



CONVERSATION: Food deserts for some and gastronomic quarters for others? The politics, sustainability and design of food-centred regeneration in London.

5.30pm to 7.30pm on Wednesday 5 March 2008, in the

Members' Study at the
Royal Commonwealth Society,

25 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5AP Tel: 020 7930 6733

"Food deserts for some and gastronomic quarters for others? The politics, sustainability and design of food-centred regeneration in London"

An emerging aspect of London's urban renewal in recent years has been the development of 'gastronomic quarters': food-spaces that form the centrepieces of regenerating neighbourhoods. These are neighbourhoods where local people can walk to food markets and individual food shops on urban streets and spend time socialising, eating and drinking, browsing and buying seasonal and regional food to cook at home. Sharing some of the physical and social characteristics of traditional street markets, and the sensibilities of farmers' markets, such places have become so popular they now attract many visitors from both London and further afield who find them highly convivial spaces to hang out in. Good food is the currency that brings this urbanism together.

Gastronomic quarters tend to be diversely populated, fine-grained, mixed-use, walkable, high density, public space-oriented and human-scaled urban spaces. They stand in sharp contrast to dominant - and unsustainable - trends in current urbanism predicated on low-density expansion, supermarket-dominated consumption and car dependent urban form. They can also be sharply differentiated from food deserts; places in which people are effectively disenfranchised by lack of access to affordable, healthy local food services, and where a range of ill effects including a significant contribution to climate change effects, overproduction of waste and rising obesity is in evidence (Sustainable Development Commission, 2008; Barton et al, 2002, 137).

Gastronomic quarters - including established places like Borough Market and Broadway Market, and more emergent food spaces like Whitecross Street and Exmouth Market - have become highly politicised. They are criticised by some as an exercise in pastiche, harking back to a past that never really existed, and symptomatic of a nostalgia for a simpler, less complex and threatening world (Fort, 2008). Others say by contrast that their physical design is artfully arranged to create rough-but-cool backdrops for conspicuous consumption. Their food is described as elitist because it implies the need for skills in choosing produce and cooking it from scratch; and exclusionary because its often-artisanal nature makes it appear to cost more than food that is factory farmed. It is argued that only the middle classes can afford the luxury of shopping more ethically at farmers' style markets rather than at supermarkets. Gastronomic quarters are thus accused of being no more than a gentrifiers' paradise that excludes working class people from good food and many other social benefits of renewal. Developing food quarters, it's said, contribute to a process by which poorer people are displaced from regenerating areas. The same spaces can in this way become food deserts for the poor and gastronomic quarters for the rich.

I think though that the evidence proves these arguments are substantially wrong. In researching a number of case studies in London and elsewhere using morphological, urban design and social science techniques I have found social features, economic factors and urban design qualities that go to making gastronomic quarters that are richly convivial, sustainable places centred on food for all. These quarters tend to exhibit rich architectural and urban



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design features that reinforce their conviviality as food spaces in a variety of ways and challenge the ascription they are either romanticised or pastiche places. Rather than referring to a past that never actually existed, these places are as real and contemporary as anywhere else in cities; they just seem to work more sustainably than most.

Broadway Market in east London, is one example where what was virtually a dormant market street has been renewed by the 'bottom up' efforts of a local residents' group to develop an outstandingly successful farmers' style market. The local food stakeholders who have led the market's revival, and others who use it weekly, say it is bringing to local people the kind of authentic market shopping that had been missing locally. Broadway Market has become the place to visit on Saturdays for an increasing number of East Londoners and others but is also very much a local community food-shopping street. Of course Broadway Market as an area has become a more attractive place to live in part because of the success of the food market and individual food shops and cafes. There are doubts over the council's role in economic revival, with a local authority management gap filled by community leaders, local tenant shopkeepers and café owners council owned property sold out from under them, and a boom in new 'high-end' residential property development helping push house prices up. A question remains about how to capture the benefits of this kind of food-centred space while managing any gentrifying effects as equitably as possible.

So this and other gastronomic quarter developments raise in my mind a series of linked questions:

- In the midst of a politically charged debate about food, how can we overcome the false perceptions of nostalgia, elitism, pretension and exclusion that are claimed as inherent to gastronomic quarters? How can we overcome the related idea that lacking food skills and knowledge is somehow a freely chosen lifestyle decision for urban dwellers?
- In terms of urban design, why is it that these kinds of streets and spaces prove most attractive to food-based regenerators and what role has these spaces' fine grain and human scale played in their success?
- How can we learn from the experience of established and developing gastronomic quarters, to protect existing food places and build new neighbourhoods in London and elsewhere, that avoid food deserts on the one hand and unsustainable sprawl on the other?
- In a context of often poor food related strategy and management from local authorities and other layers of government, how can we support and extend 'bottom up' partnerships of food stakeholders to improve the sustainability relationship of food and urban space and the day-to-day management of food centred space?
- In a regeneration context, how best can we build in the many social, environmental and economic benefits of gastronomic quarters while minimising inequality of access associated with gentrifying effects?