From Personal Lunch to Shared Moment

A Workplace Eating System for Micro-sharing and Social Interaction

Fortune Bite
A Micro-sharing Food Pod for Workplace Lunch Interaction

Politecnico di Milano
School of Design
Integrated Product Design

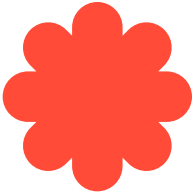
Supervisor: Prof. Emmanuele Villani
Student: Dejiang Li
Student ID: 11151046
Academic Year: 2025–2026

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Abstract

This project investigates the changing eating behaviours of early-career young professionals in Beijing, with a focus on how workplace lunch has become increasingly fragmented, individualized, and disconnected from social interaction. Based on a survey of 220 participants aged 18–30, the research reveals that eating is no longer tied to a dedicated dining space, but is distributed across domestic, workplace, and transitional environments. Many respondents eat while using phones or doing other tasks, suggesting that eating has become a secondary activity embedded within work and urban routines.

Rather than treating this issue as a lack of food access, the project identifies a loss of spatial structure, attention, and social meaning in everyday eating. The design exploration therefore focuses on workplace lunch as a key opportunity: a moment where personal meals could become a low-threshold condition for sharing and conversation. The final concept proposes a product system inspired by the serving logic of Chinese tea culture, using small offering pods and gentle circulation to transform individualized lunches into moments of micro-sharing, care, and social connection.



Project Statement

Lunch in the workplace is no longer simply a pause from work. For many young professionals, it has become fast, individual, and distracted — often taking place beside laptops, phones, and unfinished tasks.
This project asks how design can reintroduce social meaning into everyday workplace eating without forcing interaction. Instead of designing a new dining room or a traditional lunchbox, the project proposes a shared product system that sits on the meeting table as a quiet host. Through small offering pods, colleagues can place a small portion of their own food into a shared flow. As the food moves, pauses, and is offered to others, it creates natural opportunities to taste, ask, pass, and respond.
The project transforms personal workplace lunches into small moments of sharing, allowing food to become a gentle trigger for conversation and connection.

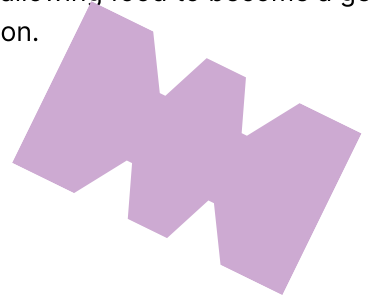


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01 IntroDuction

：Eating is no longer only about food, but about space, attention, and social connection.

Background Text

Eating is one of the most ordinary activities in daily life, but it is never only a biological act. It is also shaped by space, time, social relationships, and cultural habits. Traditionally, eating often happens around a dedicated dining setting, such as a family dining table, a canteen, or a restaurant. These spaces do not simply support eating physically; they also structure people's attention, rhythm, and interaction.

However, in contemporary urban life, eating is increasingly detached from a fixed space. For young professionals living and working in large cities, meals are often adapted to work schedules, commuting time, delivery platforms, and limited living conditions. Eating can happen at a workstation, on a sofa, during commuting, or beside a laptop. As a result, the meal is no longer always treated as an independent moment, but is often absorbed into other routines.



Fig. 01.1 Office space eating takeout

Urban Shift

This shift is especially visible among early-career young professionals in Beijing. Under the pressure of work, time, and urban living, eating becomes more fragmented, individualized, and distracted. Food delivery and convenience services make food easier to access, but they do not necessarily improve the quality of the eating experience. The problem is not simply whether people can get food, but how they eat, where they eat, and with whom they eat.

Based on a survey of 220 participants aged 18–30, this research found that eating among young professionals is distributed across multiple spaces, including home, workplace, canteens, restaurants, and transitional environments. Many respondents also reported eating while using phones or doing other tasks, showing that eating is often combined with work, digital media, or fragmented rest.



Fig. 01.2 Office space eating takeout

Urban Shift

Among these situations, workplace lunch becomes a particularly important design context. In the workplace, eating is frequently compressed into limited time and space. Personal takeout meals or lunch boxes are often eaten at desks, in meeting rooms, or near small break areas. The meal becomes efficient, but it also loses a clear boundary, rhythm, and social structure. This project therefore begins with a central concern: eating has not disappeared, but its spatial and social meaning has weakened. The aim is not to design food itself, nor to create a new dining room. Instead, the project explores how design can reintroduce a low-threshold condition for sharing, attention, and conversation within everyday workplace lunch.



Fig. 01.3 Office space carry food

Research Question

What spatial patterns define the eating habits of early-career young professionals in Beijing?

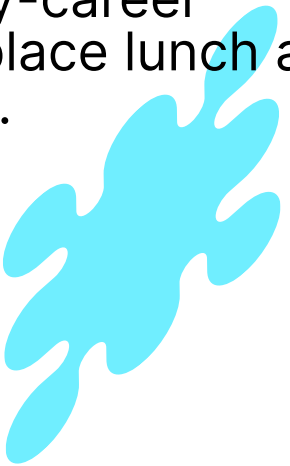
Design Question

How might we transform personal workplace lunches into moments of micro-sharing and conversation without forcing social interaction?



02. Research Context & Target Group

Focusing on Beijing early-career professionals and workplace lunch as the main design context.



Beijing Urban Context

This research is situated in Beijing, one of China's largest and most intense urban environments. For many young professionals, everyday life in Beijing is shaped by long commuting distances, high work pressure, dense urban space, and highly developed digital services. These conditions influence not only how people work and move, but also how they eat.

In this context, eating is no longer always connected to a stable dining space or a fixed daily rhythm. Food delivery platforms, convenience meals, company canteens, shared apartments, and office workstations together form a fragmented eating environment.



Fig. 02.1 Beijing Metropolitan

Beijing Urban Context

Meals can be ordered quickly, consumed alone, or combined with work and screen use. Therefore, eating behaviour should not be understood only as personal preference, but as a practice shaped by urban space, work systems, and everyday time pressure.

Beijing is chosen as the research context because it represents many of the tensions faced by young professionals in first-tier Chinese cities: efficiency, mobility, limited space, and strong dependence on digital convenience. These conditions make it a meaningful context for studying how eating practices are changing.



Fig. 02.2 Beijing elevated highways at night

Target Group: Early-career Young Professionals

The target group of this research is young professionals aged 18–30, especially those who have recently graduated and entered the workplace. This group is at a transitional life stage: they are moving from student life to professional routines, often adapting to new work schedules, independent living conditions, and urban pressure.

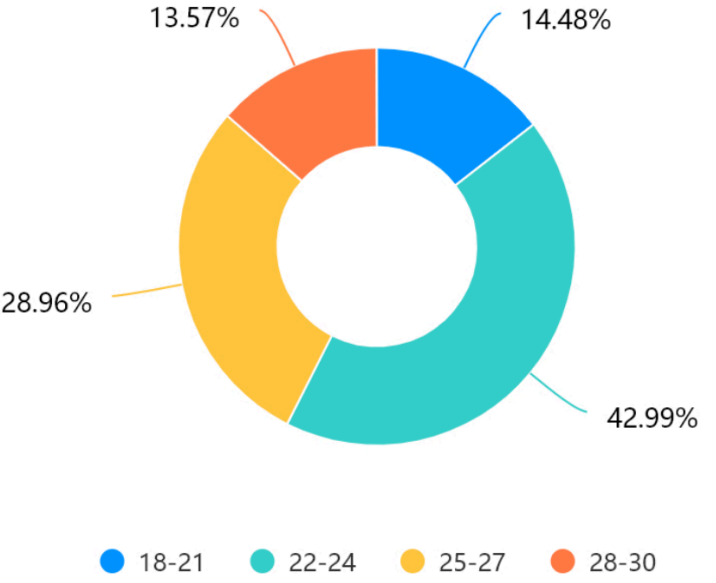


Fig. 02.3 Age statistics chart of the questionnaire

Target Group: Early-career Young Professionals

According to the survey data, the respondents are mainly concentrated in the 22–27 age range, and many are already in full-time work or internship positions. This supports the focus on early-career young professionals as a relevant user group for studying workplace eating behaviour.

This group is important because their eating habits are still being formed and adjusted. They are familiar with food delivery, digital platforms, flexible work rhythms, and mobile lifestyles. At the same time, they may lack stable domestic dining conditions, sufficient workplace dining facilities, or regular social eating opportunities.



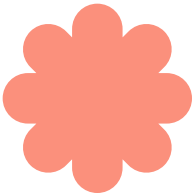
Fig. 02.4 Asian company workplace images

From General Eating Behaviour to Workplace Lunch

At the beginning, this project looked at eating behaviour across different spaces, including home, workplace, restaurants, canteens, and transitional environments. However, the research gradually revealed that workplace lunch is one of the most critical moments.

The workplace is where eating most clearly overlaps with productivity, time pressure, and social relationships. In the survey, a considerable proportion of respondents reported eating at workstations or in company/school canteens, while many also reported eating while using phones or doing other tasks. This indicates that eating is often embedded in work-related environments rather than separated from them.

Workplace lunch is therefore selected as the main design context. It is a moment where personal meals, limited space, digital distraction, and weak social interaction meet. It also offers a clear design opportunity: instead of creating a new dining space, the project can explore how to create a low-threshold shared condition within existing workplace settings.



Why Workplace Lunch

A key moment where work, food, space, and social interaction overlap.



Fig. 02.5 Workplace Lunch Analysis Chart

Research Scope

Defining the focus of the project.

01

User Group

Early-career young professionals aged 18–30

02

Location

Beijing, China

03

Main Scenario

Workplace lunch in small and medium-sized office environments

04

Eating Mode

Takeout meals, brought lunch boxes, convenience meals, and small shared food portions

05

Design Focus

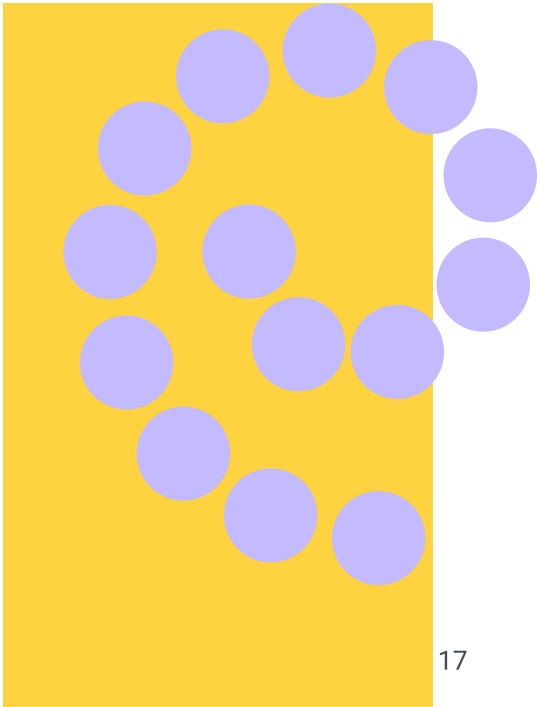
Micro-sharing, social interaction, attention, and temporary eating conditions

Not the Focus

The project does not redesign delivery platforms, canteens, or full office interiors. It focuses on a product system that supports sharing during workplace lunch.

Fig. 02.6 Fig. 02.5 Workplace Lunch Analysis Chart

03 Survey Methodology & Findings

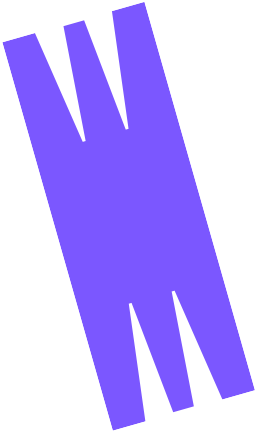


Survey Methodology

To understand how early-career young professionals experience everyday eating in Beijing, this project conducted a quantitative survey with 220 valid responses. The respondents were mainly aged between 18 and 30, with a focus on people who had recently graduated or were in the early stages of their working life.

The questionnaire was structured around five key areas: basic information, eating spaces, eating behaviours, social interaction during meals, and personal perceptions of ideal eating conditions. The aim was not only to understand where people eat, but also how eating is affected by work, time pressure, phone use, spatial limitations, and social relationships.

The survey data helps identify the shift from eating as a dedicated activity to eating as a fragmented routine embedded in work, domestic life, and digital habits. It also provides the foundation for defining workplace lunch as the main design opportunity.



Participant Profile

The survey collected responses from young people aged 18–30. The largest age group was 22–24 years old, accounting for 42.99%, followed by 25–27 years old at 28.96%. This shows that the sample is closely connected to the early-career stage.

In terms of current working status, 51.13% of respondents were in full-time work, while 33.038% were interns. This supports the project's focus on workplace eating and early professional routines.

1.年龄Your age [Single Choice]

Option	Subtotal	Percentage
18-21	32	14.48%
22-24	95	42.99%
25-27	64	28.96%
28-30	30	13.57%
Valid Count Per Participant	**221**	

3.你目前的工作状态Your current work status [Single Choice]

Option	Subtotal	Percentage
全职工作 Full-time job	113	51.13%
实习 practice	73	33.03%
自由职业 Freelancing	26	11.76%
其他 other [Details]	9	4.07%
Valid Count Per Participant	**221**	

Fig. 03.1 Questionnaire image

Finding 1: Eating Spaces Are Becoming Distributed

The survey shows that eating no longer belongs to a single fixed place. Respondents reported eating across multiple environments, including home dining tables, sofas, workstations, offices, canteens, restaurants, and even commuting spaces.

For daily eating locations, 39.82% of respondents reported eating at a dining table at home, while 28.05% reported eating at their workstation or office, and 25.34% reported eating in a company or school canteen.

This suggests that eating is no longer strongly anchored to a traditional dining space. Instead, it adapts to available spaces within everyday routines.

Option	Subtotal	Percentage
家中餐桌 family dining table	88	39.82%
家中床上/沙发 Bed/Sofa at home	21	9.5%
工位/办公室 Workstation/Office	62	28.05%
公司/学校食堂 Company/School Cafeteria	56	25.34%
餐厅 Canteen	48	21.72%
通勤途中 Commuting	17	7.69%
公司宿舍/学校宿舍 Company dormitory/school dormitory	34	15.38%
其他 Other [Details]	0	0%
Valid Count Per Participant	**221**	

Fig. 03.2 Questionnaire image

Finding 2: Dining Space Exists, but Is Often Weakened

A key finding is that even when people have a dedicated eating space, they may not use it frequently. In the survey, 40.27% of respondents said they had a dedicated eating space at home and used it often, while 45.7% said they had one but rarely used it.

This indicates that the problem is not only the absence of space, but also the weakening of eating rituals. A dining space may physically exist, but it does not always structure people's eating behaviour.

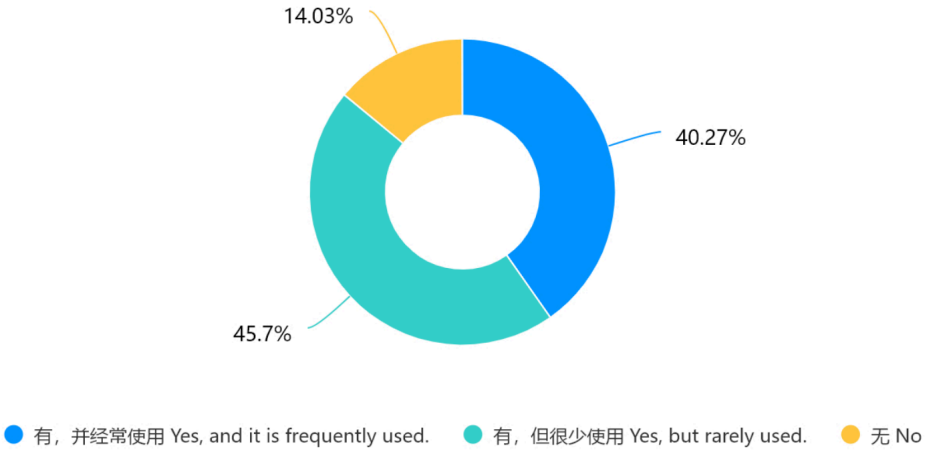


Fig. 03.3 Questionnaire image

Finding 3: Eating Is Often Combined with Other Activities

Eating is frequently merged with other tasks. In the survey, 55.2% of respondents said they often eat while doing other things, and 52.27% reported eating while using their phones.

This shows that eating is often no longer treated as a primary activity. It becomes secondary to work, digital media, or fragmented rest. The meal is still happening, but attention is divided.

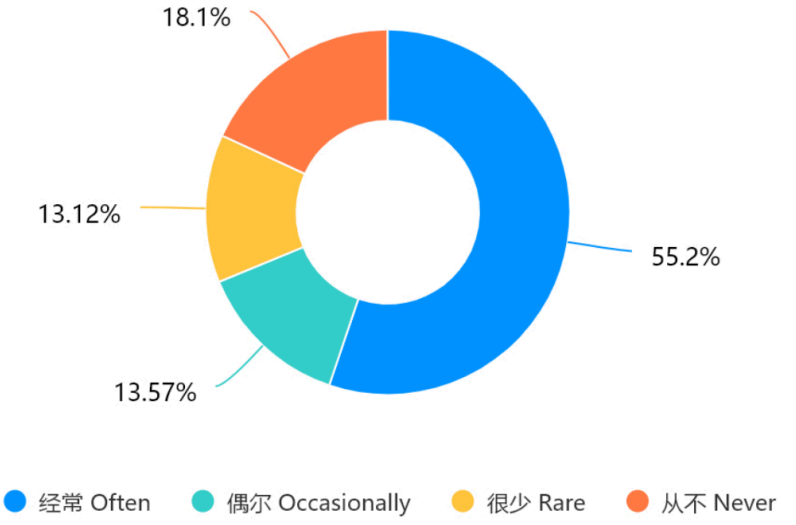


Fig. 03.4 Questionnaire image

Finding 4: Workplace Lunch Is Efficient but Socially Weak

Workplace lunch is strongly shaped by efficiency. Takeout, lunch boxes, and convenience meals allow people to get food easily, but they also reinforce individualized eating. Personal meals are often consumed separately, even when people are physically close to each other.

The survey shows that 31.67% of respondents usually eat alone, while 26.7% usually eat with colleagues or classmates. In terms of eating and social interaction, 45.7% said they only occasionally chat or socialize while eating, and 21.72% said they rarely do so.

This suggests that social eating has not disappeared completely, but it has become unstable and lacks a clear trigger.

Option	Subtotal	Percentage
独自 Alone	70	31.67%
和同事/同学 Colleage/Classmates	59	26.7%
和朋友 Friends	48	21.72%
和家人 Family	44	19.91%
经常 Often	64	28.96%
偶尔 Occasionally	101	45.7%
很少 Seldom	48	21.72%
从不 Never	8	3.62%

Fig. 03.5 Questionnaire image

Finding 5: People Still Desire Better Eating Conditions

Although everyday eating is often fragmented and distracted, respondents still express expectations for a better eating experience. When asked about their ideal eating state, 47.51% selected having a dining table, 40.72% selected eating slowly, 39.82% selected being in a relatively comfortable environment, and 37.56% selected eating with friends.

This reveals an important gap between reality and expectation. Young professionals may eat quickly or individually in daily life, but they still value space, comfort, slower rhythm, and social connection.

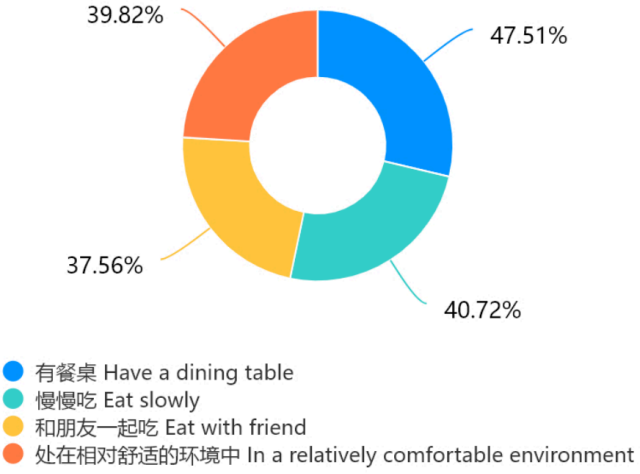


Fig. 03.6 Questionnaire image

Finding 6: The Main Barriers Are Structural

The reasons why respondents cannot achieve their ideal eating state are mostly structural rather than purely personal. The most selected reasons were work or study pressure at 56.11%, long commuting time at 44.8%, lack of kitchen conditions at 34.84%, and limited living space at 30.77%.
This means the issue cannot be solved simply by asking people to change their habits. Design needs to work within existing constraints and create low-threshold opportunities for better eating experiences.

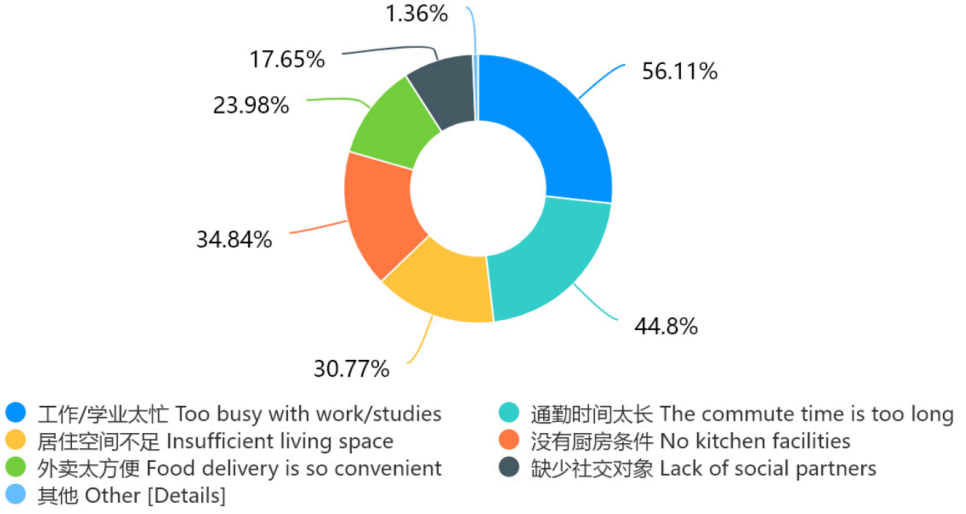


Fig. 03.7 Questionnaire image

Summary of Findings

The survey reveals three major shifts in the eating behaviour of early-career young professionals in Beijing.

First, eating is spatially distributed. It happens across homes, offices, canteens, and transitional spaces rather than belonging to one dedicated dining environment.

Second, eating is behaviourally fragmented. It is often combined with phone use, work, or other tasks, which weakens attention and ritual.

Third, eating is socially weakened but not socially irrelevant. Many people still desire comfort, slower rhythm, and eating with others, but they lack a natural condition that supports interaction.

These findings lead to the next stage of the project: identifying design insights and exploring how workplace lunch can become a moment of micro-sharing and conversation.



Fig. 03.8 Workplace takeout

04 Research Insights



From Data to Design Direction

Although everyday eating is often fragmented and distracted, respondents still express expectations for a better eating experience. When asked about their ideal eating state, 47.51% selected having a dining table, 40.72% selected eating slowly, 39.82% selected being in a relatively comfortable environment, and 37.56% selected eating with friends.

This reveals an important gapThe survey findings show that the issue of eating among early-career young professionals is not only about food choice or meal convenience. Food is already easy to access through delivery platforms, canteens, and convenience meals. The deeper issue is that eating has gradually lost its clear spatial, attentional, and social structure.

In daily life, eating is often distributed across different environments, such as home, workplace, canteens, restaurants, and transitional spaces. It is also frequently combined with phone use, work, or other tasks. As a result, eating becomes less like an independent moment and more like a secondary activity embedded within busy routines. This confirms the key conclusion of the research draft: **eating is no longer strongly tied to a specific space, but is dispersed across multiple urban conditions. between reality and expectation. Young professionals may eat quickly or individually in daily life, but they still value space, comfort, slower rhythm, and social connection.**

Insight 1: Eating Has Lost Its Dedicated Space

The first insight is that eating no longer belongs to one stable place. Although the dining table still exists in many homes, it is not always used as the main eating space. Similarly, in the workplace, eating may happen at a workstation, in a meeting room, in a canteen, or in a small break area.

This means that the problem is not simply the lack of physical space. Instead, the spatial structure of eating has become weak. A place may physically exist, but it does not necessarily support eating as a meaningful activity.

For design, this suggests that creating a completely new dining space may not be realistic, especially in small and medium-sized offices. A more relevant direction is to create a temporary eating condition within existing spaces.



Fig. 04.1 Workplace takeout

Insight 1: Eating Has Lost Its Dedicated Space

Design implication:

The product should not require a dedicated dining room. It should be able to temporarily transform an existing workplace surface into a shared eating setting.



Fig. 04.2 Socializing and dining out

Insight 2: Eating Has Become a Secondary Activity

The second insight is that eating is often no longer treated as the main activity. Many respondents reported eating while using phones or doing other tasks. This shows that attention is divided during meals, and eating becomes absorbed into work, media, or fragmented rest.

This is important because the design problem is not only spatial, but also attentional. People may be physically eating, but mentally they are still connected to work, screens, or other tasks.

For design, the goal should not be to force people to stop using phones. Instead, the product should create a more attractive and natural focus around food and sharing.

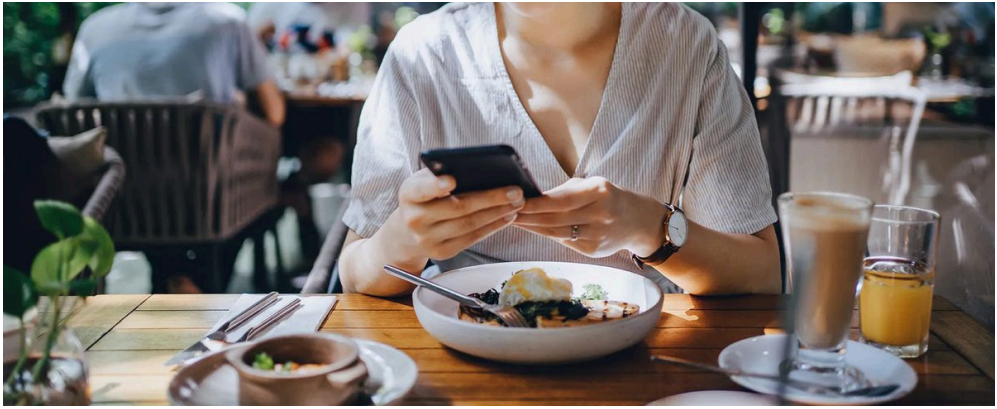


Fig. 04.3 Frequent use of mobile phones during meals

Insight 2: Eating Has Become a Secondary Activity

Design implication:
The product should create small actions that bring attention back to the meal, such as offering, opening, passing, tasting, and responding.



Fig. 04.4 Distance Lunch, Marije Vogelzang

Insight 3: Social Eating Is Weakened, but Not Absent

The third insight is that social eating has weakened, but it has not disappeared. The survey shows that many respondents eat alone or only occasionally socialize during meals, yet their ideal eating state still includes eating slowly, having a comfortable environment, and eating with others. This reveals a gap between reality and expectation. Young professionals may eat individually in daily life, but this does not necessarily mean they reject social eating. Instead, they may lack a suitable trigger, space, or reason to start interaction.

For design, this means the product should not force conversation. It should lower the threshold for interaction and make small acts of sharing easier and less awkward.



Fig. 04.5 Chinese round table dinner

Insight 3: Social Eating Is Weakened, but Not Absent

Design implication:

The product should support micro-sharing rather than full meal sharing. A small portion of food, a sauce, a snack, or a side dish can become a natural starting point for conversation.



Fig. 04.6 Dining out on weekends

Insight 4: Personal Choice and Shared Experience Need to Coexist

Workplace lunch today is highly individualized. Each person often orders their own takeout or brings their own lunch box. This personal choice is valuable and should not be replaced by a collective dining format.
However, if every meal remains completely isolated, the lunch moment loses its potential for connection. The design opportunity is therefore not to remove individuality, but to create a shared layer on top of personal meals.



Fig. 04.7 Office takeout

Insight 4: Personal Choice and Shared Experience Need to Coexist

Design implication:

Each person should keep their own main meal, while the product creates a shared flow for small portions. This allows individual choice and collective interaction to coexist.



Fig. 04.8 Solo dining and social dining

Insight 5: The Real Opportunity Is a Social Trigger

The research suggests that the key missing element in workplace lunch is not food, furniture, or decoration, but a social trigger. People may sit near each other, but without a reason to interact, they often remain silent or turn to their phones.

A successful design should provide a gentle reason to start interaction. Food itself can become that reason, but only if it is made visible, reachable, and shareable.

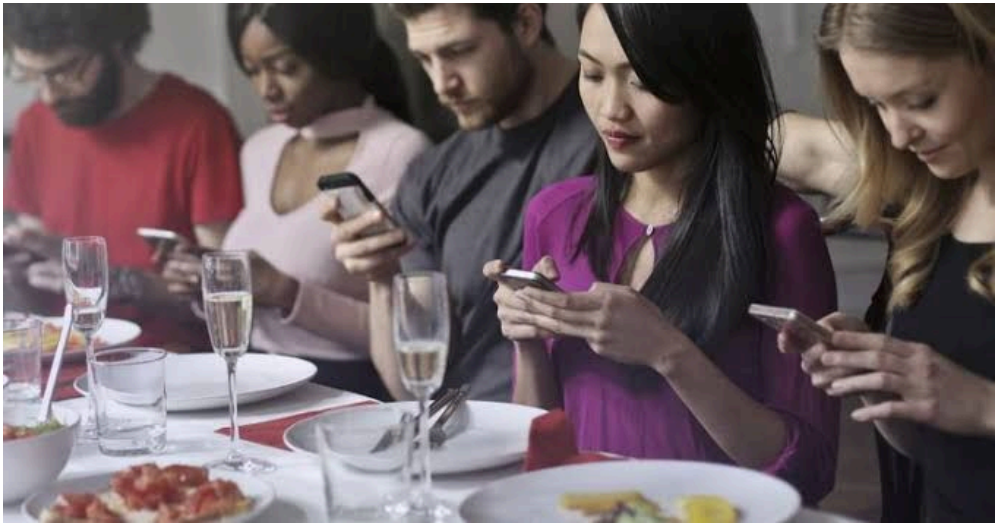


Fig. 04.8 People are addicted to their phones while eating

Insight 5: The Real Opportunity Is a Social Trigger

Design implication:

The product should act as a quiet host. It should organize food movement and offering gestures, creating natural opportunities for people to ask, taste, pass, and respond.



Fig. 04.9 Dining out and socializing

Summary of Insights

The research leads to one central conclusion:
Eating has not disappeared, but its spatial boundary, attention, and social meaning have become weak.
Therefore, the design direction should not focus on redesigning food delivery, lunch boxes, or office interiors. Instead, it should focus on creating a low-threshold condition for workplace lunch interaction.
The next stage of the project is to explore how this condition can be created through product design: **not by forcing people to talk, but by making food sharing easier, more visible, and more socially acceptable.**



Fig. 04.10 Chinese people dining together

05 Benchmark & Workplace Eating Context



5.1 Ideal Workplace Eating Models

In many international workplace examples, eating is not treated only as a support service, but as part of the work culture. Spaces such as micro-kitchens, cafés, work cafés, lounges, long tables, and mobile coffee bars allow eating, working, informal meetings, and social interaction to overlap. In these cases, food becomes a communication tool rather than only a source of energy.



Fig. 05.1 Work-related food delivery social networking

Google office

Eating is embedded in the workflow. Food, conversation, and work happen together, but eating has no clear start or end point.



Fig. 05.2 Google office dining environment

Microsoft Workplace

Eating becomes a communication tool. Informal meeting and meal activities are supported by soft workplace settings.



Fig. 05.3 Microsoft office dining environment

Steelcase WorkCafé

Eating, working, and socializing happen in the same shared space. It provides possibilities for interaction, but does not guarantee interaction.



Fig. 05.4 Steelcase WorkCafé

Vitra Campus

The long shared table encourages group eating and creates a stronger collective setting.



Fig. 05.5 Vitra Campus dining environment

Blum Mobile Coffee Bar

A compact, mobile social unit shows that social food or drink service can be brought into different workplace locations without occupying fixed space.



Fig. 05.6 Blum Mobile Coffee Bar

5.1 Ideal Workplace Eating Models

Design takeaway:
Large or well-resourced offices can use space to support eating and communication, but these models depend on available area, budget, and workplace culture.

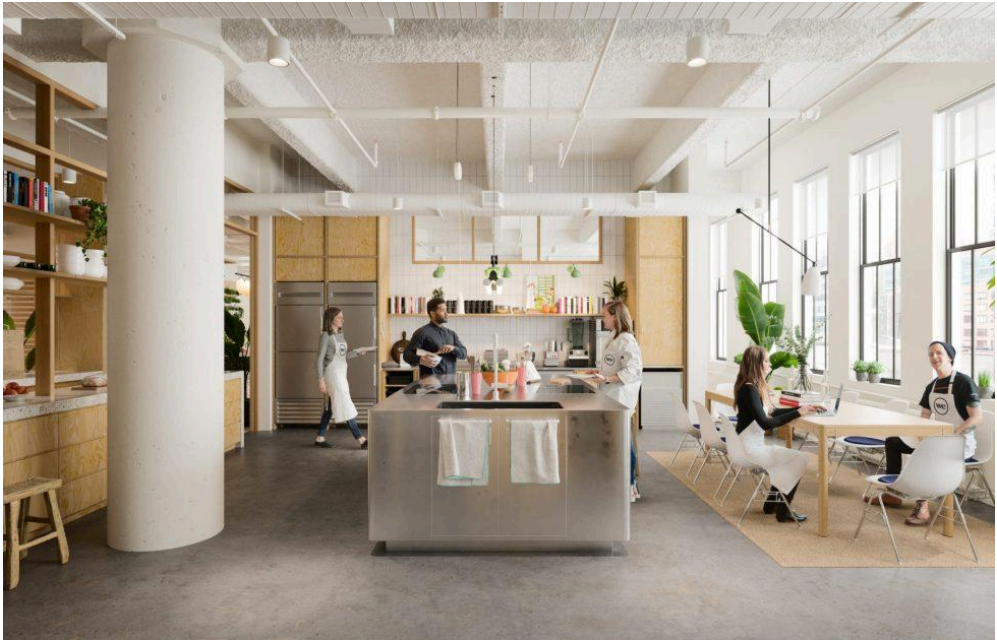


Fig. 05.7 Shared office

5.2 Chinese Large-company Workplace Models

Chinese large technology companies provide another idealized model. For example, Tencent's vertical office uses skybridges and connecting levels as social nodes. These spaces include relaxation areas, coffee or snack stations, and informal social zones. Eating is not confined to a restaurant, but embedded into circulation paths and in-between spaces.

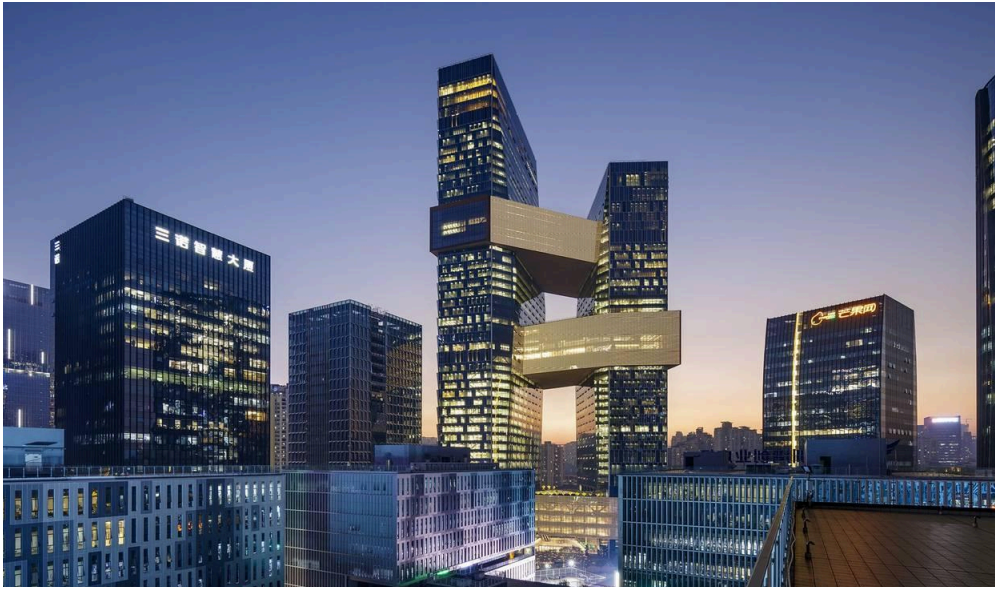


Fig. 05.8 Tencent's vertical office

Tencent Skybridge Social Nodes

It's not just a simple cafeteria, but rather "eating nodes in motion." Employees can grab food, walk through connecting corridors, pause briefly, chat, or brainstorm. Eating here isn't the goal, but rather a medium connecting people and triggering interaction.



Fig. 05.9 Tencent Skybridge Social Nodes

Limits

However, headquarters like Tencent or Alibaba are closer to ideal workplace models. They have entire buildings, cafeterias, coffee bars, and welfare budgets. They cannot represent the everyday condition of most small and medium-sized Chinese companies.



Fig. 05.10 Company cafeteria scene

5.2 Chinese Large-company Workplace Models

Design takeaway:
Tencent shows that eating can be embedded in circulation and social nodes, but most ordinary companies do not have this spatial resource.



Fig. 05.11 Tencent's vertical office

5.3 Real Chinese Workplace Lunch Conditions

For most Chinese office workers, especially in small and medium-sized companies, workplace lunch is not supported by a complete dining system. Many companies rent only one floor or part of a floor in office buildings and cannot afford self-operated cafeterias. Under these constraints, lunch is usually solved through takeout, convenience meals, brought lunch boxes, microwaves, break rooms, or nearby food services. social nodes, but most ordinary companies do not have this spatial resource.



Fig. 05.12 office eating

Cafeterias are a luxury

Many small and medium-sized companies lack the space, budget, smoke extraction, and gas supply to build their own canteens.
The Harsh Physical Reality: **Cafeterias are a "Luxury" In China**, **over 90% of businesses are small and micro-enterprises with fewer than 50 employees.** They typically rent only one or even half a floor of an office building. In CBDs with high rents and no independent ventilation or gas pipes, **building a cafeteria is not only impractical but also a "waste of space."**

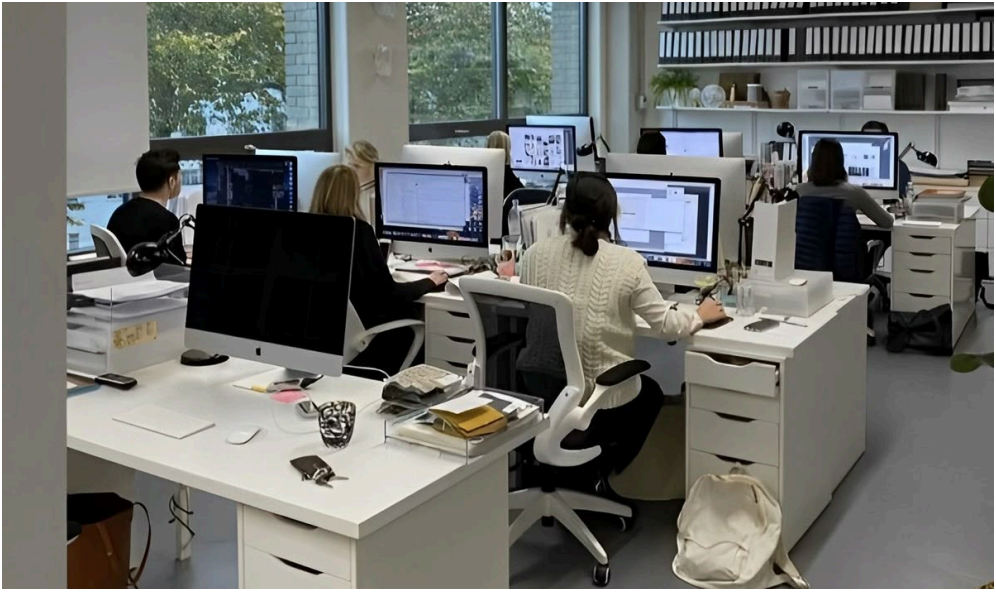


Fig. 05.13 office working environment

Workplace lunch is efficiency-oriented

Lunch is dominated by time, price, and convenience, and is more like a quick replenishment than a complete dining experience.



Fig. 05.14 office working takeout

Eating space overlaps with working space

Takeout orders are delivered downstairs, to the front desk, to the takeout locker, or to the floor entrance, and then employees take them back to their workstations, meeting rooms, or near the break room to eat. Phones, computers, and takeout boxes share the same desktop.

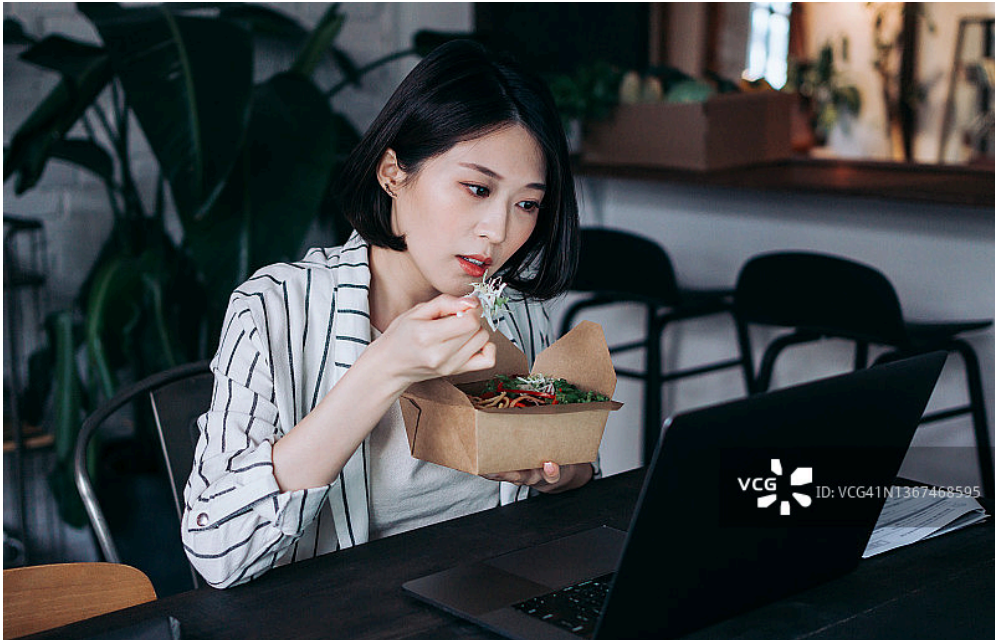


Fig. 05.15 office working takeout

5.3 Real Chinese Workplace Lunch Conditions

Design takeaway:
The problem is not lack of food, but lack of suitable intermediate eating conditions.

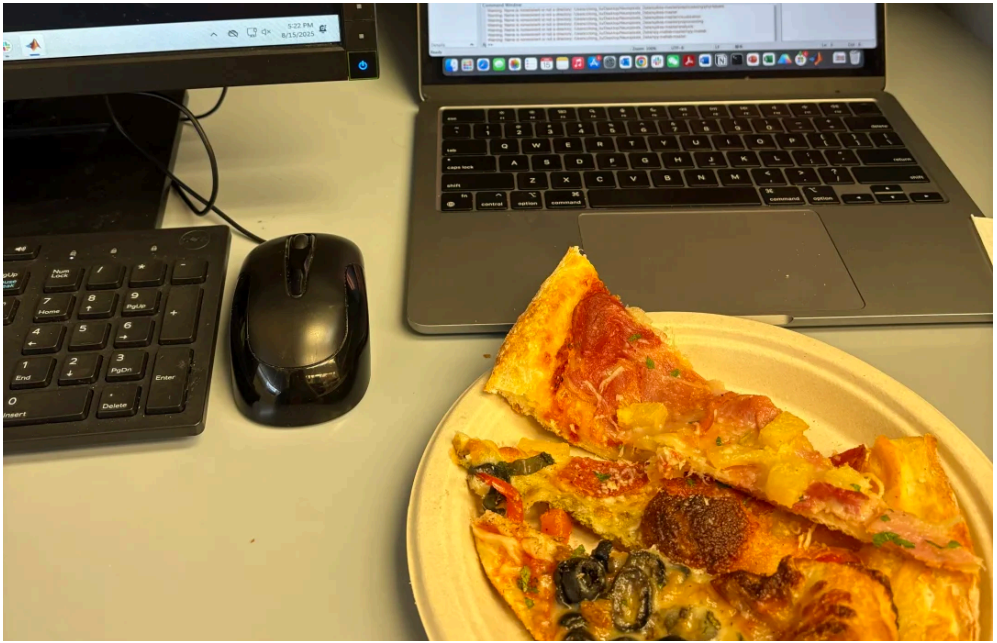


Fig. 05.16 office takeout

5.4 Typical Eating Scenarios in Chinese Offices



Fig. 05.17 Chinese cuisine

Workstation Takeout

Features: Strong individual choice, high efficiency, workstations transformed into a cafeteria, computers, phones, and takeout containers share the same desktop.
Problems: No boundary, no transition, no shared condition.
Design Inspiration: Don't just focus on optimizing takeout containers; consider how to shift people from individual workstation lunches to a shared experience.



Fig. 05.18 Workstation Takeout

Meeting Room Temporary Dining

Features: The meeting room is temporarily converted into a "private room" at lunchtime. Everyone eats takeout around the meeting table, possibly using plastic bags to protect the surface.

Problems: Temporary space, tabletops easily get dirty, and a quick return to work mode is needed after eating.

Design Inspiration: The product needs to support quick conversion, allowing for a rapid switch from work mode to lunch mode and back again.



Fig. 05.19 Meeting Room Temporary Dining

Break Room / Microwave Node

Features: The number of people bringing their own lunches is increasing, making refrigerators, microwaves, and break rooms key points of contact. The process involves retrieving a lunchbox, queuing to heat it, and then returning to the workstation or small table to eat.
Problems: Bringing your own lunch is healthier, but it doesn't necessarily lead to social interaction; heating and eating are often separate processes.
Design Inspiration: The brief gathering after "retrieving/heating the lunch" can be transformed into a sharing opportunity.



Fig. 05.20 Microwave Node

Corridor / Public Corner Eating

Features: The tea room is too small; public corridors, stairwells, and corners are used temporarily.
Problems: Space is extremely limited, leading to short dwell times and weak social interaction.
Design Inspiration: Products must be lightweight, mobile, and quickly deployed, and cannot rely on large spaces.



Fig. 05.21 Public Corner Eating

Limited Choices

Seemingly Many, But Actually Difficult to Choose

Mr. Chen, who works in a large building in Pudong, has only one large state-owned enterprise with its own canteen in his building. "Tenants" like his company, which only occupies one floor, don't have their own canteens. Although there are several shopping malls nearby, such as Century Plaza and 96 Plaza, finding a place to eat is a real dilemma for Mr. Chen. "Not all restaurants are suitable. **Lunch break is limited, the distance can't be too far, the wait can't be too long, and the price has to be considered. In the end, I still end up eating at a few Chinese fast-food restaurants."**



选择少、外卖贵、带饭难！每天中午陷入“吃什么”困境！吃饱吃好的“午餐自由”何时能实现？_上观新闻

Fig. 05.22 Chinese company canteen

High Meal Costs

A Lunch Costs Nearly 100 Yuan ,"Takeout Assassins" Thin Wallets .
For many, lunch alone can consume a quarter or even a third of their monthly salary. Previously, "Shen Gong She" conducted a survey; **among the more than 4,000 respondents, 65% spent less than 2,000 yuan per month on meals**; another 28% spent between 3,000 and 5,000 yuan per month.



Fig. 05.23 Chinese takeout

Bringing your own lunch isn't easy

Notably, the proportion of working professionals bringing their own food is rising, with 20% of respondents saying they "bring their own lunch."
Some spend 20 minutes preparing a simple meal each day, while others spend an hour making their lunch more varied. However, for those who frequently work overtime and have long commutes, bringing lunch isn't easy. Ms. Zhu, who works in the beauty industry, frankly stated, "**An hour's commute home, then cooking, steaming rice, and packing—I'm willing but unable.**"



Fig. 05.24 Self-making lunch

5.4 Typical Eating Scenarios in Chinese Offices

These scenarios show that Chinese workplace eating is often a form of spatial improvisation. People do not lack food, but they lack a shared setting that can organise the meal, create boundaries, and support light interaction.



Fig. 05.25 Chinese working environment

5.5 China vs. Europe: Core Difference

China

Decentralized eating: takeout, workstation, anytime.
No spatial boundary: desk = work + meal.
Fragmented rhythm: no clear beginning or ending.
Highly personalized: everyone eats separately.
Efficiency priority: meal = quick replenishment.



Fig. 05.26 Chinese takeout

5.5 China vs. Europe: Core Difference

Europe

Shared spaces: café, lounge, work café.

Eating can leave the workstation.

Space supports lingering and informal communication.

Social interaction is easier to happen.

Meal = break + connection.



Fig. 05.27 Europe eating mode

conclusion

In China, eating is often absorbed into work surfaces. In European workplace models, eating is more often supported by shared social spaces.



Fig. 05.28 Chinese eating mode

5.6 Design Positioning from Benchmark

The benchmark reveals that the design opportunity is **not to create another large-company workplace dining space**. Most Chinese offices do not have the resources for cafeterias, cafés, or large social areas. **The opportunity lies in creating a lightweight, shareable, and perceptible eating moment within limited workplace conditions.**

Not a cafeteria
Because small and medium-sized companies lack space and budget.

Not a lunchbox
The problem isn't how individuals serve their food, but rather how individual lunches become shareable.

Not a full interior renovation
Because actual office space is limited, renovation costs are high.

Not forced socializing
Because workplace social interactions need to be low-pressure and happen naturally.

The project focuses on a small product-scale system that can be placed in meeting rooms, break areas, or shared office corners. It preserves personal food choices while creating a shared layer for micro-sharing, offering, passing, and conversation.

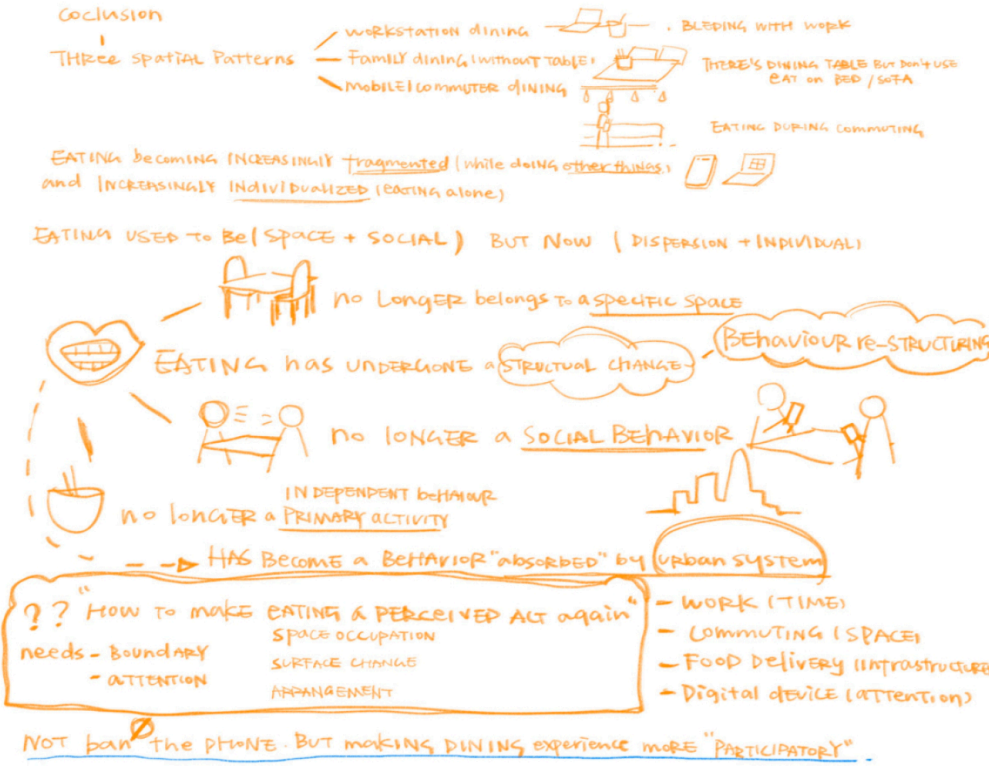


Fig. 05.29 Sketch & Brain storming

Initial Thoughts

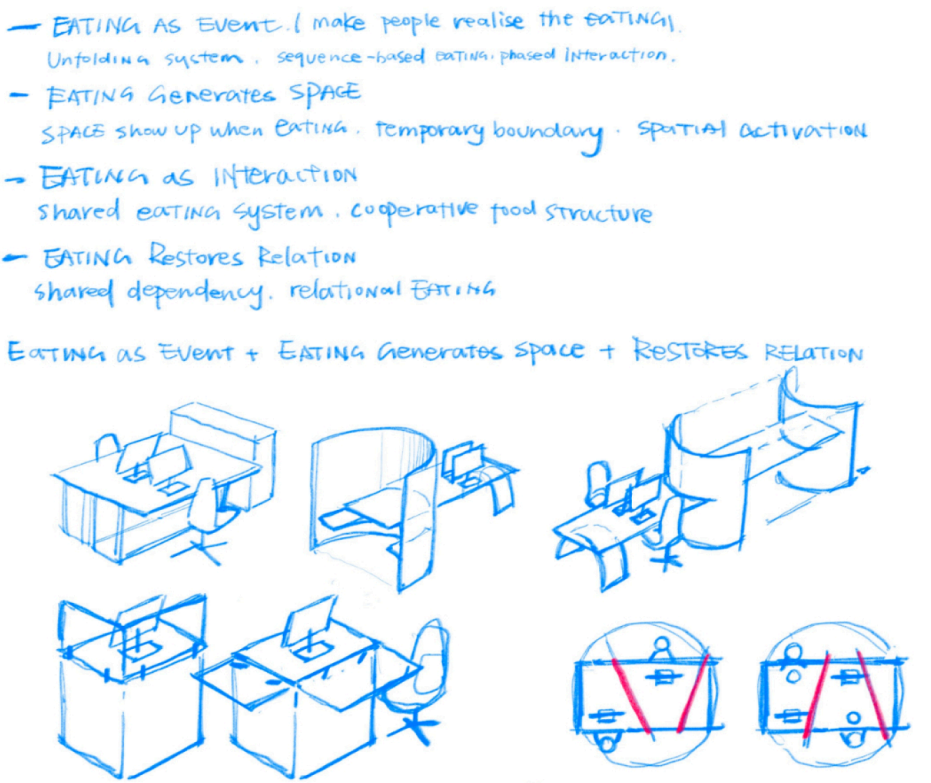


Fig. 05.30 Sketch & Brain storming

Initial Thoughts

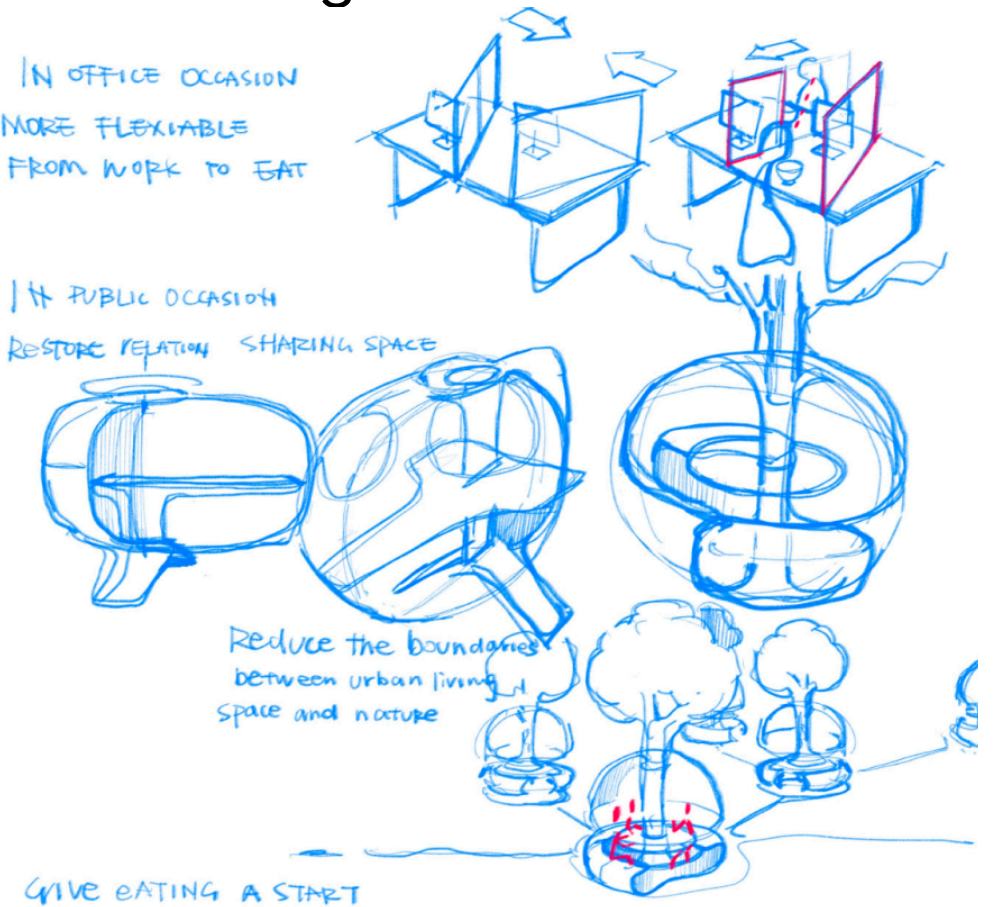


Fig. 05.31 Sketch & Brain storming

Initial Thoughts

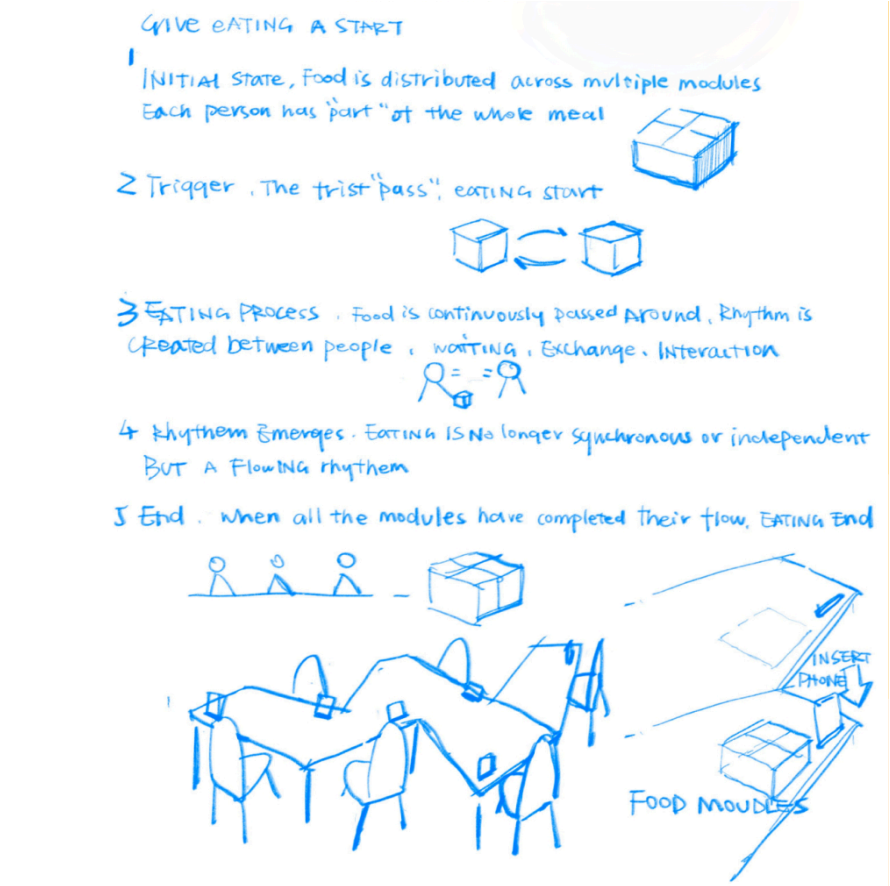


Fig. 05.32 Sketch & Brain storming

5.7 Cultural Mechanism: From Round Table to Tea Offering

Chinese Round-table Logic

The Chinese round table shows that shared food can become a social medium. Its value is not the circular table itself, but the mechanism of food circulation and collective access.



Fig. 05.33 Chinese round table culture

5.7 Cultural Mechanism: From Round Table to Tea Offering

Chinese Tea Culture

Chinese tea culture provides a more subtle interaction logic. Serving tea is a small gesture of care before it becomes conversation. This inspires the product to act as a quiet host, using offering gestures to create low-pressure social openings.



Fig. 05.34 Chinese tea culture

Therefore, the design opportunity is not to rebuild a dining space, but to create a lightweight product system that helps personal lunches become a shared moment. The final concept should preserve individual food choices while introducing micro-sharing, offering, circulation, and a clear transition between work and lunch.

The final design translates the spatial reality of workplace lunch and the cultural logic of offering into a lightweight shared eating system.

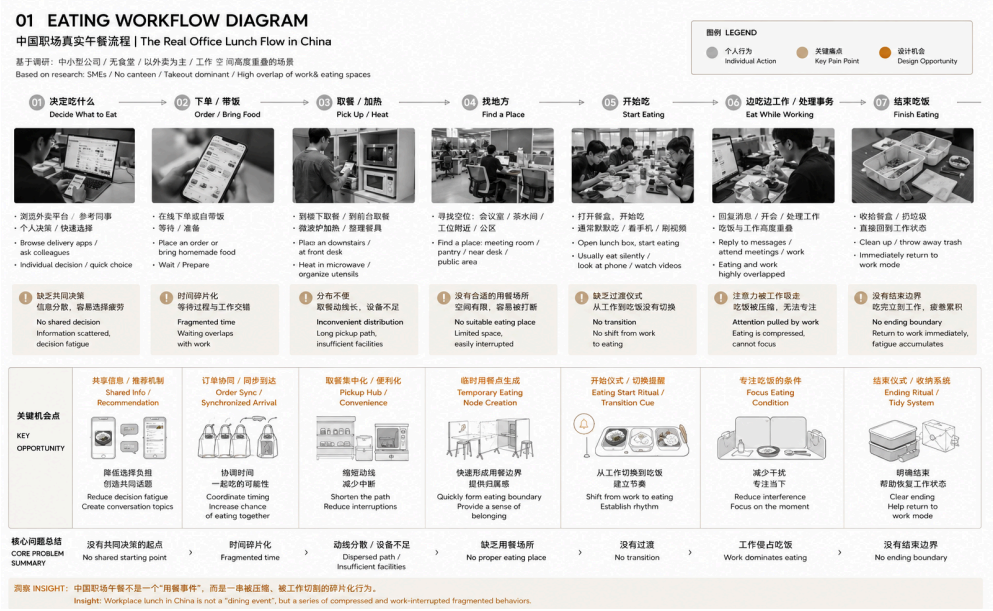


Fig. 05.35 Eating workflow diagram

06 Design Opportunity

From Workplace Eating Problems to Design Opportunity

The previous research shows that workplace lunch among young professionals is not simply a problem of food access. Food delivery, convenience meals, canteens, and brought lunch boxes already provide many ways to obtain food. In China, the supply of workplace lunch is highly developed, but the experience of eating itself is often compressed into systems of speed, convenience, and efficiency.

For many young professionals, lunch is no longer a clear pause from work. It often happens at a workstation, in a meeting room, beside a phone, or between unfinished tasks. According to the survey, many respondents eat while using their phones or doing other things, and a large proportion also agree that eating is no longer strongly experienced as a social activity.

This means that the real issue is not "how to get food", but "how to eat better within existing workplace conditions." More specifically, the missing part is a transitional condition: **a way to move from work to eating, from individual food choices to shared experience, and from isolated meals to light interaction.**



Fig. 06.01 Healthy salad

Key Problem

In small and medium-sized Chinese offices, lunch is often treated as a **temporary task**. Employees order takeout, bring lunch boxes, heat meals, find a place, eat quickly, and return to work. Most companies do not have enough space or budget to build cafeterias, cafés, or large social dining areas. Existing spaces such as meeting rooms, break rooms, corridors, or workstations are used flexibly, but they rarely provide a clear structure for eating together.



Fig. 06.02 Microwave heating

Key Problem

No transition
There is no clear shift from work mode to lunch mode. Eating often happens directly inside the work rhythm.

No boundary
The same surface may hold laptops, phones, documents, takeout boxes, and personal belongings. Eating and working overlap physically and mentally.

No shared condition
People may sit close to each other, but their meals remain individual. Without a reason to exchange, pass, offer, or respond, social interaction does not naturally happen.



Fig. 06.03 Working eating

Design Opportunity

The design opportunity is to **create a lightweight shared eating condition within limited office space.**

Instead of designing a new cafeteria, a new lunch box, or a large interior system, this project focuses on a product-scale intervention. **The product should help transform personal workplace lunches into a temporary shared moment**. It should preserve individual food choices while creating opportunities for micro-sharing, conversation, and attention.

The goal is not to force everyone to eat together or talk to each other. Instead, the design should lower the threshold of interaction. A small portion of food, a sauce, a snack, or a side dish can become an invitation. **Through offering, passing, tasting, and responding, food can become a gentle social trigger.**



Fig. 06.04 Dinning social

Design Principles

1. Preserve Individual Choice

Chinese workplace lunch is highly dependent on personal ordering, takeout, brought lunch boxes, and individual preferences. The design should not replace this reality with a fully collective meal. Each person should still keep their own main lunch.

The shared part should be small, voluntary, and flexible.

2. Create Micro-sharing Instead of Full Sharing

Sharing a whole meal may feel unrealistic in the office because of hygiene, personal boundaries, and different eating habits. A more suitable approach is micro-sharing: people only share a small portion, such as a side dish, fruit, sauce, snack, or something special from their own lunch.

This makes sharing easier, less awkward, and more appropriate for workplace relationships.

3. Make Interaction Action-based

The product should not directly ask people to chat. Instead, interaction should begin from simple physical actions: placing food, opening a pod, passing it, tasting, returning it, or offering it to someone nearby.

This follows the logic that social behaviour often starts from small gestures before becoming conversation.

Design Principles

4. Build a Temporary Eating Boundary

The design should help people recognize that lunch has started and ended. It should create a temporary shift from work surface to eating condition, even if the physical place is still a meeting table or office corner.

This boundary does not need to be large. It can be created through layout, shared objects, movement, and ritual.

5. Act as a Quiet Host

The product should gently organize the meal without becoming dominant. Inspired by the serving logic of Chinese tea culture, it can act as a quiet host: offering food, guiding circulation, creating pauses, and giving people a reason to respond.

The product should not control people's behaviour. It should simply make sharing easier to notice and easier to start.



Fig. 06.05 Sit, Feast DOPO?, Milan, 2024

Design Positioning

The project is positioned between three existing conditions:

Not a cafeteria
Because most small and medium-sized offices cannot afford or accommodate one.

Not a personal lunch box
Because the issue is not only how one person stores or carries food.

Not a social game
Because workplace interaction should remain natural, respectful, and low-pressure.

Instead, the project proposes:
A product system that helps personal lunches become shareable, visible, and socially meaningful within existing workplace settings.

Chapter Summary

The design opportunity lies in the space between individual choice and collective presence. Workplace lunch should not be redesigned as a formal meal or a forced social event. Instead, it can become a light shared moment through small actions and product-mediated interaction.

The next chapter explores different possible strategies, including digital, game-based, and physical approaches, before selecting the final direction.



Fig. 06.06 The Dining Room, 2024 Design: i/thee

07 Concept Exploration

Exploring Different Ways to Trigger Workplace Lunch Interaction

After defining the design opportunity, the next step was to explore different ways to transform personal workplace lunches into moments of sharing and interaction. The goal of this stage was not to immediately decide on one final product form, but to test how different spatial, physical, and behavioural strategies could respond to the research findings.

How can a product or spatial structure create a low-threshold trigger for people to share food and start conversation during workplace lunch?

Rather than designing a complete dining space, the project tested smaller interventions that could work within existing office environments, such as meeting tables, break areas, shared corners, or temporary lunch settings.



Fig. 07.01 Sharing dinner, Marjie Vogelzang

01 Temporary Lunch Hub

Transforming a meeting table into a shared lunch setting

A deployable tabletop centerpiece that temporarily transforms a meeting table from a work surface into a shared lunch environment.

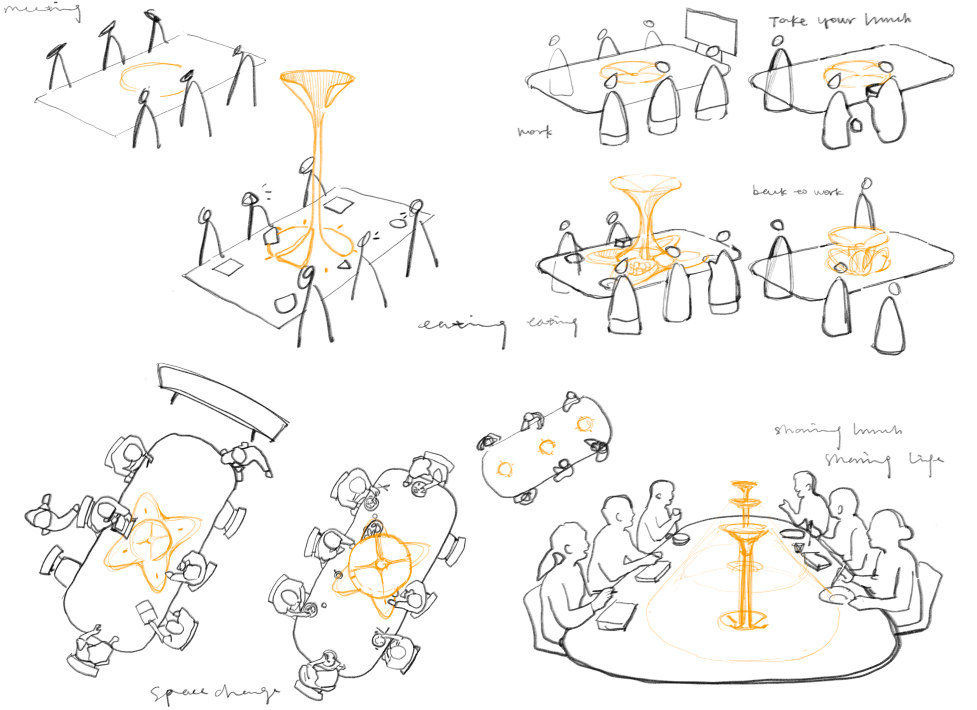


Fig. 07.02 Concept sketch

01 Temporary Lunch Hub

Transforming a meeting table into a shared lunch setting

Shared focus——Spatial transition——Temporary social field——Quick reset

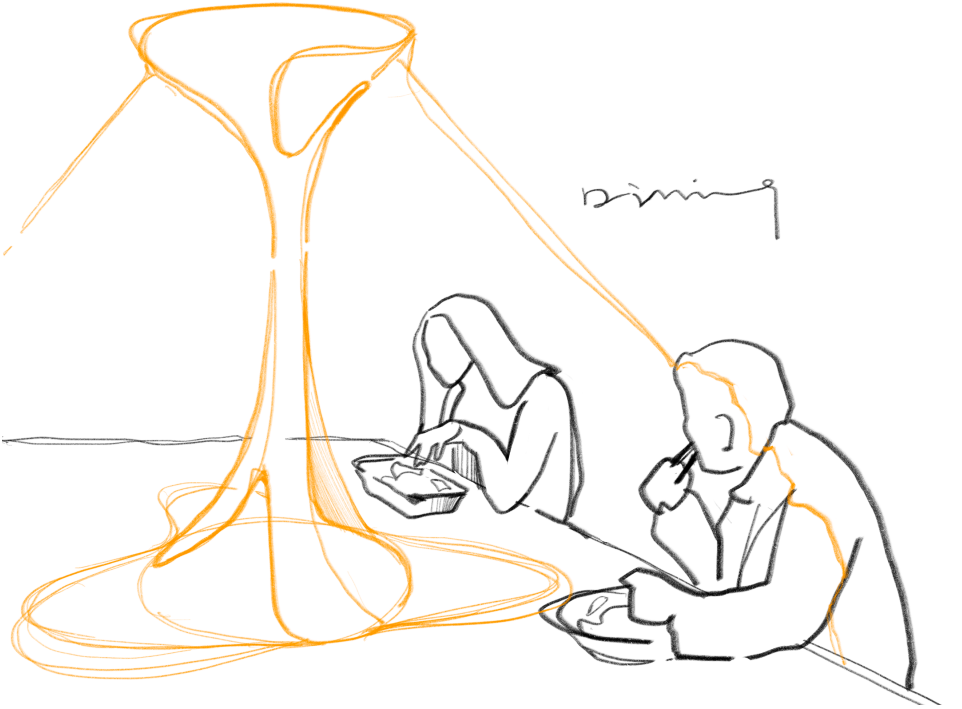


Fig. 07.03 Concept sketch

02 From Round Table to Shared Lunch System

Inspiration

This concept was inspired by the Chinese round table. The value of the round table is not only its circular form, but its sharing mechanism: food is placed at the centre, circulated around the table, and made accessible to everyone.



Fig. 07.04 Chinese round table dining

02 From Round Table to Shared Lunch System

Translation

In the workplace lunch context, this logic was translated into a shared tray system. Each person keeps their own takeout or lunch box, but can place a small portion of food, snacks, fruit, or sauce into shared pods. In this way, personal meals gain a shared layer.



Fig. 07.05 Round sharing device concept

02 From Round Table to Shared Lunch System

Value

The aim is to create a low-threshold way of sharing. People do not need to share the whole meal; they only offer a small part. Food becomes visible, reachable, and easier to pass around, creating natural chances for conversation.

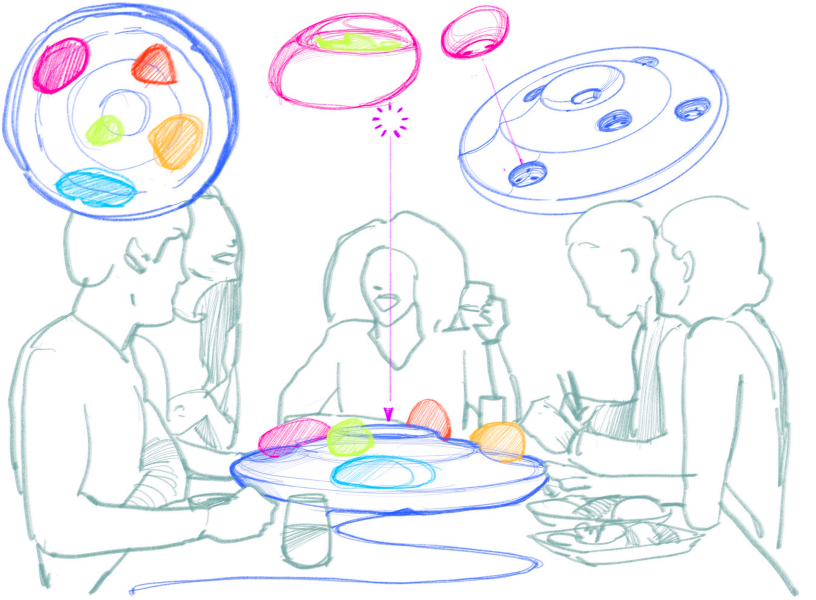


Fig. 07.06 Sharing concept sketch

02 From Round Table to Shared Lunch System

Limitation

However, this direction also had limitations. The circular tray form was too close to existing serving products, and the interaction was still not distinctive enough. This led to the next exploration: covered pods, reveal moments, and more playful sharing behaviours.

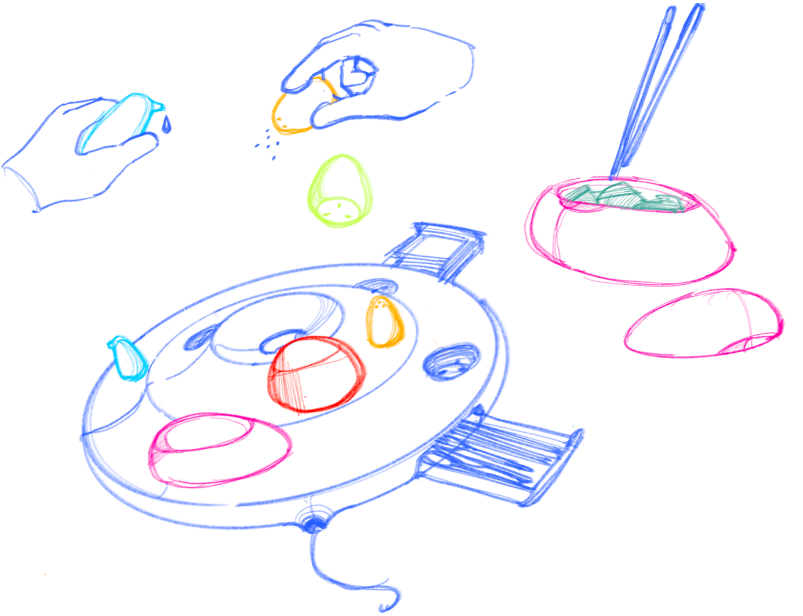


Fig. 07.07 Sharing concept sketch

02 From Round Table to Shared Lunch System

Key learning:
The project should not copy the round table form directly, but translate its social logic: shared centre, equal access, food circulation, and micro-sharing.



Fig. 07.08 Sharing concept

03 Dry Landscape Sharing Table

This concept tried to transform the lunch table into a dry landscape. The table surface became a calm ripple-like field, while the food pods were designed as stone-like containers placed across the surface. Each pod could hold a small shared portion of food and move slowly around the table.



Fig. 07.09 Sharing concept renderings

03 Dry Landscape Sharing Table

The idea created a strong visual identity and introduced a sense of ritual into workplace lunch. It also developed the previous round-table logic by turning food circulation into a more atmospheric and spatial experience.

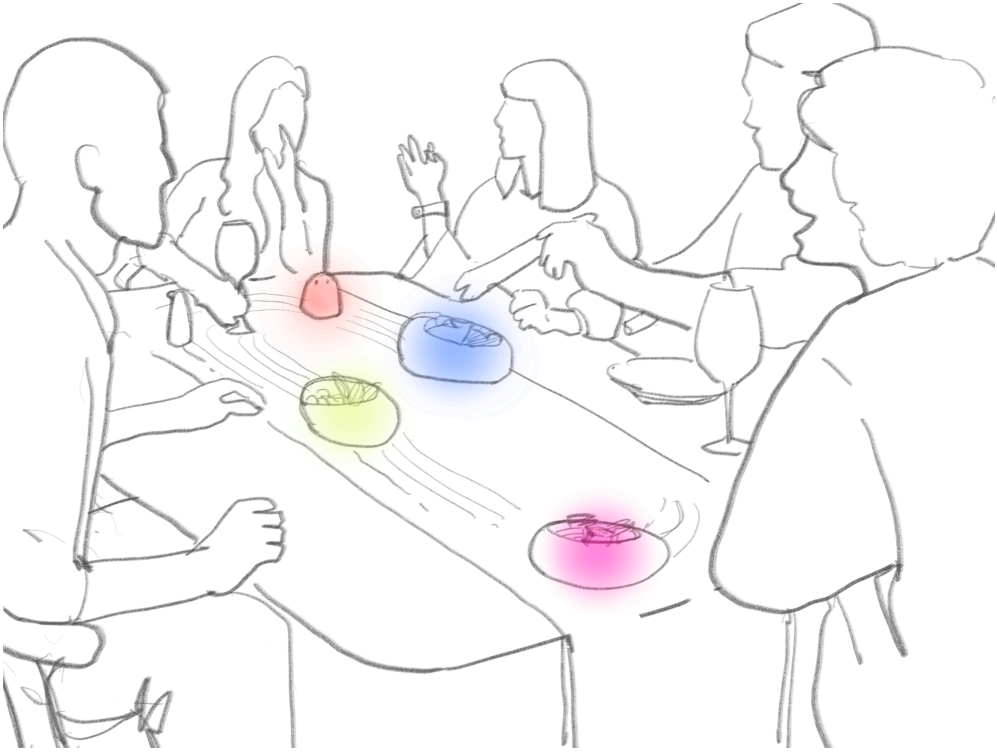


Fig. 07.10 Sharing concept sketch

03 Dry Landscape Sharing Table

However, after reflection, this direction showed a conflict. Dry landscape gardens are related to meditation, silence, and inward attention, while the project aims to support openness, sharing, and conversation. Therefore, this concept became an important transition rather than the final direction.



Fig. 07.11 Zen garden

03 Dry Landscape Sharing Table

Key learning

Keep the slow circulation and shared focus, but shift the cultural logic from meditation to offering and social exchange.



Fig. 07.12 Sharing concept renderings

04 Fortune Bite

Inspired by the fortune cookie experience, this concept hides a small shareable bite inside a split-open pod, creating light interaction through pushing, opening, tasting, and passing.



Fig. 07.13 Fortune cookies

04 Fortune Bite

This concept uses the logic of a fortune cookie: **something small is hidden inside, and opening it creates curiosity**. Each pod contains a small shareable portion and an optional taste note. When the pod is gently pushed to another person, the receiver opens it, **discovers the food, tastes it, and starts a light conversation**.

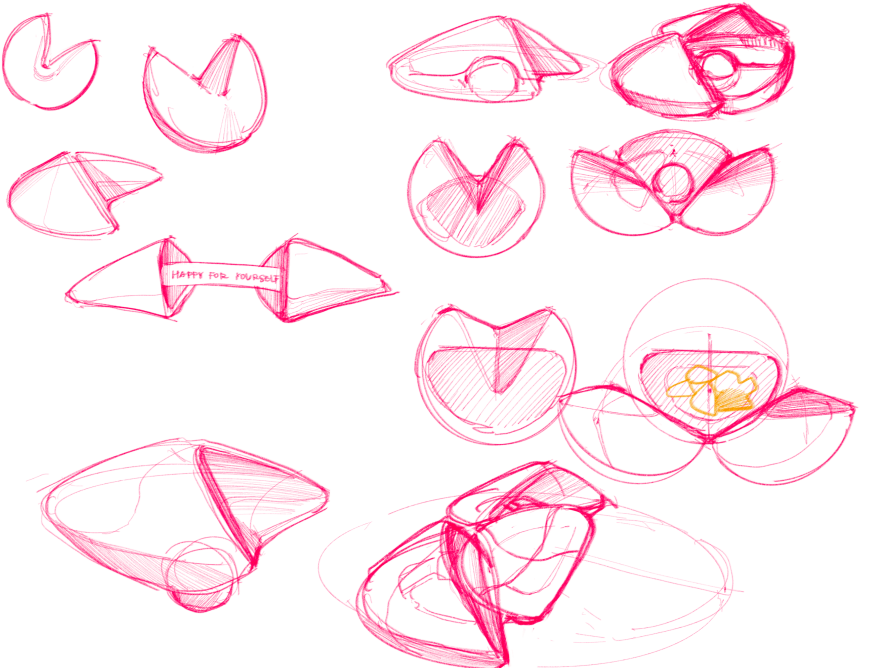


Fig. 07.14 Sharing concept sketch

04 Fortune Bite

Key value

The product turns micro-sharing into a playful but low-pressure social gesture.



Fig. 07.15 Sharing concept rendering

05 Shared Tea Ritual

This concept shifts the focus from sharing food to **co-creating a healthy drink**. In many workplace lunches, people already buy drinks, but these drinks are often expensive, sugary, and individual. At the same time, the rising popularity of **herbal and wellness drinks** shows that young people are paying more attention to health.



Fig. 07.16 Fruit tea ingredients

05 Shared Tea Ritual

Inspired by **Chinese tea culture**, this concept proposes a collaborative tea-brewing system for the workplace lunch break. Each person receives an individual ingredient jar containing freeze-dried fruits, herbs, or botanical blocks. They open the jar, choose an amount, gently crush the ingredients, and add them into a shared brewer. After a short brewing time, the group **shares one collectively made tea**.

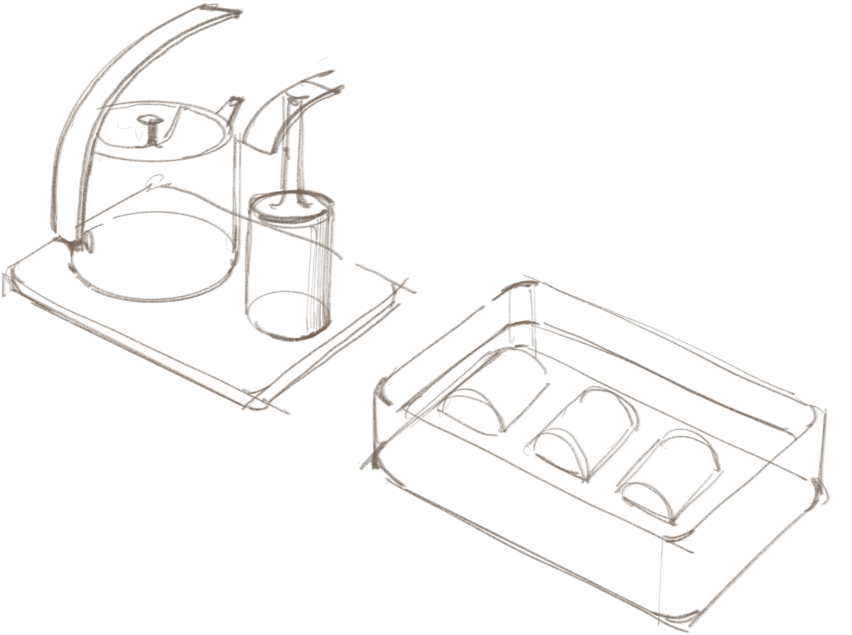


Fig. 07.17 Sharing concept sketch

05 Shared Tea Ritual

The value of this concept is not only the drink itself, but the process of making it together. **Choosing, crushing, adding, waiting, and sharing create a low-pressure ritual that allows colleagues to interact naturally during lunch.**



Fig. 07.18 Sharing concept rendering

05 Shared Tea Ritual

The value of this concept is not only the drink itself, but the process of making it together. **Choosing, crushing, adding, waiting, and sharing create a low-pressure ritual that allows colleagues to interact naturally during lunch.**

Key learning

A shared drink can become a softer and more acceptable social medium than shared food, because everyone can contribute without exposing their personal meal.

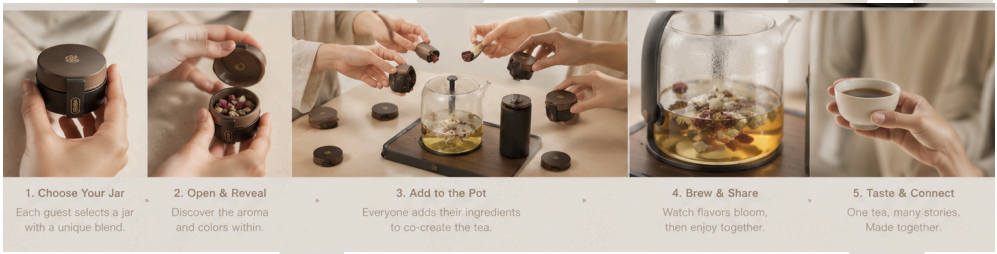


Fig. 07.19 Sharing concept workflow

08 Final Concept

Fortune Bite

Concept Statement
Fortune Bite is a micro-sharing food pod for workplace lunch.
Inspired by the experience of opening a fortune cookie, it hides a small shareable bite inside a split-open shell. Through pushing, opening, tasting, and passing, it creates a low-pressure moment of interaction between colleagues.

A hidden bite becomes a reason to connect.

Micro-sharing / Hidden bite / Curiosity / Low-pressure interaction

8.1 Why This Concept

Workplace lunch is often individual, fast, and disconnected. People may sit close to each other, but their meals remain separate.

Instead of asking people to share a whole meal, **Fortune Bite supports micro-sharing**. Each person can offer only a small portion of food, snack, fruit, sauce, or side dish.

The product does not force conversation. **It creates curiosity through a hidden bite and gives people a natural reason to ask, taste, and respond.**

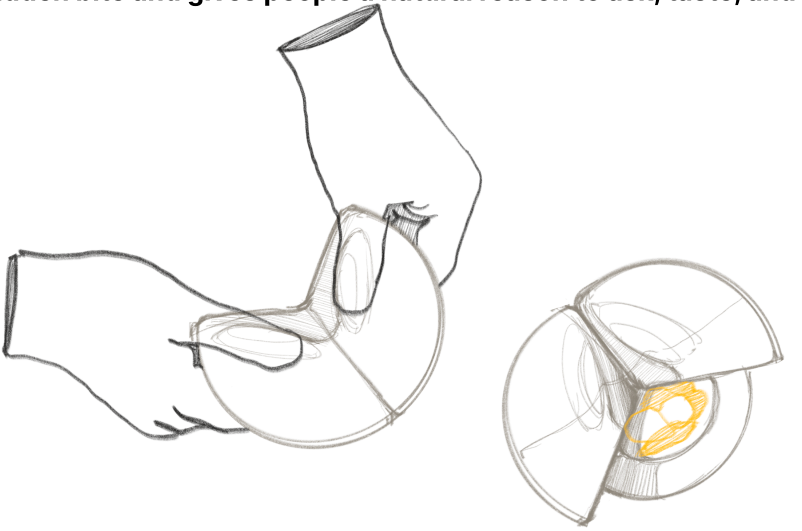


Fig. 08.01 Sharing concept sketch

8.2 Interaction Flow & Product Logic

The product works through a simple sequence:

Place： A user places a small portion of food, snack, fruit, sauce, or side dish into the inner dish.

Close： The split shell closes and hides the food inside.

Send： The pod is placed on the tabletop rail and gently pushed toward others.

Open： The receiver pinches both sides. The shell splits open from the middle seam, revealing the small dish inside then tastes the food and discovers the optional taste note.

Share： The food becomes a natural trigger for conversation, response, or further passing.

The product does not force people to talk. **It creates curiosity first, and curiosity becomes the beginning of interaction.**

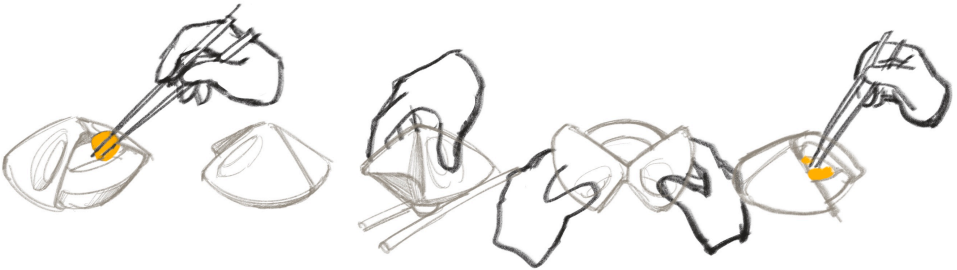


Fig. 08.02 Sharing concept woekflow

8.3 Product Components

Outer shell: split-open curved body
Inner tray: removable food tray
Rolling base: smooth guided movement
Table rail: passing path with docking points

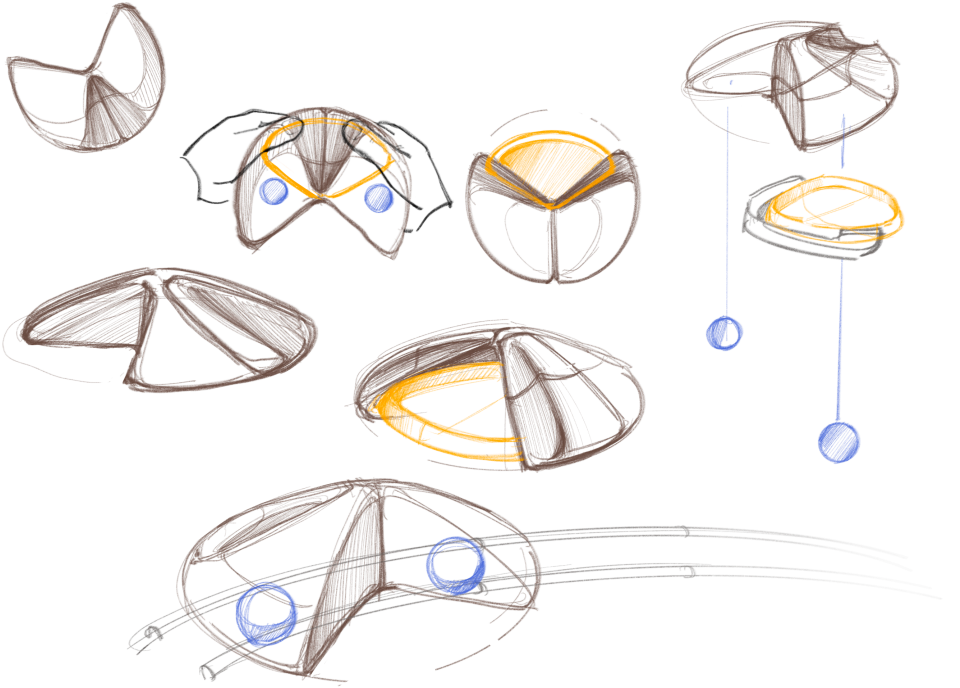


Fig. 08.03 Sharing concept sketch

8.4 Dimensions & Ergonomics

The pod is designed as a hand-scale object for easy pushing, lifting, and opening.

The pod supports a clear two-hand opening gesture while staying compact on the table. The inner tray holds one small tasting portion, and the rolling balls help it move smoothly along the rail.

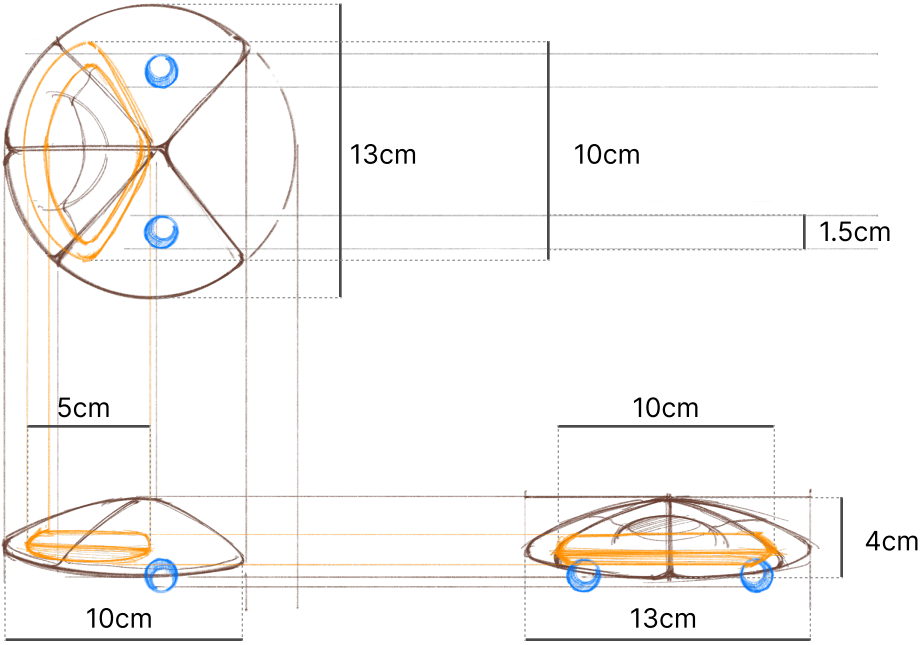


Fig. 08.04 Product dimension sketch

8.5 Materials & Food Safety

All food-contact parts are designed to be safe, removable, and easy to clean.

Outer shell: food-grade translucent PP / soft-touch PP
Inner tray: removable food-grade PP
Rolling balls: silicone-coated or stainless steel spheres
Finish: soft matte, semi-translucent, easy to clean

A mono-material PP-based system reduces **weight and supports repeated daily use, cleaning, and potential recycling.**



Fig. 08.05 Sharing concept rendering

8.6 Color Palette

- Rice White keeps the product clean and soft
- Caramel adds warmth and visual depth
- Apricot creates appetite and curiosity



Fig. 08.06 Sharing concept rendering

8.7 Design Value

Fortune Bite creates a light social moment during workplace lunch by turning a small hidden bite into a shared experience. Through **opening, tasting, and passing**, the product encourages curiosity and casual conversation without forcing people to share their whole meal or engage in strong social interaction.



Fig. 08.07 Sharing concept rendering

09 Reflection & Conclusion



9.1 Reflection

This project began with the observation that workplace lunch in China is becoming increasingly efficient, individual, and fragmented. **Food delivery and lunch boxes make eating easier**, but they also **weaken the social and spatial qualities of lunch**. Many young office workers **eat quickly, eat alone, or eat while working**, which makes lunch **less like a shared moment and more like another compressed task.**

Through research, survey findings, benchmark analysis, and concept exploration, **the project gradually shifted from designing a dining object to designing a light social condition**. The key question became not only how to support eating, but how to create a small opportunity for people to notice each other, interact naturally, and temporarily reconnect during lunch.

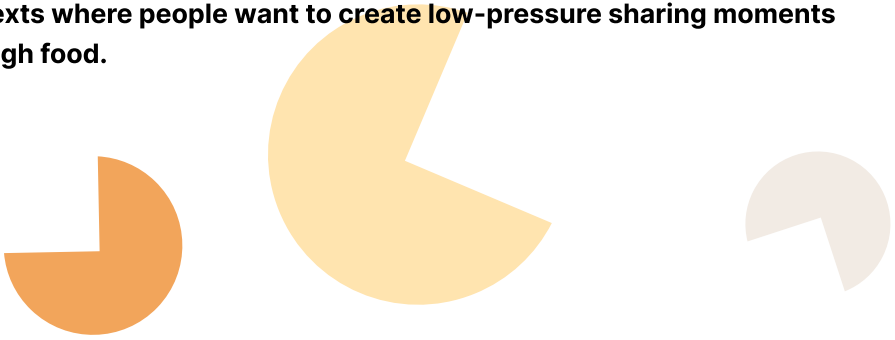
The final concept, **Fortune Bite, responds to this question through micro-sharing.** Instead of asking people to share a whole meal, it allows them to share only a small hidden bite. **The actions of placing, closing, passing, opening, and tasting create a gentle interaction sequence**. In this way, the product becomes a small trigger for curiosity and casual conversation, while still respecting personal boundaries.

9.2 Limitation and Future Development

At this stage, Fortune Bite is developed as a conceptual product system. Further development would require **more detailed prototyping and user testing, especially around the opening mechanism, rail movement, cleaning process, and food safety.**

The dimensions, materials, and CMF have been defined as initial design directions, but they should be verified through physical models. A working prototype would help test whether the split-open gesture feels comfortable, whether the pod moves smoothly on the rail, and whether the inner tray is practical for real lunch scenarios.

In future development, the system could also explore different pod sizes, different table layouts, or optional taste notes for different office cultures. T**he product may not only support Chinese workplace lunch, but also broader contexts where people want to create low-pressure sharing moments through food.**



9.3 Conclusion

Fortune Bite proposes a new way to think about workplace lunch: **not only as a moment of eating, but as a temporary opportunity for connection.** By hiding a small shareable bite inside a split-open pod, the product turns food into a gentle social trigger.

The project does not try to force people to socialize. Instead, **it creates a simple condition where interaction can naturally happen**. A small portion of food, a moment of curiosity, and a light passing gesture become enough to start a conversation.

In this sense, Fortune Bite is not just a food container. **It is a micro-sharing system that helps transform individual lunch into a shared moment.**



Fig. 09.01 Sharing concept rendering

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