



POLEN: HONEY, CULTURE & COMMUNITY

“Eating is a profoundly political act. With every bite we change the world, environmentally, economically and socially.”

—FOOD, BIGGER THAN THE PLATE, EXHIBITION AT THE V&A, LONDON

Art, design and food to shape the world

Cuisine (and food) can be art if art is meant in terms of fascination for the new and a reminder of the well known. Food, as well as art, mingles between tradition and innovation, between the expected and unexpected, between the comforting and ordinary and the exceptional and extraordinary.¹

On one hand, art gives us the possibility to shape realities, try different solutions and create new ideas that reflect our deeper needs; on the other food let us perceive the world *–before speaking, we taste–*. It's the common ground where necessity, enjoyment, knowledge and affection come together.²

Art, design and food dominate our cultures in so many ways, define our identity and shape our future thanks to the endless relationships these fields have with ecology, economy, politics, society and diversity, to name just a few. These relationships happen to be a common ground to play between the private and the public and other dualistic, parallel and interwoven concepts: home cooking and restaurant, the studio and the gallery, exploration and presentation, thoughts and actions, simplicity and complexity, tradition and innovation, the individual and the community.

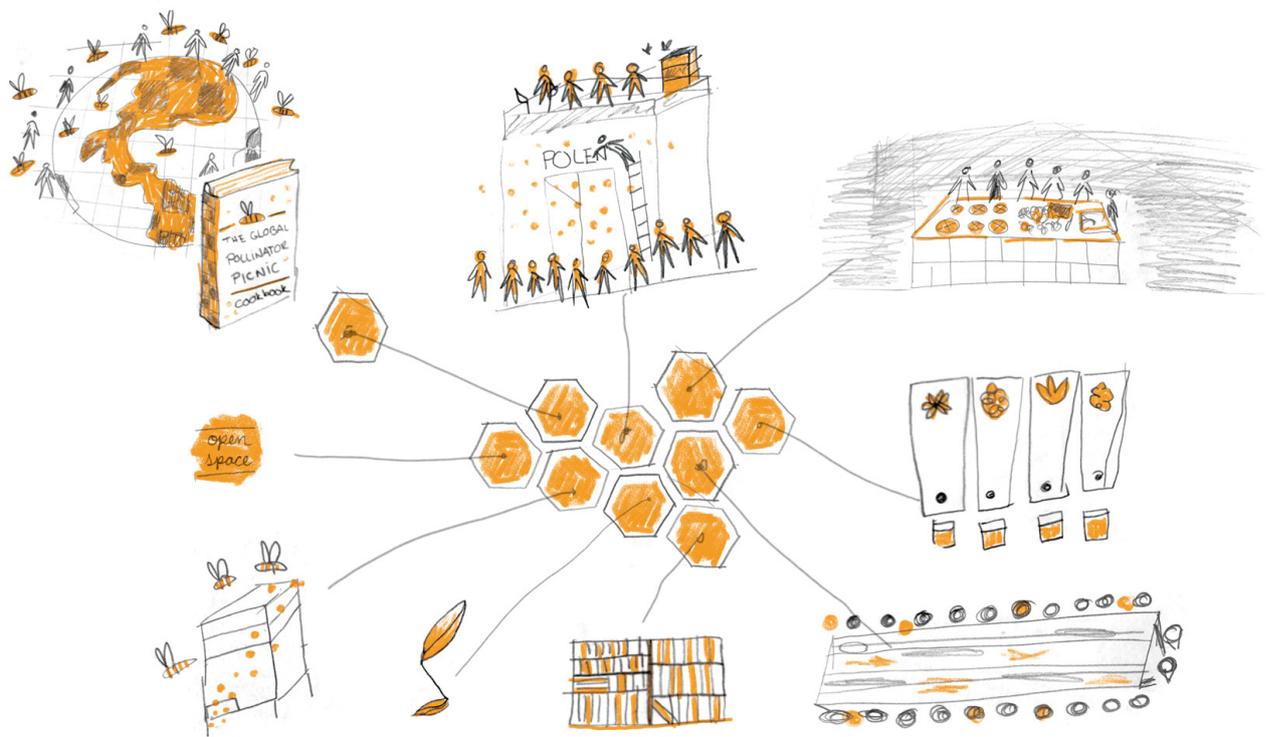
In 2019, the Victoria & Albert Museum of London held the exhibition *Food, Bigger than the Plate*, stating in the catalog record what *Food* means, [...] *an essentially ‘undisciplined’ material that spills over boundaries between science and culture, ecology and economy, technology and the body, human and non human, professional knowledge and everyday experience, is lending itself to expand ways of working. Whereas designers have traditionally approached food as something to contain and sell, a new generation of creative practitioners is embracing its complexity, connectivity and messiness. [...] and defining Design as [...] an activity and a way of thinking that can be used to explore ideas, conduct critical research and catalyse new social situations[...]*³

Art, design and food –*creativity*– are tools to start a conversation and change realities, therefore I am proposing this community-based project, **Polen**, a creative lab in Mexico City willing to share the importance of bees and pollinators through the enjoyment of honey-based and pollinator-friendly menus and bee-inspired exhibitions and performances.

The Project

Art enables us to think about the world that surrounds us, but most importantly gives us the possibility to think about ourselves and our relationship with our environment. I'm suggesting this social project inspired in how honey bees create community within the hive and how they provide ecosystem services to every being on Earth, whilst transforming nectar and pollen into honey.

Polen aims to build a strong sense of community whilst highlighting the importance and relation of bees, flowers, biodiversity and honey flavors, by creating a new narrative to promote environmental and social justice for beekeepers in Mexico through art, design and food.

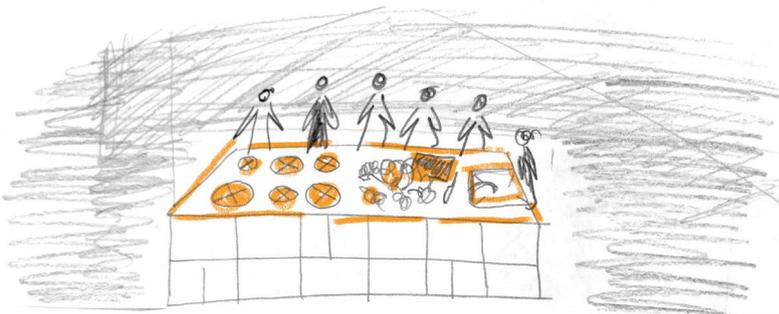


^(a)Theaster Gates has a clever upturn of art, land and human values in order to preserve communities. By literally creating spaces hands on with and for communities we can transform the world for a more mindful approach. *How to revive a Neighborhood with Imagination, Beauty and Art*. 2015. Ted Talk. https://www.ted.com/talks/theaster_gates_how_to_revive_a_neighborhood_with_imagination_beauty_and_art

Stage 1: Building the hive

Based on Theaster Gates^(a) approach to abandoned spaces and community building, our hub will be a small abandoned house in Coyoacán, Mexico City, with a rooftop garden.

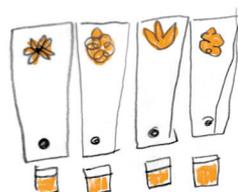
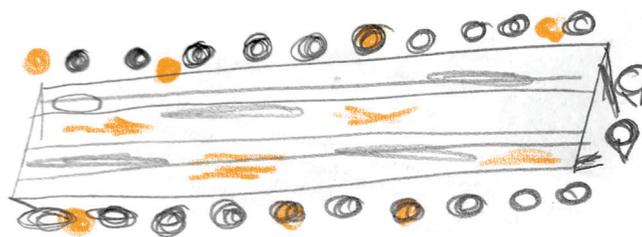
Certainly, building our hive requires professional expertise, sustainable materials and moreover teamwork. We will partner with a local architecture studio that shares our values, understand our needs both in terms of space and sustainability, and—specially important—is willing to facilitate the building process by mentoring volunteers from our community. The base of this stage of the project is collaboration and perception of time and space.



The construction inside needs happen around an open kitchen: The kitchen is, after all, the place in the food system where most ordinary people begin to engage with its broader realities. It is the juncture of culture, nature, politics and economics, where individuals and

households are linked most tangibly to all the other components of the cycle from compost to eating and back again. If we relinquish the act of cooking we lose that connectedness and with it the agency to be active participants or even changemakers in our global food system.⁴

Other important elements that we will need to be considered and constructed inside—in order to provoke a meaningful experience—are: communal tables, honey displays, exhibition and performance areas, and a library. I want this space to be open, flexible, and inclusive.



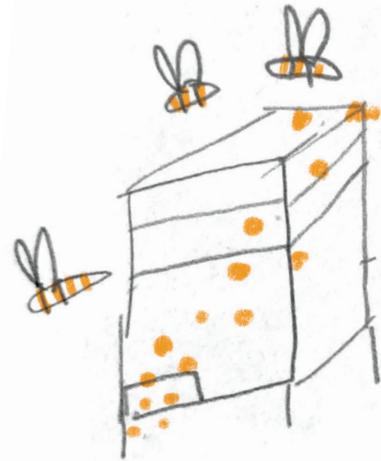
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To start planning the pollinator-friendly vegetable garden, we first need to acknowledge the importance of seeds, small capsules of life and time containing entire organisms, that can only exist because of pollinators. We plant seeds and they germinate, starting a new generation; they are not only the plant's legacy, they also act as a collective memory for humans.

Seeds are the promise of food, of life continuing beyond the season. Seeds are a currency with edible value⁵ (Asako Iwama and Lauren Maurer) that will nourish our community as well as our bees, thus making people aware of ecological systems we have gotten away from.

To add a key layer to our narrative –that can facilitate our understanding of the connections between rural and urban, the local and the universal, the individual and the community–, we will install a beehive in our rooftop garden. This will be crucial to collectivize knowledge, memories and desires, to explore a new cultural approach aiming to recover our ability to see ourselves as part of the planet, understand our responsibility towards our communities and empower agency.

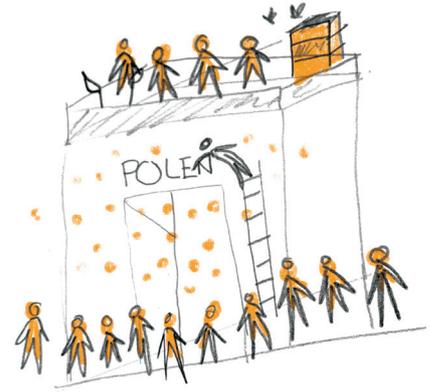


Lastly, using circular design as an activity and a way of thinking that can explore ideas and conduct critical research, we want to install a visible compost system that transforms food waste into rich soil and energy. Creating beauty –and a story– out of the by-products of production and consumption can help re-establish empathy with food as a material cycle that connects landscapes, organisms and people.⁶

Overall, these concepts of openness, curiosity and exploration play a crucial role in this project. It is profoundly inspired by *Life Is Space (LIS)*, the monthly informal day-long events organized by Olafur Eliasson Studio, where presentations, discussions and casual conversations are encouraged by integrating food experiments to dive into ideas and perception of the senses. [...] *The food experiments of LIS concern the essential duality implicit in eating together: When I eat it is an experience that is extremely individual. But when eating together with others, I situate my experience within a space that is very much collective – the meal, the act of eating together, the shared conversation, the social act. We turn the same ingredients into energy, prepared and seasoned in a similar way. It is therefore, in a sense, a common experience. But since you have a different set of taste buds, a different body, a different history, and different preferences, your experience may radically differ from mine. Of course, just as I can never be entirely certain that the color I call blue is the same blue for everyone else on the planet, taste is relative. What we have in common is that we are different.* –Olafur Eliasson.⁷

Stage 2: Pollinating

Once the space is ready, it's time to shape a framework to curate the space, leaving room for creativity, improvisation and fluidity. We will have an inhouse cooking team that will shape our weekly menus around different honey varieties, sourcing other ingredients both from our garden from local small-scale producers, needless to say that everything must be Good, Clean and Fair.⁸



Within the concept of seasonality, and the aim of creating a multi-sensorial experience for the community, **Polen** will invite 4 cooks and 4 artists yearly, to take over the space by creating a pop-up *meal-exhibition* with honey and pollinators as inspiration, in order to provoke a different level of conversation with our community and guests.^(b)

Honey is familiar, ancient and healing, but using it at a culinary level to trigger flavours and to praise its origin happens to eradicate this familiarity and transform it into an avant-garde ingredient. Aiming to disrupt this dual conversation, and bringing this complex ingredient to a nourishing community level, **Polen** will host culinary experiences around comfort and traditional food, as well as new and unfamiliar recipes to draw attention to the problematics honey and bees face.^(c) Honey will be our tool for constructing specific and nuanced relationships.⁹

The junction between art, food and design becomes a conversation with your audience. In a conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Rene Redzepi (2019), Redzepi states that –at NOMA– they are always trying to take things right up to the limit, but then they often turn the volume down. Although **Polen** is not meant to have a fine dining perspective, these words inspired ways of perceiving and sharing the eating experience itself. In the same conversation, Eliasson compares the act of experiencing a meal with art: “It’s like a work of art. You feel connectedness to where you are but also a sense of connectedness to where you come from and maybe all the way forward to where you’re headed. It’s a sensation of *presence*.”¹⁰

On the sustainable side, there’s a worldwide need for a healthy and synergistic relationship between the act of making food and protecting the climate. “Experiencing the impact of bees in relation with what we eat makes us feel connected to it, just like the connection we feel with whom we share a meal or with the plants we take care of. **Polen** aims to enhance these holistic interconnections to build a powerful narrative in order to strengthen our community.

^(b)This, by any means, wants to define the role of the artist and the role of the cook, after all, what makes the artist an artist and not a cook? The materials? If artist make something edible, does it turn them into cooks and viceversa? The idea is to question those roles and erase those boundaries.

^(c)A similar conversation is currently occurring at NOMA, their first attempt to open the restaurant after the Covid-19 lockdown in Denmark, they are shifting their high-end approach to the well-known warmth of comfort food (burgers). Exploring the idea of experience in a different level of relationship with their audience.

Stage 3: Harvesting

Inspired by Lara Gilmore and Massimo Bottura ^(d), **Polen** will focus on three business models to engage with our guests:

- **Community:** those neighbors who work to **Build the Hive –Stage1–** will enjoy free access to all our activities and special pricing for food during the first year. They will be recognized with a badge. In order to renew the benefit, seasonally we will hold community-engagement events to maintain the space, such as keeping the bees, painting walls, mounting and dismounting exhibitions, helping in the kitchen, etc.
- **Neighbors:** special discount for both activities and food. They can involve more and enjoy the **Community** benefits by attending to the events that will maintain the space alive.
- **Visitors:** full price, with the possibility to engage with the space.

Stage 4: Swarming



We don't want to create an exclusive space, we want to inspire others, engage in different levels of conversation both locally and internationally. **Polen** is aware that our food choices, the habits and rituals of human food cultures have a huge impact on local ecosystems and the planet as a whole. Therefore, inspired by Susan Lacy *International Diner Party*,^(e) we will reach out to fellow bee activists to create The Global Pollinator Picnic, happening during the celebrations of the World Bee Day (20th of May), encouraging them to activate their communities, share a meal and start conversations about the importance of bees within the food system.

Taste will play a crucial role within the whole stages of the project, taste creates bonds, it intimately and materially connects each of us with the biospheric flows of the planet. One deep way humans perceive the world is by tasting it. After tasting something, we make small iterative decisions about what we might want to taste in the future. Each of us takes part in the eternal ritual of selecting, eating and propagating ingredients every single day that we are alive. The aggregate consequence of all these decisions is the continuous reshaping of the world to reflect our preferences.¹²

^(d)Their approach to food not only as fine dining but also as a tool to create social and environmental change, feeding poor people while reducing food waste, partnering with small producers, brands and artists.

^(e)*International Dinner Party* as an inspiration of bringing communities together to support each other, giving them the possibility to bring to the table ideas and possible solutions for the issues we face.

Gratitude, preserving and sharing

Consciously deciding to document –or not– an art project plays a vital role for the creative process. The documentation of **Polen** has been thought according to each stage:

- **Building the Hive:** Visual registration highlighting the process, this will include sketches, documental photos, time lapse videos, moodboards and research boards.
- **Pollinating:** Exhibition catalogs along with creative seasonal recipes, highlighting the cook-artist collaboration.
- **Harvesting:** Visual registration of the evolving community.
- **Swarming:** During the happening, the documentation will be through videos and photos posted on social media. Afterwards, our fellow bee activists will choose a couple of recipes from their picnics, and the stories behind the people who create them, aiming to publish *The Global Pollinator Picnic Cookbook*.

Polen will also have a website and social media channels where the process will be shared in a narrative way. After the first year of operation, if we assess that it has impacted positively at a local level and it can be replicated, we would work on creating a toolkit to share our process with Creative Commons license shared through our website.



Art finds beauty in things that most people ignore, food brings underrated sensorial pleasures, design shows perspective, creativity shapes the world. Inspiration to develop the concept for this project: Theaster Gates, Lara Gilmore & Massimo Bottura, Susan Lacy, Olafur Eliasson, Rene Redzepi, beekeepers, researchers, museum curators and many other creatives with whom I've shared conversations around social impact, food, design, environment, sustainability, connections.



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