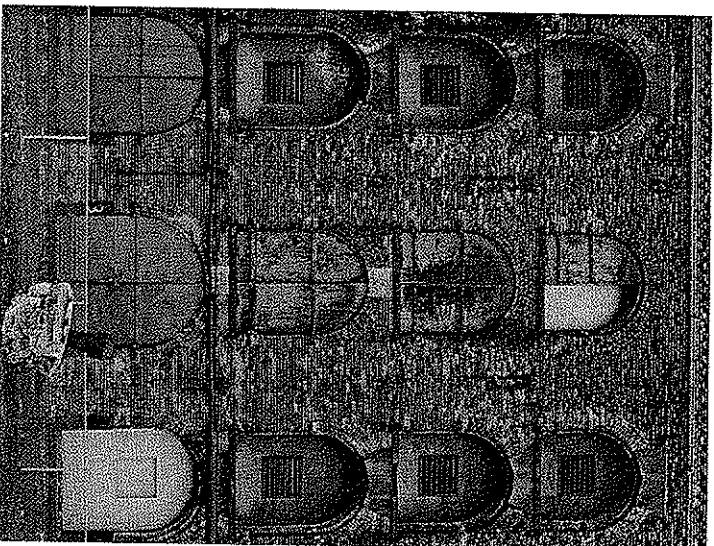


# NAKED CITY

*Sharon Zukin*

THE DEATH AND LIFE  
OF AUTHENTIC  
URBAN PLACES



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or the BID's financial resources, or the ability of the park's users to keep an eye on others? Or is it perhaps a calming vision of social order in which a contentious public yields control to the benevolent power and authority of the private sector? The conflicts over the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site, the way the state shut the public out of the decision-making process, and the fortifications around the place do not suggest a better alternative.

The paradox of public space is that private control can make it more attractive, most of the time, to a broader public, but state control can make it more repressive, more narrowly ideological, and not representative at all. Our willingness to fight the violence of terrorism and crime with more violence takes us far beyond the capabilities of the urban village's micro-social order. The scale of public interactions today demands a degree of trust among strangers that we no longer command. One democratic alternative to both private control and control by the state would create different systems of stewardship. These would encourage collective responsibility for public space among ordinary city dwellers rather than corporations, and small businesses and stores rather than commercial property owners or city agencies. Improbably a model for this kind of stewardship comes not from powerful stakeholders in Manhattan but from the immigrant food vendors of Red Hook Park.



## A Tale of Two Globals

### *Pupusas and IKEA in Red Hook*

He had, he told me, been asked to write a story about the eating places of taxicab drivers. The theory, apparently, was that here you had a class of men familiar with alien foods who freely exercised their choices from a vast selection of establishments, and had no stake in the bourgeois dining enterprise: men supposedly driven by unfeigned primitive cravings, men hungering for a true taste of homeland and mother's cooking, men who would, in short, lead one to the so-called real thing.

—Joseph O'Neill, *Netherland* (2008)

It's a Saturday afternoon in mid-July and the city is swooning in 96-degree heat and fearsome humidity. You think it will be cooler out on the water than in the subway, so you line up at the Wall Street pier in Lower Manhattan to take the free water taxi across the East River to Red Hook, on the Brooklyn waterfront. The ride is sponsored by IKEA, the Swedish big-box chain that opened its first New York City outpost in Red Hook a few weeks earlier. Because the neighborhood is notoriously difficult to reach on public transportation and IKEA is hoping to lure shoppers whose apartments are starved for Scandinavian modern couches but who don't own cars, the store has decided to sponsor water taxis from Manhattan. They have a system to discourage free riders from Brooklyn. You get your hand stamped before you walk onto the ferry so the taxi company's employees, on IKEA's

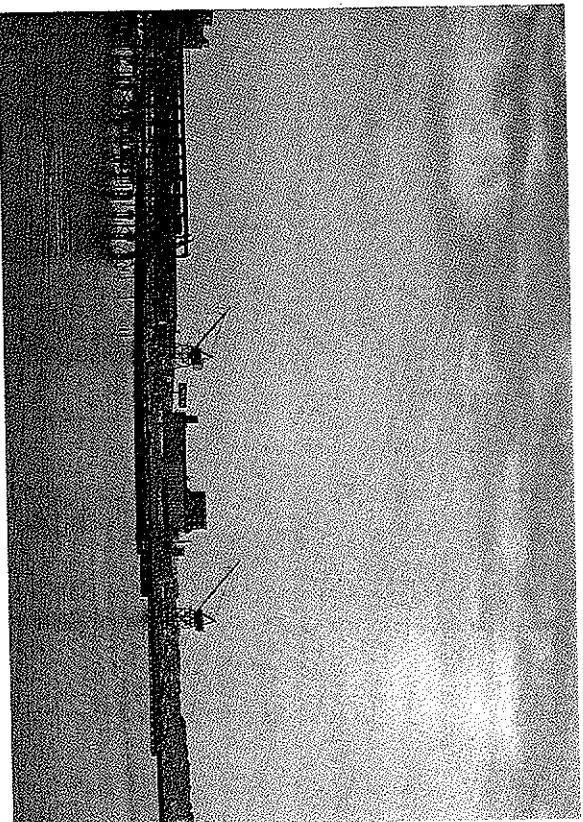
instructions, can refuse to carry any passenger on the return trip who didn't come to Brooklyn to make a purchase.

Sitting on the top deck of the ferry, you're caught up in an air of joyful anticipation. The small boat is full, with more than thirty passengers, some of them young children and their parents, all smiling and laughing from the unusual pleasure of being out on the water on a sunny afternoon, and from the pleasure of a shopping trip as well. The kids snap photos with cell phone cameras, everyone admires the Statue of Liberty on the other side of the harbor, and a few passengers point out the artificial waterfalls designed by the Scandinavian artist Olafur Eliasson that have been installed on the river for the summer as a public art project. Though the ride takes less than ten minutes, it's the kind of entertainment New Yorkers love: a chance to act like tourists on the town.

After the ferry crosses the river and enters the Buttermilk Channel, you start to see remains of an older New York on the Brooklyn shore. Rusted gantry cranes that once raised and lowered cargo from big boats stand like giant sentries, guarding the entrance to the basins where the city's port heaved and thrived for nearly a century, until, with water too shallow to service container ships, it shut down in the early 1960s. Fading redbrick warehouses built in the 1860s look like they're crumbling before your eyes, in contrast to the gleaming white cruise ship, a vertical city on the water, berthed at a modern dock that the city government recently built in hopes of attracting the kind of port business that seems more in keeping with today's tourist and service economy than yesterday's shipments of scrap iron, raw sugar, and rubber. Rounding a curve in the shoreline, the ferry approaches the Eric Basin. There, before your eyes, rising along the shore like a mirage, is a huge, new, shining, blue and yellow metal box under familiar flags: IKEA. You feel the other passengers letting out a happy sigh. We've arrived.

You file off the boat and walk past the newly landscaped waterfront park IKEA paid for, through the outdoor and indoor parking lots with spaces for more than a thousand cars, away from the giant blue and yellow box. All the other passengers go directly into the store, moving with a sense of purpose, like astronauts transferring from a space shuttle to the mother ship. But you're heading for the Red Hook ball fields.

You walk toward the big park you can see from the front of the store. You pass the Red Hook Community Farm, where neighborhood teenagers raise the vegetables that they sell at a local farmers' market, and



Old and new on the Red Hook waterfront: IKEA, dock, and cranes. Photograph by Sharon Zukin.

turning right on Bay Street you find yourself surrounded on both sides of the street by large, green playing fields that belong to the city's Parks Department.

Now the air is so hot and heavy that the five teams out on the fields, outfitted in striped soccer jerseys and shorts, are just taking photos of each other and resting in the few spots of shade under small clumps of trees. Onlookers chat while families spread lunch on picnic tables nearby. Close to the sidewalk men and women in their twenties are sunbathing on the grass, and one young woman waits in line to buy food from a vendor's truck wearing only a two-piece polka-dot bathing suit.

The vendors are your real destination. Six metal carts and trucks with panels open on one side are lined up around the quiet intersection of Bay and Clinton Streets, the national flags of Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Guatemala flying overhead, the whole setting of trucks and flags and people forming a multinational Latino food court for the soccer players and their families, and for foodies who don't know a word of Spanish. Mainly white with a small number of Asians, they make the journey to Red Hook every Saturday and Sunday afternoon for the "authentic"

foods of Latin America—pupusas, huaraches, taquitos, elotes, marinated, stuffed, grilled, and fried—that immigrants have been cooking and selling at the Red Hook ball fields since the 1970s.

Today is the opening day of the 2008 season, after an almost three-month delay, during which the vendors rushed to comply with licensing and permit requirements that the New York City Health and Parks Departments imposed on them for the first time at the end of 2007. The severity and cost of these requirements sparked a fiery response from the vendors' many loyal customers, most prominently the authors of local food blogs such as Chowhound, Porkchop Express, and Serious Eats.com, as well as New York's senior U.S. senator Charles Schumer, a Park Slope resident, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, and local City Council member Sara Gonzalez. They all feared the vendors would not be able to comply with the city agencies' new regulations. When the vendors folded their tents and closed for the winter in 2007, no one knew if they would ever come back.

Opening day starts slowly. At a little before 9 only one large vendors' truck and two carts are setting up. A team is playing soccer out on the field, the only game that will be played in the heat that day. Two reporters, notepads out and cameras ready, are interviewing the vendors and the handful of people milling around. When the game ends, several players, speaking Spanish, order cold tamarind and hibiscus drinks. More vendors' trucks arrive. Cesar Fuentes, the executive director of the vendors' association, who is also the stepson of one of the vendors, puts up a sign: "Welcome back, Red Hook food vendors."

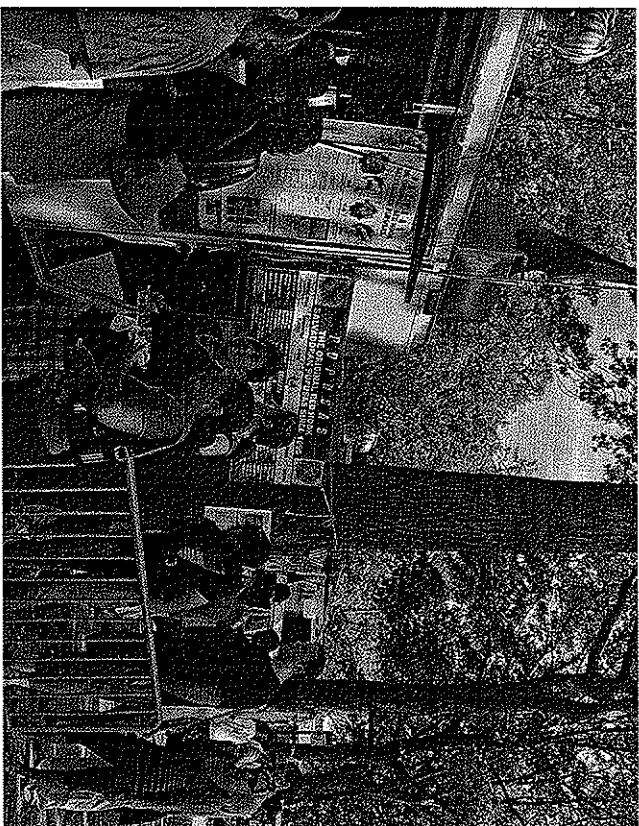
Around 10:30 more people line up at the large truck that sells pupusas, stuffed corn tortillas from El Salvador, where the vendors are now ready to serve. Customers place their orders in Spanish. Cesar walks around greeting longtime customers and welcoming new ones, assuring everyone that business will build throughout the day. He talks with two men hired by the vendors, telling them to pick up the trash and keep the park clean. Music starts to play from a Guatemalan vendor's truck.

By noon, true to Cesar's prediction, more customers have arrived. Sixty people, who are now speaking English and do not seem Hispanic, wait in line to buy food. A low-key buzz of excitement builds while the lines grow longer.

By 3 two hundred people are waiting patiently for the attention of six vendors. The two largest trucks, parked on either side of the street corner,

attract the longest lines. About thirty men and women wait to buy huarachas (cornmeal parcels stuffed with black beans or grilled meat and salsa, made in an oblong shape, and then fried) at the Martinezes' truck, and an equal number are waiting for cold fruit drinks at the Vaqueros'. You walk past the lines that have formed at the other trucks and carts, going all the way down the block, until you come to the cart farthest from the street corner, where the Rojas family, she from Ecuador and he from Chile, sell plastic containers of Ecuadorian ceviche—raw, marinated seafood and fish—and Chilean empanadas filled with meat or cheese. Because the vendors now work inside trucks instead of outdoors under awnings, you can't see the piles of tortillas unless you're first in line and can look through the open window. In any case, each empanada is freshly filled, each tortilla specially folded as it is ordered.

"It's the first time I've come here," a young man who looks Chinese American says. He smiles. "It's great to taste different things without getting jet lag."



The "original" Salvadoran pupusas: Red Hook ball fields, 2008. Photograph by Sharon Zukin.

Though the trucks stand in the same places where the vendors have stood for the past thirty years, they no longer create the effect of a *mercado*, an open-air marketplace, as they did before. What Cesar feared and what he talked about in interviews with the media during the preceding weeks, while tensions grew that the vendors would miss the entire summer season, has come to pass: selling pupusas from mobile trucks rather than in the open air has destroyed the physical intimacy between the vendors and their customers that had turned ball fields in Brooklyn into a Little Latin America. Made famous by gringo food blogs, reined in by the Parks Department's regulations, and located a big schlep away from any other attraction besides IKEA, the Red Hook food vendors' claim to the public space of the ball fields depends on their catering to the tastes of both immigrants and foodies and to the rules of the city's bureaucracy.

Despite the *Red Hook* part of the vendors' label, they live in other Brooklyn neighborhoods: Bushwick, Flatbush, Sunset Park, the less gentrified areas of Park Slope. Like most street vendors, they come by day and disappear at night. The weather limits them to working here only on weekends from April through November. Moreover, unlike most residents of Red Hook, they are immigrants. This is why they are both praised by the media for their "authenticity" and vulnerable to the rigid enforcement of state regulations.

Their social distance from the city government also reflects Red Hook's physical isolation from other neighborhoods in Brooklyn, located between the waterfront and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, with no subway station to offer easy access. One edge of the neighborhood is still a working waterfront, though much smaller and quieter now than when many of its longtime residents, today's senior citizens, loaded and unloaded big boats or worked in warehouses, coffee roasters, and shipyards on the Red Hook piers. That's when the Erie Basin was the busiest cargo port in the country, according to the 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City*. Red Hook was considered a dangerous, polyglot place in the 1920s and 1930s. It was a good site for an H. P. Lovecraft horror story and the fear of foul play in Thomas Wolfe's "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn." In the 1950s the docks were the setting for the Oscar-winning movie *On the Waterfront* (1954), in which a young Marlon Brando mourns his failure to win a boxing career that would transport him out of the neighborhood with the immortal words "I coulda been a contender." That movie, though, was filmed in Hoboken,

New Jersey, and in many ways, over the past half-century Red Hook has also missed out on opportunities for the bright lights of either commercial or residential redevelopment.<sup>1</sup>

The city government has never seriously pursued new, green manufacturers that could locate here, and gentrification has been limited. The homes are too small, the area is too far from mass transit, there are environmental nasty spots like a waste transfer station, and also a large public housing project whose tenants are mainly black and Puerto Rican and that until recently had a reputation for gangs, drug dealers, and murder. These are "the projects" where Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991) was filmed; built as high-end but low-cost housing for dockworkers, factory laborers, and their families during the Great Depression, in that movie they have become a dead-end for the unemployed and a killing field for ambitious youths.<sup>2</sup>

The stories of origin represented by IKEA and the Latino food vendors have little connection to the global trade that shaped the industrial waterfront in an earlier era or with the lives of longtime residents, either older white homeowners who worked at the port or black and Puerto Rican public housing tenants who were never hired on the docks. A Latino marketplace and a big-box store represent the city's new beginnings that shift power from older, poorer groups to the new, mobile, urban middle class. But between these two forms of today's global commerce lie great differences of scale and power: on one side, a small number of immigrants who are likely to be targeted, arrested, and deported by national security agencies and harassed by local cops; on the other, a transnational chain that is courted by local officials and developers and treated with respect by national states. During the past few years each side has developed a claim to be an "authentic" part of Red Hook, a claim that involves capital investment, state power, the media, and consumers' tastes, but not many longtime residents, whether they are white, brown, or black.<sup>3</sup>

Give IKEA credit. As much criticism as it has received for traffic, importing and labor practices, it appears poised to successfully open a big-box store in New York City, perhaps the environment most hostile to big-box stores in the United States, one where even Wal-Mart has thrown in the towel.

—*New York Times*, May 16, 2008

Four weeks before the vendors' opening day, in mid-June, IKEA opened this store, its first in New York City. The event sparked even more anticipation, fanned by IKEA's reputation for offering well-designed furniture at modest prices and by a long trail of community protests and lawsuits and a rising crescendo of articles in the local media, from the *New York Times* to Brooklyn blogs. A month before the opening IKEA declared that it would not allow customers to line up outside the store until forty-eight hours before the doors were officially unlocked at 9 a.m. "That may seem like a bizarre warning," the *Times* says, "except that a man showed up two and a half weeks before the opening of a West Sacramento Ikea store in California in 2006, and another person showed up two weeks early in Tempe, Ariz., in 2004"—all, apparently, hoping for giveaways of free merchandise. But IKEA openings have also brought tragedy. When a new store opened in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 2004 three early shoppers were crushed to death by a stampede of eight thousand customers who rushed to claim credit vouchers for \$150 of merchandise.<sup>4</sup>

Enthusiasm on the part of potential customers contrasted with ambivalence at best and outright hostility at worst on the part of Red Hook residents. Both criticism and acceptance centered on the nature of the big-box store and its implications for the neighborhood's future development. Though much smaller than Wal-Mart, with fewer than three hundred stores compared to the giant discount chain's seven thousand, IKEA employs more than a hundred thousand workers in thirty-six countries around the world, primarily in the economically developed countries of North America, Europe, and Asia. In 2008 alone, the year the Red Hook store opened, another nineteen IKEA clones were born in metropolitan areas from Paris to Shenzhen. All IKEA stores are big—the Red Hook store has almost 350,000 square feet—and each uses a warehouse design to cut labor costs and enhance shoppers' feeling of getting bargains. Like Wal-Mart and other big-box stores, IKEA depends on most customers providing their own transportation, usually by automobile, and driving their purchases home; for this reason IKEA branches, like other big-box stores, are surrounded by parking lots. The chain's claim to show corporate social responsibility by encouraging sustainable forestry and forbidding the hiring of child labor stands in marked contrast to the environmental evils of traffic congestion and air pollution they are often accused of producing around their stores. Whether these conditions really harm residents' quality of life or are just a screen for defending property values, they have sparked

protests in many communities, including Red Hook, against IKEA's plans to open stores.

In the first years of the twenty-first century the chain began to build a ring of stores in suburbs around New York City. Because so many New Yorkers who own cars then drove to the nearest IKEA, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to shop, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani complained that the city government lost millions of dollars in sales tax revenue for all the knock-down bookcases and Swedish meatballs sold there to city residents. But most big-box chains find it hard to open stores inside the city. First, New York's zoning laws prevent superstores from locating almost anywhere except in manufacturing zones along the waterfront. Second, it is difficult and expensive in a densely built city to acquire enough land to build a 300,000-plus-square-foot store and parking lot. And third, when stores add the cost of improvements to nearby streets, parks, and subway stations demanded by the city government, they often just give up. In some cases, though, the most serious problem is community resistance. While some New Yorkers object to the aesthetics of a big-box store sitting on the waterfront, and others dislike turning over what could be open public space to commercial uses, residents who live close to a projected site, even in a brownfields location like Red Hook, say they cannot accept the traffic congestion and air pollution of thousands of shoppers' cars passing through their neighborhood every day. Homeowners' organizations in Red Hook argued that the neighborhood's cobblestone streets were not suited to heavy traffic and emphasized the lack of public transit lines and highway exits near the proposed store's location.

In fact, IKEA was not completely successful in its efforts to open stores in or near New York City. In 2000 six hundred residents of New Rochelle, a near northern suburb, crowded into a public hearing to testify against the chain's plans to build a store there. Though some residents welcomed IKEA because of its potential to contribute to the town's revenues from sales and property taxes, most bitterly opposed it because of three contentious issues: a projected increase in traffic through the community's streets, a potential decrease in property values, and a planned demolition of twenty-six businesses, two churches, and 160 homes to build the store. After two years of controversy IKEA dropped its plan to open a branch in New Rochelle.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, however, the chain was negotiating with a real estate developer to build a store in Brooklyn. The first site they chose, near the

Gowanus Canal, had housed a coal transfer station for a local utility company and was in the center of an area slated for redevelopment. Here too, though, community groups protested IKEA's plans. Building the store would not require displacing any homes or businesses, but local residents, who lived near an old industrial site, objected to the air pollution and traffic congestion that would be caused by car traffic. These residents preferred an alternative strategy that would produce entertainment facilities and new housing, and in this vision to upscale the Gowanus area they were joined by some local developers and community organizations. Defeated in Gowanus, IKEA shifted its sights to an unused piece of land on the Red Hook waterfront, a place with a dying shipyard, practically no residential neighbors, and few prospects for commercial redevelopment. Opening an IKEA on this site seemed to be a slam dunk.<sup>6</sup>

But redeveloping the Red Hook waterfront would not be easy. A community-based 1972 plan, adopted in 1995, called for a mix of industry, housing, and retail stores and was at first supported but then overruled by the City Planning Commission. Individual projects could not overcome conflicts of interest between local businesses and developers, or between white homeowners and black and Puerto Rican housing project tenants. When a local real estate developer said he was trying to put together a plan to open a gourmet supermarket—a branch of Fairway, a popular Manhattan chain—in a vacant, city-owned warehouse nearby, community groups erupted in dissent. Local politicians admitted that a supermarket could offer jobs to unemployed neighborhood residents, especially public housing tenants, and bring access to inexpensive, fresh fruits and vegetables that residents sorely lacked. Homeowners, however, protested that prime waterfront land could find more socially valuable uses and objected to expected increases in car traffic. After more than two years of negotiations the City Council voted to approve the sale of the warehouse to the local developer, who would partner with Fairway to build the store. Red Hook's City Council member at the time, who had pressed to use the warehouse site for affordable housing, agreed to support the sale in return for the developer's pledge to add 33,000 square feet of free work space for local artists and nonprofit groups to market-rate rental apartments on the upper floors.<sup>7</sup>

The fight over Fairway reflected the lack of consensus between white homeowners who wanted to upscale the waterfront with new residential construction and black public housing tenants who wanted jobs, as well as between developers who wanted to build stores and housing and business

owners who wanted to upgrade industrial facilities around the old port. These arguments prefigured the conflict that would take shape when IKEA appeared on the scene, with disagreements over traffic, access to decent shopping, and jobs. In general, though, when Fairway finally opened in 2006 its presence suggested that the upscale tastes of Brooklyn's gentrifiers and foodies had developed influence, if not power, over the area's redevelopment. After all, Fairway had "discovered" Red Hook fifteen years earlier by renting warehouse space there to store imported olive oil.

In contrast to the lengthy conflict over Fairway, IKEA's entry into Red Hook took only three years. Though claims about air pollution from automobiles arose again as a major issue, the company tried to deal with it at the outset by saying it would arrange for public ferry and bus transportation to the store; as a sweetener, IKEA threw in a lushly landscaped waterfront esplanade along the unused Eric Basin. The chain's executives shrewdly stressed the economic impact of their providing five or six hundred construction jobs on the site and an equal number of permanent jobs in the store. "They are high-paying jobs," the company's real estate director said, "and the benefits package of IKEA is fantastic." But opinion in the community was divided, with most of the four thousand white homeowners and gentrifiers arguing against IKEA and most of the seven thousand black and Latino public housing tenants arguing for it. Talk of traffic and jobs dominated the conflict as it raged through successive rounds of public hearings at the local community board, City Planning Commission, and City Council, with both sides claiming Mayor Michael Bloomberg as an ally. First he said he was a supporter of the project, then he said, "But I think if I lived there, I don't know whether I would be, quite honestly." Even IKEA's claim that it would provide meaningful jobs was attacked by the city comptroller, who objected to the store's plan to pave over an old graving dock, one of New York's few remaining ship-repair facilities, for a parking lot. Except for the comptroller, though, local officials expressed their admiration for IKEA's deep pockets. "There hasn't been an investment of this size since World War II," said Sara Gonzalez, the City Council member whose predecessor had supported Fairway before losing his seat on bribery charges. Though the property had sat fallow for decades, she said, "no one ever stepped forward and had a financial commitment for that site until IKEA put their proposal and their money on the table." The store could find an "authentic" place in Red Hook, in short, if it sparked economic development.<sup>8</sup>

On the day the store opened, ahead of schedule, in June 2008 thousands of customers arrived. Water ferries pulled in at the dock every twenty minutes, teams of reporters and TV crews swarmed around workers wearing yellow IKEA shirts, and by noon all fourteen hundred parking spaces were filled. Families, who seemed to be mostly black and Latino, shopped with their children, and many Muslim mothers wore the hijab. Though it was a weekday, when most adults go to work, so many customers appeared that it took thirty to forty minutes to get through the checkout line. Shoppers also crowded into the cafeteria, where they waited half an hour to make their way to IKEA'S famous Swedish meatballs and fries.

Who could have known that so many Brooklynites would succumb to the store's "Swedeophilia"? That in Brooklyn as elsewhere, the appeal of Swedish design would touch emotions to a degree that Macy's or Kmart, which depend just as much as IKEA on products made in Asia and the Global South, do not? The answer was clear when shoppers flocked to Red Hook throughout opening day and continued to arrive three times an hour by ferry on the weekends, surely a sign of interest if not fascination. Because IKEA didn't issue an official statement, it was difficult to know how many local residents the store had hired, but many of the workers, and nearly all of the cashiers, were black, as were the West Indian delivery van drivers waiting in front of the store and the security guards provided by another outside firm. All in all, except for its huge size, the store looked very much like the face of Brooklyn. It did not, however, look like the food vendors' site just a few blocks away, at the Red Hook ball fields.<sup>9</sup>

This is "real street food" served by common folks who have undergone their share of discrimination, toughing out a living in a foreign land while giving something back to their peoples.

—"J. Slab," *Porkchop-Express.com*, August 22, 2006

Unlike IKEA'S entry into Red Hook, which involves a fairly well-known narrative of real estate development, retail chain store expansion, and community resistance, the food vendors' arrival is shrouded in individual memory and family history, folded in turn within the longer narrative of contemporary migration. The earliest vendors came to the ball fields in the mid-1970s when family members, Central and South American immigrants like themselves, began to play soccer there. At first some of the women just

brought food so their families could eat during the entire day they spent at the park. Gradually, though, they began to think about selling the food. "They were coming as a family trip, on a picnic," says Ana, the daughter of the vendor who has been at Red Hook longest, a woman from Colombia who has sold homemade food at the ball fields since 1974. "And her uncle had a lot of friends here. People would come over to her and ask about her food. She brought steaks and arepas [South American cornbread], you know? For the picnic. So many people started asking her, 'Do you sell it?' So she said yes, and she started bringing more and selling it."<sup>10</sup>

In those years weekend soccer players who came to New York from Latin America were beginning to form national leagues like the Liga de Fútbol Guatemala, which has been playing at the Red Hook ball fields since 1973. Though the Liga Mexicana was established two years earlier and is now the biggest Latino soccer league in the city, it only began to take a major role at the ball fields in the past few years. It's not clear whether the early teams mixed players from different countries. Today the Red Hook ball fields attract not only Latino men, but also men and women soccer players from many different countries, with the Mexican League organizing activities on Saturdays and the Guatemalan League on Sundays.<sup>11</sup>

Both the popularity of soccer in New York and the dominance of Latinos on the Red Hook ball fields reflect huge and quickly growing increases in Latin American immigration since U.S. laws were changed in 1985. Among the nationalities represented by the vendors, the number of Salvadoran and Ecuadorean immigrants living in New York increased three times between 1980 and 2000; that of Colombians, four times; Guatemalans, eight times; and Mexicans, thirty-six times. In 1985 New York City had one store that sold tortillas; by 2001 six tortilla factories owned by Mexican immigrants produced ten million tortillas a week in a small area of Brooklyn between Bushwick and East Williamsburg called the "Tortilla Triangle." Between 2000 and 2007 the number of Mexicans increased by more than 100,000 to 289,755, and the Ecuadorean population grew by more than 50,000 to 201,708. Though the largest number of documented, or legal, immigrants continues to come to New York from the Dominican Republic (602,093 New Yorkers in 2007), Mexicans and Ecuadoreans are the fastest growing Latino groups.<sup>12</sup>

Pedro, a Mexican vendor who has been selling elotes (grilled ears of corn topped with mayonnaise and lime juice) and tropical fruit drinks at the ball fields since 1988, first came to Red Hook with his friends to watch soccer. "I saw that nobody was selling Mexican food," Pedro says. "I started



just people playing soccer.”

Yolanda's family, who comes from El Salvador, has also sold food at the ball fields since the late 1980s. “My mother was coming with my uncle,” Yolanda says. “And then my aunt. You know, it’s a family thing.”

“And then he [the uncle] kept telling us, you know, ‘There’s a lot of people from back home. I’m sure if you guys go and sell pupusas you’re gonna make a lot of money...’ and I was, like, ‘I’ve never made pupusas in my life!’”

Yolanda’s mother didn’t know how to make pupusas either, but her aunt had the skills. “And then my aunt taught my cousin, her daughter. So I just started by taking the money; I was the cashier. [My cousin] was the one making the pupusas, and my mother was flipping them and serving them to the people. That’s how we started.”

“And then, little by little, I was, like, ‘I want to learn too!’ So I started, little by little.”

José, the son of another vendor, a woman from Guatemala, began coming to the ball fields with friends to watch soccer in 1991. A friend already sold food there, “and after a while, they started telling me, you know, ‘Why don’t you bring your mom?’ So I brought my mother, and they told you, you know, ‘Do something!’ And then [in 1996] she started. She started with fried tacos.” Only one of the ten vendors at the ball fields today—Matilde, who comes from Ecuador and started selling ceviche in 2003—owned a restaurant in her home country. A few vendors, though, have used their experience at the ball fields to enter the restaurant business in New York. Marta, Ana’s mother, left to start a small restaurant elsewhere in Brooklyn before returning to Red Hook a few years ago; two other former vendors, a Mexican and a Honduran, own restaurants in other Brooklyn neighborhoods.

From the outset selling food at the ball fields has been a family affair. As in other immigrant-owned businesses that are carried on indoors, family members supply their labor, hone new skills, and pool their often scarce capital. They prepare traditional foods from family recipes as they remember them with ingredients that are at hand, re-creating a taste of home along with innovative fusions. Selling traditional products in a market where sellers and buyers share the same ethnic background and language establishes a common cultural space where immigrants feel at home. Meanwhile non-Latinos feel as though they have stumbled onto a foreign enclave, an unexpected Little Latin America, in the midst of Brooklyn. But

borhood does not have a large population of recent Latino immigrants. None of the vendors who sell at the ball fields has ever lived there. Instead the Red Hook food vendors’ story of origin is entirely connected to soccer, and though business enterprise connected to soccer, or with other sports such as cricket, as in the New York novel *Netherland*, may represent a new form of the American Dream, it is located in Red Hook only because of the neighborhood’s earlier decline.

When the first food vendors arrived in the 1970s the neighborhood was still suffering from the closing of the port ten years earlier. Though some scrap metal dealers, food distributors, and junkyards remained, most warehouses and docks lay half-empty or abandoned; Todd Shipyards, the future IKEA site, was failing. The city government talked about building a container port, which would create jobs for unemployed homeowners and public housing tenants in Red Hook, but these plans faded when the city’s fiscal crisis broke in 1975. At that point and for years to come, the city had no money either to broker economic development on the docks or to maintain the large amount of park space it owned in Red Hook. “Years ago,” says Greg O’Connell, the local real estate developer who renovated the Red Hook Stores Warehouse for Fairway, “this was dumpy. You’d see packs of dogs down here. You’d see no one.”<sup>13</sup>

“Back then, it was ugly,” Pedro says about the late 1980s. “You know, they would find people who died over there,” adds Carolina, his daughter. “Lots of drugs,” Pedro says. “Prostitution.” “No white people,” Carolina continues. “No families, because that place... it’s... no people. It was a very bad place.”

“Oh, God, it was scary,” Ana recalls. “I used to be scared. By eight o’clock at night, I was, like [she makes a frightened face]. It was very dangerous. A lot of fights breaking out. And there were no cops.”

The immigrants’ presence gradually began to improve the park. “Our friends came,” Pedro says. “We took care of each other. We were, like, ten friends altogether, and we helped each other. We weren’t scared; we supported each other. Over time, we made the place better.”

An upturn in the city’s fortunes and a small surge of new residents also helped. In the late 1980s the Parks Department received a donation from Sol Goldman, a real estate developer, to renovate the historic swimming pool across the street from the vendors’ site. Designed in monumental style and built as a public works project during the Great Depression, the pool