The participation of citizens in the renovation of their neighbourhoods is not only possible but desirable. Only the inhabitants themselves can stand up and carry out initiatives to improve their living conditions. Bottom-up projects are possible and are already implemented in cities. What is needed is the development of a culture aimed at sustainability through workshops, training courses, social initiatives, awareness campaigns, etc., to stimulate the common desire for improvement and the will to do something about it.

These testimonials show that the objectives of renewal, dialogue and inclusion can be achieved by activating a network of interested people: first of all, citizens and municipalities, with the support of cultural institutions, investors, social change associations and also private companies and organisations. Moreover, migrants can be an active and positive (no longer negative and neglected) part of this change, allowing them to finally feel part of a place that appreciates them, listens to them and values their different knowledge and points of view.

Pilot project: The neighbourhood... food

As a pilot project for the neighbourhood home system, food culture was chosen as an intermediary for inclusion and socialisation, since food is one of the most immediate vehicles for sharing the rituals, knowledge, lifestyle and myths of different cultures. “Eating other people's food seems easier—even if only apparently—than decoding its language” (Montanari, 2011). Food has never been seen by human society as mere nourishment, but has always been enriched with other symbolic and relational meanings that go beyond its nutritional value. “Sharing the same food is at the origin of all rituals” (Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition Foundation, 2019). Sharing a meal represents an ancient and always effective bridge between cultures: diners will first notice the differences between their culinary cultures, but then, most importantly, the things in common. Foods, ingredients and recipes in history have always travelled across lands and continents following people (Bloch-Dano & Prencipe, 2017), which is why today's typical ingredients of a culinary tradition often actually originate on the other side of the planet (the tomato, very dear to the Italian cuisine, for example, is originally from America).

For a neighbourhood home centred on food, two core activities have been imagined: cooking classes focused on an ingredient chosen by the home on a seasonal basis and social eating sessions, in which all the participants of the cooking class can share the meal. These activities will allow not only people to gain confidence in each other in a relaxed context but also to understand how the ingredients connect people around the world.

Every inhabitant of the neighbourhood can freely and spontaneously propose a cooking class in the home setting and can add the event in the community's (online and offline) calendar. Through the classes, people can share stories of their culture, specific gestures and cooking rituals from their typical tradition, teaching

a recipe that fits the established seasonal ingredient. The social eating at the end of the lesson brings all participants to the same table and makes that social inclusion effective.

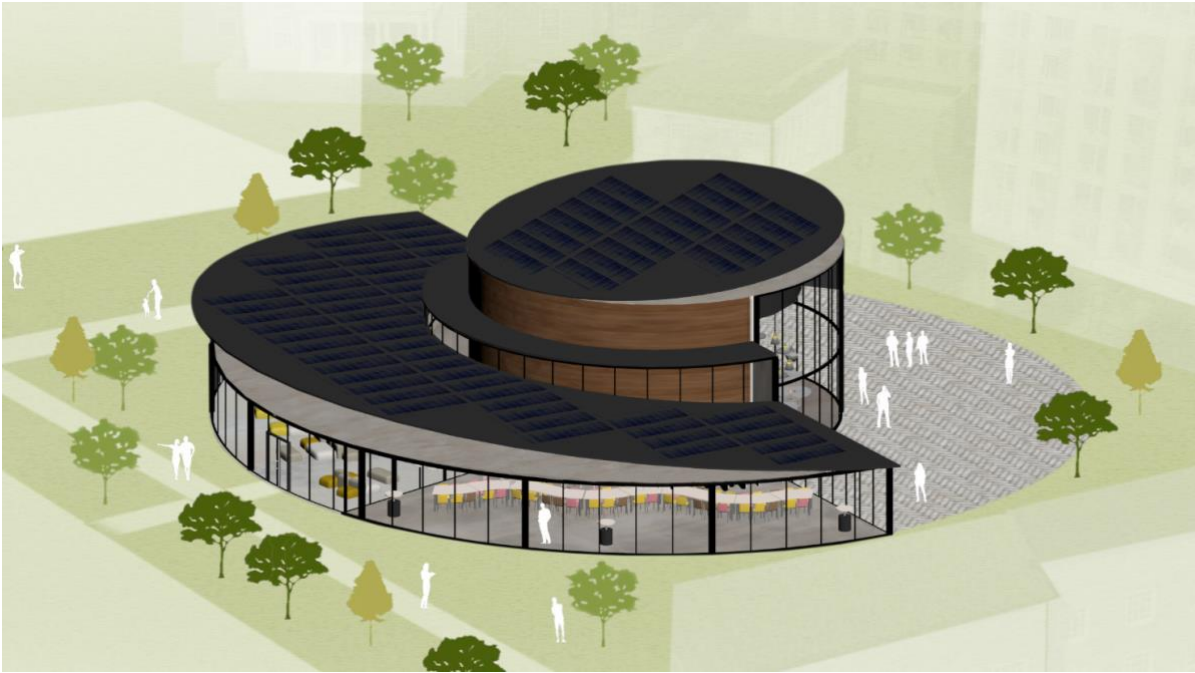


Image 3: 'MeetEat' pavilion from above.



Image 4: Architectural elevation, front (above) and rear (below).

The structure, called 'MeetEat', is imagined as a newly built pavilion entirely designed around the themes of integration, nourishment and sustainability. The journey starts at the entrance area, provided by

a reception for passers-by's curiosity and information, an entire wall of interactive digital frames showing past initiatives that have become shared neighbourhood memories and modular and freely aggregable seats for dialogue and waiting. Here citizens can also have information about the network and the activities of the other neighbourhood homes in the city. These are in constant communication with each other. Registration for the initiatives can take place on the online platform, on the interactive screens or at the desk set up for support.



Image 5: Entrance area with a reception desk and view of the dining hall.



Image 6: Entrance area, focusing on the seats and the digital frames.

Over the entrance, the journey continues in the kitchen area, the main feature of this home. Here, all those who want to participate and learn will be able to register for free, bring ingredients with them and use the spaces and tools provided by the structure. The kitchen has an innovative and 'neutral' interior design because the neighbourhood home needs to be flexible and abstract from any specific culinary cultures. This choice of neutrality aims to create new behaviours and values that favour community and participation rather than choosing a typical layout of one culture at the expense of others.

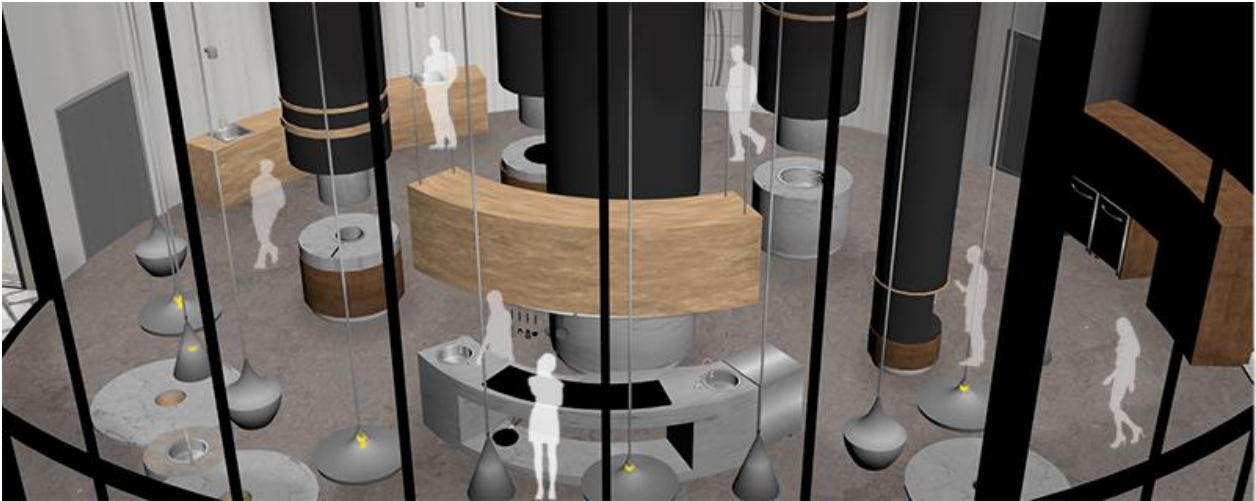


Image 7: Kitchen area from outside.



Image 8: Kitchen area, with a focus on the 'Earth' section during a cooking class.

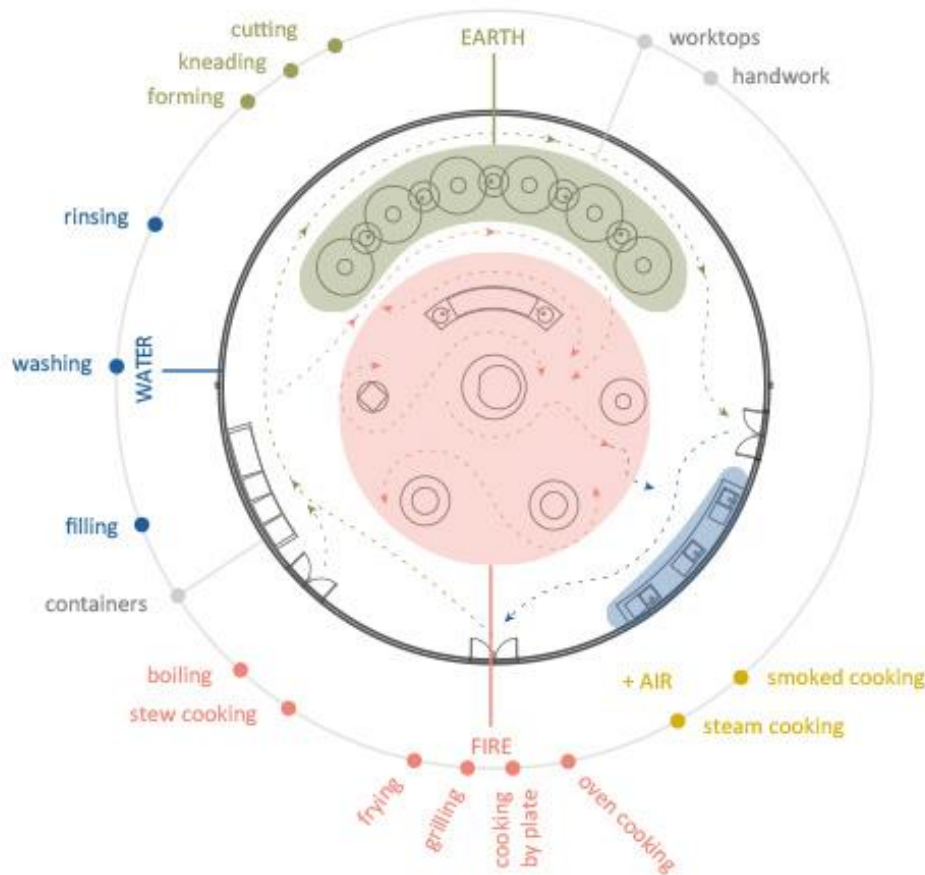


Image 9: Architectural plan of the kitchen with the semantic and functional organisation.

To identify a common core of all food preparation, every possible action of a general cooking process was analysed:

- 1) Storing the participants' ingredients: containing and refrigerating
- 2) Preparing the ingredients: cutting, cleaning, kneading, washing, etc.
- 3) Cooking (if needed): boiling, frying, smoking, grilling, steaming, baking, etc.
- 4) Dishing up
- 5) Washing

The clustering and arrangement of these activities and their corresponding furniture took inspiration from the Lévi-Strauss culinary triangle semantics. The metaphor of the four natural elements (water, earth, air and fire) was used because each one is essential in all culinary traditions and can evoke the imagination of the ancestral rites of all culinary spaces.

- A) The 'Water' section collects all the 'filling' (as a cauldron) and washing activities: containers, pantries, shelves, refrigerators, sinks and dish drainers;
- B) The 'Earth' section is dedicated to handwork such as 'kneading', 'cutting', 'forming', etc. and has a group of worktops equipped with sinks, drawers for instruments and waste bins;
- C) The 'Fire' and the 'Air' sections are six functional blocks for fire-related activities, each provided with a different type of cooking: stove, oven, wood-burning oven, grill, plate and deep fryer. The 'Air' section corresponds to the ventilation hoods system on these fire blocks to guarantee vapour and smoke absorption. The six fire totems are the core of the entire MeetEat pavilion because they

represent—at a mythical level—the fireplace of the tribe, around which stories, culture, myths and rites are transmitted.



Image 10: Social eating in the dining hall (street view).

The journey in this home ends in the dining hall, where the experiences of inclusion, socialising and empathising are consolidated by sharing the meal altogether. This is a meeting space, too, a comfortable area that allows citizens to discuss neighbourhood problems, find some solutions and organise collective social events. To merge these two purposes (the social eating sessions and the citizens' meetings), a modular table has been designed that allows multiple combinations for space flexibility. In MeetEat, a community as a sustainable and inclusive network can be created, responsibility for neighbourhood wellness can be fostered and a renewed sense of belonging can be inspired.

"There is a growing need to find new ways to defeat food paradoxes (malnutrition, non-sustainable production systems and the battle against food waste, to name a few). In the past 15 years, the design method has been consolidating into this field of food. Participatory design and co-creation in food experience design became popular along with the discipline of food design and social design." (Massari, 2017)

Conclusion

Around the world, many projects have been designed to increase inclusion and interaction with migrants and foreigners in response to global and urban changes. However, fewer projects have been designed for the inclusion of all citizens to stimulate a new sense of community belonging and a renewed civic responsibility.

The neighbourhood home project aims to highlight the common roots of all peoples in the world, who have always been interconnected by culture through migration and trade in history. Culture is the human dimension par excellence: in each territory, culture has been shaped in typical expressions, rituals and

myths that enclose people's real essence and values. It is necessary to understand these rituals to realise the underlying cultural values and traditions. Transmitting and sharing gestures of typical cultural activities from all over the world, the neighbourhood home system will help create inclusion with each other in the district (and the entire city) context.

This approach can generate not only a more inclusive society in each neighbourhood but also a possible common cultural heritage, composed of new shared values and behaviours and can become part of their daily lives. No longer "I" and "them" but an "us". Curiosity for diversity must be the social innovation engine, an opportunity for growth and wisdom that allows us to recognise and valorise, in the end, our common roots. More inclusive cities and nations should be the most desirable goal today, transforming conflicts and social exclusion into interconnections and sustainable communities.

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