

COMMENSALITY & EMANCIPATION:

CONNECTION VIA FOOD AS A TOOL IN JUST DESIGN

Our challenges as designers of the future are marked by the results of industrialization, globalization, corporatization and the introduction of technologies that exponentially increase our capacity to reduce costs and labour, raise the human population, as well as destroy the conditions of life as we know them on earth. At this point in time, neoliberal capitalism has successfully commodified all aspects of life; turned all objects into products, all environments into exploitable resources or destinations, even food and water are money making machines. Food in particular has become increasingly visible because of its ability to encapsulate tensions and contradictions of contemporary life.



Here I will demonstrate how progressive re-conceptualization of the food regime will require the re-introduction of more pluralistic understandings of food (and life) that include its non-economic attributes (for example: its cultural significance, issues of food security and sovereignty, its ties and dependence on nature, its role in health, its social significances, etc.) I will outline some of the noteworthy qualities of commensality - the shared consumption, preparation and production of food - as a means of building more durable and positive social relations, and ultimately combatting issues of global inequality, and the climate crisis. Then, I will highlight projects in Montreal that resist dominant food doctrines and exemplify the potential of shared food experiences. I hope to demonstrate that commensality is, and will continue to be, a useful tool in designing with justice and holistic well-being in mind.

THE CORPORATE FOOD REGIME

By analyzing the state of the contemporary food industry, we reveal many of the conditions and issues that we are faced with globally. Our food systems have lost sight of their own roles as nourisher of people and their inseparable interdependence on creatures and environments. The 1960s, a post-war era of industrialization, were marked by the Green Revolution, “a campaign which injected high yielding varieties of wheat, maize, and rice coupled with heavy use of subsidized fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation and machinery into the agricultural economies of the global south.”¹ It was justified, widely supported and subsidized for saving the world from hunger, but the Green Revolution produced as many hungry as it saved and resulted in the monopolization of seeds and chemical inputs, the loss of 90% of the global south’s biodiversity, the shift to oil-based agricultural economy, and the displacement of peasant farmers, amongst other implications.² The following phase of the 1980s was marked by liberalization, deregulation and privatization that “overrode national labor and environmental laws and legally prevented countries from protecting their food systems from foreign dominance.”³ These transformations resulted in our globalized, highly centralized, industrial agrifoods complex; “...multinational grain traders; giant seed, chemical and fertilizer corporations; global processors; and supermarket chains. These global companies dominate markets and shipping, and increasingly control the world’s food-producing resources: land, labor, water, inputs, genetic material and investments.”⁴ Some of the symptoms of our corporate food regime include: increased food insecurity, an endless array of injustices toward peasant farmers, disregard for ecological limitations to the point of irreversible destruction and wide-spread nutritional and health issues.

Central to these consequences, is the dominant idea that food’s role is to extract private value.

Moreover, as these markets begin to undermine society and the environment, capitalism will periodically implement reforms that are certainly needed but do not alter the fundamental imbalance of power within the core of the corporate food regime. Profound changes are required to avoid cycles of liberalization and reform and to significantly combat injustices. Crucial to these more profound transformations will be radical and progressive politics that centralize systemic change, justice and pluralistic understandings of food rather than economic ‘sustainability’ and development.

COMMENSALITY

An overwhelming amount of current writing on the de-commodification, commoning, and de-corporatization of food, reveals the positive impacts of re-introducing the shared experience of food. Here, I will call this commensality, most simply defined as: 'the everyday, recurrent act of eating together and sharing food at the same table' which also inherently extends toward habits of food production and distribution.⁵ The term also implies a sense of sharing food habitually and recurrently, assuming some degree of dependence and reciprocal care amongst sharers.⁶ The term can function to describe the literal rendition of 'social food contexts for connection' but also translates to a metaphor of commoning that has emancipatory potential.

As dominant food systems attempt to deny planetary ecological limitations and the exploitation of outsourced human labor as part of the process of capitalist accumulation, the commoning of food becomes a resource for resistance against existing hierarchies, power imbalances and inequalities through mutual aid, community engagement, and active systemic change.

Through commensal practices, communities are able to revive the non-economic attributes of food, strengthen their own relations in ways that facilitate solidarity and support, minimize exploitation and indifference and, encourage caring for others and the earth.⁸

UNITY, IDENTITY & CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

According to Warren Belasco, the perception of “you are what you eat” seems to be universal and demonstrates the profound significance of food that goes beyond its makeup of biochemical nutrients and beyond its monetary relevance. Eating the same meal, prepared and produced together, can be equated to the production of the same flesh and blood, the literal bodily unification of those that eat together.⁹ Belasco, in his discussion of food’s role in constituting identities, concludes that “what we eat has enormous significance as a medium for personal recollection and collective identity.”¹⁰ Particular foods and aromas insight vivid memories in each individual. Often they relate to ethnic or regional markers and become ways of preserving identities now perceived to be endangered by migration, mobility and suburban mass culture. He gives an example of a student that finds solace in making cuban cafecito. Coffee functions as a vehicle and context for healing amongst cuban exile communities by creating space and moments for shared anger, mourning and yearning. For this student, sharing stories of cuba over coffee helped shape her identity- a very literal form of commensality. Shared food memories overcome distance and reinforce relationships.

Sharing food functions as a way of establishing closeness; of eliminating a sense of possessiveness; of de-individualizing.¹¹ Across the globe, there are cultural understandings of food that connect people deeply and transcend the dominant, overly commodified representation of food. Francesca Bray, in *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology*, writes about the importance of symbolic and ideological nourishment in her case study of rice farming in Malaysia. Despite neoliberal pressure to modernize and participate in global markets, she speculates that peasant rice farming has remained relevant and subsidized by the state on account of deep rooted assumptions about the significance of rice in the constitution of Malaysian identity. She demonstrates through Japanese literature how in Asian nations, people understand themselves as being constituted socially, physically, spiritually and morally by their staple food.¹² Exchanges of rice “circulate like blood” through communities, signifying strong closeness and care, fortifying respect and mutual aid and maintaining reciprocal gift and sharing economies that have existed for millenia.

Ultimately these shared food experiences fortify more complex and honest understandings of food that have deep implications in the lives of people across the globe.¹³

These are examples that illuminate localized practices of commensality and their profound implications in unifying and constituting identities. These are understandings of food that go far beyond economic and bodily fulfillment attributes. These are exchanges that exist outside of capitalist economies and nourish vital components of social life. They also empower people, allowing them to organize their own lives according to principles that do not conform to the agendas of the state or corporations.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The social implications of food, and the actual infrastructure that accompanies those contexts, exemplify Eric Klinenberg's idea of social infrastructure: spaces which invite people into the public realm, provide services and opportunities to connect, resulting in social cohesion and more resilient communities. Some of Klinenberg's examples include libraries, playgrounds, schools, courtyards and swimming pools. Many radical and progressive food projects also provide contexts and spaces that function as infrastructure for repeated and secure social interaction and joint participation amongst community members. According to Klinenberg, they are an element of urban life that is fundamental to well-being, and the fight against inequality, polarization and the climate crisis.

One beautiful example that rings true to commensality is the case of community gardens in Chicago. Chicago has been historically affected by food insecurity, gang violence and poverty, amongst other implications related to outsourcing of industry, the riots in the 70s, and the great recession. Community organizers for the last 30 years have been developing community gardens where food is grown, people are employed and abandoned properties are transformed.¹⁴ There are now over 800 community gardens and urban farms in Chicago, providing invaluable tangible benefits to the people that live near them. They have led to less social isolation, civic participation and neighborhood attachment; They significantly reduce the stress levels of those that live close, visit or pass by; Children are given the opportunity to engage and learn about agriculture and their own food cycles; Intergenerational interactions are fostered; The gardens provide access to nature and its health benefits to populations that are systemically restricted from it; And, they provide large quantities of unprocessed, nutritionally rich food for the communities that surround them; Entire communities respect and support them for their benefits, and for reintroducing joy into relationships to food that, in many cases, have become tainted by shame and anxiety.

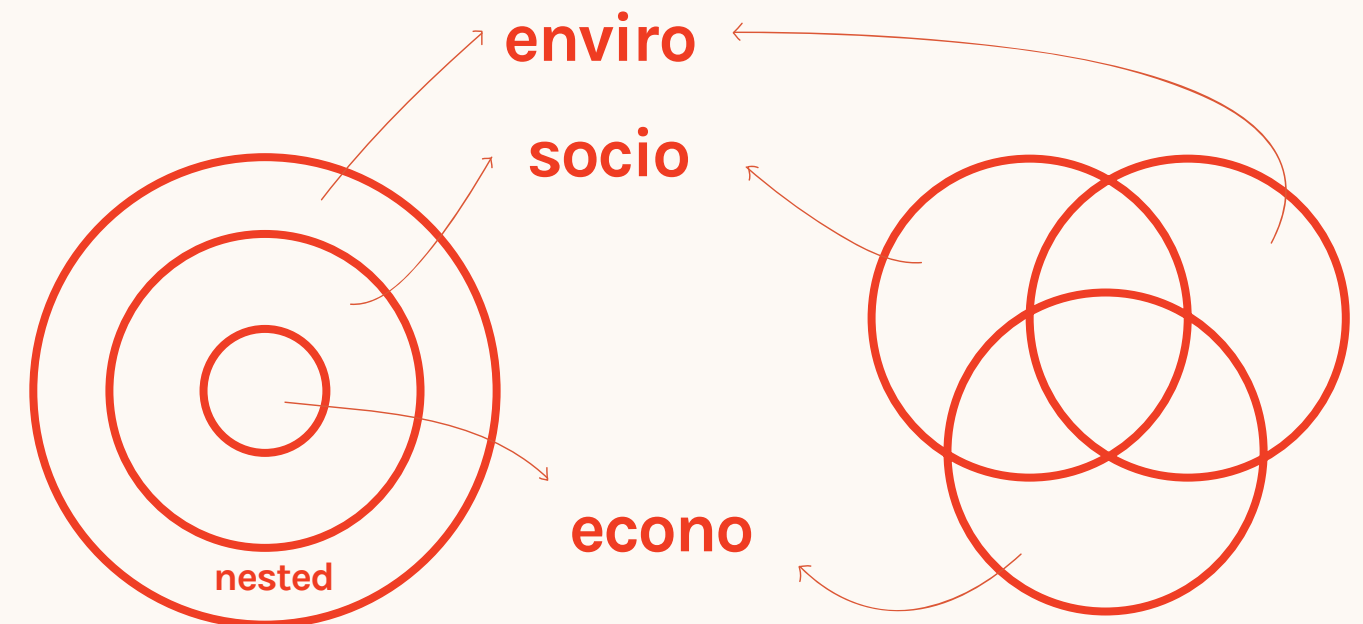
By introducing radically alternative food projects into these communities, organizers provided opportunities for shared food experiences that led to empowerment, reappropriation of food systems, resistance to systemic oppression and, they were able to repair issues of food insecurity and social decay.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Neoliberal market economies function on a basis that justifies absolute proprietary rights, individualism, and a denial of interconnectedness, and mutual dependence.¹⁵ As we saw in our unpacking of the current dominant food industry, these narratives have fundamentally transformed global food regimes, resulting in amplified inequalities, injustices and environmental destruction. An important implication of commensality, is its re-commoning and democratization of food consumption, production and distribution. People's movements for sustainable agriculture, justice and food sovereignty, have been operating for years, challenging dysfunctional global food systems. And, in response to the social, economic and environmental contradictions of the corporate food regime, both rural and urban communities are establishing alternative food regimes where food is not only an object of consumption and monetary value, but is recognized in its multiple dimensions.¹⁶ These projects re-introduce commensal practices, stewarding shared resources for the community outside of dominant market logics. They expand individual consumption toward communal nourishment, ultimately addressing food poverty, social isolation, and the degradation of community.¹⁷

In response to common concerns around the implications of increasingly dominant globalized and concentrated corporate food systems, an international coalition of peasant farmers', rural women's and indigenous people's movements met in Mexico in 1996. They formed La Via Campesina, a massive social movement that included members in over 70 countries, and together proposed an alternative paradigm called "food sovereignty" that would challenge the basis of the corporate food regime and propose concrete alternatives.¹⁸ The definition they proposed included the re-centralization of the needs and aspirations of producers, distributors and consumers of food, and the decentralization of market and corporation demands. As well, the promotion of transparent trade, guaranteeing just incomes, rights for consumers to nutritional control and, the implementation of nested models of enviro-socio-econo sustainability that acknowledge both economy's and society's dependence on the environment (See Fig. 1). Food sovereignty is a political demand (more radical than any reformist, affirmative approaches) to address hierarchies and power imbalances within the corporate food regime.¹⁹ Food sovereignty is an attestation to the emancipatory potential of food relations. In the forum's published text is written: "Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations."

Fig. 1



Not only do food sharing initiatives counter the commodification of food, but they repair social structures that are important in combating social isolation and food poverty and can also initiate much-needed reflection on the causes of urban inequalities.²⁰ Where commensality is involved, food interactions tend to fuse durable social connections, that help us address issues of unequal food access, that encourage re-engagement with production processes and the enviro-socio implications involved with consumption.

These interactions take us outside and beyond capitalist, individualist, frameworks into ones of gift economy, abundance, exchange and solidarity.

CASES IN MONTRÉAL

Here in Montreal, alternative food projects that initiate commensality are plentiful. Each addresses respective issues, through its own mechanisms but, food is what ties them together and to the global efforts towards food sovereignty. Some have more radical approaches than others; some directly attack capitalist mechanisms, others work around them.

Santropol Roulant

Santropol Roulant, a meals-on-wheels non-for-profit describes itself as “a vibrant intergenerational community brought together by food and community engagement, for a healthy, well-fed and close-knit city.”²¹ The organization is built around a volunteer program that gardens, cooks and delivers meals across the city to elderly. A vibrant urban agriculture program revolves around their green rooftop, aiming to engage and educate the community about their own food cycles.²² They also support and host several community collectives that provide bike repair services to the community, teach and learn composting, bee-keeping and urban foraging techniques. Monthly, they host events where all volunteers and clients are invited to share a meal and spend the evening connecting. They are able to nearly close their food loops through urban farming and composting techniques, addressing serious environmental issues related to global distribution and waste. The overall picture is a highly diverse community of engaged volunteers learning about food cycles, gifting, trusting and supporting one another. Through commensality, Santropol Roulant decreases social isolation, increases food security, addresses climate issues and contributes to systemic change.

Le Frigo Vert

Frigo Vert, the Concordia Food Collective, is an anti-capitalist alternative health and community space. It functions as a non-for-profit fee-levy group that uses its funding to provide very affordable, local and nutritionally valid vegetarian foods along with alternative health products.²³ It provides services that include a range of free workshops, massage services and STI testing clinics etc. It also provides a lounge area with open wifi and access to a kitchenette. Inherent in their anti-capitalist mission is the acknowledgement of climate issues throughout their programming and decision making. The project also intentionally and overtly prioritizes access for marginalized communities and rejects hierarchical models of capitalist accumulation. This is one of the more radical projects in Montreal that gathers people around food sharing in an effort to build solidarity around rights to food and health.

Le Detour

Le Detour, hosted within Point St Charles' Batiment 7 project, is a self-managed neighbourhood grocery store, that is providing diverse food choices at the lowest cost possible, overcoming the food desert of the neighbourhood, and aiming for collective ownership of peoples' right to eat healthy. In exchange for 3 hours of volunteer work, members are discounted prices of food and can attend monthly forums where everything from management to inventory is discussed. They are developing a local food network that is transparent, based on a non-capitalist circular economy and non-commercial means of exchange (barter, time exchange etc.)²⁴ Here, a community is organizing its own local food system, choosing to prioritize environmental issues and diversification of food options, absolutely defying the neoliberal transformations in our food doctrines. Here, the collective engagement with food cycles leads to healthier, more accessible and sustainable food systems as well as a more resilient and connected community.

These projects manifest the ideals of food sovereignty and demonstrate the potential of food relations in emancipatory undertakings. They are a few amongst many others including the NDG Food Depot, City Farm School, The People's Potato, The Concordia Food Coalition, La Place Commune, Alternatives, McGill's MUSE etc. Each one engages communities in their own food systems - re-insights commensal practices throughout distribution, preparation, production or consumption aspects of food relations.

CONCLUSION

I challenge you to watch what happens when you are sharing food with the people around you. Through every avenue, food points right to our humanity - pleasures, power imbalances and preoccupations alike. I've had the pleasure of facilitating gardening sessions where volunteers (7 to 70 years old) would grow, pick and eat their own vegetables and inevitably invest in their own body, the strangers around them and the plant in their hands. Without a doubt, connecting throughout food processes is important in our process of resistance and solidarity against the climate crisis and global inequality.

ENDNOTES

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