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DESTABILIZING THE QUOTIDIAN: URBAN RECIPES FOR CULTIVATING CARE IN THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN CITY

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores how everyday practices can be an inspiration for novel designerly ways of relating to others and cultivating care in response to the prevalent lack of care in our precarious world. We present Urban Recipes, an ongoing project that combines the spatial exploration of drifting with the recursive practice of recipe-making, opening up a space for new ways of relating to the more-than-human urban environments that are home to both humans and nonhumans. Applying the metaphors of cooking to this paper, we trace the evolution of the project, starting from the recipe and developing it into the cookbook and the test kitchen. Finally, as we gather our reflections at the table, we meditate on how the transformation of the personal, the destabilization of the quotidian, and the creation of the joyful through Urban Recipes facilitate a new way of noticing and caring.

PRELUDE
When catastrophes ranging from pandemics to natural disasters saturate our newsfeeds, for many of us the initial shock quickly morphs into a perpetual sense of anxiety and precariousness. As Anna Tsing has observed, “precarity is the condition of our time” (2015, p.20). In such a condition, we go about our everyday lives, becoming increasingly blind to our interdependencies with others and losing our ability to care (The Care Collective, 2020). Yet caring for one another has become ever more necessary and urgent in this fragile world: design, as “an art of responding” (Ávila 2022, p.52), has the potential to cultivate such care.

This paper tells the story of how two designers cultivate care as a “necessary practice” and an “affective force” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p.160, p.162), through adopting seemingly mundane everyday practices. For this purpose, we present the ongoing project Urban Recipes, which combines the spatial exploration of drifting with the recursive practice of recipe-making. Originally an auto-ethnographic exploration, Urban Recipes has developed into a design experiment that expands from the personal to the collective and connects them to the ecological. In doing so, it opens up a space for new ways of relating to and caring for one another in the more-than-human city. Tracing the project’s evolution, this paper reflects on how design can foster a care that is inclusive, regenerative, and joyful.

This paper is structured around the same metaphors of cooking that we use in the Urban Recipes project itself. These metaphors produce not only linguistic play but also an embodied practice that brings new ideas into existence (Murray-Rust et al., 2022). Therefore, we invite you to drift through the recipe from which the project originated, the cookbook that served to expand the exploration, and the test kitchen where diverse experiences were enacted, and finally arrive at the table for reflections. This paper contributes to a growing body of design work that sheds light on our entanglements with the more-than-human by exploring practices of noticing and relating (Liu et al., 2018; Biggs et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2022). Moreover, we propose three tactics for designers working with care: the
transformation of the personal into the collective, the destabilization of everyday practices, and the creation of joyful engagement.

A RECIPE

For many city-dwellers, traversing and experiencing the contemporary urban landscape involves the act of walking. “The city is a discourse”, as Roland Barthes (1970-1971, p.92) has intriguingly suggested, and wandering through its multiplicity of spaces serves as a form of both writing and reading the urban text.

Strangers to the cities we now reside in – Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and Umeå, Sweden, respectively – we walked to explore the unfamiliar. These explorations were undirected and open-ended. Instead of relying on the panoptic view offered by a map or following a totalizing line suggested by a navigation app, we let intuition and curiosity lead us and willingly got lost in the “shadows and ambiguities” (de Certeau 1988, p.101) that our wandering created. Urban Recipes was born when the experience of walking in one city was translated into a set of instructions that were shared and later carried out in another urban space hundreds of miles away.

Walking as a form of art-making has been practiced by generations of wanderers. Reviving Charles Baudelaire’s melancholy figure of the flâneur, Walter Benjamin describes the Parisian meandering in the 1920s as “a demonstration against the division of labor” (Benjamin 1982, p.427). While the Dadaists explored the quotidian space in Paris, the Surrealists walked the Parisian countryside to conduct a psychological investigation (Careri, 2017). Guided by the critique of the capitalist city, the Situationists drifted aimlessly in the post-war urban landscape, sensing the rapidly changing ambience in an attempt to capture the city’s latent unconsciousness (Sadler, 1998). Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Fluxus artists effected playful excursions in New York City through walking scores inspired by musical practice (O’Rourke 2013, p.12).

In the making of Urban Recipes, we drew inspiration particularly from the urban drifting (dérive) practiced by the Situationists. In his “Theory of the Dérive”, Guy Debord regards cities as rich in “psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes” (Debord 1958, p.62). Dérive, with its constructed randomness and playfulness, is able at once to effect emotional disorientation and to invoke psychogeographical observation that penetrates the mundane façade of the city (Debord, 1958). Following the tradition of the dérive, our own driftings, enacted separately in our respective cities, led us to form renewed impressions of familiar routes, discover less-visited corners, and pay attention to humble happenings.

No longer a space experienced through the functionalist pursuit of efficiency, the city reveals its rich ecologies to the observant drifters.

Could such an experience, embodied and idiosyncratic, be shared and even recreated in another context? What could the dislocated recreation bring about? Sharing an interest in the everyday practice of cooking and a personal connection with family recipes, we were fascinated by how recipe-making could turn subjective experience into shareable knowledge. The recursivity of the practice provided space for interpersonal exchange and improvisation. This reflection prompted us to note down recipes based on our spatial explorations – drawing on the event scores created by Fluxus artists, these urban recipes used poetic instructions to encourage associations and actions. The recipes, created in two different cities, were then exchanged between us.

The received urban recipe served not only as a navigation guide but also as a form of disorientation that often infused the act of drifting with a sense of proximity and wonder.

Following each other’s urban recipes, we documented our observations in drawings, notes, photos, audio recordings, and videos. Often these recipes directed the wandering eyes to the voiceless – a fallen chestnut, a moving shadow, a chirping bird – prompting rumination on our ecological entanglements in more-than-human cities (Figures 1-3).

Figure 1: An urban recipe titled “release & keep” created by Seda Özçetin.
A COOKBOOK

After a period of making and exchanging urban recipes, we created a cookbook with the intention of engaging an audience beyond ourselves. By way of introduction, the cookbook opens with a few lines formulated in a poetic way that reflect the style of the urban recipes previously created. Two urban recipe examples aim to inspire the cookbook’s readers (Figure 4). An illustrated section of “ingredients” (Figure 5) lists possible urban encounters, including humans and more-than-human things and happenings (a passer-by, a raindrop, a moving shadow, etc.). Following the “ingredients” section, a section titled “techniques” lays out actions one can take to sense, observe, and relate to one’s encounters (touch, hold, whisper, etc.). Next, the “utensils” section names tools that can be helpful for documenting the drifting (camera, pen, paper, etc.). Finally, the reader can find a “recipe-making” section that offers space for them to create their own urban recipe and reflect on their experience.

Akin to the urban drifting that the cookbook hopes to inspire, its texts follow roving lines. These lines, comparable with “lines of thought as well as lines of motion” (Ahmed 2006, p.16), create a sense of space and movement that directs the wandering eyes of the reader. In suggesting rather than prescribing elements of an urban recipe, the cookbook constitutes what Umberto Eco calls an “open work”, inviting its readers to activate their own “emotional and imaginative resources” (Eco 1989, p.9). A two-dimensional space to be inhabited, the cookbook stimulates both an imagined and an embodied spatial exploration.

A TEST KITCHEN

To bring our exploration further and engage a wider audience, we hosted the workshop Urban Recipes: Test Kitchen Nº1 in Eindhoven during the 2022 Dutch Design Week (Figure 6). Part of the Design United program entitled “More than Human Design”, the workshop counted 16 participants from various backgrounds in design and beyond.
Figure 6: Workshop materials for Test Kitchen Nº1: the cookbook and posters.

The workshop started with a brief introduction to the project as a whole and the workshop’s specific aim and structure, after which participants were each handed an Urban Recipes cookbook (Figure 7). While participants flipped through the cookbook, we read out one of the recipe examples and prompted participants to recall their recent walking experiences, including the journeys they took to arrive at the workshop space. We asked participants to create their own recipes in the cookbook, drawing on the sample recipes provided, including potential ingredients and techniques, as well as their individual experiences and interests. Following the recipe-making session, participants gathered around the table and passed their recipes to the person next to them as a way of exchanging. Participants then ventured outside and began their individual drifting, following the urban recipe they had received (Figures 8-10). After 30 minutes, participants met back at the workshop space and shared their documentations, experiences, and reflections (Figures 11-12).

Figure 7: Introduction of the Test Kitchen Nº1 workshop. Photo: Twycer.

Figure 8: A workshop participant realizing a received recipe.

Figure 9: A workshop participant annotating a received recipe as a way of documentation. Photo: Twycer.

Figure 10: A workshop participant documenting their experience. Photo: Twycer.
The urban recipes created by the participants and their subsequent drifting documentations revealed a plurality of experiences and perspectives. Taking a cue from the wandering lines spread through the cookbook, many participants constructed their recipes in a visually engaging way, with some incorporating symbols and sketches (Figure 13). The newly created urban recipes displayed a keen attention to the more-than-human and a manifest sense of ecological care. The recipes encouraged their readers to linger in the outdoor space, noticing and interacting with everyday things usually taken for granted, often in an unexpected manner. For example, one recipe prompted its recipient to employ senses beyond vision by asking them to “touch the tree trunk and feel the natural energy from the tree flowing into your palm”. Another recipe foregrounded a sense of connectedness by asking its recipient to “walk to the tree that has lost most of its leaves and say to it ‘it’s all right, there will be a new spring soon’”; this instruction also brought about personal contemplation, with its recipient reflecting in their documentation that “speaking to the tree was so powerful, I think it also helped me understand that there will be a new season”. One recipe directed its reader to observe a flying insect and, from there, to imagine wings of their own: “maybe you can also create your own wings and fly above”.

Similar to the diversity of the recipes themselves, participants also documented their driftings in different ways (Figure 14). Most participants recorded their experiences in written notes, and many also captured their encounters in digital photos as well as through diagrams and sketches, some in a humorous way. A range of found objects were also presented, including fallen leaves, a blade of grass, and a discarded shopping receipt. In recording their own experience, one participant annotated the original recipe they had received directly, forming a striking dialogue. Just as the operation of cooking often requires improvisation based on the resources at hand, the documentations also showed ad-hoc acts. In response to one recipe’s instruction to smell a fallen leaf, for instance, the recipe’s recipient noted that they were unable to find a leaf and therefore “smelled the bikes”. While most recipes focused on connecting its readers with nonhumans in the surroundings, a tangible and intimate interaction with the nonhuman others also directed one to look back at oneself, as one participant noted, writing “the roughness of the bark brought my attention to my dehydration”. Participants recorded their dialogues, both with themselves and with nonhuman others. For example, one participant contemplated, “what makes a shadow pretty? Can only pretty objects cast pretty shadows?”, while another observed, “an insect jumped on my arm with a metallic green tail, and I was just saying don’t move, let me take your picture”.

In the concluding session of the workshop, participants reflected on their experiences of making, exchanging, and recreating urban recipes. Some commented on the open-endedness that the process had afforded. Such an open-endedness provided space for improvisation and play. The playfulness many participants had found in their experiences helped shed a new light on how they might relate to others in different ways, both human and
more-than-human. The exchange of recipes offered participants unique insights into a perspective other than their own, and the embodied experience of drifting helped generate a kind of knowledge that was both situated and tacit. Activating the city as a site for participation and play, the test kitchen thus served as a way of “collaborative place-making” (Wark 2011, p.140).

A TABLE

We have so far traced how Urban Recipes came about and evolved through its different enactments. While the project is still ongoing, we present insights that have emerged to date. We hope these insights offer useful tactics for designers who engage with care practices.

TRANSFORMING THE PERSONAL

Exploratory and introspective, Urban Recipes started off as an auto-ethnographic inquiry. We turned to our own personal contexts, trying to understand our place in the world through the cities we live in and the walks we take (Schouwenberg & Kaethler, 2021). This initial exploration yielded insights into ourselves as well as our relations with everyday urban spaces, which then led to the creation of a first series of urban recipes. Exchanging these recipes with each other gave us glimpses of our thought processes and vulnerabilities; subsequently, the act of realizing each other’s recipes brought new discoveries in our respective cities. It was through these embodied experiences that a deepened sense of care emerged: we started to care about each other and the more-than-humans we encountered. Recognizing the power and potential of the personal, we opened up Urban Recipes to include more people in this exploration. In the test kitchen, a multitude of personal perspectives was transformed into collective action through the shared experience of making and drifting.

This collective action in turn highlighted the “multilateral interdependencies” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p.160) inherent in our world, compelling us to care.

Transforming the personal in this way helps cultivate a care that, rather than being “imposed from outside, a utilitarian rationalist contract or altruistic ideal” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p.160), emerges from within and affects people beyond their individual selves. Moving from the personal to the collective and realizing the transforming potential of the expansion, this practice of care becomes both situated and inclusive.

DESTABILIZING THE QUOTIDIAN

Connecting two seemingly different things often brings about surprising results. In this project, we applied the functional juxtaposition of urban drifting and recipe-making to the everyday experiences of being in the city. This juxtaposition at once multiplied the capacities of individual experience and demonstrated the potential of everyday practices to offer new ideas for design. The practice of recipe-making, for example, provided vocabularies and tools that are both relatable and transferable. The embodied experience of walking and drifting made the introduction of conceptual themes experiential rather than didactic. Both practices – recipe-making and walking – convey a sense of familiarity that makes them welcoming and achievable. At the same time, the contrast between the necessity of intention and attentiveness in recipe-making and the desire for freedom and aimlessness in drifting brings a productive friction that encourages playful creation. The juxtaposition of discrete everyday practices and different personal interpretations engendered a dislocated familiarity, which in turn defamiliarized the everyday urban environments and prompted participants in the test kitchen to experience the city in fresh ways. Such an experience helped the participants not only to notice the quotidian, but also to cultivate a sense of care towards the more-than-human and one another.
The strategy of defamiliarization is often used in artistic and design practice to break away from established patterns and bring about new perspectives (Wilde, 2022). When the mundane is destabilized, we are transposed to a terrain of wonder, which encourages us to pay attention. Taking notice of the habitually neglected paves the way for breaking out of our inertia in order to have concern and practice care.

CREATING THE JOYFUL

Just as the notion of play was pivotal to the Situationist dérige, a sense of playfulness suffused Urban Recipes. In exchanging recipes with each other, the playful ignited a curiosity that sustained our initial exploration. In the test kitchen, this playfulness mobilized an active participation and brought to the fore new ways of knowing and relating. These new ways of knowing, as María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p.65) argues, can in turn foster unexpected connections and affection. Moreover, the engagements prompted by our project demonstrated that caring can be joyful and energizing. Joy becomes especially critical to the way that we human beings, as a collective, respond to the ecological urgencies facing us today (Haraway, 2015). To create the joyful, therefore, means to utilize the generative potential of play. In doing so, we are able to affirm our capacity for caring and at the same time practice a care that is life-affirming.

POSTLUDE

In a world where prevalent precarity and carelessness risk paralyzing our capacity to imagine better futures, it is imperative to tell different stories (Haraway, 2016). Traveling on the journey that is Urban Recipes, we tell a story of how to realize design’s potential to cultivate care in the more-than-human city. From the recipe to the test kitchen, we transformed personal sensibility into collective ways of caring for humans and beyond. By destabilizing familiar everyday practices, we rendered visible the more-than-human entanglements in urban spaces. Infusing the exploration with play, we moved beyond the act of noticing and fostered affective caring. These explorations have opened different avenues for future design practice. One direction would be to investigate how cultivating more-than-human care can transform the way designers conceptualize and build the smart city and its technologies. While our journey continues, we believe that our recipe-making practice provides food for thought to other designers interested in more-than-human care.

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