

Emotion will drive new urban food practices

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Urban primary food production in combination with urban food practice — unleashes its full transformative potential. In 30 years time, cities will be celebrating their own harvest seasons.

Food production today is driven by large scale economics. High volumes of identical produce, with uniform quality, are grown in large, monocultural fields, and are then shipped across the globe to a supermarket near you. And to everybody else's supermarket too. Everyone gets the same stuff, basically.

Will this change in the future? Yes and no.

The economic rationale behind it won't change. Just as luxury goods don't sell by being cheaper, alternative food practices will continue to evolve and coalesce into a broader change. Scientists describe some of today's practices as "pockets of future existing in the present". Our bet is that our feelings of reverence for nature, and a longing for some food security, will increase over time with climate change, recurring food and energy crises and political turmoil. We will realize how fragile the just-in-time version of food security is, even though it has given us cheap food, and we might opt for more of a just-in-case attitude.

Parallel urban reality

These new alternative urban food practices will not entirely supplant the global food system, but can start to work in parallel with it, supplying urban districts with a larger degree of self-sufficiency, using more sustainable methods. These urban districts will become enviable places to live, pushing local real estate prices upwards. The productive city will bloom, in more than a metaphorical way.



To see how this will work out we must consider not only the future urban food production, but urban food practice. Cities have always been places where food is processed and refined, rather than grown, based on what we choose to eat. Changing what we eat is a good first step, but it is not enough. If food production is to be sustainable, we need to change not only what kind of food we produce but how food is produced (including primary production, processing, distribution), where it is produced and by whom. All this is what makes urban food production — and urban food practice — relevant in the future.

The climate impact of transporting food is less damaging than one thinks, if sea faring ships are used, and (again) the economies of scale are at work. The large negative impact comes in the production phase, and during the processing. (Nevertheless, it does feel intuitively odd to buy a lamb chop from New Zealand, when living in its antipode Stockholm.) Since we humans are not rational beings, local production can still give us solace and reassurance. It just feels better, and we re-connect.

Giving up age-old divides

Another mental shift will be giving up on the age-old divide between food producing countryside and parasitical city. Also, on a city planning level.

Today, zoning laws divide cities into housing, commercial and industrial districts. Outside the city we have rural land, which is protected from development. If you build there, it is no longer considered farmland. For good reasons. We are truly dependent on keeping our best soils as farmland. But there is an inherent conflict in that many cities are located just adjacent to very good farmland, that is why the cities were located there in the first place. So, if the city expands, the farmland has to go.

A possible solution would be to introduce a new zoning category, the food-producing urban district. Among these future semi-high buildings, you'd find density food enterprises galore, allotments in the yards, sea food farms in the water, food cathedrals and food forest gardens instead of parks. In such a district the celebration of harvest will take hold again.

How does that sound? How does it feel? Probably quite positive.

Making 2052 real in 2022

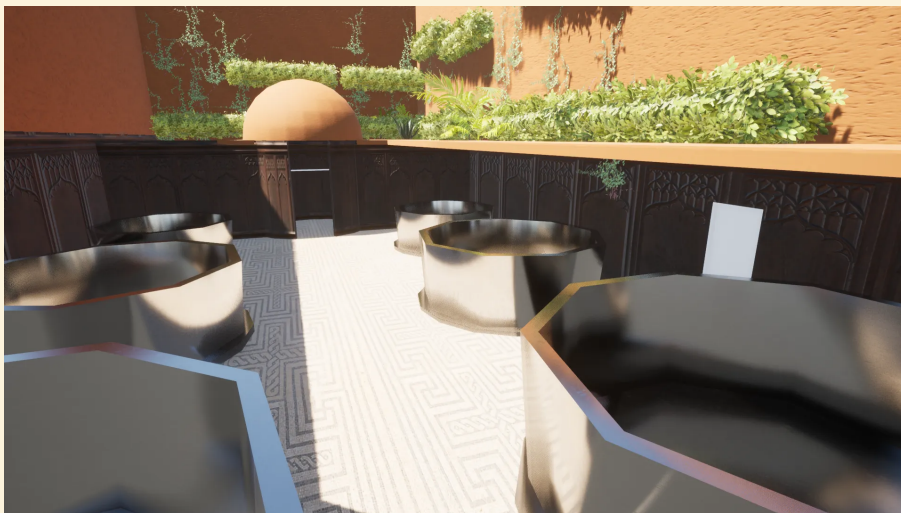
Working with the City of Stockholm we created a scenario for urban food production in 2052, using a speculative design method called future prototyping. We have also created a few futuristic yet likely and

realistic dishes, to get an actual taste for this future 30 years ahead.

In our speculative scenario several food crises in the 2020s and the 2030s altered our relationship to food, and the production of food.

In the Stockholm of 2052 food production is revered and takes place in cathedral-like buildings. Mostly on an industrial scale, but for redundancy local groups take care of allotments and local ecosystems. The Harvest Festival has replaced Christmas as the year's most festive season. Children receive gifts. Special harvest decorations are common and adorn homes and public spaces.

It has been interesting to compare our ideas with a soberingly scientific meta survey ("Exploring the transformative potential of urban food", A. Hebinck et al, Nature, Dec 2021). The survey compiled results from 82 scientific papers on world-wide studies on urban food initiatives such as community gardens, urban agriculture, food justice organizations and more. The most prevalent outcome among these initiatives was increased (re)connection with nature, increased ecological resilience and increased self-sufficiency.



Enter the food cathedral.

These findings chime very well with parts of our more speculative approach where we set a semi-spiritual tone for our 2052 food practice, with the cathedral-like food production plants, celebratory rituals and a new festive harvest season. Reverence for food changes our behavior. Hygienic



demands on the visitors to the food cathedral's production hall are turned into a ritual of cleansing. The ritual takes place in a somber, dome-capped room. You wash your hands and put on a special coat before you enter the impressive light-filled main hall with its high ceilings. We believe that reconnecting with nature and the feelings of security, comfort, sociability and joy will be the primary drivers of this change, rather than pure economic reason. Then of course, in the long run, emotional value easily translates into economic value.