

UTOPIA ON A PLATE

Greensparrow talks to POST--OFFICE



A Greensparrow canapé event at POST--OFFICE

Interview by Hans Larsson

On a Saturday morning in June I sat down with Phyllis Wong, the motor behind Greensparrow catering, to discover the ideas and experiences behind her work. Born and raised in Singapore, she went on to study architecture abroad, obtaining a degree from SCI-Arc in 2001. Following this, she worked as an architect in Los Angeles and London until 2009, after which she moved to Rotterdam with her husband, where they are currently raising two children. Wong is the founder and owner of Greensparrow, which specialises in seasonal, locally-sourced fare, drawing from her international upbringing to stage an almost serendipitous encounter of textures and flavours.

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HL: We were talking a little bit about how you came to Rotterdam. Was there a decision early on about moving away from Singapore, for architecture in particular, or for some other reason?

PW: I already had a few cousins living abroad doing their studies, so it was already in the family, and I knew that I would like to do the same, mainly because Singapore is a small country. I always wanted to explore; when you're young, you yearn for everything that is beyond the walls

of your home. I chose USA because I wanted to go to SciArc.

HL: Is there anything about Singapore in terms of the built environment, something that you still take with you – such as the smells or sights, for instance?

PW: I miss the smell of rain. In a tropical place the smell of rain is very different. It's the smell of asphalt, the smell of ferns, big plants, and the moisture in the air. But as for Singapore as a whole, it's a place where new things are constantly being built, rather than changes being implemented within what already exists. So when I go back and look for things from my childhood such as a library or a swimming pool, a lot of it is gone. That's a pity.

HL: It seems to have been formed, like the Netherlands, by a deep will to generate the built landscape, and maybe more so than here, to erase.

PW: That's right, and it's a very young country as well. When making their master plan, they were able to look around at many historical precedents, and they were really influenced by the Netherlands. But for someone who grows up in the 80's and goes back now, there

are not a lot of places I can go back to and think 'ah, I remember this...'

HL: So in a certain sense it's a city that doesn't allow nostalgia.

PW: It's not flexible when it comes that. But I have to say there are a lot of people who probably feel the same way as I do, who are staying put and making changes there. Like my brother and his friends, they studied abroad, they came back...

HL: Is it a city that allows someone to be involved?

PW: Not officially; it's quite a rigid place, which has its reasons. But if you start small and work on your community, you can.

HL: And when you studied in LA, how did you personally approach architecture, what was the 'way in' for you? Was it related to your previous studies in interiors?

PW: My father was a furniture dealer. As a child I remember that the furniture at home was always changing. He was very particular about quality of construction and materiality. And as a dealer, he would know what was around in the market and every year we would have something new. That was probably my first lesson in the differences of design quality. He even custom-made our dining table – he had his own factory – and we are still using it now; it's made out of solid mahogany! My mother was a house-maker, and she was always really fashionable. She was quite trendy compared to the other mothers; very hands-on, creative, and draws really well.

HL. And regarding the curriculum at SciArc, was there an

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overall theme? Were they developing a particular way of thinking through the questions they asked you?

PW: A lot of the times the courses touched upon on the geographic location of LA, which is very diverse, because there is the ocean, the valley, the mountain, the desert. There was always a project that took you to the desert. Around LA, the desert is vast.

HL: I was in LA one day, because we had a stopover in LAX when I was young, with my parents, and we basically rented a convertible and rode the highways of LA. I wasn't that impressed by the place at the time because it had too much of a car culture. But I remember this particular atmosphere of the sun and the ocean.

PW: You would always feel the sky in LA. You feel like the horizon is just so much wider there. It's something always present when it comes to designing buildings, which tend

to be very light there. When I moved to Europe I realised that, by comparison, the buildings in LA are like sheds, because you don't need the insulation that you have here.

HL: Moving on to your work with food - was this something that developed in parallel with your education and work as an architect?



Wong during a POST-OFFICE Lunch Break

PW: Not at all. It really came because of two things. First, because of moving to Rotterdam and being really disappointed by the food culture here, which was and is so supermarket dependent. There was no support for local farmers or local produce, not to mention organic food. I was really disappointed by that. And second, I subsequently became a mother, and my interest came naturally just from thinking of what to feed my child.

HL: How did you grow up with food?

PW: I was spoiled with choice in LA. It's much richer. There are Mexican/Latino options, the standard American stuff, and then a huge Asian presence. LA has, for example, the biggest population of Koreans outside of Korea; there are also lots of Vietnamese, Japanese, and a huge Chinese community. In London I don't even need to mention the diversity - it was amazing.

HL: In Singapore was the main restaurant your mother's kitchen? Is that where you got your influence from?

PW: There was that, but in Asian cities there is also a huge presence of street food which is very affordable, in food courts where you can eat outside. That's something lovely about Singapore.

HL: What I found really unique about London were the markets. They happen constantly, they are everywhere,

and the food there is often homemade.

PW: It's important to support what's around you rather than just have things flown in from Kenya or Spain. Just like a farmer, you can produce something yourself and then you consume it, afterwards going back to produce again. In the bigger picture, this aspect of sustainability is also an important topic in architecture these days. It's getting more important to make something not for one architect's ego, but for the community.

HL: Have you made some kind of research or exploration into food, or made discoveries that are very special to where you are now?

more personal experience and its span is shorter, it's always about trying to perfect a form of art. The best part is the social connection at the end, when you and someone else enjoy the meal, or when you and someone else enjoy a space. Architecture and cooking are very similar in this sense.

I find that what I'm doing right now is happening because I'm a designer. As designers we want more diversity, and we want things to enrich us. In the process of making this meal or this space we want to delve into different influences and find more alternatives that can fulfill us. If I was cooking without the experience of being an architect that it would be very different.



Outdoor eating during a POST-OFFICE Lunch Break

PW: I believe in being sustainable and therefore seasonal, taking what nature gives you. In summer you have an abundance of colours and fruits. In winter and spring there is different produce. We are drinking orange juice right now [spring] but it's actually a winter thing. Not a lot of urban residents know that. Right now it's actually time for strawberries and cherries. This kind of knowledge makes you appreciate the environment. When you eat seasonally you are learning about the place where you live - just like farmers, who know the soil and the earth. And when you become a parent you want the best for your children.

Another important aspect is that cooking is a total and complete art form. It's very similar to how architects project their utopia. When you cook, even though it's a

HL: What would be different about your cooking if you weren't an architect?

PW: I don't know... maybe the way I do it. In architecture many times you work systematically, and you have to really coordinate really well before putting all these things together.

HL: How do you conceptualise the meal you are making? Do you design the plate based on something abstract, or is it based on something you smelled that morning?

PW: Sometimes it's spontaneous, but a lot of times you have to plan ahead. For example, when doing a P—O lunch, you have to put together the context, season, the people who are coming, and only then do you respond

with what you want to produce. It's a lot of preparation. You need to know where to get the ingredients, and form an ensemble with them. You need planning. It sounds easy because it's just something on a plate.

But if you want that 'something on a plate' to be appetizing, to be attractive – and I really don't want to spoon you just *stamppot* - it has to be more interesting. Food to me has to have more layers. It must have texture, must be crunchy, must be smooth and soft, it has to have another level that you don't get from opening a can. It must smell good, look attractive, and as a designer you think about this more than your mother who maybe is more concerned about nutrition. You want to go beyond that. The meal has to be nutritious and attractive, seasonal and sustainable. And then it becomes a perfect utopia on a plate!

HL: It seems that in your preparation, there really is deliberation and a careful selection of elements, but also a desire to be relevant, responding to what is around you that day and that season, as you describe before.

PW: If you start to pair the same seasonal ingredients differently, you always get something different; you always get a surprise and that's more interesting. It's good to have predictable things because you feel more secure, but surprises can make your day.

HL: And how do you surprise yourself?

PW: Sometimes there are so many thoughts in my head that spin around faster than I can say. You play around, you see the possibilities; it's like an architectural concept, everything is possible, but in order conclude it you have to pair the materials and see it.

HL: How do you discover new ideas about food? Is it about trying different restaurants or talking to people?

PW: It takes time. Trial and error, practicing. There are endless options.

HL: To touch upon the movie nights you held at P—O, featuring *In the Mood for Love* and *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* - is there something you would like to explore with film, that you see having a relationship with an evening of eating?

PW: Film is related to the social aspect. We dine together in a space and bring ideas together. These days when one would think that the virtual world is reducing physical interaction - actually, it's not. Film as a medium brings together a message in the form of colours, in the form of a storyline, and it's one of the very few mediums that can absorb an audience together for ninety minutes into this "other world" created by someone else.

I chose films related to food because they show the hidden pursuit of perfection that we also find in the way architecture is made. Jiro is a legend among his people and this is because he is a perfectionist. How many architects are not perfectionists? We mostly all are. We strive for precision and responsible actions, but you can't really see that in the product; you can't see that in the food or the building. But when you have the social connection made possible by the movie night, you bring it full circle. --