



Dr. Francesca Zampollo

Design researcher, consultant, teacher, facilitator, Founder of Online School of Food Design©, Author of the Food Design Thinking methodology.

Dr. Francesca Zampollo is a Design Theory and Food Design researcher, consultant, teacher, and a keen public speaker. She is the author of the Food Design Thinking methodology which she brings to companies, schools, and professionals. Francesca is the founder of the OSFD Online School of Food Design© (onlineschooloffooddesign.org), the founding editor of the International Journal of Food Design (the first and only academic journal on Food Design), the founder of the International Food Design Society, and she organised the first, second, and third International Conferences on Food Design. Francesca earned a PhD in Design Theory applied to Food Design in 2014. She taught Food Design and Design Theory at London Metropolitan University and Auckland University of Technology as a full time lecturer and researcher, and now teaches in various universities as a visiting lecturer. Francesca's current research and work revolves around Design Theory, System Design Thinking, Design Activism, and the role of spirituality in Design (francescazampollo.com).

Unveiling Food Design Activism

Dr. Francesca Zampollo

Abstract

This paper introduces Food Design Activism, a specialised branch of Design Activism tailored to address food system challenges such as sustainability, equity, and justice. Food Design Activism integrates the philosophy and practice of Design Activism within the diverse field of Food Design, encompassing its 14 sub-disciplines. It explores how designers can leverage this framework to reimagine and reshape food systems, creating solutions that are innovative, inclusive, and meaningful. By exploring its principles and examples of spaces of application, the paper argues for the urgent need to apply activist approaches within food systems to achieve transformative change and societal impact.

Keywords: Food Design Activism, Design Activism, Food Systems, Food Design, Sustainability, Food Sovereignty, Food Justice.

Introduction

In this paper, I will be proposing and introducing the concept of Food Design Activism, a branch of Design Activism applied specifically to food systems. Food Design Activism uses the philosophy and practice of Design Activism to reshape food systems in light of challenges related to sustainability, justice, and equity.

While Design Activism broadly seeks societal change, Food Design Activism operates within the multifaceted discipline of Food Design, encompassing its 14 sub-disciplines: Food Product Design, Design With Food, Gastronomy, Food Tech, Agriculture, Design For Food,

Food Space Design, Eating Design, Food Service Design, Marketing and Communication, Critical/Speculative Food Design, Food System Design, Sustainable Food Design, and Policy Making and Activism (Zampollo, 2023). This article discusses the basic food-specific character of Food Design Activism; its principles in general; and its conditions for systemic changes in food.

Design Activism

Design Activism utilises Design to create forms of societal change related to social, political, environmental, and economic issues. Fuad-Luke (2013) defines it as “imagination and practice applied [...] to create [...] counter-narrative[s] aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental, and/or economic change” (p. 27). It is precisely the capacity for provoking debate, challenging assumptions, and fostering alternative narratives that gives Design Activism its transformative potential (Hendren, 2015).

Markussen (2013) illustrates how the crossover between aesthetics and politics in Design Activism enables the transformation of society by way of the Design process. Such a crossover underlines the potential of Design Activism to challenge powers, seek justice, and advance sustainable development. The principles of Design Activism (Zampollo, 2024) — revealing, political, contesting, disruptive, designerly, and real — serve as a foundation for Food Design Activism, contextualised within food systems.

Food Activism

Food activism looks to alter food systems to attain social, economic, and environmental justice. Counihan and Siniscalchi define it as

"efforts by people to change the food system across the globe by modifying how they produce, distribute, and/or consume food" (2014, p. 3). Key areas of food activism are food justice, sovereignty, and security — all of which do call for the right for everyone to have proper nutrition and fight against exploitative practices.

Within her critique of industrial agriculture, Vandana Shiva (2018) underlines ecological and social harms. For Shiva, it is the way in which industrial systems — importantly — place profit over and above sustainability — that has thrown up very serious environmental degradation and health crises. Food activism is the way to promote such systemic injustices through demands for agroecology, community resilience, and local control over food systems.

Fusing Design Activism and Food Activism

Food Design Activism combines the principles of Design Activism (Zampollo, 2024) with the goals of food activism to address food-specific challenges. This fusion creates a holistic approach to reshaping food systems, integrating creativity with critical reflection to foster justice and sustainability. As Fuad-Luke (2009) notes, Design Activism generates "counter-narrative[s] aimed at balancing positive social, institutional, environmental, and/or economic change" (p. 27).

In food activism, the goal is to create interventions that foster equitable access to healthy, culturally appropriate, and sustainably produced food. Food activism often involves critical reflection, challenging dominant food industry practices and proposing new ways of thinking about food, much like Hendren's (2015) description of Design Activism as a means to provoke political

debate and engage the public. Thus, Food Design Activism not only tackles the societal issues surrounding food but also uses Design as a tool for both resistance and transformation.

In fusing together Design Activism and Food Activism I propose the following definition of Food Design Activism:

Food Design Activism is the deliberate use of Design practices to pursue equality, justice, and well-being for human beings and vitality of all natural elements of a food system: plants, animals, soil, water, and air. Food Design Activism pursues food sovereignty, food safety, food justice, and agroecology. Food Design Activism reveals, contests, and disrupts unjust power structures, gives voice to marginalised communities, and initiates real, actionable changes.

Principles of Food Design Activism

Here we explore the seven Food Design Activism principles. Six of these are the same foundational principles of Design Activism, discussed at length in a previous paper I wrote (Zampollo, 2024): revealing, political, contesting, disruptive, designerly, and real. The six Design Activism principles are here briefly described and then contextualised within the topic of food systems. The seventh principle is unique to Food Design Activism, which is here described as principle number one: Food Design Activism Changes Food Systems.

I propose that only projects that address all seven principles are examples of Food Design Activism. Projects that address some or most of them are likely to be examples of activism, Food Activism, Design for Social Innovation, Critical Design, etc.

1. Food Design Activism Changes Food Systems

Food Design Activism addresses interconnected aspects of food systems, such as production, distribution, consumption, and waste management. It uses systems thinking to create well-rounded solutions that balance environmental, social, and economic needs (Pretty et al., 2006). By incorporating sustainability principles, Food Design Activism promotes more resilient and equitable food systems.

For instance, urban food forests illustrate how Food Design Activism fosters sustainable ecosystems that provide fresh produce while enhancing biodiversity and encouraging community involvement. The Beacon Food Forest in Seattle is a notable example, prioritising ecological balance and social inclusion.

2. Food Design Activism Is Revealing

Food Design Activism uncovers systemic injustices and hidden power dynamics within food systems. By bringing these structures to light, it raises awareness and motivates change. Markussen (2013) highlights Design's role in exposing societal inequities, while Bridle (2012) stresses the importance of understanding networks for effective action. One example is carbon footprint labelling, which reveals the environmental impact of food products. This transparency enables consumers to make informed, eco-friendly choices while encouraging companies to reduce emissions. Similarly, initiatives like Toast Ale, which brews beer using surplus bread, draw attention to food waste and inspire systemic changes.

3. Food Design Activism Is Political

Design is inherently political; it reflects and shapes societal values. Food Design Activism confronts dominant ideologies to advocate

for justice and equity. Rancière's (2010) concept of dissensus underscores Design's ability to challenge hierarchical structures and promote alternative perspectives. Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs are a clear example of political engagement in food systems. These initiatives build direct relationships between farmers and consumers, bypassing corporate supply chains to ensure accountability and fair distribution of resources.

4. Food Design Activism Is Contesting

At its core, Food Design Activism challenges entrenched norms to create opportunities for transformation. Markussen (2013) describes contestation as vital for disrupting dominant ideologies and enabling alternative approaches. The "ugly food" movement, for example, contests cosmetic standards that lead to food waste. Companies like Imperfect Foods sell "ugly" produce, promoting sustainability while reshaping consumer attitudes. Similarly, seed-sharing platforms empower communities to challenge corporate control over agriculture and preserve biodiversity.

5. Food Design Activism Is Disruptive

Disruption plays a key role in introducing new possibilities by challenging established systems. Food Design Activism disrupts profit-driven food systems by advocating for localised, inclusive models. Alternative Food Networks exemplify this by connecting producers and consumers directly, bypassing traditional supply chains. Apps like "Too Good To Go" and "Olio" combat waste by redistributing surplus food to those who need it. These initiatives redefine waste as a resource, advancing sustainability and enhancing food security.

6. Food Design Activism Is Designerly

Being "designerly" means using creativity and iterative problem-solving to address complex systemic challenges (Cross, 1982). Food Design Activism employs participatory and co-design methods to empower communities in reshaping food systems. Examples include food hubs and community gardens, which bring local stakeholders together to co-create solutions for food insecurity while emphasising sustainability. Participatory workshops further enable communities to design equitable and accessible distribution systems.

7. Food Design Activism Is Real

Food Design Activism delivers tangible, lasting improvements to food systems. It moves beyond abstract ideas to produce practical, actionable interventions. Markussen (2013) emphasises the dual political and aesthetic nature of Design Activism, which transforms everyday experiences. Examples include public food-sharing fridges and surplus food redistribution systems. These initiatives provide immediate benefits to communities while addressing broader issues like food waste and insecurity. Seed banks and libraries offer another impactful solution, preserving biodiversity and supporting local farmers.

Conclusion

Food Design Activism offers a transformative way to tackle challenges within food systems. By combining the principles of Design Activism with the goals of food activism, it advances justice, sustainability, and equity. From uncovering systemic inequities to implementing practical solutions, Food Design Activism highlights how Design can reshape food systems and improve lives.

Through this approach, designers can magnify their impact, address urgent global issues, and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future.

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