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A Cool Way to Make Architecture Pay: Ice Cream!

By Carolina A. Miranda | Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2009

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Making a living as an architect has never been an easy proposition. Very expensive schooling is generally followed by years of laboring under another architect for slave wages — all in the hopes that one day a devastatingly rich patron will fund the dream building. But with the economy grinding along in second gear, billings have plummeted and even prominent designers, from Frank Gehry to Norman Foster, have been forced to downsize staff and shut offices — which means that a lot of people in the field are finding themselves watching daytime TV. There is, however, one architecture-related business that is booming: ice cream.



Carolina A. Miranda

The Coolhaus ice cream truck in Los Angeles

Ice cream sandwiches, to be exact, constructed and dispensed by a roving Los Angeles food truck that goes by the *nom de glace* Coolhaus — a nod to Rem Koolhaas, the Pritzker Prize-winning architect who designed Seattle's futuristic glass-and-steel Central Library. Coolhaus is not your average ice cream truck. For one, it doesn't play annoying, repetitive jingles. It is a tricked-out former postal wagon with a Barbie-pink custom roof, shiny wheel rims (acquired at an auto-body shop in East L.A.) and lots of photos of famous buildings, including Louis Kahn's concrete-heavy Salk Institute in nearby San Diego. The menu, naturally, is totally architectural: a rotating selection of made-to-order ice cream sandwiches in flavors such as Mintimalism, Louis Kahntaloupe and Frank Behry (in honor of the architect who designed the city's luminous Walt Disney Concert Hall).

[\(Read about Frank Gehry.\)](#)

Owned and run by L.A. natives Natasha Case and Freya Estreller, Coolhaus debuted at the Coachella music festival near Palm Springs in April, with an initial investment of \$15,000. That first weekend, the business broke even. By June, it was operating in the black. "It's very profitable," says Case, who received her master's degree in architecture from UCLA last year. "It's almost better than architecture."

[\(Read TIME'S 1981 cover story on ice cream.\)](#)

Since its launch, the truck has been in high demand. Coolhaus has more than 4,300 followers on Twitter, where they are kept up to date on the truck's whereabouts. It has been profiled in food and design media alike and recently fielded a call from someone at Gehry's office, wondering when the truck would be making its way to that neck of L.A.'s suburban sprawl. And in a town where none other than Brad Pitt has made distinctive architecture as necessary as a personal trainer (Pitt interned at Gehry's office in 2004), the truck is regularly hired out for glitzy parties. (This past week, it handed out ice cream sandwiches at a Fox Studios event featuring actress Zooey Deschanel.) The business is doing so well, in fact, that Case regularly hears from unemployed former schoolmates. "People I went to grad school with, they're not working, so they'll call me," she says. "I only pay \$10 an hour, but it is an opportunity to work on an architecturally themed project."

Carrie Foster, a second-year graduate student at SCI-Arc, L.A.'s avant-garde architectural academy (and a friend of Case's from their undergraduate days at UC Berkeley), is working on the truck several days a week for the summer. In her time on the project, she has come to view Coolhaus less as an ice cream truck and more as an architectural installation. "The truck arrives at a destination, and it creates a whole new atmosphere," she explains. "We'll show up in a parking lot, and that leads to a gathering of people in a parking lot — a place they probably wouldn't have gathered before. It brings awareness about abandoned urban spaces and how to reuse them."

Alex Demyanenko, a television producer and food-truck devotee, says the presence of the truck can build a minisociety in minutes. "It's like a flash mob," he says. "When the truck arrives, people start coming out from every direction — and there's a community atmosphere. People meet other people. Everyone is there to share in the experience of that truck." Case adds that in a sprawling city like Los Angeles, where traffic is permanently gridlocked, being mobile means being able to cultivate a broader fan base. "It breaks down the urban fabric," she says. "We are neighborhood-specific in every neighborhood."

[\(See nine kid foods to avoid.\)](#)

Certainly the concept of mobile food-vending has long existed without the benefit of architectspeak. Mexican taco trucks have been part of the L.A. landscape for decades. And in recent years, other local food vendors have taken the humble truck concept gourmet. There is the venerated Kogi truck, which dispenses Korean-Mex tacos and makes ample use of Twitter to advertise its location. And other vans, purveying everything from shave ice to Vietnamese sandwiches, have also mushroomed — all despite a controversial citywide edict, put into effect last spring, that requires them to move at least every 30 minutes. (The law remains largely unenforced. "Nobody bothers us," says Case.)

Ultimately, however, a truck's success rests on the quality of its product. At Coolhaus, artisanal ice cream from L.A.'s gourmet comfort-food outpost Milk is pressed between soft, fresh-baked cookies and sold under a variety of architectural names — from Tea-dao Ando (a green-tea ice cream in honor of the Japanese architect who built the Pulitzer museum in St. Louis, Mo.) to Orange Julius Shulman (a blood-orange sorbet named after the famed architectural photographer). The sandwiches are traditional in appearance, though in their structure they blend the bold horizontal lines of Koolhaas' Seattle library with the tilted circular forms of Snohetta's Alexandria building. Above all, they are refreshingly delicious. "The cookie offers great texture — there's integrity to it — and the ice cream is not too sweet," says Cathy Danh, an L.A. foodie and blogger who recently sampled Coolhaus' wares for the first time when the truck made a pit stop in Venice Beach. "I'd absolutely eat there again." Each sandwich retails for \$3.50.

Following the success of their truck (they have bookings for private parties into 2010), Case and Estreller are now at work developing their next architecturally inspired food project: perhaps an experimental supper club or even a line of Popsicles made to resemble famous buildings. "The name of our umbrella company is Farchitecture," says Estreller, who didn't study architecture but currently works in low-income housing development. "Coolhaus is just one of our projects. There will definitely be other projects." Future Frank Lloyd Wrights may want to take note: perhaps you should study food service instead.

Miranda, a former reporter for TIME, is an arts and culture writer based in New York. She blogs at C-Monster.net.

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