



PENSAR Y COCINAR

A situated investigation 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 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.





A Situated Understanding

Slow disasters are understood as systemic and cumulative processes of ecological and cultural erosion produced by the interaction of social and ecological systems. Drawing on socioecological systems thinking, slow disasters are not singular events but gradual transformations that infiltrate everyday life, embedding themselves in bodies, soils, practices, and imaginaries.

In Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, located in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, these processes become tangible through soil erosion, water stress, the loss of agrobiodiversity, and the weakening of biocultural memory. Ingredients disappear quietly from kitchens; practices erode alongside the soil; relationships that sustain collective life are progressively strained. These conditions are approached as entangled processes that must be read and addressed together.

Importantly, Santo Domingo Tomaltepec is a territory where soil, food, and community are deeply interdependent. Agricultural practices, culinary knowledge, and communal labour have historically shaped both the landscape and its social organisation.

For this reason, from the outset, the project was conceived as a co-investigation, carried out with the soil and with those who inhabit and care for it. Emphasis was placed on listening to the territory, recognising existing agroecological practices, and working at a pace attuned to local cycles.





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





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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.





Towards a Field Hospital in Mexico

One of the core goals of *Slow Disasters* is the establishment of Field Hospitals in its sites of activation. A Field Hospital operates as flexible yet long-term-evolving infrastructures for repair, bringing together food practices, ecological research, artistic methodologies, and local knowledge to address slow disasters from within specific territories.

In Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, this first phase of *Slow Disasters*, through *Cocina de Suelo*, the *Círculos de Estudio*, and ongoing agroecological practices, the work suggested that many of the conditions for a Field Hospital in the Oaxaca already exist. Its role would be to support experimentation around soil healing, the revival of biocultural practices, and the sharing of tools and knowledge across generations. Rather than being a singular building, it would operate as a modular and adaptable infrastructure, capable of expanding and contracting in response to local conditions and capacities.

The next steps in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec point toward the development of a prototyping and learning structure dedicated to soil care and biocultural restoration. This would include spaces for experimentation, collective work, and shared learning, developed in close collaboration with the community and with researchers from UNAM Ecosystems and Sustainability Institute. Lightweight and flexible architectural forms, such as polytunnels and modular units, are envisaged as a means to support long-term use while remaining responsive to the region's landscape and climate. Over time, the structure would increasingly draw on local vernacular building methods and materials emerging from the restored bioregion.



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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.

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