

# Moving Worlds

A JOURNAL OF TRANSCULTURAL WRITINGS

Volume 6 Number 2 2006



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EATING THE CITY

*Food, Culture  
& Community*



# Eat Art and Communities: From Oxford to Melbourne

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Alan Davidson (AED) has been a seminal force in the creation of the community of the Oxford symposiasts. His innovative attitude, his sympathetic productiveness, his thaumaturgic vision of the new discipline, integrating all the dimensions of food history and cookery, has been altogether fruitful. In the last twenty-five years the *vis davidsoniana* has nurtured the collective curiosity and the efficient activity of a great diversity of interdisciplinary researchers. In my view, these researchers embody to perfection an emerging, evolving, and consolidating community of productive minds.

From my experience of having created quite a few performative activities for communities, I would like to suggest the Oxford Symposium of Food as a reference model of how the concept of a new community is conceived, develops its internal cues and laws, and goes on growing according to the internal logic of its everchanging needs. A working community, or working with communities, includes and absorbs the idiosyncratic identities of its constituents. The singularities of each of the individuals are transcended but also integrated. The newly formed community, if properly managed, brings to the flourishing of its activities synergy and productivity.

The brilliant intuition of AED, in the case of the Oxford Symposium, sharpened not only new ways of observing, seeing, and understanding certain aspects of reality, which became translated into the themes of the different editions of the symposia, but also enabled the sharing of the discoveries. There were no barriers, fears or limits to the expression of individual knowledge within the security that was inspired by the communal curiosity. That is how a working community becomes *gestaltic*: its productivity is global, cannot be understood simply as the sum of individual approaches, but as the true spirit of search and research.

Every fertile discovery on a proposed theme, and its subsequent publication as a paper, gets its eloquence from its coherence with the subject. But its contents reflect the *quanta* and the *qualia* of the different





cognitive maps of the members working in a synergy that is faithful to the spirit of the Symposium. It is as if orchestrated by a latent and manifest *vis davidsoniana*.

### **Working with communities**

I started learning about the ways of cultural communities at the Oxford Symposium. The dynamism of its organization, its growing and interlacing roots, the renewed shared passion, the enthusiastic and wise research, the exigency without rivalry, the summative and euphoric discoveries – all are signs of the conscious advance of a scientific enterprise.

Other vital and cultural communities for me have been my family, the girls' school I attended and my friends, the University, the Eat Art artists, food art festival members and the cooks – especially the cooks, the people steeped in mysterious knowledge about sensations, about the physical and organic properties of substances, and how these can be manipulated and transformed into edible delicacies. They have been the most influential constituents of my experimental attitude to life.

### **Creating for communities**

As Ali&Cia (meaning Ali&Co) we develop food as a performance art. We are usually required to design to measure a specific project involving





food sensations, art and the communities in which we work. Our patrons rely on us to celebrate rituals of passage. They value our speculative ability to decipher hidden and/or manifest dimensions of reality, deconstruct them so as to finally reinterpret them in our innovative language: the code of its edibility.

The variables are as follows: human protagonists; the environment; space and time; tools; and the budget. Ali&Cia takes its time to get fully familiar with the idiosyncrasies of the cultural background and identity of the members of the community or communities involved. Then it engages itself in a series of conversations with its patrons to make sure that the Project is understandable, and the results appealing: everybody gets seduced by it, each side signs the agreement and, finally, some volunteers assume the role of interlocutors.

From this stage on, no effort, pain or satisfaction, is to be avoided. The ideal patrons never voice dismay or decline their responsibility to provide support and funds for every need, conscious as they are of the miraculous synergetic event that will be the outcome – a sort of new Babel but with an edible, sensory, festive conclusion. The enlarged Ali&Cia ruminates upon the successive stages of the exhaustive plan and facilitates the satisfactory achievement: The Project. This global and pluridimensional immersion derives from the fact that every actor has signed an agreement to become a co-author, and hence makes possible





a dialogue between different mentalities and the assimilation of now shared expectancies, in other words, a dialectical production.

As the promoter of an idea, if you have consolidated your interest, alerted your curiosity, and erased any indulgence to feel lazy at the apprehension of the complexity of a Project, you are in a position to work in a productive, creative way with a community. Develop the habit of inquiring about how reality can be featured from the optics of the other protagonists. Select a frame to envisage the enquiry, set the horizon that is from now on to be taken as the common denominator. Consider that food and its concomitant, the cooking, is probably the most universal, non-verbal, and wise instrument to body forth ideas, embedded with messages, symbols, emotions and nostalgias, and materialize them into the realm of a deliciously solid edible matter.

### **Cooking and eating reality with the communities**

Ali&Cia goes quite far when it proclaims the feasibility of an imagery of all reality as being edible. It concludes that the only plastic matter that exists is food, and that therefore reality can be interpreted in edible terms the same way as painters use pigments and sculptors stone or wood to express their views. According to such a perspective, ordinary living human creatures become interpreters of reality, and food becomes the most useful, inspirational tool to provoke a catharsis of forgotten

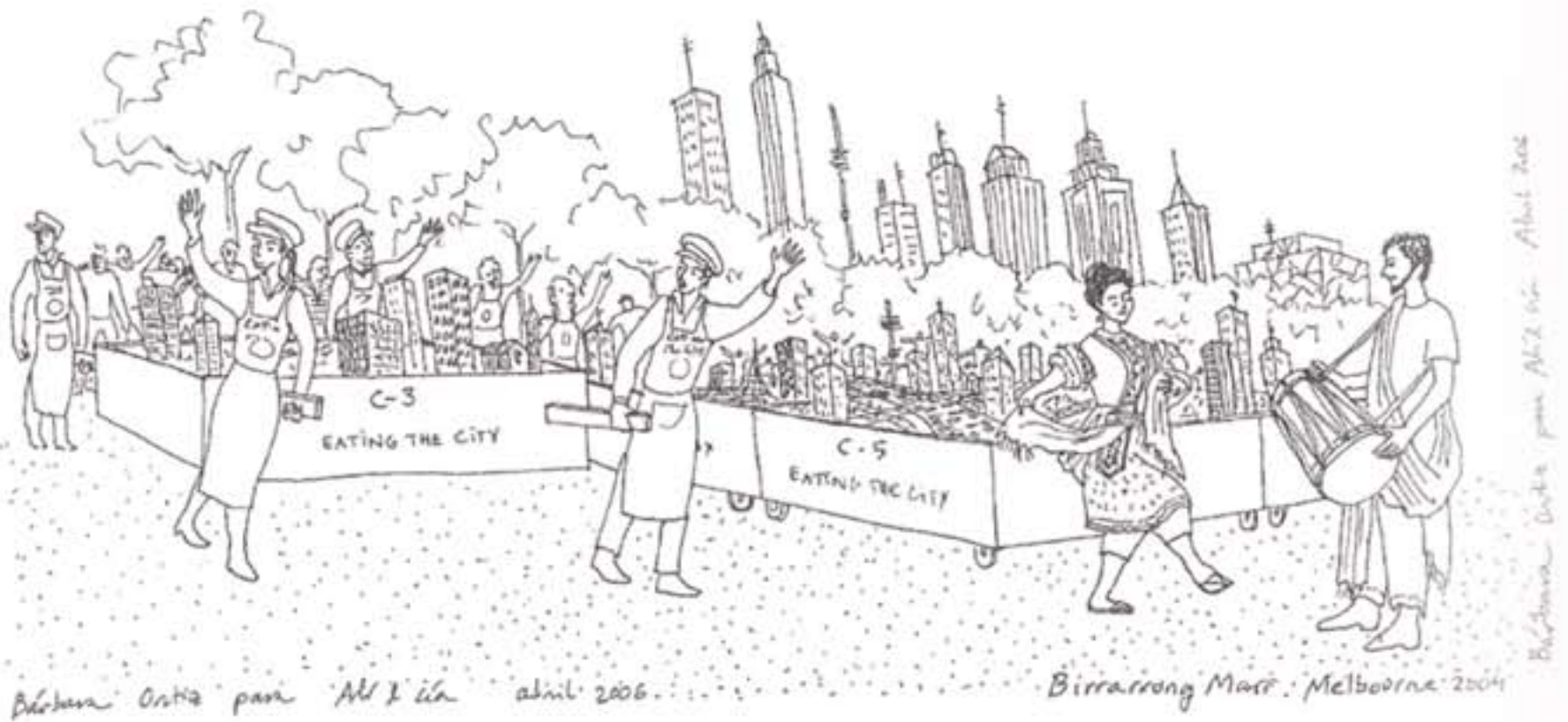
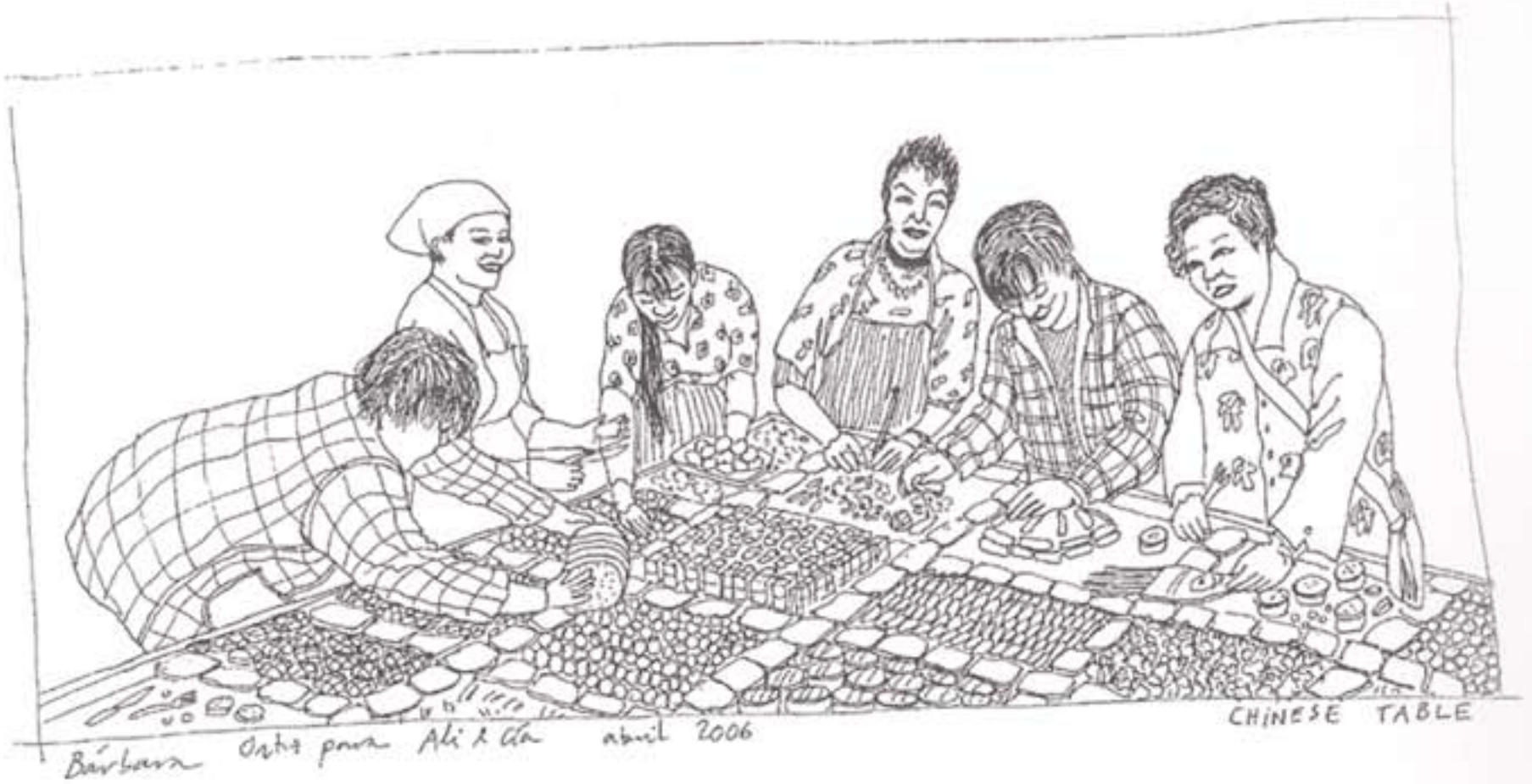




ways of seeing and communicating facts and thoughts between people. Food – manipulating, transforming, cooking, eating and sharing it – impregnates the feelings and desires in a way that is more accessible than any other to every human being all over the planet. And this has always been so in the long history of humanity. Perhaps only dancing and music can compete with food as a universal medium of communication. That's why we, Ali&Cia, tend to integrate them in our ways of celebrating when we are creating and producing with communities.

All communities are different. It is precisely their singularities that constitute the essence of their compatibility. Having got access to the inner logic of one community on a Project as a reference model, and to the understanding of its internal ties and cultural dynamisms, you get a basic line to the meanings and significances of all the other communities you are working with. It allows you to transfer the basic structures in order to coordinate the cultural profiles among different communities. So, when you have been asked by a certain client to organize an event involving festive culture and the communities, you know how to proceed: you think of where the convergent axes of their sociocultural and historical perspectives meet, and then proceed to distribute the tasks in such a way that their singularities become integrated, and everybody contributes through creativity with food and other celebratory ways to the part of the Project in which they are involved.







## The ceremonies of Urbanphagy

I'll describe, roughly, how Ali&Cia conceived the first Ceremony of Urbanphagy for the Council of the Arts of the City of Melbourne. Ali&Cia set out to epitomize the concept. Cooking and Eating Melbourne became a case study, a paradigm of Eat Art performative events.

Ali&Cia received one day an invitation to create a macroproject to celebrate a ritual of passage: the arrival of the ultra modern, the newly launched Federation Square of the town of Melbourne. The Council of the Arts wanted us to create and organize a very festive, sensory, happy, big event involving food and the communities of the city. In the end, we came to the conclusion that Melbourne, one of the most modern, most functional, and vanguardist cities in the world could also claim to be one of the older, if not the oldest, cities around the world. That is what the expanded Ali&Cia in Melbourne was able to demonstrate, through practical example, through the collective 'devoration' of the town by all the attendants to the massive, festive banquet held on 8 April 2003.

If we consider what the town, as much as the current ways of life, owes to its citizens, to its inhabitants from the beginnings of its history, we will realize the multidimensional impact they have imprinted on it. Let's just point out their ways of achieving pleasure, enjoying and celebrating all their characteristic features of producing food, transforming it, selling and buying it, elaborating it, flavouring it with local aromatics as well as new ingredients that testify to their having imported the uses with them, so that the 'foreign' will be present and accessible to everybody. Thus, when thinking of creating for communities, Ali&Cia starts thinking of a cultural base-line and common attitude towards food in order to draw together all the inherited wisdom and habits, to contrast as well as to integrate them, so as to produce the final event.

In our case the celebratory themes fused in one multidimensional category: people. And it was decided that communities of the first, second and, in some cases, even third generation of immigrants, and of the aboriginals, the earliest inhabitants, would each cook a twentieth part or parcel of the city map. They would cook according to their particular culinary traditions and all the parcels would represent the culinary authenticity of the represented communities; at the same time the parcels would reflect in an ultra realistic way the skyline, and the textures and structure of the City of Melbourne as such.





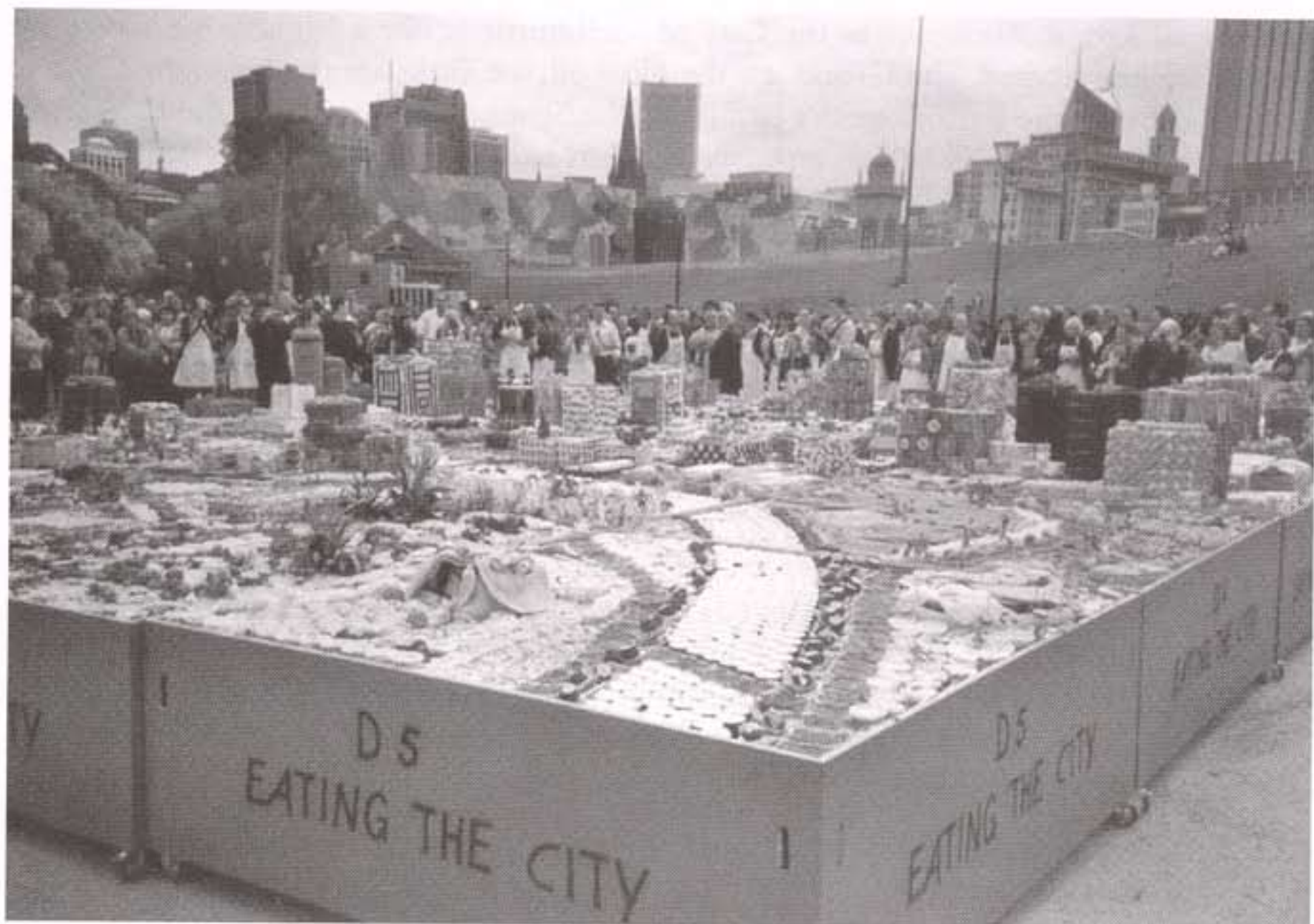
We did not have to convince the people of the authenticity of their role: they were eager to remember, to pay homage, to revive and integrate their past into their present in a continuum with the members of the rest of the communities. All equally present, eloquent, and productive.

Ali&Cia had complete trust that the representation or, better, the reproduction of the City centre in edible terms, by its very inhabitants as subjects and interpreters of such an innovating performance, would have the best results.

All you need to know is that you have to rely fully on the people in the communities, totally believe in them, and let them understand that your part of the agreement is to respect them: to propitiate the catharsis of their collective subconscious, to nourish their inspiration, tune in to their culinary wisdom, experiences, memories, nostalgias, and facilitate a new contact, a new way of perceiving their environment, and their urban horizon. As if out of the blue, it would become a reality that could be described as 'the miracle of the gustatory pupils'.

The miracle of the gustatory pupils consists of seeing things, physical, external things, from the perspective of, up to then, ignored sensory qualities: the buildings, the parks, the transportation and vehicles, the human beings and other living creatures, all can be perceived as rough, satin, smooth, cold, warm, savoury, sweet, acid, blue, hot, red, yellow,





brown, piquant, poignant, tender substances, from which, after manipulating and cooking the appropriate ingredients, you build at scale, and in 3D, the map of your town. As much as understanding the town in the new code of its edibility, the pupils/people were expected to understand and use the ingredients they were familiar with, involving an understanding of all the emotional, symbolic, and cultural values accumulated for generations.

Then you provide the people with the opportunity to ramble through the city – and you will witness the upsurging of such a liberating, strong, and up to then hidden instinct of urbanophilia and urbanphagy.

To return to our initial work: We had been running workshops with all community members to make ideas and decide from what traditional ingredients and dishes we would build every urban element of the particular parts of the City Centre of Melbourne each group had been assigned. Two of the best examples follow:

During one of the workshop sessions, in this case with the Vietnamese, an old woman was baking something in the oven. I asked her, 'What are you baking, lady?' And she answered me, 'I'm baking the parking!' The other example would be the attitude of the Italians. On my asking about their opinion of the Project as such, a woman said to me:



We all love it, Alicia; for us the City of Melbourne is like a Minestrone where we all are represented. The Greeks are the olive oil, the Turks are the lamb, the Chinese are the rice, the Italians are the basilicum, the Spanish are the saffron, the Indians are the water, and so on and so on ... we all form equally an essential part of it and feel represented by such a dish that at the same time is the building element to construct the Queen Elizabeth Market. That's why it is so delightful and we all enjoy and are nourished by it!

Respect for different peoples, trust in communal energy: this is what I learned from the *vis davidsoniana*, and this is what I find throughout the Eat Art world.

Note: The drawings, made by Ali&Cia's Bárbara Ortiz, feature the Corn of Africa (Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia), the Chinese, and a global view of the thirty-five communities involved in proudly creating, buying, cooking, serving, sharing and devouring the city of Melbourne with all the rest of the people living and visiting the town on that memorable day.

