
Table Talk

Lisa Landrum

Associate Dean (Research), Associate Head, Associate Professor



For as long as there have been tables there has been table talk. Conversations across tables often happen during a meal. In the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti wrote a book called *Table Talk*. Well, that's an easy English translation. The original Latin title was *Intercenales*, a neologism (new word) invented by Alberti to mean "between meals." Like an intermission between acts of a play, the short stories collected in *inter-cenales* were intended to provide relief between main courses, offering food for the mind.

One of the most overtly architectural fables in *Table Talk* is *The Temple*. It tells the story of a church from the point of view of its stones. Personified, the stones speak: the large heavy stones at the base complain that they bear the weight of the entire edifice and, being next to the road, are always in shadow and being splashed with mud. Meanwhile, the little ornamental stones higher up bask in the sunlight and receive admiration. Angered by this apparent injustice, the heavy base stones rise up in revolt. Their catastrophic action causes the entire temple to collapse.

In another story called *Fate and Fortune* a philosopher shares what he learned from a dream. In this dream he sits on a peak overlooking a turbulent river filled with people trying to survive. The river is Life, the banks Death. Those who try to escape the river by clinging to its shore perish. Those who climb atop high floats are beaten down on the rocks. Those who gather in large vessels are shipwrecked by reckless helmsmen. The only individuals who stay afloat are those who swim a middle course, buoyed by ancient planks. *Fate and Fortune*, like *The Temple*, imparts an allegorical lesson, for the planks are books, relics of the liberal arts. For Alberti, these were the most reliable aid for completing the toilsome journey of life.

Leon Battista Alberti is best known as an Italian architect, who advised some of the most powerful rulers of the day on major building projects. Alberti was also a prolific author, who wrote ten books *On the Art of Building* (1452), dedicated to Pope Nicholas V who was embarking on a great renovation of Rome. Why would Alberti take time – in between these important architectural commissions – to indulge in *Table Talk*?

The tradition of talking across tables over a meal – and deeming such diversions important enough to write about – predates Alberti. In the early third century, a certain individual named Athenaeus wrote a 15-volume work called *Deipnosophistae*, “Sophists at Dinner.” This is an amazing collection of philosophical fragments, literary anecdotes, and cultural commentary, composed in the form of a lingering conversation among friends sharing a meal. It is modeled after Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the philosopher Socrates, the comic poet Aristophanes, and others, gather for a drinking party and ruminate about love and life.

Athenaeus was not an architect, but a well-traveled Greek scholar, born in North Africa, schooled in Alexandria, and living in Rome during the rise of Constantine when he entertained *Sophists at Dinner*. There are few direct references to architecture in this work, but many stories about how practices of cooking, feasting, hosting, and partying vary from place to place. If an architect were designing a dining hall or public festival ground in the third century, she would surely want to join these sophists at dinner to learn about local customs. On a more fundamental level, *Deipnosophistae* interrelates the quality of conversation with the quality of a meal. Certain expressions are sour, others are savory, and to go for too long without good table talk is to starve.

What is the value of table talk today in the context of design education?

In architecture schools, table talk takes place in desk crits. The dinner table is a desktop heaped with delicacies slowly cooking, with tasty ingredients at hand, and with bits of crumbs and moldy leftovers strewn about for composting. The discursive desk critique between student and advisor is a diverting break from the main course of individual design work. Like the dialogues of Alberti, Athenaeus and Plato, these conversations may drift into strange topics and times. The tone may be instructive, humorous, or obscure. At the end of this table talk, some may feel satisfied or even stuffed; others may still feel hungry, or, worse, suffer indigestion.

Did the conversation provide an answer? Or, did it raise more questions about the value of design and strange diversity of the world? Ultimately, the social table talk of desk crits becomes absorbed as internal dialogue. When faced with a design problem, the designer calls her wits to council and takes advice and criticism from various voices, perspectives and times.

A design process is a messy feast with many cooks and guests. Designers are one among many at the meal, but they must also be prepared to stand at the head of the table and lead a conversation. Learning to enjoy table talk prepares one for this role, while also making design education all the more fulfilling and delicious.

Further reading:

David Marsh, Leon Battista Alberti, *Dinner Pieces, a translation of Intercentales*. New York: The Renaissance Society of America, 1987.
S. Douglas Olson, *The Learned Banqueters, a translation of Athenaeus' Deipnosophistae*. Loeb Classical Library, 15 volumes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
David Leatherbarrow, “Table Talk” in *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 119-140.
Marco Frascari, “Semiotica Ab Edendo, Taste in Architecture,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 40.1 (Autumn 1996): 2-7.