

DESIGN

Making Food Seriously Local

By ALICE RAWSTHORN
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LONDON — It hasn't been plain sailing. A batch of tomatoes was destroyed by bugs. The luffa sponges were growing nicely until spider mites attacked. There was a flood. The fish nearly died in a power cut. The edible flowers did die, so have the mushrooms.

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A wall of basil plants in the meeting room at FARM:shop in Dalston.

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Something & Son
Fish and vegetables in the main aquaponics room at FARM:shop on Dalston Lane in East London.

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Something & Son
The storefront on Dalston Lane.

"We had no real skills in growing food when we started, and have had to learn quickly, through the failures as much as the successes," said Paul Smyth, a design engineer who has spent six months trying to grow all of those things and more with his colleagues in the eco-social design group Something & Son. "You have to be resilient in an experiment like this," he said. "Everything that has gone wrong has taught us that next time we should do it differently."

The experiment is FARM:shop, which aims to discover how many different types of food can be grown in a small shop on a busy street in Dalston in East London. Founded by Mr. Smyth, the graphic designer-turned-artist Andy Merritt and the social scientist-turned-farmer Sam Henderson, Something & Son has filled the once-derelict shop with the technology needed to cultivate produce in cramped conditions. Something edible is now growing in every room. When you walk in, the first thing you see, and hear, is water flowing from tanks of tilapia fish to feed rows of lettuce. Up on the roof, three hens are braving the noisy Dalston traffic.

FARM:shop is an intriguing role model at a time of growing interest in environmental and social design. "It blew me away because it is so strikingly original and demonstrates a rare ingenuity and wit," said the curator Beatrice Galilee, who commissioned Something & Son to create a garden for the Gwangju Design Biennale in South Korea this autumn. "At the heart of their work is a really ethical position on the environment and an understanding of crops, plants and the processes of food production. Their approach also strikes me as particularly British with their old-fashioned curiosity and enthusiasm for engineering."

Something & Son dates back to 2008, when the three founders met while working for environmental groups in London. "We wanted to do something environmental and socially engaging," Mr. Merritt said. "And we all come from the route of wanting to do something meaningful, which is also creative."

Their first project was to create a park inside a car as an installation for the London Festival of Architecture. Then they heard about a program for artists to occupy empty shops in Dalston, and submitted the proposal for FARM:shop. In July 2010

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Something & Son

A greenhouse in the back yard of FARM:shop in East London. The experiment is intended to discover how many different kinds of food can be grown in a small area in a busy city.

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Something & Son

A close-up of plants growing in an aquaponic system.

they were given the keys to 20 Dalston Lane, a dilapidated, four-floor, late-19th-century building most recently occupied by a Turkish women's refuge. The local council gave them £6,000, about \$9,500, toward the costs of renovation.

The shop was a dump, Mr. Merritt recalled: "Layers of carpet, horrible vinyl everywhere and bars on the windows to protect the women and children inside the refuge. We had to rip it all up and spent months trying to make it look O.K. Somehow someone found out what we were planning and tweeted about it on the first day. Suddenly we had 40 volunteers wanting to help. It has gone on like that ever since."

All of the growing technology has been donated by the manufacturers and adapted for FARM:shop in collaboration with Something & Son. The tilapia and lettuce on the ground floor are fed by an aquaponic system from Aquaponics UK, which uses water and waste from the fish tank to provide nutrients for the plants, and then cleans the water for the fish. Both are now thriving, though it proved tricky to find the right balance of heat for the tilapia and nutrients for the lettuce. The warmer the water the faster the fish grow, but the bigger they become the more nitrates they produce, sometimes too much for the plants.

On the first floor, tomatoes, peppers and basil are flourishing in a hydroponic water-based system developed by Growell, alongside a small aeroponic unit that feeds plants by spraying the roots with water. The yard outside is filled by a greenhouse to cultivate vegetables, built from wood and plastic sheeting, and an herb garden made from wood donated by the London 2012 Olympic Games construction site. The chickens strut cheerfully around their roof-top coop, but Something & Son has had no luck with the mushrooms in the basement. "We will prevail," said Mr. Merritt.

FARM:shop is financed principally by a cafe that serves the produce grown there and at Church Farm, where Mr. Henderson is based, in the Hertfordshire village of Ardeley, an hour's drive from Dalston. The profits are ploughed back into FARM:shop, as is the income raised from renting out desk space, running guided tours of the building and hiring it for meetings and DJ nights.

The Something & Son trio work there for free helped by volunteers, but recently took on a paid employee to run the cafe. They hope to hire more paid staff, introduce new types of produce and growing technologies, and, eventually, make the building more sustainable in terms of energy and water use. "Originally we had no time, no money, no kit and only a short lease," Mr. Smyth said. "We know what we need to do."

Something & Son is now embarking on new projects, starting with the Gwangju garden, which is sustained by an aeroponic system that the team designed from scratch. Next it hopes to open a bigger urban farm, possibly in a disused warehouse or factory.

"The challenge here at FARM:shop is to learn how to be more systematic, like farmers, I suppose," Mr. Smyth said. "But we also want to find a larger site, still in London and still with strong community links, to see what happens when we grow food on a much bigger scale."

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