

05 Feb 2014



As kids, coming home from school, my sister and I used to have a joke: “If you can’t smell burning in the kitchen, then we’re having salad for dinner.” My Mother has many talents, but cooking isn’t one of them, so it was routine for us to see black smoke billowing out of the kitchen, accompanied by colourful Glaswegian language! But every smoke cloud has a silver lining, and through necessity I developed an interest in cooking from an early age – and have been a foodie ever since.

Article first appeared

<http://www.blog.urbact.eu/2014/02/paradiso-del-cibo-food-paradise>

Whether you enjoy growing, cooking or just eating it, this is a brilliant time for those with a shared interest in food and urban issues. All around us, there are amazing initiatives reshaping our cities and addressing shared problems through the medium of food. I’m going to come back to this subject in greater detail in another blog post, but here are some appetizers in the meantime.

30% of global consumer energy demand and 20% of Greenhouse Gas emission: food is at core of key challenges

I’ve just come from the launch of the new URBACT pilot projects where two of the new additions have a food related theme. Burgos in Spain will share its expertise in placing gastronomy at the heart of a city’s economic development model, whilst Sodertalje in Sweden will seek to transfer its highly effective work connecting local suppliers to school kitchens. Both are good examples of the integrated approach to urban development championed by URBACT.

These new projects address issues highlighted by food campaigners: a focus on supporting local producers; reducing food travel kilometres; and promoting sustainable local economies which link cities with their neighbouring rural areas. Two ongoing Round 3 URBACT projects also address these themes. One is the URBACT Markets project, led by Barcelona, promoting the importance of markets in cities. The Catalan capital – itself home to 39 food markets – is working with nine other cities to explore ways in which the supermarket tide can be turned in favour of markets and local suppliers.

At the other end of Europe, Brussels is leading on Sustainable Food. As its name suggests, this URBACT network explores how to grow, deliver and enjoy food in cities. The project addresses some of our key challenges – such as the food sector accounting for over 30% of global consumer energy demand and 20% of greenhouse gas emissions. It also focuses on ways to repair the fractured relationship between city consumers of food and their rural suppliers, and champions the community growing movement.

Their point is that it's not just in the countryside that people can grow food. Not so long ago, urban spaces in Europe were routinely used for growing vegetables and raising animals, and projects like Sustainable Food reconnect with these principles of self-sufficiency. Since 2007 the Incredible Edible movement has also spread this ethos, supporting communities to come together through producing and sharing food. Pam Warhurst, the movement co-founder, explains the phenomenon in her TED talk *From humble beginnings, they have fostered the establishment of a network that is now going global and which has created links into schools, amongst businesses and within communities.*

An important role in the emerging sharing economy

The connection between food and communities was at the heart of another inspiring food story led by Amsterdam-based design-agency Pink Pony Express. Tasked with resolving a litter and public hygiene problem relating to discarded bread in a diverse Amsterdam neighbourhood, they mobilised an ambitious campaign that tackled the problem and brought different local groups together. The wonderful story of transforming holy bread into energy (yes, holy bread, that's not a typo!) – is too long to recount in full here but you can enjoy it on their website . It is a very cool experience!

A key finding for Pink Pony Express was the power of food in bringing people from different communities together. Sharing food is a long and deep-rooted expression of human connection that is found in most cultures. The reciprocity of offering and accepting food is also a basic human instinct. So it's not surprising that food occupies an important role in the emerging

sharing economy, with its emphasis on citizen collaboration and reciprocity.

In Seoul, possibly the world's leading Shared City economy, an innovative project called Zipbob uses food to create and rebuild community cohesion. This social enterprise uses community cooking in a variety of ways to foster engagement – for example by bringing groups together to experiment with making and sharing dishes utilising the same ingredients. Making and eating food together is used as a way of creating a shared social space in neighbourhoods where residents have lost their sense of community due to a dramatic and intense period of urbanization. Zipbob's work is an important part of the shared city economy promoted by Mayor Park.

The good news is that food is here to stay – as an urban development theme at least. Whether through growing, delivering or simply enjoying, it is something that binds us all. The role it plays in the social, economic and environmental life of cities is likely to move up the agenda, and this is likely to be reflected in URBACT's future work.

In the meantime, we've only been able to whet your appetite here, so, if your city is already doing interesting things in this area, we'd like to hear about them – and you can follow our two new pilot projects once their online spaces are established.

By Eddy Adams, URBACT Thematic Pole Manager

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