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The Multimodal Dining Experience

A Case Study of Space, Sound and Locality

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Abstract. *This paper presents a case study of the three multimodal dining experiences provided by a local fine-dining restaurant during autumn 2015 in South Ostrobothnia in western Finland. All of the elements of these multisensory events were designed to underpin the desired local ambiance, especially as it pertains to soundscape, place, and food. The events took place in a linen textile mill, an old power plant, and an art gallery. Focus-group interviews were conducted to explore the overall experience, as well as participants' perceptions and opinions. This paper highlights the multimodal aspect of ambiance. The results led us to think not only about the physical and sensory, but also the cultural and social dimensions of the ambiance.*

Keywords: *multisensory experience, local culture, fine dining*

Introduction

We experience and perceive the world with our five senses—sight, sound, smell, touch and taste—which function not independently from each other, but with each other. In Seinäjoki city, Finland, a multidisciplinary scientific community composed of food, cultural musicology, architecture and marketing researchers has been focusing since 2011 on experimenting with and studying the multisensory dining experience. The key research interest has been multisensory correspondence, i.e. the interaction and crossover of different senses, and the reception of multisensory experiences. The research has been conducted in coordination with authorities from fields such as music, sound design, cuisine, audio-visual and the scent arts. The interaction between researchers and artists has provided novel research platforms by enabling researchers to study multisensory arts, creating processes and multimodal experiences in live situations. Also, for the artists, the cooperation has provided possibilities for exploring and developing their own perspectives on multimodal art forms.

This paper presents a case study of the multimodal dining experience, including three events that took place in autumn 2015 in South Ostrobothnia in western Finland. A local fine-dining restaurant provided three dining experiences focusing on local aspects of food and location. The events took place in settings that are normally unusual for fine dining: a linen textile mill (formerly used as a sawmill), an

old power plant and an art gallery (formally used as a youth association house). All of the elements of these multisensory events were designed to underpin the desired local ambiance, especially with regard to soundscape. Here, we want to explore the overall experiences of the participants and think about what we could learn about multisensory ambiances from these experiences.

Primary research data consists of group interviews, and for the analysis, we used the Five Aspects Meal Model (FAMM) (Gustafsson et al. 2006) and frame analysis (Goffman 1974). The results led us to think not only of the physical and sensory, but also of the social dimensions of ambiance. The results also will be discussed from a sound design viewpoint to debate possible future implications.

Research Questions, Methods and Materials

The study was designed to explore the quality of the overall customer experience after having experienced multisensory fine-dining events in different extraordinary spaces. In this paper, we aim to answer these two research questions: 1) How did the study participants experience the dinner events and what kind of meanings people gave to the experiences? 2) Drawing from this case study, what aspects should be considered when designing local dining ambiances?

The data was collected in three South Ostrobothnian towns where a local fine-dining restaurant, Juurella, organised experiential dinners. The menu represented New Nordic Cuisine (see: www.nynordiskmad.org). Authentic tastes and the use of genuine and unusual local raw materials are essential parts of the restaurant's cooking philosophy. The portions are creative and aesthetic, and the service is personal, caring, and easy-going. At every event, the menu was the same, with a few slight modifications, and it included two appetisers, a main course, and two desserts. All of the venues were well-known and historically important places in the community. Places with local historical significance fit with the essential idea of Juurella's pop-up restaurant tour: locality. In these venues, locality was highlighted in food, table settings, music, and in the photo slide show of photos mainly of local landscapes. The events created challenges for the restaurant. For example, not one of them had a proper kitchen. The first event was held at the power plant museum Jyllinkosken Sähkölaitosmuseo in Kurikka town. The second event was held at the linen textile mill Jokipiin Pellava in Jalasjärvi town. The third was held at the Art Gallery Harri in Alavus town. The venues were furnished with tables and chairs, and decorated in moderation. For example, in the linen textile mill, the dinner took place in the factory hall, where all the machines and stocks were clearly visible to the dinner customers.

To make cooking possible in these circumstances and make the service system fit in each place, much planning and preparation were needed. The soundscapes were planned with carefully selected music, and at every event, the music selections were rooted in the local history of the town. In the old power plant museum, the music theme was international jazz performed by Finnish musicians from the 1920's to the 1950s, and in the art gallery the music choices were local contemporary folk and brass band music played by Finnish orchestras. At two of the events, carefully selected archival recordings from local musicians were used. These performances were introduced to the audience after the dinner's main course. All of the sensory

elements or cues were created to form a balanced ambiance, but they were clear enough to make the diners perceive the themes.

A customer-critic approach was used in evaluating customer experiences. This method is suited to evaluating services in which customers spend a lot of time together in carefully planned environments and where aesthetics form an essential part of the service package. The method requires active participation from the audience. (Harris et al. 2011.) Three focus groups, with six persons in each group – men and women ages 18 to 63 years – were recruited to take part in the study. Each group participated in one dinner. Before the dinners, the study participants were asked to take notes and observations on the location and space, place setting, sonic environment, lighting, food, customer service and ambiance of the event.

Study participants were placed at different tables, with two to four people in a group. Immediately after the events, focus-group interviews were conducted to discuss study participants' perceptions and opinions in detail. The discussions were informal, and the researchers did not participate, but only observed the situation and reactions. Interviews were documented via audio recorder and transcribed for the analysis. Approximately six months after the events, we asked the same focus groups via email what their thoughts and memories of the events were.

Dinner at the Linen Textile Mill Jokipiin Pellava

In this chapter, we examine more closely one dinner event and make some observations from the group interview that took place at the linen textile mill. Jokipiin Pellava is a family company founded in 1920, and the surroundings of the mill form a traditional South Ostrobothnian cultural milieu, with the river and field landscape. The entrance to the venue was from the backyard, and the food service was carried out in a factory hall with open space between yarn-warping and weaving machines, with a strong smell of linen. Warm and indirect lighting, instead of the factory's fluorescent lights, was used to soften the space's lighting.

The music's theme was 'from the linen mill to the cotton fields', and the playlist combined local folk music and North American blues, which was intended to reflect the massive migration from South Ostrobothnia to North America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a surprise element, a short archival audio recording from a local folk musician was played during the dinner, and the playlist included a few songs from a well-known local humor band to contrast with the sonic environment. The space was also decorated with projected pictures from the factory and community to try and make the locality message stronger.

Interview

Next, we will explore briefly the overall customer experience at the event in Jokipiin Pellava, especially from the viewpoint of space and ambiance. The customer opinions from the group interview are classified by applying the FAMM model's categories to give structure to the description. Categories are atmosphere, product (food), space, and encounter.

The atmosphere was seen as strongly positive and pleasant. The description concerning atmosphere during the dinner emphasised surprising elements and new experiences. Some of the interviewees felt that the event strengthened the sense of community and pride for one's native place. Interviewees clearly emphasised how

much this experience also had enriched them. Also, they often highlighted their appreciation for the work done by the Restaurant Jurella.

The place and space created multisensory and nostalgic experiences that were highly appreciated. Interviewees felt that the experience actually began outside the factory building before dinner. When entering the venue, the customers had to find the entrance from the backyard, and to get there, they had to walk through the factory area. While walking, they got in touch with the surrounding cultural landscape. This experience with traditional river and field scenery was highly appreciated, and it was even stronger with the smell of smoke outside. The impressive entrance also raised expectations for the dinner. Nostalgia also was in the air. One of the interviewees, a 24-year-old woman, explained her experience: 'My mind went to the old times. That river, water, fields. The traditional Finnish landscape. And that scent in that place ... the times what you haven't really lived, but you would like to experience and live.'

The genuine factory surroundings enriched their imagination and also elicited thoughts about factory work and the workers. This gave the experience a whole new perspective. These elements of the experience clearly increased feelings of authenticity. The space and the situation inspired and surprised guests. The projected photo show was the only thing that was criticised because many of the interviewees found the show difficult to follow from the tables.

A local folk musician's audio recording, which included a story and music from the 1970s, was played to the diners after the main course. At that moment, the soundscape changed dramatically as the people listened to it in silence. It was described as a stimulating and contrasting element, although one of the interviewees felt it was a disruptive element. The dishes in the table settings were considered diversified, and the entire table settings were considered reasonably festive and simple, allowing the emphasis to be placed on the food. For example, interviewees valued the fact that the linen tablecloths were made in the very factory in which they were eating.

The food was described vividly. Many interviewees had been impressed because of the many memorable and surprising details in the food, such as the unusual raw materials used for flavouring (e.g. pine), cooking techniques (e.g. smoked potatoes), and inspirational structures of the food. The sensitivity and simplicity of the preparation methods made a strong impression and acted as a catalyst for discussions between strangers. Interviewees also valued the local origin of the food, which was the core experience of the multisensory dinner. People felt that the menu meshed well with the surroundings, especially its smell.

The kitchen and waitstaff's encounters with customers during dinner were seen as highly respectful. The personnel were able to meet guests in an unaffected, personal, and caring way. Customer service was considered effective and professional, but also peaceful. The waiters' work style was described as sensitive and discreet. Interviewees appreciated the chef's efforts to participate and discuss the meal in a casual way with all of the customers personally. Interviewees came to the conclusion that the food was prepared with passion and love.

Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, we have presented and analysed experiential dining from the viewpoint of multimodal space. Let us now look at the results purely from the soundscape

viewpoint and use frame analysis (Goffman 1986 [1974]) to interpret people's experiences with the sonic environments of the dinners. When analysing all three group interviews, we can conclude that three frames could also be considered guidelines for acoustic design in multimodal restaurant events. First people talked about the *technical aspects affecting the soundscape*, such as the music's volume and acoustic properties of the space. According to the interviewees, the volume level of the music was pleasant. This is in line with the fact that the sound designer monitored the volume level throughout the dinners.

Secondly, they talked about the *soundscape as part of a multimodal dining experience*, e.g. how they perceived congruence between the music, the hum of voices, and the food. For example, one of the interviewees, a 43-year-old woman who took part in the dinner at the art gallery, said that even though she loved accordion music, it did not mesh well with the hum of voices and that brass band music suited the ambiance much better. One probable explanation might be the hard acoustics of the art gallery. When sound designing for a dining venue, a sound designer should consider the venue's acoustical features in relation to the music that will be played in the venue.

Thirdly, the music was received mostly very positively, contributing to a meaningful experience. However, one of the interviewees in Jokipii said that occasionally, the music completely broke the mood or ambiance. In any event, in this case, *music was perceived as a meaningful and special experience*. The results of our case study further confirmed that when all of the environmental elements of the dinner event – space, sound, visuals, food – are carefully selected to support the chosen theme (in this case, locality), it can deeply intensify the multimodal experience of the participants.

The sense of locality was created and supported by using archived audio recordings and carefully selected music for the events. This sonic ambiance combined with the unusual (for dining) space, along with the food, prepared with local ingredients, formed a multisensory whole. Besides exploring the experience from the sensory perspective, we need to take a look at the social aspects of the event. According to the interviews, people felt that instead of having a private dinner in a fine-dining restaurant, they were part of a social, yet intimate, event. Because of this, people started to talk with strangers.

An examination of people's perception of locality deepens our understanding of the different cultural and social meanings people give during staged, multisensory experiences. With our case study, we have also demonstrated one possible and fruitful method to study and collect research data from experiential events.

The results of this case study underpin the multimodal aspect of ambiance. We don't sense in isolation. Instead, we always have our subjective and cultural interpretations within every sensory perception. As Susanne Højlund (2015) notes, we should realise that although human senses are universal, we should also think of our sensory functions as a cultural activity. In our multisensory dining events we explored study participants' experience from the standpoint of local ambiance, which was highlighted especially by using sound. The deeper understanding of the experience led us to think not only of the physical and sensorial, but also of the cultural and social dimensions of the ambiance experience.

The case study's theme for the dining events was locality, and besides the food, all of the environmental factors and elements were designed to enhance the experience

of locality through sensory stimuli. The results show that people gave personal meanings to the experience and made associations between different elements of the experience.

Six months after the events, we asked the focus groups again how they reminisce and feel about the events now. The responses signified that the experiences had been profound: 'Exceptional,' 'unforgettable,' 'unique,' 'never experienced anything like that,' and 'exciting' are a few of the emailed descriptions. Many of the respondents said they had been remembering the event many times since then, and they remembered not only the atmosphere, but also the tastes, smells, and the way people interacted with each other.

The social dimension of the experience is something to consider more closely. It is also present in the negative critique that some of the interviewees provided. One of the reasons why people criticised the photo slide show was that it disturbed their conversations. It also clarified the essential core of the multimodal dining experience – that is, dining as a social activity.

To think about possible future implications concerning multimodal ambiances, we need to pay attention to the balance and intensity of the sensory stimuli. In our case, the photo slide show triggered something that could be termed *sensory overload* (Spence et al. 2014), which refers to a situation in which one is receiving so many intense sensory stimuli that they become irritating. The challenge is to find the optimum level of stimulation. We need to study more people's experiences with ambiances. The multimodal viewpoint also can deepen our understanding also of the cultural and social dimensions of the experiences and ambiances.

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