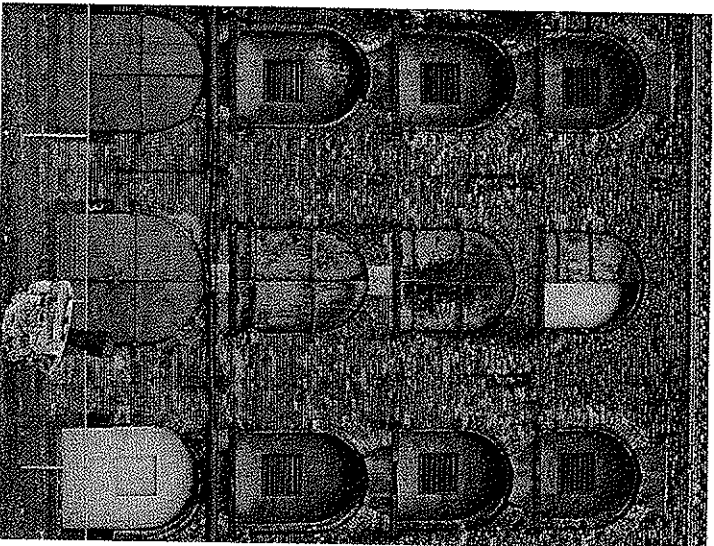


NAKED CITY

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

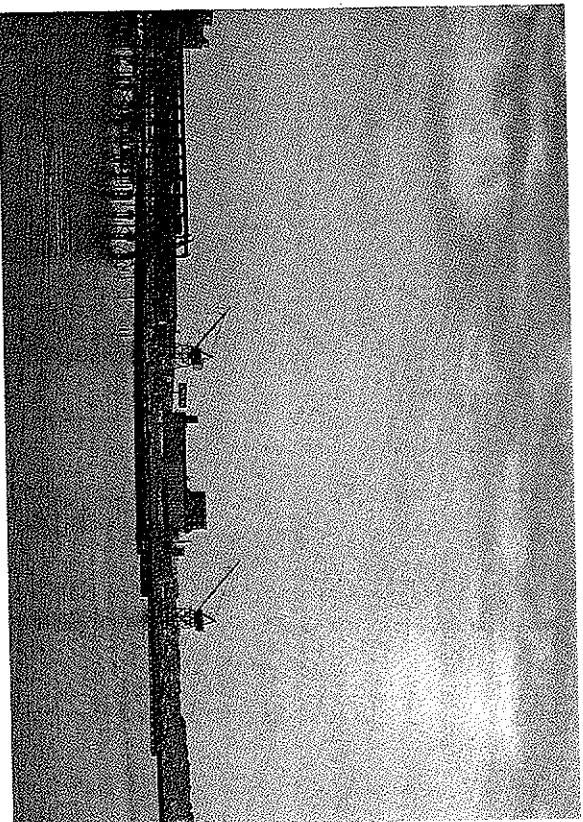
instructions, can refuse to carry any passenger on the return trip who didn't come to Brooklyn to make a purchase.

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.¹

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.²

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.³

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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷

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.⁸

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.⁹

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."¹⁰

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.¹¹

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.¹²

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.”¹³

“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

was one of Robert Moses's contributions to the city's landscape, but like the McCarren Park Pool in Williamsburg it was taken out of service because of the disastrous erosion of the city's budget and social and racial tensions in the neighborhood. In 1991 the Parks Department reopened the renovated pool and families began to come to the park again. Around that time artists and gentrifiers started to rent lofts and buy houses in Red Hook, leading to perpetual rumors of revitalization. During the next decade, with city revenues seeming more secure and BIDs and conservancies taking over some of their financial burden, the Parks Department cleaned up the ball fields as part of a program to improve parks throughout the city. Though Red Hook did not undergo a total renewal, partly because of unresolved conflict over whether there would be commercial or residential development of the waterfront, the neighborhood began to attract more positive notice in the media.

An early though still rare write-up of the Red Hook food vendors appeared in Eric Asimov's "\$25 and Under" column of restaurant reviews in the *New York Times* in 1994. Assigned to sniff out cheap good eats in neighborhoods that were located under the radar of the city's cultural critics, Asimov begins by talking about the soccer games at the ball fields. "World Cup soccer stars grow up in places like this patch of dirt on a square block near Gowanus Bay," he writes, balancing a view of Red Hook between the grittiness of Brooklyn's decaying waterfront and the hopefulness of kids from the barrios.¹⁴

Asimov goes on to say that watching soccer is best enjoyed with food, and "around the field is some of the best and freshest street food in New York, sold by families who have simply set up a table and a grill." He admires their informality as much as their food, for the scene at the ball fields looks and sounds like a street market in El Salvador or Mexico, as "vendors walk around with cardboard boxes, hawking beer, soda and Chidlets." He strolls among "the families [who] grill huge steaks on sidewalk barbecues and fry pork and empanadas in big pots set atop ashcans," and describes how "young girls sit at tables mixing dough, passing on the finished products to older sisters and mothers for stuffing and grilling." Pausing to praise the pupusas, Asimov also recommends "sweet tamales," "crisp tacos," and "chicharrones," which he says "are simply deep-fried pork rinds, but more delicious than any out of a bag." Asimov's column is very favorable to the vendors, but it revels in the standard rhetoric of first-world reviewers who, when they encounter third-world food, are attracted to the exotic and play

off the poverty. They find "authenticity," though Asimov doesn't use the word, in the humble foods prepared by women.¹⁵

Yet this was how the vendors really worked. Then as now, the women of the family prepared the food while the men chatted with customers and took the money. Only one man cooks among the vendors today, Luis, a Dominican married to Cecilia, a woman from Salvador, who sells Salvadoran food. Like the other vendors, Luis first came to the ball fields by circumstance. In his case, though, he did not come for the soccer; he was invited by his future wife "to have pupusas and meet her family," who already sold food there. Though Luis had worked at various jobs since the age of fourteen, he really liked to cook. When a member of Cecilia's family decided to stop working as a vendor at the ball fields, the family invited him to join them: "That same day, I remember, they were collecting the money to help buy the supplies, and I said, I remember, 'Sir, please, I don't have all of the money.' But it was OK, they said OK.... After the meeting, we went to have a cup of coffee, and I had no idea of the change my life had just taken."

Luis quickly adapted to Salvadoran food and became expert at cooking it. "It's an art," he says, "making pupusas is an art." He even taught the young women who work at the stand with him, a cousin and a family friend from another state who is spending the summer in New York, to fill and fold them. "But I don't make them," he says, "because in Central America you would never see a man making pupusas. It's a woman's job. In Salvador, the culture is very *machista*. There's a difference because in Santo Domingo—yes, [there] you would see a man cooking."

As they made the transition from bringing food for a family picnic to selling it, the vendors kept the informal atmosphere of a Central American plaza. They continued to cook in the open air and to sell their special dishes at tables they set up in the morning and took down at night, a setup that eventually attracted the attention of the New York City Department of Health. Today family members from both the first and second immigrant generations work at the stands while their small children play in the park nearby, under the watchful eye of relatives. Until four or five years ago Ana's parents worked the stand by themselves. "Now," she says, "[our mother] needs our help, so we come help her." At one of the Mexican stands Maria works with her aunt Rosa and her uncle Juan, who are the primary owners, and with another aunt and uncle as well.

Like most of the owners, Rosa and Juan work seven days a week on this business, with Rosa in charge of food preparation: washing the dirty dishes on Sunday night, assembling the ingredients for the next weekend's dishes, preparing the meat on Monday, and from Tuesday through Friday getting everything ready for Saturday morning. Other family members work at the stand only on the weekends. This is a typical division of labor among the men and women and parents and children in the vendors' families. For the first generation running the stand is a full-time job, though they may have another full-time job working for someone else and also take occasional jobs catering a wedding or a party. For the second generation working at the stand on weekends is a way to help their parents financially as well as a moral obligation. It may also offer a means of supplementing their own income while nurturing a family business that could eventually be so successful that they would have to hire other family members or even paid employees.

Though many vendors of the first generation do not speak English well, their grownup children, in both the 1.5 generation who came to the United States as children and the second generation who were born here, speak it fluently. They have at least a high school education, and some are college students or graduates, including a banker, a nurse, and a social worker who is studying for a master's degree. Some members of the second generation own different types of small businesses and have moved to suburbs outside of the city or to Staten Island, returning to Brooklyn on weekends to work at the stand. Not as highly educated as the children of, say, Korean or Russian immigrants, the food vendors' children are more likely to stay in the family business, at least part time, while pursuing their own careers. The money the family earns by selling food at the ball fields and the sense of initiative the children develop may give the second generation more of a boost, in both social and economic capital, than the children of Latino immigrants who work in factory or restaurant jobs and don't have an opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills.

The children's contribution is crucial to the vendors' success. Besides working at the stand, the second generation act as intermediaries between their parents and the growing clientele of non-Latino customers, between their parents and the media, and, most important, between their parents and the state agencies that control street vendors in New York: the city's parks and health departments. These forces have been crucial to creating the vendors' "authentic" place, their right to do business, in Red Hook.

The number of non-Latinos descending upon the fields, ordering *huanaches* and *agua fresca* and asking about *masa* and *balada*s, has noticeably ballooned over the summer. Add to this an eclectic assortment of folks—from law students to German filmmakers—who have come to both eat and [do] research, and you're left with a pretty dynamic scene. —"1. Slab," *Porkchop-Express.com*, August 22, 2006

Since the 1970s the Red Hook vendors' clientele has changed in two important ways. First, as more immigrants arrive in New York from all the Latin American countries and come to play soccer at the ball fields, they encounter foods they don't know, prepared and sold by vendors who speak Spanish as they do but do not share other elements of their culture. Meanwhile, the growing non-Latino customer base interprets and promotes the vendors' products as "authentic" food. The result is that each vendor represents a national culture, but the marketplace as a whole becomes Latino.

"The Mexicans didn't know what a pupusa was, they were like, 'What's that?'" Yolanda says. "And we said, 'It's a pupusa.' And they said, 'What's inside it?' And we told them, 'Meat and cheese; we have different fillings.' And they're, like, 'OK, let me try one.'" For her part, Yolanda, a Salvadoran, has learned to like the Ecuadorean seafood ceviches that Matilde sells. By the same token, when José's mother displayed her Guatemalan fried tacos, the Mexicans recognized them as *flautas*.

In time, though, the presence of *different* Latin American specialties, sold *side by side* in Spanish at different tables, created an unusual, pan-Latino atmosphere. Most customers bought food from vendors from their homeland. But unlike at home, they also bought food from vendors of other nationalities, and some vendors began to prepare and sell the foods of other countries along with their own. The Red Hook vendors started something unique in New York City: an authentically Latino cultural space to sample authentic Latino food that was *not* sold in an authentically Mexican or Ecuadorean or Salvadoran way. It is not unknown for immigrants from different countries of the same region to reinvent authenticity in this manner; West Indian immigrants in New York, London, and Toronto have created pan-Caribbean carnivals, immigrant vendors in Harlem have opened an African market, and Korean-owned restaurants in New York sell dim sum and sushi. But the Red Hook vendors have established a rich, pan-Latino space, exploiting both their common cultures and differences.¹⁶

The second, even more important change in clientele is the increasing number of “American,” or white, customers, as the vendors call them, who are neither Latinos nor immigrants and who don’t speak Spanish. Vendors are hazy about when the majority of their customers shifted from Latino to white, but it could not have been before the early twenty-first century. By 2008, though, the vendors estimated that between 50 and 60 percent of their customers were not Hispanic, up to 80 percent during the weeks some of them sold at Brooklyn Flea, an outdoor swap meet held in a schoolyard in Fort Greene, before they passed the Health Department inspection and returned to their location at the ball fields.¹⁷

Some vendors think the growing number of white customers reflects the expanding gentrification of Brooklyn neighborhoods, including Red Hook. But it also reflects the vendors’ growing media presence, especially in the food blogs and wikis that began to emerge around 2003. The two trends are related, for the demographic changes of gentrification are often expressed in the bloggers’ language of cultural consumption, representing, in this case, the tastes of a new, mobile, urban middle class that seeks the experience of “authentic” food.

Anglos may claim to love pupusas, but in fact their somewhat different food preferences have influenced the vendors to tweak the menu. Rosa, a Mexican vendor, follows her mother’s recipes from Pueblo but recently made some changes: “Since we work with different people, including more white people, we add different things. We add more vegetables. Here, people like to eat more vegetables than us. So there are small things like that we change.” Yolanda’s family went through the same experience: “We changed [the menu in 2006] because of the population change [among our customers]. We used to have [pupusas with] meat and cheese and plain cheese, because that’s what we like. But when the population started changing, that’s when we introduced beans and cheese.”

Luis, the Dominican who cooks pupusas, claims not to have changed any of his Salvadoran wife’s family recipes. But when a customer at the other pupusa stand, perhaps a more recent immigrant or one who comes from another region of their country, told Yolanda’s family, “Back home, in El Salvador, they make shrimp pupusas,” Yolanda recalls, “[we] said, ‘Oh, really? I wonder how they taste.’ So we went home [to our kitchens], and we tried them, we tested them out, and gave them to people, and said, ‘What do you think?’ And they were very good.”

Some of Yolanda’s willingness to experiment with ingredients comes as a response to competition from Luis’s stand, for both vendors specialize in pupusas. The food vendors’ association tries to regulate competition by limiting the number of new stands that would offer the same dishes, but it’s not easy to tell vendors who have been there a long time what to cook. Yolanda’s family, who started selling at the ball fields eight or ten years before Luis and Cecilia, has put up a sign, “The Original Pupusas,” “to differentiate” their stand, as they say, from Luis’s. They see themselves as the *authentic* Salvadoran vendors at the ball fields in both senses of the word: they were there first, and they create original products. “Back home, the cabbage [that accompanies the pupusas] is white,” Yolanda declares. “But from the beginning, we decided to make it pink. If you buy [Luis’s] pupusas now, the cabbage is pink as well. He just recently changed this from last year.” The sense of competition must have grown sharper when Luis rose to be a finalist for the 2008 Vendy Award, an annual honor given to the vendor whose dishes are judged to be the best street food in the city.

If vendors struggle a bit to differentiate the identity of their stands, they must also contend with changes in the ebb and flow of tastes among soccer players, customers, and fellow vendors representing different nationalities. Marta, the Colombian vendor who has been selling food at the ball fields since 1974, recalls that when she first came, “they had more people, Puerto Ricans. It was more a mixture, the people playing [soccer] over in the other fields.” At the same time, she remembers that there were more Colombians selling food: “[Today] we’re the last ones left.” José, a Guatemalan vendor who has been selling at the ball fields since 1996, says, “Not that many Spanish people [are] coming to this park. There’s not that many players, teams. They have been saying that we need them [the soccer leagues]... but not anymore. *They need us.*”

Luis, on the other hand, thinks, “[We vendors must promote ourselves to the] many, many people [who] come, even Americans, just for our products, even if there isn’t soccer,” but they must also make an effort to keep their Latino customer base: “We want to help the Guatemalan League so they get the publicity they need, so we can have more football matches. The Hispanic public can go to other places, to Flushing [Queens], or to other places... We need to make sure the Red Hook games can yield good prizes. Otherwise, the best players and teams will go to other places like Flushing or wherever the prizes are bigger.”

The mix of Latino customers from different homelands creates fewer problems for the vendors than the cultural differences between Latinos and whites. But accommodating Anglos' food tastes has been easier than adjusting to the times and rhythms of their meals. For Latinos, eating is only one part of the seamless experience of spending a day at the ball fields. They play or watch their friends play soccer, they cheer for their favorite teams, they chat with family members and catch up on news from their home countries, and they eat. In contrast, "the white people [come] for two hours," Rosa says. "They eat... they look around... and they leave! But the Latinos, no. Because with Latinos, you know [she and her niece Maria look at each other and laugh], they arrive, they eat breakfast, they eat some more, and they eat dinner there too."

Anglos mix and match foods on their plate to sample tastes, textures, and ingredients; they have developed the habit of grazing on all different foods at once. Latinos, however, have developed a cultural sense of which foods are appropriate to eat at different hours of the day. "In the morning," Rosa says, "they eat breakfast foods. In the middle of the day, they eat fruit. And later in the afternoon, they eat corn. The Latinos change what they're eating, but they keep eating."

These different patterns challenge the vendors' ability to pace production. Though an Anglo will line up to buy one or maybe two huaraches, "with Hispanics," Maria says, "sometimes they get ten huaraches at a time. There's one person, and they get ten. Everybody else with them is sitting down." But the Anglos' lack of familiarity with the Latino foods is good for business; not only are more Anglos buying from the vendors now, but some buy a large variety of different products just to taste them. "They doubled our sales," Pedro, another Mexican vendor, says. "The Spanish people," Carolina explains, "they make [this] food at home. For the white people, they don't make [this] stuff at home. They come [to eat]."

My wife and I were there yesterday and are at several of the tents/stands lined up by the soccer field. As usual, I pointed and bought, but [I] don't have much of an idea exactly what each item was.

—Steve R., Chowhound.com, May 5, 2003

What brought the *blanquitos* to Red Hook—and brought them in droves, in the early twenty-first century—was the Internet, especially the food

blogs and Brooklyn-based wikis that emerged then. "It was the web," Cesar Fuentes says. "It was a grassroots effort that came from the new patrons.... It was a blogger revolution."

The earliest post about the vendors appeared on October 1, 2000, on the Outer Boroughs board at Chowhound.com, a foodies' wiki. Though the post offers a very positive review, the writer does not show great familiarity with the dishes. What must be a pupusa is described as "something about taco [sic] size, about 6" round. They form a pocket in the dough and fill it with ground meat and cheese, and then fold the dough over it, flatten it and fry?" It's "worth the trip," the post ends, because it's "the kind of real food that readers of these boards seem to favor," and the Latino vendors are "cooking for people who know what it is supposed to be." In the words of the novel *Netherland*, this food is "the real thing" because it carries "a true taste of homeland and mother's cooking"; the food is good because it meets accepted standards of "authenticity."

This post elicits little response until, three years later, on May 5, 2003, another post about the vendors, this time by Steve R., says the food is "great," but again, the writer can't identify any dishes by name. "One was a 'pancake' which clearly had cheese and a meat inside, freshly griddled in front of us. Another was a flauta-like deep fried with chicken (?) thing that came with a red sauce poured over it. A third was at the taco stand but used very large flour tortillas to hold the fillings (Burritos?). Any ideas? Thanks."

Later that day another post identifies the "pancake" as a Salvadoran pupusa. But it isn't until six weeks later that a lengthy post for the first time goes into rapturous and specific detail about the dishes. "This is chow heaven," Chuck declares,

an absolute must for Brooklyn hounds. Everything I sampled was super, with the pupusas being the single most exceptional treat. For the chow record, there were two pupusa tents set up the day I was there [Yolanda's and Luis's]. One featured a long line and three or four women with movie star looks, the other (the ones I sampled) an even longer line and also beautiful, in a more earthy way, women. And a patriarchal looking man who regrettably informed me that the atole had just run out—next time I'll get there earlier! Between the scene and the food, this is possibly the single most transportive spot I've encountered in my six years in the city.

In just a few lines Chuck not only sketches all the features of an “authentic” culinary experience, including the “beautiful,” “earthy” women and “patriarchal” man, but he also connects this experience to the emotional bliss of gentrifiers and hipsters (it’s “transportive”). Going farther than Eric Asimov’s column of almost ten years earlier, this writer’s combination of exoticism and primitivism speaks less of Red Hook than of an urban Shangri-La, a mythical place of unheard-of delights. As for Chuck, someone who seeks “authentic” places in the city, he is clearly not Latino.

During the next few years other local wikis and blogs emphasized how *good* the Red Hook vendors’ foods taste and how *little* they cost. The explicit hook, by this time, is *authenticity*. Writing about the “authentic Mexican, Honduran, Colombian, Guatemalan, Dominican, and Salvadoran food” on the daily blog Gothamist.com, Allison Bojarski praises the vendors’ willingness to “pat out pupusa parties by hand from 10am until their rations run out.” In addition to the food, the authenticity of the neighborhood attracts her, this “out-of-the-way corner of Brooklyn” with its “hardscrabble housing projects” and artists. Bojarski establishes her street cred, and her credentials as a cultural consumer, by emphasizing that she has “ventured” to Red Hook “many times.” Like many others in the new urban middle class, she establishes her *own* authenticity, her right to the city, by her hard-won local knowledge.¹⁸

“J. Slab,” the pseudonym of the founder of the Brooklyn-based food blog Porkchop Express, takes a somewhat different view. Slab loves the vendors’ food and is the first media person to conduct an extensive interview with Cesar Fuentes, by now the manager of the Red Hook Food Vendors’ Association, but he reverses the usual framework that sees the vendors as authentic because they reproduce a distant, exotic locale. Instead he suggests that the vendors are authentic because they contest a rapidly gentrifying city. It’s all about *respect*, Slab says. “Respect the fact that, in an area where the bells of gentrification have begun to toll loudly, where Fairway has arrived and Ikea is not far off, a scene like this refuses to be anything but what it is.” He reinterprets authenticity in *New York* terms, as a way of life that resists gentrification, but it is a way of life that gentrifying bloggers, like white residents of Harlem, can consume.¹⁹

Cesar Fuentes, the vendors’ spokesman, agrees with this point. He underlines “the paradigm shift that’s happened from Latino to non-Latino [and] to a changing neighborhood.” For Cesar, the media, especially Porkchop Express, are crucial players in expanding the food vendors’ clientele to

meet this demographic shift. But Cesar has his own take on the vendors’ authenticity. He doesn’t say the tastes are exotic, the women are earthy, or the *mercado* scene is a sensual evocation of a dusty Central American town. It’s that the vendors are artisans, “*artisans* of their craft.” Unlike ordinary street vendors who “will sell you a hot dog or an ice cream,” the Red Hook food vendors “cook with the soul and with the heart, just as if they were cooking at home. This is how you get what you get over here: *fresh* authenticity.”

The Red Hook ball fields, where Latino families put up makeshift restaurants serving real, honest food of their home countries, is one of the last bastions of real food to be found in New York City. If it’s replaced by a series of dirty water [hot] dog carts, a sausage-and-pepper stand, or some generic high bidder, it would be a travesty.

—Ed Levine, *Seriousseats.com*, June 5, 2007

Despite, or because of, their growing celebrity, the Red Hook food vendors became the target of tightened regulation by the two city government agencies that control street food and public parks. In June 2007, after the vendors’ summer season had already begun, the New York City Parks Department abruptly decided to “regularize” the temporary use authorizations they had granted to the vendors for years. Instead of continuing to issue four-week permits and renewing them throughout the season, the Parks Department would impose an open bidding process like the one in use at other public parks for vendors to buy longer-term licenses. Though the auction could have become an excruciating annual procedure, the Parks Department eventually decided to issue use permits that would be valid for six years. At the same time, though, the New York City Department of Health declared that the conditions in which the Red Hook vendors had worked for thirty years violated the city’s health code, and threatened to shut them down if they did not qualify for a license.

No one knew for sure why the city government suddenly went on the attack. The Parks Department said that because the vendors wanted to use the ball fields for a longer season, they went beyond the limits of temporary use. Though the Health Department claimed they did not know that food was being prepared and sold at the Red Hook ball fields, most vendors vaguely recalled health inspectors visiting them eight or ten years earlier. Meanwhile Cesar Fuentes claimed that he “had receipts” to prove that the

vendors had “registered” with the city’s Department of Consumer Affairs. Cesar also suggested a financial reason the city government clamped down. He said the City Comptroller, New York’s chief financial officer, discovered that the Parks Department was not extracting as much money from the vendors as they could do by auctioning use permits: “[The Comptroller’s Office] was [now] coming down hard on us about these kinds of affairs.” But what really may have motivated the city government’s attack is Red Hook’s gradual gentrification and the imminent opening of IKEA. “One of the interesting things about gentrification,” Cesar says, “is... that once this change takes place, someone’s going to get evicted. Sooner or later. It’s happened in Harlem, in Williamsburg, it’s happening here.”

In fact the vendors had not had an easy time with city agencies since the 1990s. During the 1970s and 1980s, when the Parks Department lacked the staff and the desire to enforce their control over public parks in a troubled area of the city, they sold a use permit to the Guatemalan League and left the Liga to deal with the vendors. “It was just a very vague, very informal attraction,” Cesar says. By the 1990s, though, with more Latino immigrants coming to the ball fields, the Parks Department formally required the Liga to apply for a permit. Though the food vendors still had an informal arrangement with the league, they gradually drifted apart. The reasons for the breakup aren’t clear, but during the 1990s, with more vendors selling food and drink, problems arose over a continual pile-up of garbage and the illegal consumption of beer. Because of these two issues, by 2000 the vendors were in trouble with the Liga as well as with the local police precinct, the local community board, the city’s Health Department, and the borough parks commissioner for Brooklyn, Julius Spiegel. At that point, when Cesar, a college student who spoke both English and Spanish, was frying plantains on weekends at his family’s stand, the vendors asked him to negotiate on their behalf with the authorities. “And Julius Spiegel gave me a shot. Gave me two weeks. And in two weeks, change began happening.”

Cesar developed a three-part strategy for defending the vendors’ interests. First, he insisted that, like a Business Improvement District, the vendors should take responsibility for sanitation and security, hiring people to clean up all the garbage left in their area of the park, whether it was the vendors’ own garbage or someone else’s, and forbid the sale of alcohol. “Between 2000 and 2004, we really cleaned up our act,” Cesar says. “I mean literally.” He also met often with the head of the local police precinct: “Just

so the cops [on the beat] would know that I know him.” The biggest change, though, was that he organized the food vendors into a self-governing association so they could pool resources, coordinate actions, and speak with a single voice—Cesar’s. Maybe because he studied sociology in college, Cesar saw the beauty of collective action.

The vendors’ reputation grew not only with the Parks Department and the police, but also with local politicians, mainstream media, and bloggers. In 2006, at the peak of the media buzz, Cesar persuaded the vendors to incorporate their group as a not-for-profit association, a 501c6, according to a provision of the U.S. federal tax code. As he explains it, they formed a trade association “whose main vision is to preserve and maintain the thirty-four-year tradition that is the Red Hook Food Vendors.” Cesar “may have had a premonition,” as he says, that increasing publicity would motivate city agencies to look more closely at the vendors. At any rate, their new nonprofit status helped them the next year, when the Parks Department demanded that they bid for a use permit.

This demand aroused serious anxiety. The vendors had no idea how much competition they would face for a permit to sell food at the ball fields, or how much a winning bid would cost. They had heard that the hot-dog vendor with one of the most lucrative spots in the city, in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, paid one hundred thousand dollars a year just for the permit. (According to the Parks Department, the cost of a seasonal permit for a hot-dog stand in Central Park at that time varied from six hundred dollars to three hundred thousand dollars, depending on location.)²⁰ In Red Hook the food vendors were paying a total of \$10,500 a season for a series of renewable, four-week permits, and an additional \$30,000 for cleanup. If other groups or individual entrepreneurs put in higher bids for a new use permit, the vendors would lose the location they had developed for thirty-four years and lose a major share of their livelihood as well. They were also disturbed about the time it took for the Parks Department to issue the application form and rules for completing it—from June, when the department told the vendors they had to enter an auction to bid for the permit, to the following January, when the vendors finally got the application form. Moreover the Parks Department set the deadline for filing the form only four weeks later, giving Cesar, who, as the executive director of the Food Vendors Association, was responsible for completing the application but also held a day job as a social worker, “a lot of sleepless nights.”

Just at this moment, tensions within the vendors' association exploded. Several members accused Cesar of not giving a full accounting of the money he collected from them, a few hundred dollars a month, and of paying himself too big a salary. Cesar replied by resigning from his position as executive director and threatened to stop representing the vendors in negotiations with city agencies. Three weeks later, after all the vendors had signed a petition asking him to return and pledged him their "total support," Cesar resumed his position.²¹

The contacts Cesar had cultivated, as well as his premonition that he should incorporate the vendors' group as a nonprofit organization, worked out well in the permit crisis. A staff member of a local development corporation helped Cesar complete the forty-page permit application, which he did on behalf of the nonprofit organization rather than for the individual vendors. "When a nonprofit applies for something," Cesar says, "it's something that the city really needs to consider very strongly. Because it's not greed, it's *for* something." During the months of waiting for the Parks Department to issue the application, and waiting again for their decision, the vendors also benefited from the support of local elected officials and the media, support that Cesar actively solicited. "I decided right off the bat," he says, "I decided to go public. First, I decided to advise our intimate friends, our supporters, the news writers.... Then we tapped into politicians, who were very proactive because the news on the web blogs went like wildfire."

As a result the Red Hook Food Vendors Association had no competition in their bid for the use permit, which the Parks Department granted at the same price the vendors were already paying: \$10,500 for the season. The new permit is good for six years; it covers the entire year rather than just the summer months, and it carries only 5 percent increases for inflation each year after the first. Cesar credits the vendors' triumph to the media that supported them, but more grandly he also sees it as a triumph for democracy: "Even if there were very big forces at work," he says, "there's nothing bigger than the force of people coming together. It wasn't just about the vendors—twelve people and their representative. It was about a whole city fighting for something. It became symbolic."

This is a sad update for me to write. The government agencies whom WE are supposed to be in control of have taken their toll on yet one more of our fun and particular to NYC gems and reduced what was once one

of the most unique and rewarding experiences in NYC to just another generic, watered down, lowest common denominator of any other bureaucratically regulated version of their kind of fun they think we should be having that there could be. Welcome the end of an era that had successfully prospered and pleased the populace of NYC for three decades without problem nor incident.

—Steve M., Yelp.com, August 17, 2008

Though the vendors' unity worked to great effect in gaining the group a permit from the Parks Department, each family was on its own to bring its stand into compliance with the city's health code. This was an expensive and time-consuming process. Every vendor had to find an enclosed, mobile truck or cart of the kind the Health Department required for hygienic food preparation, scrape together the money to buy it, and then renovate or retrofit it for immediate use. Buying a used truck is expensive—it could cost fifteen thousand to thirty thousand dollars—and equipping it to pass the health code inspection adds another twenty thousand to thirty thousand dollars to the bill. Vendors' families pooled their savings to meet these costs, with some of the grownup children taking out loans on their houses and other families seeking loans from relatives in their home countries—an unusual reverse remittance. Family members drove down the East Coast to pursue leads on used trucks that might be suitable, but some vendors, even after spending thousands of dollars to install new equipment, failed to pass the health code inspection on their first try. Moreover, because the Parks Department did not issue a full permit until the end of March 2008, several vendors waited until then to buy their equipment. That is why, on opening day in mid-July, only six of the twelve vendors in the association, the first to get their licenses from the Health Department, were ready to do business at the ball fields.²²

Equipment was only one part of the problem. The Health Department demanded that every person working at the stands, from the owner to each assistant, get a food vendor's license. This required each vendor and worker to take a course on sanitary food preparation; passing a four-hour course entitled them to a two-year mobile food vendor's permit, while passing a fifteen-hour course qualified them for a lifetime. Another problem involved putting all workers at each stand on the books. Licensed street vendors must pay taxes; this requires them to incorporate their business or file tax forms as a sole proprietorship, which opens their bookkeeping to all

state agencies, including the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Department of Homeland Security as well as the federal, state, and city tax bureaucracies. Finally, food vendors pay two hundred dollars each for the Health Department permit that enables them to have their truck inspected and also rent space in a commissary where they store their truck during the week.

After months of drama over the permit crisis, including last-minute charges and countercharges when a city agency lost the paperwork, the Red Hook food vendors prepared for their return to the ball fields. In March, when the news came that they had won the Parks Department permit, a headline in the weekly *Brooklyn Paper* set the joyful tone: "The Red Hook vendors are back!" For the next three months food bloggers, radio stations, and the city's leading newspapers kept up a constant stream of anxious reports and hopeful speculation. By early June Cesar was being interviewed everywhere and sending out email bulletins about when the vendors would likely return. Supporters, including professional journalists and chefs, posted video clips of the previous season online. The city seemed collectively to lick its lips and hold its breath in anticipation of the vendors' opening day, though some people, joking about IKEA's imminent arrival, predicted a culture clash between tacos and Swedish meatballs.

Striking a somber note, Cesar cautioned the vendors' many fans that meeting the Health Department's requirements might alter their appeal. "Our victory was bittersweet," he told *Porkchop Express*. "The physical, unique aesthetic—weather-beaten tarps, an Old World food bazaar and unique 'mercado' feel—couldn't be kept despite our appeals." This earlier "character," he said in a later radio interview, "was very rustic, very authentic."²³

Though most of the vendors' fans remained loyal, everyone noted the changes. A few bloggers even posted negative reviews. New customers complained about the long wait to buy food, rude treatment by vendors, and exhaust fumes from the trucks. For old customers there was an even more serious problem: the intimacy was gone. Of course it wasn't surprising for the vendors to feel on edge and maybe give that impression to customers when the uncertainty over their situation had delayed the season from opening on time and shortened the number of days when they could try to recoup their investment. Working in a truck may be more hygienic, but the whole process of preparing and selling food at the ball fields was no longer

as informal as it had been before. Moreover dealing with the large number of non-Latino customers did not enable even the most generous-spirited vendors to pretend they were cooking for neighbors and friends. Instead vending at the ball fields had become, as Steve M. and others suggested on Yelp.com, a bureaucratically controlled situation. Seeing the vendors as a counterweight to Brooklyn's rapid redevelopment was much harder than it had been in the 1990s and early 2000s—and was surely very different from when the first vendors came to Red Hook in the 1970s. Looking into the future it seemed unlikely that immigrant food vendors could coexist with the alternative form of global commerce practiced by IKEA just a few blocks away.²⁴

"THE REAL WORLD: BROOKLYN" (MTV, 10 P.M.)... Anyone who watches a show about eight 20-somethings set loose in a house with a manufactured beach and a mini Crunch gym, and then makes fun of them because they're not living an authentic Brooklyn lifestyle, is seriously missing the point. Even if the house is in Red Hook.
—*New York Times*, January 4, 2009

The consensus among Brooklyn's resident cultural critics before the store opened was that IKEA did not conform to the borough's "authentic" lifestyle. Too spare for the working-class traditionalists, too conformist for the hipsters: IKEA's aesthetic would appeal to no one, they said, and would betray the monumental ruins of the waterfront as well. Red Hook residents who opposed IKEA made a different point. They argued that the store would draw such heavy traffic that the area was "going to be a madhouse," as one neighbor said. Within a few weeks of the store's opening, though, the media reported a new consensus: the real effects were not so bad. IKEA's free water ferries and shuttle buses "made the hard-to-reach neighborhood without a subway stop a little less remote," said the *New York Times*, and an unanticipated large number of visitors, many walking around the neighborhood on foot, confirmed that Red Hook now appeared *interesting*. "It's transformative," the architecture critic Philip Nobel wrote in *Metropolis* magazine, unconsciously evoking Chuck's earlier Chowhound post ("it's transportive") about the food vendors. In one way or another, through pupusas or Swedish meatballs, consumer culture was going to change the neighborhood from an urban wasteland into a destination: "Red Hook is now, for the first time, on the way to other places."²⁵

Surely it had been unrealistic to think that IKEA shoppers and fans of the Red Hook food vendors were separate tribes, each with its own tastes and customs. Despite the criticism of mass consumption that IKEA fed—see the scene in the movie *Fight Club* (1999) where Edward Norton's character says, "I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. . . . What kind of dining set defines me as a person?"—vaguely creative twenty-something and would-be nonconformists really like IKEA products. It isn't all about modern design. In a post on Mark Bitman's food blog on New York Times.com, Daniel Meyer confesses that he alternates between trips to Red Hook for quesadillas at the ball fields and trips to IKEA for Swedish meatballs. This provokes posts from other readers, who admit that they love the Swedish meatballs too. Does this mean that tastes have shifted from the vendors to IKEA, or that there is a chance for peaceful coexistence?²⁶

Cesar's fears about the food vendors' vulnerability to gentrification appear to be well founded. But the vendors have been willing to court non-Latinos as a new clientele, not only tweaking their menu at the ball fields but pursuing new customers in other places. According to a recent Chowhound post, two of the ten Red Hook food vendors park their trucks late at night in front of a music club near the Gowanus Canal and sell dishes to patrons coming out of the shows. Paradoxically the trucks that the vendors bought in order to stay at the ball fields really make them more mobile. But this may be an involuntary mobility, thrust upon the vendors by several factors: changing expectations about Red Hook inspired by new chain stores; foodies' changing tastes in ethnic foods, compounded by less discretionary income in the economic crisis; and competition from the city's growing number of Mexican restaurants and food trucks, some of which are not owned by Latinos.

When Luis competed for the 2008 Vendy Award, he lost to the Vendley brothers, three white guys from southern California who sell tacos and carne asada at Calexico, a "chainlet" of two food carts that they park on the street in Manhattan; in 2009 they opened an indoor restaurant on the waterfront near Red Hook. This doesn't mean that Luis's pupusas aren't great, but it does demonstrate that the vendors face sharp competition in a city of eaters where cosmopolitanism is a way of life, and that authenticity is always subject to new interpretations.²⁷

Luis's loss to the Vendley brothers also suggests that after all the vendors' efforts to meet the city agencies' requirements, after all the political support they won, and after all the media buzz, they still haven't achieved

a permanent right to the city. Many street vendors are hounded by the police and the enforcement agencies, pushed out of central locations and neighborhood shopping streets by planters and other street furniture and local "anti-vendor" rules. Like Luis, about 90 percent of New York's street vendors are immigrants. Most don't speak fluent English. They find it hard to defend themselves against unpredictable coercive action by the state's security organizations. In 2008, when the City Council held hearings on bills intended to lighten the vendors' burden and increase the number of full-time food-vending permits from thirty-one hundred to twenty-five thousand, the Bloomberg administration proposed fingerprinting people arrested for unlawful vending, a serious step against immigrants trying to earn a living by selling tacos without a license or in an illegal location.²⁸

Red Hook's future is bound to take more twists and turns as the city government tries to figure out how to deal with the demands of different forms of globalization. Some think the best strategy for future growth would renew Red Hook's industrial roots. Just before IKEA opened, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey signed a lease that permits a cargo port to continue operating on four piers for the next decade. And a new study criticized the mayor for allowing IKEA to turn the old graving dock into a parking lot because this made it hard for the shipping industry to have repairs done in New York City.²⁹

But this is not the only plan under way, and Cesar is right to fear that the vendors cannot outlast Red Hook's gentrification. The permit and license crisis of 2007—occurring, perhaps not coincidentally, on the eve of IKEA's arrival—nearly drove the vendors out of the location in the ball fields that they had held for more than thirty years. If the space that they created is, in its own way, an urban village, it is threatened by the corporate city of chain stores that is gradually forming along the waterfront.

Yet the vendors' supporters are trying to imagine another model. At the end of the vendors' 2008 season, the New York chapter of Architecture for Humanity, a nonprofit group that designs and builds social service projects in Africa and South Asia as well as in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, organized a competition for ideas about designing a permanent marketplace at the ball fields. This marketplace would reproduce the informal *mercado* the vendors had created before the Health Department imposed its new regulations. While keeping conditions sanitary and up to code, it would restore the immediacy of vendors cooking for their customers under canvas canopies in the open air. Thirty-one entries were submitted to two

juries, one consisting of five of the Red Hook vendors; the other, more specialized, including Cesar Fuentes, “J. Slab” of Porkchop-Express.com, four well-regarded architects and designers, and a high-level staff member of the Parks Department. The designers of the winning entries were asked to work together with Architecture for Humanity, the Vendors’ Association, and the Parks Department to build a permanent home for the food vendors. This would be a new public space sponsored by a different sort of public-private partnership, an urban village “for the public realm.”⁹⁰

Unlike the traditional urban village, this marketplace is a consumption space to bring ethnic groups and social classes together—not too different from the farmers’ market at Union Square but certainly different from the corporate food court in a shopping mall. Though the *mercado* would be a victory for Brooklyn’s foodies, it would also be a triumph for a vulnerable group of immigrant vendors who until recently operated in the shadow of the law. Unlike most groups with only an informal claim to a place in the city, the Red Hook food vendors will have won recognition of their right to put down roots.

The struggle for the right to the city at both Union Square and the Red Hook ball fields underlines the growing importance of food consumption in defining an “authentic” urban experience. In a different way, food production is beginning to define another kind of common space, community gardens, where land is publicly owned but not classified as park land. Here, unexpectedly, another group of stakeholders with little money or power has also won the right to put down roots.



B

The Billboard and the Garden *A Struggle for Roots*

The New York I lived in [during the 1970s]... was rapidly regressing. It was a ruin in the making, and my friends and I were camped out amid its potsherds and tumuli.... If you walked east on Houston Street from the Bowery on a summer night, the jungle growth of vacant blocks gave a foretaste of the impending wilderness, when lianas would engird the skyscrapers and mushrooms would cover Times Square.

—Luc Sante, “My Lost City,” *New York Review of Books*,
November 6, 2003

The weather is unusually warm for a Saturday morning in mid-October, and the clear horizon of the sky stretches blue and wide above this distant patch of Brooklyn. To the southeast, high above the elevated subway tracks, a jet plane climbs on the first part of its journey, away from Kennedy Airport in Queens, its real point of departure, but also far away from the two-story, redbrick houses and vacant lots of East New York, long known as one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. When you get out of the subway train at Van Siden Avenue and walk down the stairs from the elevated tracks, you feel a bit lost in the shadows and the absence of shops, except for a small corner bodega, on the quiet street. But a short, smiling