



PENSAR Y COCINAR

Prototyping Infrastructures for
Slow Disasters in Santo Domingo
Tomaltepec, Oaxaca

Narrative Report



THINKING AND COOKING WITH SLOW DISASTERS

This case study forms part of *Slow Disasters*, a long-term, transdisciplinary and multi-continental umbrella project initiated by Andrew Merritt, which uses food, art, and ecological research to respond to “slow disasters”: gradual processes of socio-ecological degradation that unfold over decades and centuries, often without triggering immediate response.

The Mexico activation was developed and led by Cocina Colaboratorio, under the direction of Emilio Hernández, with the support of Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo. It unfolds as a situated, long-term investigation shaped alongside a local learning community in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, Oaxaca, grounded in soil, food systems, and collective memory.

The collaboration between *Slow Disasters* and Cocina Colaboratorio emerged through conversations initiated at Delfina Foundation, where Andrew Merritt met Emilio Hernández during their residency within the Politics of Food programme. This encounter established the basis for a shared inquiry into slow disasters, food, and land, which later took shape in the Mexican context through Cocina Colaboratorio’s existing territorial work and network.





A Situated Understanding

Within the broader framework of this initiative, slow disasters are initially framed as systemic, cumulative processes of ecological and cultural erosion produced by the interaction of social and ecological systems. Drawing on socioecological systems thinking, they are understood not as singular, abrupt crises, but as gradual transformations that unfold over decades, quietly embedding themselves in bodies, soils, practices, and everyday imaginaries.

However, grounding this inquiry in Oaxaca, and specifically alongside the learning community in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, has fundamentally deepened and reconfigured this understanding. Informed by Latin American critical disaster studies, which emphasize that disasters are never merely "natural" nor purely temporal, our situated work has revealed that slow disasters are the material manifestation of historically produced vulnerabilities. They are entangled with asymmetric relations of power, economic precarity, and the slow violence of environmental and cultural displacement.

In the context of Oaxaca, this dynamic is sharpened by the growing romanticization of rural life and the gourmetization of local food cultures. While regional gastronomy is celebrated and commodified globally, the agricultural territories and communal fabrics that sustain it face acute pressures: real estate speculation, water grabbing, the commodification of native seeds, and the silent abandonment of the fields driven by economic exhaustion. Here, slow disasters operate not only as ecological erosion, but as a form of biocultural extractivism that detaches food from the very bodies, soils, and communal relations that cultivate it.





More importantly, situating ourselves in Oaxaca reveals that these vulnerabilities do not unfold over passive territory. In Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, soil, food systems, and communal life are deeply interdependent. Slow disasters manifest tangibly in prolonged droughts, the erosion of topsoil, and the quiet loss of agrobiodiversity. Yet they also advance in more intimate, sensory dimensions: through the silent disappearance of native ingredients, the progressive erosion of indigenous language and local names that anchor ecological relations, and the gradual flattening of taste as everyday diets are displaced by standardized, external food regimes. When a plant disappears or is no longer cultivated, the language used to speak about it and the palates attuned to its nuances erode alongside it.

Yet, at the same time, being situated in Tomaltepec shows that the territory holds its own living archive of repair. Through communal labour, situated community knowledge, and relational practices of soil care, the community actively resists this erosion. Here, the power of collective encounter emerges as an indispensable tool for transformation: gathering around the land and the table becomes a space to reconstitute social fabrics, reawaken taste, hold memory in common, and imagine alternative pathways of sustenance. In Oaxaca, we have learned that understanding slow disasters cannot be separated from recognising the living agency of the soil, the transformative potency of coming together, and the collective pedagogies capable of tending to it.





Cocina de Suelo: Soil as a Common Body

The project operates through a situated research-and-encounter device called *Cocina de Suelo* (Soil Kitchen). Developed collaboratively with the inhabitants of Santo Domingo Tomaltepec and constructed largely through community workshops using local materials, *Cocina de Suelo* is a modular, mobile structure designed to work with the territory rather than upon it. It functions as a platform for dialogue, observation, learning, and collective action, capable of adapting to different moments, needs, and spatial conditions.

From its early stages, *Cocina de Suelo* became closely intertwined with the work of Las Caracolas, a community-based agroecological learning group in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec. The *Cocina* was invited to be installed within a communal plot already used by Las Caracolas for soil regeneration, seed exchange, and the reactivation of communal and domestic gardens. This moment marked a shift from activation to continuity, rooting the project within an existing collective process.

Aligned closely with Emilio Hernández's conceptual framing, *Cocina de Suelo* is approached as a living, relational platform, while the soil itself is understood as a common body: a shared, living entity where ecological processes, social histories, and everyday practices are inscribed, accumulated, and transformed over time. In this sense, the soil functions as an archive of memory, labour, violence, care, and resilience.

Cooking becomes a way of thinking with the soil. Through shared meals, conversations, observation, and hands-on





practices, the *Cocina* enables direct and embodied engagement with the land. Knowledge is not transmitted or extracted but “cooked”: slowly assembled through listening, repetition, and collective practice. The act of cooking connects culinary practices with agroecological ones, allowing everyday gestures to open questions around degradation, nourishment, and repair.

As a space of encounter, *Cocina de Suelo* brings together practical, ancestral, technical, and experiential forms of knowledge without hierarchising them. It supports moments of collective study and diagnosis alongside concrete practices such as composting, fermentation, preparing bio-inputs, and other soil-care techniques. In doing so, it accompanies a broader search for tools and practices capable of acquiring memory, sustaining continuity, and reconfiguring relationships with the soil that feeds and holds the community.







Work on the Ground

Between August 2025 and January 2026, the project unfolded as a continuous process advancing through interrelated activities developed in close dialogue with the community and with Las Caracolas. Before each public or collective session, moments of conversation and co-design were held to define objectives, needs, and working rhythms.

Key activities during this period included:

- Participatory design of the *Cocina de Suelo* (October–November 2025), refining its function as a platform for encounter, observation, and collective work.
- Soil observation and diagnosis sessions (November 2025–January 2026) focused on recognising signs of erosion, water stress, and soil degradation in local parcels.
- Activation of the *Cocina de Suelo* as a convivial kitchen for the soil, consolidating it as a space for ongoing meetings, agroecological practice, and situated research.
- *Círculos de Estudio* held on-site, including sessions focused on the history of the soil, the health of local parcels, and transformations in the local food system.
- Preparation of bio-inputs and soil-care practices, such as composts, fermented fertilisers, and soil teas, developed collectively with Las Caracolas.

Across these activities, attention was placed on reading the soil's rhythms and allowing them to guide the pace of the work. The process reaffirmed that the agency of the soil itself shapes both the timing and the form of collective action, requiring slowness, care, and sustained presence.





Círculos de Estudio

The *Círculos de Estudio* form the methodological backbone of the project. Conceived as a series of situated encounters rather than a linear programme, the *Círculos* create a shared space for collective inquiry, where reflection, observation, and practice unfold together over time. Rather than producing fixed conclusions, they are designed to hold questions open, allowing knowledge to emerge gradually through repetition, dialogue, and embodied experience.

Each *Círculo* is anchored in the territory and connected to ongoing work with the *Cocina de Suelo* and Las Caracolas.

Círculo de Estudio 1 — La historia de nuestro suelo (The History of Our Soil)

The opening session focused on reconstructing the collective history of the soil. Participants shared memories, stories, and observations related to land use, cultivation, and food practices, tracing how the territory had transformed over time. This encounter foregrounded the soil as a carrier of memory and positioned lived experience as a valid form of knowledge.

Círculo de Estudio 2 — La salud de nuestras parcelas (The Health of Our Plots)

This session centred on observing the current condition of local parcels. Through collective diagnosis, participants identified signs of erosion, changes in soil structure, and issues related to water availability. Technical observation was combined with experiential knowledge, allowing different forms of expertise to coexist.







Círculo de Estudio 3 — Alimentos y desplazamientos (Food and Displacements)

Focusing on the local food system, this encounter explored how ingredients, crops, and culinary practices had shifted over time. Participants reflected on which foods had been introduced, which had been displaced, and how migration, market pressures, and environmental change intersected in everyday diets. Attention was given to the silent nature of these displacements and their impact on biocultural memory.

Círculo de Estudio 4 — Cocinar para el suelo (Cooking for the Soil)

This session activated the *Cocina de Suelo* as a convivial kitchen for the territory. Through the collective preparation of composts, fermented fertilisers, and other bio-inputs, cooking was reframed as an act of care directed toward the soil itself. Culinary gestures and agroecological practices were brought together, reinforcing the understanding of soil as a living participant in the process.

Círculo de Estudio 5 — Horizontes de continuidad (Horizons of Continuity)

The final encounter opened a space to reflect on continuity and future pathways. Rather than defining outcomes, the session focused on how the practices, relationships, and questions generated through the *Círculos* could be sustained over time. Emphasis was placed on collective responsibility, shared rhythms, and the ongoing role of the *Cocina de Suelo* as a long-term platform.





A mi me gustaria

Sembrar plantitas

- Seguir cuidando la
- Cuidar la naturaleza
- Que siga

Por que m

Towards a Field Hospital in Mexico

One of the core goals of Slow Disasters is the establishment of Field Hospitals across its sites of activation. A Field Hospital operates as a flexible, long-term infrastructure for repair, bringing together food practices, ecological inquiry, artistic methodologies, and situated knowledge to address slow disasters from within specific territories.

In Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, the outcomes of this first phase indicate that the relational and ecological foundations for a Field Hospital in Oaxaca already exist. Its role is not to impose external solutions, but to nurture ongoing experimentation around soil healing, the revival of biocultural practices, and the intergenerational transmission of tools and memory. Rather than being conceived as a singular, static building, it operates as a modular and adaptable infrastructure, capable of expanding and contracting in response to local rhythms, needs, and capacities.

The transformative capacity of this approach was vividly manifested during the *Círculos de Estudio*, when a young participant voiced a critical reflection on how one of the deepest dimensions of slow disaster is the quiet erosion of desire: the gradual loss of interest among younger generations in participating in the everyday cycles of agricultural care and communal life. Responding directly to this shared realization, he proposed recovering an abandoned parcel belonging to his grandfather to cultivate a biodiverse milpa. This gesture opened a tangible pathway of intergenerational repair, connecting this activation with Cocina Laboratorio's broader research on local maize diversity and situated practices across the territory.





in doing so, the project moved beyond diagnosis, creating generative intersections that mobilized both individual and collective agency to reclaim the land as an active space of learning, nourishment, and belonging

Looking ahead, the next steps in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec focus on prototyping a learning and production structure dedicated to soil care and biocultural restoration. This infrastructure will operate as a situated biofactory to research, formulate, and produce the bio-inputs and ecotechnologies necessary to sustain local agricultural health and regenerate degraded plots. Developed in close collaboration with the community, allied practitioners, and guest researchers, the space will integrate areas for collective study with hands-on agroecological experimentation and tool development. Lightweight and modular structures designed for the local climate are envisioned to support sustained engagement while remaining attuned to the region's landscape and seasonal cycles. Over time, this infrastructure will progressively incorporate local building techniques, communal craft knowledge, and materials emerging directly from the ongoing care of the territory.





CREDITS

Project led by Emilio
Hernandez Martínez in
partnership with
Cocina Colaboratorio

Narrative report
written by Emilio
Hernandez Martínez
and Carolina Lio
based on materials
from Emilio Hernandez
Martínez and Cocina
Colaboratorio

Graphic Design:
Looking Forward

Photos: Markus
Martinez and Cocina
Colaboratorio (2026)

Funded by: Fundación
Jumex Arte
Contemporáneo

Slow Disasters is a long-term, multi-continental project and methodology developed by British artist Andrew Merritt to address what he terms “slow disasters”: the long, often invisible destruction of landscapes and their biocultures caused by centuries of industrialisation, extraction, and ecological neglect. The project uses art, food, and historical-ecological research to restore damaged environments and rebuild relationships between people and place.

Slow Disasters unfolds through two interconnected structures (Field Kitchens and Field Hospitals) which reappropriate mobile infrastructures typically used in emergency zones. Together, Field Kitchens and Field Hospitals create a distributed network of regenerative sites across the UK, Mexico, South Africa and Italy.

Art Lead: Andrew Merritt | Research Lead: Nik Petek-Sargeant | Curator: Carolina Lio | Associate Artist and Mexico Project Lead: Emilio Hernandez Martínez | Associate Wild Food Expert and South Africa Co-Lead: Loubie Rusch.

Project produced by Looking Forward. Partners: University of Cambridge (UK), Local Wild Food Hub at The Sustainability Institute (SA) and Cocina Colaboratorio at UNAM National Autonomous University of Mexico, with the support of Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo and Gaia Art Foundation. by Looking Forward. The project are realised in partnership with Cocina Colaboratorio at UNAM National Autonomous University of Mexico, with the support of Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo.



