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I, Jaren Abedania, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Community Planning in Community Planning.

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Spatializing Commensality: The City as Public Dining Room

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Spatializing Commensality: The City as Public Dining Room

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by

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the same physical space, people add the intangible element of camaraderie to the consumption of food. Therefore while acts of provisioning may symbolize the sharing of food, they do not equate to situations that stimulate social interaction through sustained physical presence that occur while eating and drinking together. In practice, planners and urban designers fixate on provision and hope for commensality.

To be sure, planners and urban designers acknowledge the social connotations of food, but this is often in the context of farmers’ markets and public marketplaces, which primarily function as sites of food distribution. Thus, commensality can serve as another way to position food relative to the planning and urban design professions. In the current mode, practitioners ask, “How do we design for food?” They should also be asking, “How do we design for commensality?” This thesis, “Spatializing Commensality,” contends that commensal acts can stand apart from sites of provisioning as a viable spatial element, particularly in shared public spaces. By formulating modes of commensality, this project explores a set of spatial strategies to instigate sites of commensality—places for shared food consumption and urban vitality—in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati.
Let us begin by first clearing the decks: how did I come to pursue this thesis? As one might expect, it represents the culmination of several personal narratives, often parallel yet seldom intersecting, until now. The realms of food, urban space, and community have finally coalesced in this work.

A lot of people say they love food. I would say they lust. The former demands respect and thoughtfulness, but sadly this is often not the case when it comes to modern food practices.

Popular American culture often objectifies food, overemphasizing commodification and fashion to the detriment of its significance. Even now-popular touchstones "organic" and "local" are quickly becoming jaded designations. More than lust, I respect food, both as sustenance and social process.

And no, I do not consider myself a "foodies," or a "gourmand" for that matter—this would be a misnomer. Such appellations reduce food to a purely hedonistic...
element that belies the multidimensionality of food. As discussed in this thesis, food provides far more than sensual pleasure alone. Food is fundamental to—among other things—personal and tribal identity, tradition, memory, and ultimately, place.

For me, that place is the kitchen and dining table of my childhood. From the time I was five or six years old, I would eagerly help my mother and father chop vegetables, stir pots, set the dinner table, and when the meal was complete wash dirty dishes. Perhaps I was not cognizant at that time, but in hindsight this seemingly ordinary routine is the most enduring legacy of my personal history. Every night my parents transferred not only skill and taste, but also acclimated me to the value of shared food experiences.

Fast-forward to 2010—then two years removed from college, unable (possibly unwilling?) to secure a job related to my architectural degree—I ventured to satisfy a persistent yearning: cooking, a return to the eagerness of that childhood kitchen. Late that year, I started a humble catering enterprise.
and some time thereafter—and by some strange luck—I was offered an opportunity to work on a thriving San Francisco-based food truck, Hapa SF. Not only was I able to cook in a quasi-professional capacity, but also witnessed the daily replication of food’s capacity to redeem underused physical spaces. It became irrefutably clear that the simple act of sharing food in common space engenders socially vibrant places.

These experiences, though temporally disjointed, have collectively led to my current study, the nexus of an affinity for food’s enduring meaning and a penchant for convivial urban spaces. This thesis gives me the opportunity to formally explore an ever-present hunch: that what is so meaningful to my personal identity—a sense of place and time mediated by food—is likewise meaningful to the identity of our cities.
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The well-known aphorism goes: “you are what you eat.” As trite or cliché as the adage might seem, much research continues to explore the relationship between the human body and food. Of course, physiologically, it sustains our bodies, yet the significance of food extends beyond mere nutritive value: symbolically, it is a basis for personal identity; socially, varied palates signify either sodality or otherness; and for our cities, food can be understood as a means of spatial organization.

According to food policy analyst and writer Wayne Roberts, “More than with any other of our biological needs, the choices we make around food affect the… street life and infrastructure of the city.” This has led the author to contemplate why the equally obvious connection has not pervaded common logic: that the city is what it eats. Additionally, and more
long been excluded from this dialogue, yielding to sociologists and anthropologists. However, these latter disciplines and related fields are by definition aspatial, unconcerned, at least in practice, with the physical manifestation of our relationship with food. This thesis seeks to resolve this gap between sociological and anthropological theory and planning and urban design. Relevant questions being:

1. What can a sociological and anthropological understanding of food contribute to the food debate taking place in the planning and urban design profession?
2. By what mechanisms can food’s social agency be translated into an urban design element?

Food is increasingly recognized as a planning issue. As cities begin to harness the value of outdoor farmers’ markets, market buildings, market districts, and even urban agriculture, as a service and an amenity for all residents, food provision...
and consumption becomes a spatial design matter as well.\textsuperscript{02}

As concerns of food insecurity continue to intensify, planning and urban design professionals prioritize improving food systems—the mechanisms by which food is produced, obtained, and consumed—as a means to ensure healthy and vibrant communities. However, such an agenda tends to reduce food to mere alimentary object, a nutritive necessity rather than social agent. Although mitigating food insecurity is a necessary and urgent objective, contemporary planning debate positions food attainment as an end in itself, not a process towards greater civic engagement.

Meanwhile sociological and anthropological studies shed light on the distinction between food provisioning, or the buying and selling of foodstuffs, and commensality. In the former, material exchange supersedes social exchange. In such cases, food is understood solely as a quantifiable commodity, and there is a clear separation between the buyer and seller with little to no social transaction required. Conversely, commensality, or fellowship at the table, implies both consumption of food and social interaction. By dining together in the same physical space, people add the intangible element of camaraderie to the consumption of food. Therefore while acts of provisioning may symbolize the sharing of food, they do not equate to situations that stimulate social interaction through sustained physical presence that occur while eating and drinking together. In practice, planners and urban designers fixate on provision and hope for commensality.

To be sure, planners and urban designers acknowledge the social connotations of food, but this is often in the context of farmers’ markets and public marketplaces, which primarily function as sites of food distribution. Thus, commensality can serve as another way to position food relative to the planning and urban design professions. In the current mode, practitioners ask, “How do we design for food?” They should also be asking, “How do we design for commensality?” This thesis contends that commensal acts can stand apart from sites of provisioning as a viable spatial element, particularly in shared public spaces.

This thesis consists of 3 parts, divided into 7 chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 1 starts by placing food

\textsuperscript{02} Franck, Karen. 2005. Food for the City, Food in the City. \textit{Architectural Design} 75(3), 42.
in the context of the city. It provides a brief historical view of food’s role in the development of the modern city and its subsequent disappearance. Chapter 2 is a discussion of how the planning and urban design professions’ indifference to food’s role in urban life has exacerbated food insecurity and a loss of food-centric spaces. To move beyond a purely nutritive and biological perspective, Chapter 3 draws on sociological and anthropological research regarding the multidimensionality of food in terms of identity, communication, and connection to place. Chapter 4 is a discussion of place-based or local food systems, specifically the Slow Food Movement, which is an exploration of how food can be leveraged as an actionable tool towards food-based-place. Chapter 5 specifies a distinction between food provisioning and commensality (the act of sharing food), with an emphasis on the notion that the latter can lead to a more powerful planning and urban design rhetoric relative to food. Through the exploration of existing public food consumption styles, Chapter 6 postulates modes of commensality, which help construct the physical dimensions and operational characteristics of commensality, which are subsequently mobilized in a proposal for Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine district, shown in Chapter 7.
The fate of nations depends on the way they eat.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du Gout*, 1842
Figure 0.3, De la Mort.
Food and cities share an intimate history. In fact, records indicate that the two are mutually reinforcing paradigms. The “Urban Revolution,” or the shift from nomadic to settled communities that occurred many thousands of years ago, followed advancements in agriculture. A different yet not altogether contradictory explanation suggests that permanent settlement rather induced the necessity to acquire agricultural methods. Whichever scenario is more historically accurate, it stands to reason that the histories of food and city are inextricably intertwined. At Çatalhöyük in present-day Anatolia—a city which arguably marks the beginning of urban civilization—decorated shrines and intricate craftwork indicate a stable food source that afforded pursuit of other “non-essential” avocations: a telling characteristic of urban life. Furthermore, feasting was specifically memorialized in centrally located

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shrines through the display of bucrania.\textsuperscript{02} This contrasts with the concealment inside individual rooms of more common plant foods that comprised the everyday diet. This demonstrates a clear spatial distinction among the settings where feasts and quotidian meals took place.\textsuperscript{03} As early as Neolithic settlement then, at least implicitly, food adhered to a spatial logic.

From the ancient roots of urban culture to the modern-day experience, food has sustained and, quite truly, shaped our cities. In her book \textit{Hungry Cities}, architect-cum-urban food activist Carolyn Steel describes the visible evidence of food's historic influence on urban form:

\begin{quote}
Look at the plan of any city built before the railways, and there you will be able to trace the influence of food. It is etched into the anatomy of every urban plan: all have markets at their heart, with roads leading to them like so many arteries carrying the city's lifeblood\textsuperscript{04}.
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{02} The common practice of decorating the severed head of sacrificial oxen.
\textsuperscript{04} Steel, \textit{Hungry Cities}, 118.
\end{flushleft}
Referring specifically to pre-Industrial London, Steel insists that a keen appraisal of the city’s map reveals how food once entered the city from its hinterlands: Bread Street, Fish Street, Cowcross Street, Chick Lane. These street names indicate where particular products could be obtained; however all are simply vestiges of a bygone era when city life revolved around access to food. Usually in the form of urban markets, food production and provision were at the figurative and literal heart of the city. With a bit of investigation, similar narratives can be uncovered in scores of cities around the globe.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, grain, fish, and meat markets were all necessary components of the city, and in fact, informed physical space. From the Roman Forum, to medieval plaza, to the 19th century high street, these archetypal urban forms were built specifically as venues for food exchange and consumption. As an integral part of the
urban fabric, food remained perpetually on public display. However, markets and trade centers often transcended their purely economic purpose as well. In the article “Food for the City, From the City” author Kristin Brennan muses:

societies that have engaged in vibrant trading of crops in market places have been more likely to delve into the broader fruits of cultural exchange—the sharing of languages, culture, religion, literature and world views.06

Historically then, the social capacity of food has always been recognized. Most often embodied by urban markets, food has a powerfully binding social effect. Wherever food markets survive, they introduce a quality to urban life that is increasingly rare, harkening back to an ancient way of public life: a sense of belonging, engagement, character. People have always come to markets to exchange and consume food and, naturally, socialize. The need for such spaces in which to mingle is as great now as it has ever been—arguably greater as modern

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06 Brennan, Kristin. 2003. Food for the City, From the City. In Emilie Buchwald (Ed.), Toward the Livable City (pp. 79-86). Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 86.
society becomes increasingly attenuated by technology.\textsuperscript{07} Brennan continues, “Societies were and are changed by the interactions that happen in the market place.”\textsuperscript{08} Yet city dwellers might not even been aware of food’s transformative effect. This thesis endeavors to uncover how this socially functional aspect of food might be actively engaged.

Furthermore, Steel explains, “It was rare for any city in the pre-Industrial world to leave its food supplies to chance—they were far too important…managing the food supply was a matter for civic authorities.”\textsuperscript{09} It was the responsibility of public officials—or in ancient cities, religious figures—to maintain the health and, by virtue, the social vitality of its citizenry. Such is no longer the rule. To satisfy the outsized appetite of our growing global population, this power has since been relinquished to private, multinational corporations more concerned with delivering efficiency and capitalization.

\textsuperscript{07} Steel, Hungry Cities, 111.
\textsuperscript{08} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{09} Steel, Hungry Cities, 76.
than fulfilling the actual needs of the public. Steel laments

*The modern food industry is a law unto itself: a transnational cartel with its own rules of engagement, more political clout than governments, and bank accounts to match. In the end, control of food is power, and over the past hundred years or so, it has been passing steadily out of the hands of nation states (to say nothing of cities, farmers, and consumers) and into the paws of an elite group of global corporations.*

Although the food industry is one of the most important infrastructures that support urbanity, the system has been coopted by the regime of globalization, and now represents values counter to notions of community. Even Cincinnati once managed a collection of public markets through a city ordinance, stipulating acceptable goods and specified locations and hours. If food was once a municipal obligation, why is this no longer the case?

Now centuries removed from early civilizations that relied on spatial adjacency to food supplies, the relationship between food and city has been thoroughly diluted. Steel

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warns that the “distance between city-dwellers and their food is a paradox at the core of civilization” and that “resolving it is the greatest challenge of our time.”

Our food systems—the mechanisms and processes by which we produce, obtain, and ultimately consume food—are broken, or at the very least severely mismanaged. This change, of course, has spatial ramifications.

In the article “Landscapes of Exchange: Rearticulating Site,” architect and writer Clare Lyster explains that the material process of food exchange impinges on the articulation of public space. So whereas prior to the Industrial Revolution food production and consumption remained primarily local practices centered around public spaces, the advent of railroad transportation contributed to the rapid expansion of modern cities and the decentralization of food production processes to the urban periphery. Allegedly “dirty” food facilities were removed from the city center, thereby

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12 Lyster, 221.
clear that food production and consumption were once closely tied to the physical expression of our cities. From Neolithic Çatalhöyük, which revolved around enshrinement of their food supply, to our modern-day cities, ravaged by the effects of globalization, our relationship with food is articulated spatially. Secondly, it has been mentioned that more than mere sites of food provisioning, public food spaces are imbued with social vibrancy. As the exchange of food historically took place in public markets, people were more likely to convene in public spaces. However, with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, public food spaces became increasingly endangered for the sake of urban sanitization. Thus, this thesis pays particular attention to the way food is made manifest in the public realm and how public food spaces specifically contribute to the character of our cities.

The Industrial Revolution—symbolized by the locomotive, which facilitated the transport of food from increasingly more distant locations—consequently fooled city dwellers into believing that feeding cities was a relatively simple task. The spatial distance between producer and consumer wrought by industrialization originated a cognitive disconnect between the two parties. Food quickly became an uprooted commodity, arriving from everywhere and seemingly from nowhere in particular. Where modern industrialization it has gained, or achieved, in one regard, it has lost in the other. "Industrialization", Steel argues, "has exacerbated, rather than solved, the problem. It has allowed us to build cities any size, shape and place, without considering whether it makes any ecological sense."13 This thesis acknowledges this paradox, and seeks to reclaim food as a positive spatial component of the urban landscape.

This brief report has revealed a few key issues. It is

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13 Ibid.
Planners and urban designers have contributed more to the problems entrenched in our food systems than one might assume. Planning practitioners are remiss in neglecting the importance of food relative to the larger planning agenda. Up until very recently, as concerns of food insecurity and “food deserts” continue to intensify, planners have managed to insulate themselves from the conversation regarding food systems.

Food systems researchers, Kameshwari Pothukuchi and Jerome Kaufman admit that urban food issues have maintained relatively low visibility on the planning agenda. In a study by the authors—a survey of twenty-two US city planning agencies—it was found that, among other reasons, many planners do not consider food as their “turf” and thus not competent enough to engage the subject.

Respondents ascribed food systems to a social service issue, beyond the realm of physical and economic development that planners primarily occupy. Furthermore, respondents defined food systems as a fundamentally rural issue and not urban; farms and accompanying processing operations are located ‘out there’ and do not effect what goes on ‘here.’ Clancy attributes this misperception to the decreasing number of “components of a complete food system” present in the city.\(^2\)

The long-held resistance to incorporate food issues into the planning agenda has escalated concerns regarding food insecurity—lack access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate, non-emergency food sources. Barbara McCann claims that the process of post-World War II suburbanization that catalyzed “white flight” contributed to a parallel “supermarket flight” as grocery retailers followed middle-class shoppers in the migration out of central cities.\(^3\) The vast availability of large parcels at the urban fringe allowed retailers to maximize square footage and capitalize on economies of scale at the peril of urban markets. This shift has given rise to so-called ‘food deserts,’ wherein inner-city, and often lower-income, neighborhoods are confronted with inadequate food retail options due to poor proximity and insufficient mobility. According to a recent survey of US metropolitan areas, the total square footage of grocery stores in low-income communities is just over half that of wealthier suburban communities.\(^4\) In cases of such structural deficiency, residents of food desert neighborhoods are relegated to paying more for lower quality food items from nearby convenience stores, travelling long distances to access remote grocery retailers, and inevitably suffer attendant health complications associated with poor consumption habits.

As food manufacturers, distributors, and wholesale and retail markets become more decentralized and vacate central cities, food systems are increasingly invisible to both

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consumers and planners. This has resulted in a severe
misconception regarding the complexity of urban food systems
and the ultimate implications of these systems on the physical
and social environment. Planners can no longer afford to see
themselves as removed from food issues. Citing an Association
of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) report that identified
multiple themes germane to the discipline, Pothukuchi and
Kaufman equate food issues to a “distinct community facet,”
which has largely remained ignored.\textsuperscript{05} The authors reason
that although planners devote much attention to the other
“essentials of life”—air, water, shelter—the fourth, food, must
likewise be seen as a means to improve human settlements.\textsuperscript{06}

Following Pothukuchi and Kaufman’s study, ensuing
discussion has questioned: under whose purview does food
fall and how are planners implicated? Clancy notes that while
a roster of public agencies—Public Health, Social Services,
Roberts, for example, advises that as planners attempt to combat the deleterious effects of urban sprawl by promoting compact cities, they must get the “fundamentals right, not the least of which is the urban food system.”

Accordingly, much research has focused on developing strategies to increase access to healthy foods in underserved neighborhoods. Generally speaking this entreats planners to reconsider current land use, zoning, and economic development policies to better support grocery store development in food deserts. However, this approach is only so useful. As Steel argues, supermarkets create places that might provide places to shop, work, and live, but to call them ‘vibrant urban communities’ is very wide of the mark. They are what the French anthropologist Marc Augé calls ‘non-places’: ersatz, branded versions of the real world with little sense of local identity. Augé contrasts such places (for example, shopping malls and airports with what he calls ‘anthropological places’, spaces that carry memories and associations, that express

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07 Clancy, 436.
08 Pothukuchi & Kaufman, The Food System, 118.
10 Roberts, 20.
11 Pothukuchi & Kaufman, Attracting Supermarkets.
embedded history. Vibrancy can only exist in such places, where public life in all its forms is allowed: not just what is safe, familiar and comfortable, but also what is unexpected, strange, even dangerous. Public life, with all its contradictions—its ‘otherness’—is the essence of urbanity. Take that away and put it in a corporate box, and you destroy the whole point of urban existence.¹²

While supermarkets address the basic issue of food insecurity, they do not engender real urban experiences. The solution to one problem gives rise to an entirely different complication. This thesis contends that the utility of food must be given more thoughtful consideration.

¹² Steel, Hungry Cities, 147.
Thinking of food solely as a problem necessarily de-emphasizes the capacity for food “to attain broad civic aims, such as...strengthening our connection to place.”01 As food writer Darrin Nordahl comments, “Addressing food security is reason alone to explore the notion of a more public system of food...but there are certainly more.”02 And although food desert research recognizes the spatial implications of food inequity, this remains framed primarily by a nutritive or biological approach. In order to move beyond this limited approach to food, the discipline might benefit from perspectives formulated in sociology, anthropology, and cultural geography.

Akin to the relationship between food and cities, food is inextricably bound to personal and cultural identification. In their seminal work Consuming Geographies: We are where we...
Valentine suggest that “In a world in which self-identity [is]... woven through webs of consumption, what we eat (and where, and why) signals, as the aphorism says, who we are.”

Bell & Valentine argue “food has long ceased to be merely eat, cultural geographers David Bell and Gill Valentine explore how landscapes of consumption—as opposed to production—constitute place-based identity. In their argument, food identities are defined at progressive scales: body, home, city, region, country, and global. Whether we are conscious of the fact or not, “food occupies an unrivaled centrality in all our lives.” It forms the basis of daily ritual: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Weekly ritual: obtaining groceries or the occasional night out. And seasonal ritual: thanksgiving supper or labor day barbecues. Food creates rhythm. According to their article “Beyond Mere Sustenance,” Greene & Cramer believe, “If we view food as a common facet of our daily lives, and we see culture as ordinary, then certainly food is a means by which we create cultures.”

Moreover, we often define who we are by the foods we choose to consume and those we choose to avoid. Bell & Valentine suggest that “In a world in which self-identity [is]... woven through webs of consumption, what we eat (and where, and why) signals, as the aphorism says, who we are.” I, for one, identify as a “vegetarian” while others vehemently defend their carnivorous lifestyle. A quick walk through the aisles of any food purveyor reveals a range of products targeting specific food lifestyles: gourmet, vegan, natural, organic, gluten-free. As individuals and as a collective society, we construct a significant portion of our identity based on food habits.

Our connection to food is not only normative, but also distinctly emotional. When anxious or otherwise wistful, we seek out “comfort foods.” Food is also central to many of our most memorable events: birthdays, weddings, holidays. No doubt these words conjure images of birthday cake, bubbling champagne, and countless other food traditions.

Thus, food is functional beyond its nutritional benefit. Bell & Valentine argue “food has long ceased to be merely

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03 Bell, David & Gill Valentine. 1997. Consuming Geographies: We are where we eat. London: Routledge, 3.
05 Bell & Valentine, 3.
about sustenance and nutrition. It is packed with social and symbolic meaning. As semiotic Roland Barthes implores

> When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. That is to say that it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication.

Bell & Valentine similarly suggest that food is communicative in that “every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about our selves, and about our place in the world.”

When food assumes such a communicative value, Montanari argues, “our human socializing instinct immediately attributes meaning to gestures performed while eating. So in this way we define food as an exquisitely cultural reality.” Food connects people physically and symbolically when we share the table: “sharing a table is the first sign of membership in a group.” This extends beyond familial ties and includes any social division to which one belongs. Steel describes, anecdotally

> Nineteenth-century gun crews ate together at tables slung between their weapons, taking turns to serve each other from the ship’s gallery. The natural camaraderie of the table was thus transferred directly to the fighting effectiveness of the ship: men who ate their meals together worked better as a team and would more readily die together.

Bell & Valentine confirm this suspicion noting that food identities “are seen as a fundamental way of shoring up a sense of community identity.” Operating as a “social glue,” food bonds people physically in space and cultural through a shared experience. When we add notions of place, the functionality of food

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06 Ibid.
08 Ibid.
10 Montanari, 96.
11 Steel, Hungry Cities, 213.
12 Bell & Valentine, 15.
as a spatially generative tool becomes clear. DePriest-Hricko & Prytherch suggest that place “develops from emotions related to experience and is composed not only of physical elements, but also activity, meaning, and place attachment.”

It stands to reason then, that food in public space, through its ability to create emotional attachments, connects people to that place.

Furthermore, in The Power of Place, Dolores Hayden argues “People make attachments to places that are critical to their well-being.”

When food inhabits public space, typically in the form of farmers’ markets and public market houses, it not only serves a physiologically nutritive function but also nurtures our social selves. Hayden believes that public space also functions as “storehouses for collective and social memories.” Montanari echoes this notion suggesting that food “is the repository of traditions as collective identity.”

So when food and public space converge, this creates a synergistic effect that reinforces the possibility for a food-based-place.

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15 Ibid.

16 Montanari, 133.
We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods.

... May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency.

...

Our defense should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food.

...

That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it. And what better way to set about this than an international exchange of experiences, knowledge, and projects?

...

Slow Food guarantees a better future.
The recent renaissance of urban agriculture and locally-sourced food products is symptomatic of a broad movement towards food localism, quality, security and resilience that combats the onset of placeless foodscapes. Foremost among myriad food movements, Slow Food has attracted the most devout following. Founded in 1986 by Italian food activist Carlo Petrini in response to a proposed McDonald’s in Rome, Slow Food is a protest in opposition to the spread of Fast Food and the type of life that ensues. Extended work days, longer commutes, and resulting shorter attention spans undermine our ability to appreciate the sensual pleasure of eating. The Slow Food Movement signifies the fundamental principles that this study pursues, seeking a defense against the perversion of an increasingly “fast” world laden with wanton disregard for the significance of food. In response
to the apparent acceleration of global culture, Slow Food means giving the act of nourishing oneself the importance it deserves, learning to take pleasure in the diversity of recipes and flavors, recognizing the variety of places where food is produced and the people who produce it, and respecting the rhythm of the seasons and of human gatherings.\(^\text{03}\)

As the Manifesto describes, slow food begets a corresponding slow life, predicated upon respect for individual and civic well-being.\(^\text{03}\)

In a discussion of the Slow Food Movement, food culture theorist Carolina Greene suggests that Slow Food is a “movement creating meanings through...performances.”\(^\text{04}\) According to the author, the main performances of the Slow Food Movement are related to the purchasing, preparation, and consumption of food in a way that respects the people and places involved in its production.

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\(^{04}\) Greene, Carolina P. 2011. *Competing Identities at the Table: Slow Food, Consumption, and the Performance of Social Style.* In Janet M. Cramer, Carolina P. Greene, & Lynn M. Waters (Eds.), *Food as Communication/Communication as Food* (pp. 75-93), New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 75.
logic. Local food production and distribution may not be the panacea that food system researchers seek. As Born & Purcell describe, planners and food system reformers assume that localization equates to ecological sustainability and social justice, a misappropriation that the authors refer to as the "local trap." While localism engenders visions of quaint food producers and corner store markets, such a system alone cannot necessarily satisfy the ever-increasing food demands of our rapidly expanding urban areas. The authors argue that the local trap conflates the scale of a food system with outcome. In common planning language, it confuses ends with means, or goals with strategies. It treats localization as an end in itself rather than a means to an end, such as justice, sustainability, and so on.

The problem is that local is not inherently good, nor globalization inherently bad; in fact, there is nothing inherent with any scale. Scale is not a solution, but rather a contextual circumstance or

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05 Ibid.
06 From Santlofer, Asphalt Terroir, 175: In contemporary France, the term is used in the food and wine industries: "to describe the somewhat mystical combination of the uniqueness of place, climate, and the producer’s skill merging to create distinctive tastes and products rooted to a locale."
07 Greene, 79.
relative indifference of planners and urban designers regarding the value of food space within our cities has precipitated the current condition of food insecurity, planners are likewise able to reverse this trend.

The authors advise that the “Local-scale food systems are equally likely to be just or unjust, sustainable or unsustainable, secure or insecure.”¹⁰ However, Born & Purcell disclaim that recognition of the local trap is not the wholesale rejection of the local scale as undesirable. Awareness of the local trap is simply a reminder that our cities and the food networks that supply them are intertwined with a highly complex global infrastructure.

The critical point to be drawn from this survey is the notion that local means of food provision is not the panacea for our woeful food systems. This reinforces that consideration that food provisioning is not the most useful site of inquiry into the food debate within the planning and urban design discipline. Instead of responding to a condition, as food insecurity entails, by shifting focus to designing spaces for shared food consumption wherein the transmission of food is recognized as a valuable resource, we can initiate a paradigm shift.

An essential argument of this thesis is that if the

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¹⁰ Ibid.
5. FROM PROVISIONING TO COMMENSALITY

In light of the previously discussed local trap, this thesis looks for another way to conceptualize food relative to the planning profession. Stemming from the previous survey of food’s centrality to personal identity and interpersonal communication, the social utility of food is a promising site of inquiry. This thesis contends that the shortcoming of contemporary planning debate is that it prioritizes problems in food provisioning—the material exchange between producer and consumer—with less emphasis on the corresponding dearth of opportunities for social exchange mediated by food.

To be sure, prevailing planning and urban design literature addresses the social implications of food insecurity, however these arguments remain primarily framed by a nutritive and biological framework. That is, physiological health is the objective and social vibrancy is a by-product. The two must be considered equally; these are not mutually exclusive goals.

As this thesis has previously discussed, the value of food is not solely nutritive, but also represents a vehicle for shared experience. Of course, rectifying poor access to healthy, affordable food deserves considerable attention, however, food security does not in itself equate to vibrant cities. To engage this argument, there is a need for further distinction between food provisioning—purely functional—and commensality, which implies the socializing effect of food. This will allow us to move beyond fixating on provisioning strategies and construct a framework predicated upon shared food experience.

According to anthropologist Nina Etkin, “In the idiom of animal behavior, provisioning refers to one individual feeding another,” bound by “comprehensive rules that govern interactions within the social group.”01 For example, amongst family members, a clear separation exists between parents as the providers and offspring as the beneficiaries. In relation to our modern food

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Figure 5.1.
Alimentation v.s. Commensality.
industry, there is a similar divide between grocer and consumer. Furthermore, provisioning implies that the recipient does not consume the food or drink obtained in the same location (or at the same time) as the exchange. As Susan Pollock suggests, such exchange highlights the separation between giver and receiver rather than that which they have in common, as well as the act of serving or presenting rather than a shared space of consumption.²⁰ This thesis acknowledges that this is the prevailing mode of exchange that characterizes our modern foodscape. We buy in one place to consume in a completely disparate space and time. In relation to the planning profession, while improved provision might alleviate the stress of food desertification, it does not espouse the value of shared experience that is so vital to our urban spaces.

Provisioning may be thought of as a kind of partial or skewed commensality—a fundamental, albeit inedible, element of meals. Derived from the Latin com for “together” and mensa for “table,” the term encapsulates the notion of fellowship at the table; the shared experience of eating and drinking together. Such giving and taking of food and drink represents an “archetypal form of social practice.”⁰³ Far more than a nutritive essential for survival, the sharing of food is a social necessity. This distinction between food provisioning, or the buying and selling of foodstuffs, and commensality, lays the foundations for the study that follows. In the former, material exchange supersedes social exchange. In such cases, food is understood solely as a quantifiable commodity, and there is a clear separation between the buyer and seller with little to no social transaction required. Conversely, commensality, or fellowship at the table, implies both consumption of food and social interaction. By dining together in the same physical space, people add the intangible element of camaraderie to the consumption of food. Therefore while acts of provisioning may symbolize the sharing of food, they do not equate to situations that stimulate social

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²⁰ Pollock, 11.
²⁰ Pollock, 2.
interaction through sustained physical presence that occur while eating and drinking together. In practice, planners and urban designers fixate on provision and hope for commensality.

Pollock also explains that commensal acts are a means by which we both maintain social expectations and also transform them: Practices may often adhere to expectations, but they also always contain the potential for negotiation and change, however incremental, that can ultimately transform them and their contexts in the long run. The possibilities for intended and unintended changes that arise through daily practices associated with commensality.  

Thus, if commensality can be embedded in the urban framework, allowing for it to become an everyday experience, planners and urban designers can extend the possibilities for social transformation.

This reinforces the argument that the provisioning of food alone does not engender dynamic, healthy places. It is the act of commensality that breeds social interaction. If planners and designers This is particularly relevant for our cities—ever accelerating and increasingly attenuated by mobile technologies—as food and commensal acts will always remain an analog for social interaction. Whereas food systems research is primarily concerned with food access and provision, commensality is clearly about creating and reinforcing social relations. If planners and urban designers aim for commensality, why not design for it specifically?
I hate people who are not serious about meals...
It is so shallow of them.

_The Importance of Being Earnest_, Oscar Wilde, 1895

Figure 6.1.

The Importance of a Meal.
commensality, spatialized

If this thesis were founded on a purely sociological approach, it might identify issues about making convivial places through food, but not prescribe action. As such this thesis goes further than would a purely sociological one, proposing that spatial design for food can make an important contribution to the conviviality of cities. In order to transcend the sociological and anthropological approach that has defined this study thus far, in search of relevancy for the planning and urban design disciplines, the discussion must turn to how commensality becomes spatially active. This thesis has already discussed how food writ large is made physically manifest—urban forms carved by foodways and archetypal venues erected in service of food—so it is already understood how food is related to spatial design. However, such examples are still primarily related to the sites of food provisioning. That is, commensal acts are only spatial insofar that they often
take place at the site of provisioning. This thesis contends that commensal spaces can exist apart from sites of provision as viable spatial agents. By elucidating the spatial characteristics of commensality we can then begin to postulate how the social agency of food can be translated into an urban design element.

According to Pollock, if commensal acts are a fundamental element of sociality, then the space in which they take place are particularly relevant.\textsuperscript{01} The author contends that commensality is not limited to the actual act of consumption; rather, the entire social act, from presentation of food or beverages to the seating and serving order, the utensils used, the setting, time of day, conversation, smells, sounds and taste all contribute to the perpetuation of as well as changes in social constellations and political relations.\textsuperscript{02}

Embedded in this statement is an allusion to the most common site of commensality: the table. The table is often the supporter of food, with few exceptions. Even in the absence of a proper table, say, at a garden picnic, the table is simulated in form by the prototypical checkered picnic blanket. It is the stage upon which the choreography of commensality is performed. And as British architect Will Alsop muses, much like a properly designed stage set, the table certainly plays its part. The author declares “Food, combined with a carefully prepared table, offers a simple pleasure which is the essence of conviviality.”\textsuperscript{03} Greene shares this sentiment, arguing that the table is a critical space for Slow Food advocates; the site where slow food philosophy is practiced and maintained.\textsuperscript{04} This thesis questions how urban space can function as such a table.

Still, the question remains: How can the social utility of food, embodied by commensality, be translated into an urban design element? In order to devise a spatialization of this intangible quality, further understanding of how food consumption operates in urban space is necessary.

\textsuperscript{01} Pollock, 3.\textsuperscript{02} Ibid.\textsuperscript{03} Alsop, Will. 1999. An Angel At My Table. In Claire Catterall (Ed.), Food, Design and Culture, (pp. 115-129), London: Laurence King Publishing, 1.\textsuperscript{04} Greene, 80.
To do so, this thesis looks at six venues and events where commensality is witnessed: pop-up meals, food truck pods, food festivals, parklet cafés, alleys, and public plazas.

Understanding how these venues support or heighten the experience food consumption, and conversely, how commensality impinges on space, allows for the conceptualization of modes of commensality that embody the characteristics of these activities. These in turn, help inform a proposal for Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati that can accommodate each of these modes.
Representative of so-called “pop-up meals”, events such as the Diner en Blanc and Permanent Breakfast are staged, but seemingly spontaneous social gatherings held in public spaces, According to the Diner en Blanc organization, the event is “held on the most prestigious sites of the city, without authorization.” As such, it subversively posits commensality as a public right. In their boldness, these events call attention to the urban environment that surrounds the commensal act. These are the quintessential “performances” that Greene alludes to.

Characteristics:
+ No additional infrastructure required
+ Unsanctioned / subversive
+ Performance / commensality as exhibit
+ Fleeting

02 Greene, 75.
Food truck pods are the temporary assemblage of mobile food vendors, typically in underutilized spaces of the urban environment. Unlike the pop-up meals, permits are required. In the example provided, a group of some 30 vendors have congregated on an empty parking lot. And as evident in the image shown, the vendors create a sense of enclosure, which concentrates the social activity. Like pop-up meals, these events are over in a matter of hours, leaving little evidence of what transpired.

**Characteristics:**
+ No additional infrastructure required
+ Sanctioned
+ Short-lived

Figure 6.4. Off the Grid, Fort Mason.
Food festivals represent the complete takeover of urban space, including the vehicular right-of-way, for the purpose of celebrating food culture. Such events affirm the notion that streets are well suited to accommodate commensal activity. Usually taking place over several days, these events necessarily interrupt the “normal” use of the public right-of-way. In this way they are much like pop-up meals.

Characteristics:
+ No additional infrastructure required
+ Controlled and tightly managed
+ Widely accessible
Parklets are addendums to the existing urban infrastructure, usually situated in the vehicular right-of-way and often adjacent to cafés or restaurants. They occupy a subversive position in urban space, but are more enduring than pop-up meals and food truck pods as they require additional infrastructure to extend the pedestrian use into the right-of-way.

**Characteristics:**
+ Require additional infrastructure
+ Provisionally sanctioned
+ Occupation

Figure 6.6. Columbus Avenue Parklet, San Francisco.

Figure 6.7. Divisadero Street Parklet, San Francisco.
Alleys like Belden Place in San Francisco can be adapted to serve as outdoor seating for adjacent restaurants. Like parklets, this also constitutes the reclamation of a previously vehicular space. Adapting these spaces does require placement of infrastructure, however they are not permanent.

**Characteristics:**

+ No additional infrastructure required
+ Adaptive
+ Semi-permanent
Public plazas such as the Elm Street Esplanade of Findlay Market are arranged for the explicit purpose of serving commensal activity. Tables and chairs are made readily available to patrons who purchase goods from nearby food retailers. Such spaces are permanent fixtures and serve few other purposes.

**Characteristics:**

+ Permanent
+ Sanctioned
Pop-up meals, food truck pods, and food festivals are representative of an **Ephemeral** Mode of Commensality. By definition they are temporary installations lasting on the order of hours. In the case of pop-up meals and food truck pods, sites of ephemeral commensality are constantly on the move. And while food festivals might last for significantly longer than the other two venues in this category, they occur with less frequency—typically on an annual basis. Because venues of this distinction do not require any specific infrastructure, their presence is lost with the conclusion of the event.

**Requirements:**
- Allow for improvisation and customization
- Sense of performance

Parklets and alleys used as sites of consumption represent a **Cooptive** Mode of Commensality. Cooptive refers to the fact that these sites are spaces not necessarily intended for food-related businesses. In the case of parklets, it is a deliberate reclamation of an active vehicular right-of-way for a pedestrian use. And although alleys may not necessarily be active rights-of-way, using them for commensal purposes still represents the cooptation of a previously vehicular space. Thus, similar to Ephemeral Commensality, the Cooptive mode is a subversion of the status quo.

**Requirements:**
- Occupation or reclamation of contested space
- Durable infrastructure
Lastly when people consume food on public plazas, they are engaging an Institutionalized Mode of Commensality. This implies that the spaces are explicitly constructed as a site for food consumption. These spaces are necessarily permanent and enduring.

**Requirements:**
- Permanent infrastructure
- Dedicated space
Figure 7.1.
Street Picnic in San Francisco.
The Over-the-Rhine neighborhood comprises a total of thirty-eight restaurants—all of which offer take-out service—one grocery store, and one public market. Despite this rather robust food scene, there is a marked lack of publicly accessible commensal spaces. Aside from Findlay Market and Washington Park (although each only provide outdoor seating seasonally), few existing public facilities accommodate the modes of commensality previously discussed. This proposal is an attempt to rectify this shortfall.

The project synthesizes the three previously discussed modes of commensality into one coherent design, which allows for improvisation, and is a permanent occupation embedded in the urban landscape intended specifically for commensal uses. Practically speaking, a program of city-owned and managed—meaning always publicly accessible—tables is proposed for the neighborhood.
Seven total sites are proposed: two sites on Main Street, three on Vine Street, and two on Elm Street. Priority is given to the Vine Street corridor in consideration of the number of restaurants located in that district already. The Main Street and Elm Street corridors are potential sites pending further development in those areas.

As shown in the plan below, a site on Vine

Figure 7.2. Proposed Sites for Commensality.

Figure 7.3. Vine Street Detailed Site Plan.
Street between Twelfth and Thirteenth Streets reclaims portions of both east and west sides of the street.

Although the two sites on this portion of Vine Street are adjacent to existing restaurants, they would remain accessible to the general public and available on a first come, first serve basis. Thus, a certain commensal choreography would occur, as users walk from nearby restaurants and stores to secure a table.
The proposal makes commensality visible in the urban landscape by putting it on display in the most public of urban spaces: the street. Following the precedent of parklets and alleys, the proposal occupies the vehicular right-of-way—the purported domain of the automobile—equating public food consumption with the defensible rights of motorists.
Reclaiming the right-of-way would also have the effect of introducing a different spatial experience of the street relative to modes of transportation. As Franck puts it, “Within the fast pace of life, anonymity and large-scale spaces of the modern city, food venues gives a sense of intimacy, a place to pause at an eminently human scale.”

Franck, The City as Dining Room, 6.
The system of tables can be modified to accommodate different party sizes or simply move as determined by preference. The individual sections are pushed or pulled in order to expand or contract seating arrangements. This is reflective of the Ephemeral Mode of Commensality which demands a certain amount of control over the commensal space. A movable table provides this control but also forces users to potentially negotiate with neighbors.

Figure 7.7. Configuration Options.
Figure 7.8.
View of 13th Street & Vine Street.
Figure 7.9.
View of 14th Street & Vine Street.
This thesis argues that designing for commensality is at least equally important as the necessity to mediate food insecurity. Embedding commensal spaces in the urban environment would mobilizing stronger food systems in support of shared food experiences. Planners and urban designers must consider that a complete paradigm shift might be necessary to fully ameliorate our quickly eroding food security. By embedding commensality in the urban environment, planners and urban designers can make it an everyday occurrence; as commensal acts have powerful socializing effects, such an approach would precipitate more secure communities. This project is simply one visualization of this approach. And it points to the notion that the concept of commensality has a spatial connotation as well, embodied at least in the form of the table.

The prevailing conversation should be about more than how to attain food; we should also consider ways in which the food that we do have can be leveraged towards greater ends. This project proposes making the entire cityscape the site of commensality. By conceptualizing public space as public dining room, planners and urban designers can generate more social dialogue and thereby greater community resilience. Additionally, by prioritizing the social utility of commensality, practitioners can originate a demand for a more robust food system in support of commensal spaces. As Franck insists, “encouraging social exchange and interaction, the public consumption of food brings vitality and conviviality to urban life.” Designing more thoughtfully for this public consumption, that is commensality, would secure such conviviality.

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01 Franck, The City as Dining Room, 5.


IMAGES CITED

Figure 0.1. A Former Life. Image Source: Author.

Figure 0.2. Hapa SF. Image Source: Author.

Figure 0.3. De la Mort. Image Source: Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme. 1842. *Physiologie du Gout*, n.p.n.

Figure 1.1. Reproduction of mural at Çatalhöyük. Source: http://humanpast.net/images/plato106.jpg.


Figure 1.4. 19th Century High Street, Image Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/95/The_'Heart_of_Midlothian'_'High_Street_'Edinburgh.jpg.

Figure 1.5. Del Monte Tomato Canning Factory. Image Source: http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Del_Monte_Foods.jpg.

Figure 1.6. City of Cincinnati Ordinance on Public Markets. Image Source: Cincinnati Historical Society Museum Library.

Figure 1.7. Interior View of Gustavus Franklin Swift’s Refrigerated Train Car. Image Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/37/Early_refrigerator_car_design_circa_1870.jpg/330px-Early_refrigerator_car_design_circa_1870.jpg.

Figure 2.1. A Planning Issue. Image Source: Author.

Figure 2.2. No Food, No Place. Image Source: http://www.rodalenews.com/files/images/food-desert-shopping-cart.jpg.

Figure 2.3. This is not a market. Image Source: Author.

Figure 4.1. The Slow Food Snail. Image Source: SlowFoodUSA.org.

Figure 5.1. Alimentation vs. Commensality. Image Source: Author.


Figure 6.4. Off the Grid, Fort Mason. Image Source: http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-E2m-7ghv7vw/T2_PjgwpXYI/AAAAAAAABZQ/8Z9Dmybw2DY/s1600/OTG3layout.jpg.

Figure 6.5. Taste of Cincinnati. Image Source: http://www2.cincinnati.com/blogs/livininthe cin/files/2012/05/Taste-of-Cincinnati-3.jpg.
Figure 6.6. Columbus Avenue Parklet, San Francisco. Image Source: http://pavementtoparks.sfplanning.org/images/slide1-columbus-parklet.jpg.

Figure 6.7. Divisadero Street Parklet, San Francisco. Image Source: http://pavementtoparks.sfplanning.org/images/divisadero_after2a.jpg


Figure 7.2. Proposed Sites for Commensality. Image Source: Author.

Figure 7.3. Vine Street Detailed Site Plan. Image Source: Author.

Figure 7.4. Resulting Commensal Choreography. Image Source: Author.

Figure 7.5. Section of a Commensal Installation. Image Source: Author.

Figure 7.6. Elevation of a Commensal Installation. Image Source: Author.

Figure 7.7. Configuration Options. Image Source: Author.

Figure 7.8. View of 13th Street & Vine Street. Image Source: Author.

Figure 7.9. View of 14th Street & Vine Street. Image Source: Author.