

# The City as Dining Room, Market and Farm



Food has been sold on the street ever since people have lived in town settlements. Encouraging social exchange and interaction, the public consumption of food brings vitality and conviviality to urban life. In recent years, the sale of food in upmarket cafés and speciality shops has intensified, becoming a tool of urban regeneration. Here, Karen A Franck, the guest-editor of this issue, introduces the themes behind 'Food + the City' and suggests why architects and planning professionals should pay attention to 'the city's multiple functions as dining room, market and farm'.

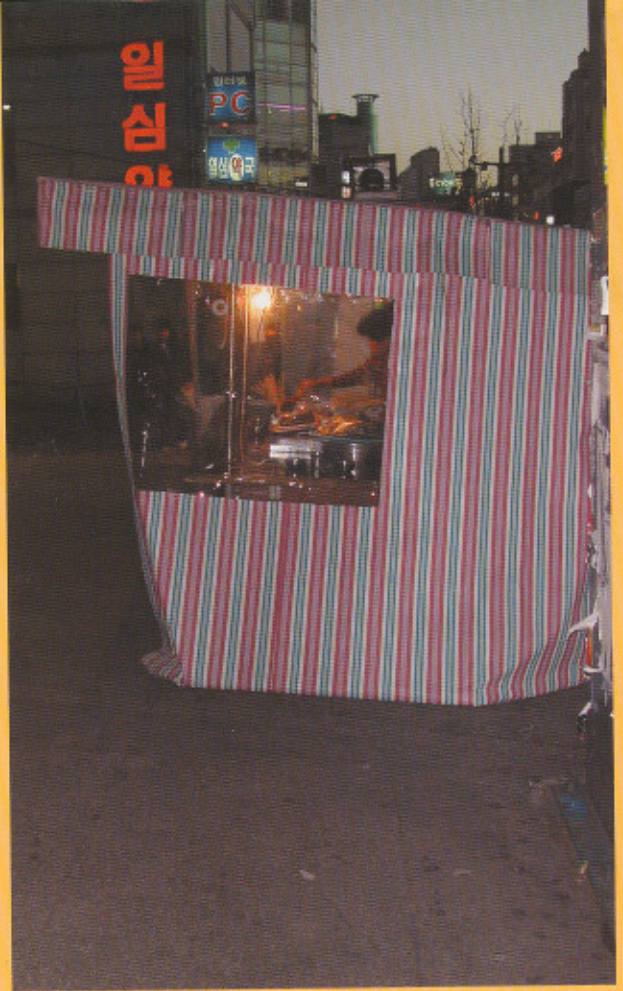


On the streets of Istanbul, vendors sell boiled corn, stuffed mussels served with slices of lemon, soft pretzels and even rice pilaf in small plastic glasses; in New York it may be hot dogs, kebabs, egg rolls, roasted chestnuts, and also pretzels – but harder ones. In Seoul, on cool autumn evenings, many vendors appear, all at once, to prepare and cook a wide range of foods right in front of you, often protected from the wind and cold by canvas enclosures. Around the world, for hundreds of years and more, people have purchased (and eaten) food on the street, just as they have purchased meat, fish, cheese, herbs and fresh produce from urban markets, both indoors and out.

Sitting down in a public place to drink or to eat has also existed for centuries from the age-old tradition of informal street-side eateries in China to medieval cookshops in inns in the UK to the 16th-century emergence of coffeehouses in the Middle East and then Europe. More elaborate interior design and culinary arrangements emerged with the French invention of the restaurant in the late 18th century. For religious holidays and other special occasions, people have long gathered in public places to eat together. (In medieval times, the cathedral was a site for such events.) In all these ways, food continues to play a highly visible role in public life in cities throughout the world, meeting people's need for sustenance, sociability and entrepreneurship, and generating a sensory-rich feeling of vitality.

While some traditions remain remarkably the same, others change quickly and dramatically. Even though Europe adopted the café, from the Middle East, in the 17th century, the outdoor sidewalk café is a very recent import of the late 20th century, from the Mediterranean to the UK, Scandinavia, the US and Australia.<sup>1</sup> While restaurants have existed for a long time, their number, variety and popularity has increased worldwide since the Second World War due to a number of factors: an increase in the disposable income of many households; the acceptance in many countries of women eating out without the company of men; the fact that people now remain single for longer periods of time; and because more women now go out to work and have less time to prepare family meals at home.

Growing fruit and vegetables within the city limits, or even nearby, disappeared from many Western cities as large-scale agriculture became exclusively a rural activity, with foods being packaged and transported long distances to urban supermarkets. As the many advantages



Top  
Street vendor cooking hot dishes, Seoul, South Korea. Many food vendors in Seoul use this kind of collapsible canvas enclosure with plastic windows on the sides.

Right  
Vendor's pushcart for boiling and selling ears of fresh corn, Istanbul, Turkey.



of local agriculture are being rediscovered, farmers' markets and the regeneration of public market buildings attract both residents and tourists, helping to regenerate surrounding districts. And urban residents also rediscover the benefits of growing fruits and vegetables themselves in private and community gardens, city farms and allotments.

The public culture of food brings vitality and conviviality to urban life. People come together in public spaces to buy and to eat, and even to grow food, and in these ways, also, to be with others. They may join people whom they already know, finding in restaurants and cafés the space to eat and converse with friends and family that is simply not available in their own small apartments. Or they may simply enjoy the presence of strangers. Eating venues offer what Ray Oldenburg in his *Great Good Place* calls a 'third place' – that is, neither home nor work.<sup>2</sup>

Within the fast pace of life, anonymity and large-scale spaces of the modern city, food

Right  
Street vendor, Philadelphia.  
As people go to work, they  
stop to buy coffee and choose  
from a variety of rolls and  
bagels. Later in the day, they  
may purchase a hot dog and  
chips or a soda.

Below  
Place Djemaa el Fna,  
Marrakesh, Morocco. Every  
evening during the religious  
month of Ramadan, vendors  
start preparing food and  
setting up tables for the meal  
that breaks the day's fast at  
sundown.





Top left

Allotment garden, Stockholm, Sweden. Starting in Germany, during industrialisation in the mid-19th century, cities, factories and monasteries provided plots in allotment gardens for poor families to grow food and to keep pigs and chickens. Such gardens became an essential source of food during the world wars. Introduced in Sweden at the beginning of the 20th century, allotment gardens throughout Europe are now more recreational than a matter of food security.



Top right

Spitalfields Market, London. The Horner Market Building (1889), with housing above, once housed a wholesale food and flower market. The interior covered space now houses an arts-and-crafts market, a café, and a food market on Fridays and Sundays. Developers want to build glass blocks inside the market for restaurants, bars and shops, significantly reducing the space available for the present group of small and highly diverse businesses. Despite community opposition, buildings in the western section of the market have been demolished to create space for the construction of office towers.



Bottom left

Stone Street, Lower Manhattan, New York. The departments of city planning and transportation pedestrianised this historic street of 19th-century buildings and restored the street and building facades to their earlier appearance, expecting a range of small businesses to move into the previously vacant and deteriorated shopfronts. To their surprise, the new businesses are all highly successful cafés, bars and restaurants.



Bottom right

Tom's, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, New York. Owned by a local family since 1939 and a true 'third place', this coffee shop is ever popular with neighbourhood residents and those working nearby, including police officers, and remained open throughout the neighbourhood decline of the 1960s and 1970s.







venues give us a sense of intimacy, a place to pause at an eminently human scale. When the food we eat, grow or buy is local, we also experience a connection to the region, the seasons and the ground we inhabit. Our connection to organic life, within all the abstractions of the modern city, is strengthened. And with the explosion of food products and meals from distant cultures, we find another kind of connection.

Food in the city enriches our everyday sensations of sound, sight and smell through the ways in which it is produced, displayed and consumed. What rich sensory experiences one has walking on the streets of Chinatown in New York or visiting fresh food or fish markets anywhere. What a welcome alternative these are to the many sanitised, sterilised and essentially anaesthetising streets and supermarkets of modern cities. Even just walking by, these sensory experiences are possible and plentiful because the food is not enclosed – neither in tight plastic wrapping nor in shops or restaurants closed and remote from the street. Indeed, a common theme in 'Food + the City' is the blurring of boundaries between inside and out, public and private, eating venue and public circulation that food brings about in street vending, sidewalk cafés, new restaurants in train

stations and airports, and even in public housing estates in Hong Kong.

In many cities, new food-consumption venues are the forerunners of urban regeneration. A lone but quickly popular café or small restaurant, such as Florent in the Meat Packing District in New York, may be followed, quickly or over a period of years, by more restaurants and bars, and also clubs, fashion boutiques, new flats and loft apartments. Elsewhere, the establishment of restaurants, cafés and food markets can be part of a planned redevelopment, as was the incorporation of the largest Whole Foods Market in the US, and some of the most expensive restaurants in New York, into the new Times Warner Center in Manhattan. Either way, by chance or by intention, restaurants and food shops that cater to those with sufficient money to spend on these luxuries are likely to raise rents in the area, forcing out existing businesses and excluding new ones that might serve a different clientele. Municipal governments, keen to encourage consumption by residents and tourists, and to increase the economic wellbeing of the city, often support these trends, perhaps by changing land-use and zoning regulations, as New York and Philadelphia have done, to encourage sidewalk cafés on certain streets.

Nonetheless, the growing gastronomic culture of cities has a range of important economic and health benefits. The great number of restaurants and food outlets provides employment. Opening one's own store or restaurant, although risky, offers opportunities for

Above  
Spiral Café, Birmingham, UK  
[Marks Barfield Architects,  
2004]. The newest Costa café  
in the city centre joins four  
new cafés and restaurants  
in the Bullring. With a curved  
copper roof and bronze  
interiors, the café takes the  
form of a seashell. According  
to the press release, the  
heated outdoor seating area  
'continues the continental  
atmosphere of outside dining  
already successfully  
established along St Martin's  
Walk'.





Right  
Vegetables for sale on the stairway of the Noryangjin fish market, Seoul, South Korea. Selling fresh produce or prepared foods in public places is an important source of income for individuals and families throughout the world. Attempts to curtail or forbid these practices rob people of their livelihoods and cities of their liveliness.

#### Notes

1 For cookshops and early street-food in the UK, see Moira Johnston (ed), *London Eats Out*, Philip Wilson Publishers (London), 1999. For histories of the café and restaurant in Europe, see Kenneth Kipple and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas (eds), *The Cambridge World History of Food*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, and Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, University of Illinois Press, 1996.

2 Ray Oldenburg, *Great Good Place*, Paragon (New York), 1989.

3 For the importance of vending street food as a source of household income in developing countries, particularly for women, see Irene Tinker, *Street Foods: Urban Food and Employment in Developing Countries*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

entrepreneurship. Selling cooked food on the street, as an independent vendor or an employee of a vending company, turns out to be a very important source of income worldwide. Recurring municipal efforts to 'clean up the city' by curtailing such activity therefore threaten not only the liveliness of public life, but also the livelihood of city residents.<sup>3</sup>

The increasing number of farmers' markets in the poorer neighbourhoods of our cities give residents access to fresh produce that is simply not available in neighbourhoods that rely solely on small cornershops and fast-food chains. Residents of these neighbourhoods also grow food which they sell at these markets, and family-owned farms in the region are able to stay in business.

Through various programmes, these and other food enterprises offer training and work experience for those who are desperately in need, including immigrants, the formerly homeless, released convicts and young juveniles. And growing food and learning to cook and serve it becomes part of the curriculum in schools where city children have little if any experience in these areas. Food is a mechanism of change in a great variety of ways – for entire neighbourhoods as well as individuals.

It is time for the architectural and urban design planning professions to support and enhance the city's multiple functions as dining room, market and farm. The Modernist tenets, which too often posited a segmented and sterile city where dining and shopping were hidden in interior spaces and where growing occurred in distant locations, need to be replaced by the encouragement, through planning and design, of a true mixing of land uses that incorporates places (and ways) for growing and selling local produce as well as for consuming it. Open space need not always be interpreted as space exclusively for leisure.

It is this kind of design and planning orientation to the benefits that food can bring to both large-scale and small-scale urban areas that Brian McGrath, Danai Thaitakoo, Gil Doron and Susan Parham promote in this issue. It is the liveliness, conviviality and sensory experience that open-air markets and informal eating venues bring to city life that Nisha Fernando, Jeffrey Cody and Mary Day wish to maintain in the face of the modernisation projects and city regulations that threaten them. And all of us join Jane Lawrence, Rachel Hurst, Gail Satler and Masaaki Takahashi in discovering the many ways that food in the city is a boundary-breaker. At the same time, like Louisa Carter, Jon Binnie and David Bell, we need to notice, always, who is included and who is excluded, who benefits and who loses. ▫