Urban foodscapes:
Repositioning food in urban studies through the case of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside¹

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**Introduction**

Food is a basic material requirement of life and is central to urban lives and landscapes. From low-income people’s daily struggle to obtain sufficient sustenance, to the growth of community gardens in middle class neighbourhoods, the production and distribution of food is an increasing concern in cities. Thus, we argue that food should be a more central focus of urban studies research and that the concept of ‘foodscape’ can contribute to this literature. ‘Foodscape’ offers a language for thinking through food-place relations in terms of the geographies and politics of urban class relations and their connection to the character of urban built environments and socio-economic conditions. Focusing on foodsapes emphasizes the socio-spatial construction of food and thus highlights, not simply food provision, but also questions of existing power structures and potentialities for future change. We develop this concept through the case of Vancouver, BC’s low-income, but gentrifying Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. We highlight how food access for poor people in cities involves a complex and contradictory negotiation of both sites of encounter and care and also exclusion and regulation. We then explore how recent incursions of middle and upper class ‘foodie culture’ into the neighbourhood, through the food industry’s role in gentrification, are reshaping the foodscape for both low-income residents and higher income ‘foodies,’ creating sites of both encounter and conflict. Foodsapes, like socio-economic classes and urban neighbourhoods, are relationally produced in and through the spaces of everyday life.

**Foodsapes and the City**

If we position food at the center of a critical analysis of urban inequality, it is worthwhile to utilize and further develop an established approach or concept in our analysis. One possibility is research into ‘food deserts,’ typically defined as low-income areas that lack grocery stores or other retail food, often due to income or racial inequalities (Walker et al., 2010, Kelly et al., 2011). Largely based on quantitative techniques and GIS, this literature has developed a rigorous and detailed approach to the analysis of food in cities (McKinnon et al., 2009). Yet, its strengths in identifying neighbourhoods that lack grocery stores and in highlighting economic and racial inequalities in food access are mitigated by its tendency to produce static and fragmentary accountings of numbers of food sources without conceptualizing the ever-changing, social, relational, and political nature of landscapes of urban food consumption and provision.
For critical urbanists, an alternative to this quantitative, supply-side approach is ‘foodways,’ “the cultural and social practices that affect food consumption, including how and what communities eat, where and how they shop and what motivates their food preferences” (Alkon et al., 2013: 127, Cannuscio et al., 2010). The *sociality* of the foodways approach is paralleled by the second, complementary concept of ‘foodscape,’ which explicitly emphasizes the *spatiality* of food systems. While food deserts and foodways have become well-defined through their use in the urban studies literature, the use of ‘foodscape’ has been more diffuse; referring in its different uses to food production, retailing, and consumption and to a range of scales, from global to local (Cummins and Macintyre, 2002; Mikkelsen, 2011; Goodman, 2015). Urbanists have deployed the concept to explore “the ecological sites and social relations of food production, consumption, and distribution” in the corporate organic foodscape (Johnston et al., 2009: 513) and to explore foodsapes within which food has moral and ethical meaning (Goodman et al. 2010). Both of these approaches point to the political potential of foodsapes in elucidating the “processes, politics, spaces, and places of the praxis … embedded and produced in and through the provisioning of food” (Goodman et al. 2010:1783). Despite these interventions, it can be argued that foodscape remains a “chaotic conception” (Sayer, 1992) – one that may evoke a general sense of a phenomenon but is too all-encompassing to be of great analytical value.

Nevertheless, we argue that this weakness can and should be overcome because the concept offers a language for thinking through food-place relations in terms of the geographies and politics of urban poverty and survival (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009). The concept can be sharpened by taking seriously the situated and relational connotations of Appadurai’s (1996: 33) use of ‘-scapes,’ “which are not objectively given relations … [but] deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors.” Thus, the foodscape concept both requires and rewards being *situated* in a particular place and focused on the relationships that a particular community has with food. Its conceptual value can also be enhanced by focusing on the mutually constitutive relationships among various aspects of a food system, rather than on its separate, quantifiable, or mappable attributes. Deploying foodscape in this situated, relational way necessitates a qualitative approach that elicits interviewees’ personal narratives to explain the complex, enacted, changing, and political food landscape of a particular urban neighbourhood and its residents. We deploy foodscape in
this way to focus on the intersections of food, consumption, survival, inequality, and politics in the urban landscape.

This unequal landscape is a very different foodscape than the one featured in the glossy advertising of gentrifying condo developments or in municipal sustainability discourse. In many cities, including Vancouver, urban food policies promote some forms of food production and distribution, such as community gardens, fruit tree projects and other ‘green’ initiatives; yet often ignore the relationship between food insecurity and neighbourhood change (Mendes 2008; McClintock, 2014). The power of these hegemonic discourses leads to food itself being thoroughly implicated in gentrification and subsumed under neoliberal logics in contemporary global North cities. This discourse is not complete, however, and urbanists should critically analyze both the experience of poverty and survival and also the sites and practices of middle-class ‘foodingism’ as relationally produced in urban neighbourhoods. Moreover, in such a critical analysis, we should identify the politics of food being generated in contemporary urban neighbourhoods.

Food is part of the relational construction of both urban environments and class relations. Charitable food programs, community gardens, and restaurants are all spaces in which food is produced, distributed or consumed. They are also sites where people from differing class positions may interact. For example, charitable meal programs have a long history in middle and upper class efforts to both support and influence “the poor.” Those who use the charitable system have little say in when, what, or with whom they eat and are expected not to complain about, or reject, the food provided (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2003). At the same time, restaurants are increasingly deploying the discourse of middle class charity to offset critiques that their enterprises are displacing poor people from certain neighbourhoods. Gentrifying restaurateurs argue that they provide employment and make neighbourhoods safer and more economically viable (Chambers, 2011). Some have developed their own free meal programs or have partnered with non-profit organizations to provide food to low-income residents (Aiello, 2014). Non-profit organizations, for their part, often seek to address food security through community food programs such as community kitchens, gardens, and food justice awareness campaigns. Their staff typically operate as facilitators, allowing participants to make decisions around what and when to eat. These programs are often built around the philosophy of empowerment and reworking traditional inter-class relations in the charitable food sector.
In the following sections, we discuss three distinct, yet overlapping, components of the Downtown Eastside foodscape as a case of more general relationships among food, class, and urban space: the daily pathways through various charitable food programs that many low-income residents navigate; the growing influence of gentrifying restaurants in redefining the neighbourhood; and the efforts of non-profit organizations to create a more equitable and sustainable foodscape for residents. Each aspect represents a space where various economic, political and cultural positions come into contact, relationally producing and reproducing the neighbourhood foodscape. These sites or “contact zones” are envisioned as both locations where cultural hybridization can occur (Hannigan, 2010) as well as places of cross-class encounters that can result in tension or solidarity (Lawson and Elwood, 2013, Valentine, 2008). This analysis is based upon interviews with low-income residents of the Downtown Eastside, social service providers, and restaurant owners and workers. These interviews were supplemented by participant observation across a wide spectrum of spaces our interviewees inhabit in this foodscape. These included employment and observation in middle and high-end eateries, working closely with several non-profit organizations around food issues, attendance at food and social service-related meetings and public forums, organizing and being involved in working and research groups, and participating in site visits and tours to Downtown Eastside social service, housing and health agencies.

The Downtown Eastside of Vancouver: A Complex and Contested Foodscape

The Downtown Eastside, which encompasses approximately ten city blocks, has long been an important and contested social space in Vancouver. Originally a site of Indigenous homes and communities that were largely displaced, by the 1950s it became increasingly a “space of male labour,” comprised of transient or former workers in the BC resource industries (Ley and Dobson, 2008: 2483). Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels, providing basic housing and charitable services, first emerged to care for the needs of this population (Sommers, 1989; Linden et al., 2012). At the same time, a small though continued Indigenous presence in the area paralleled a mix of other racialized groups such as Asian-Canadians in Japantown and Chinatown. Later, during the 1980s, following the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and the beginning of state-led erosion of social housing, mental illness and homelessness became increasingly evident in the neighbourhood. Today, low-income residents make up a majority of
the Downtown Eastside’s population, and it continues to be a space that provides much needed resources, including food and shelter (Smith, 2003). The Downtown Eastside is also a space where illicit drugs are easily accessed. This has given rise to high rates of health and social problems including Hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS, overdose, as well as forms of gendered and economic violence that exacerbate insecurity and poverty (Linden et al., 2012). Yet, as Masuda and Crabtree (2010:661) point out, residents have “a paradoxical relationship” with the neighbourhood. Despite the daily challenges of living there, it “is a place that encourages healing through acceptance, solidarity, and community” (Ibid).

These attributes have recently been threatened, as the neighbourhood has increasingly become the focus of gentrification efforts on the part of city planners and developers. Through a discourse of ‘social mix’, significant rezoning has slated much of the neighbourhood for higher-end retail and residential development (City of Vancouver, 2014). Arguably also threatened by recent changes are the Downtown Eastside’s significant concentration of government and non-profit social services – over 35% of social service offices in the city are located there, as well as a high percentage of social and subsidized housing (Smith, 2003; Ley and Dobson, 2008). Among these service providers are religious and secular organizations that provide free and low-cost food.

These organizations are part of a foodscape that is full of contradictions and juxtapositions. In the space of a few blocks there are dozens of free and low-cost food providers, including soup kitchens, subsidized cafeterias, and drop-in centers (Li, 2010).² Corner stores advertise ice cream, soda, and 99 cent pizza while grocers in nearby Chinatown sell inexpensive produce (although they themselves are threatened by profound gentrification pressures). Food is sold or bartered on sidewalks along with used clothes, bicycle parts, and myriad other wares. Community gardens and urban farms have sprung up in previously empty lots, providing an opportunity for residents to grow their own food. Inside some SROs, where many residents live, social service organizations run community kitchens to compensate for SRO rooms’ lack of facilities and space for storing or preparing food. Recently opened high-end restaurants and cafes are replacing less expensive diners as they cater to ‘foodies’ who are seen by themselves and their peers as ‘adventurous’ for visiting the area (Burnett, 2013).

Food, then, is not only central to survival for low-income urban residents in Vancouver and elsewhere. It has become both a political rallying point for more inclusive rights to the city
and a vehicle of gentrification. Food is squarely on the agenda of municipal attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by replacing imported goods with local urban agriculture and farmers markets while food consumption itself has become a fashionable cultural marker of class distinction and the basis for a restaurant industry that has long encouraged and benefited from advancing gentrification frontiers. Therefore, this is a politically and intellectually crucial time at which to focus on questions of food and the politics of daily survival in cities (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009). The critical study of food and foodscape allows us to generate examples, ideas, arguments, and questions about how to better analyze and organize urban food systems and to empower those whose daily survival depends on them.

**Practices of survival in an urban foodscape**

Accessing food is central to daily geographies of survival for low-income residents of the Downtown Eastside. Their daily paths through the streets are both enabled and constrained by the structure of that urban space and their experience of the various ways in which food is made available there. A significant part of this experience entails interactions with charitable food programs that provide free meals and snacks. These organizations are trying to address the specific needs of the people they serve in an attempt to improve health and well-being. In this sense, these sites can be thought of as spaces of care and sustenance (DeVerteuil and Wilton, 2009) where both the materials for survival are provided and acts of caring are performed that create networks and relationships between residents and staff. At the same time, these spaces are sites where middle class expectations regarding behavior and the worthiness of the poor to receive food are enacted. Thus, meal programs are often contradictory spaces for the low-income residents that have come to depend upon them.

When asked about their access to food, residents often stated that getting something to eat on the Downtown Eastside was relatively easy. As Marina, a white woman in her 40s said, “You can’t starve here on Hastings,” the major neighbourhood street where many social service agencies are located. When asked where he goes to eat, Willis described how he moves from one meal program to another through the day as a ‘shuffle’:

I start the morning at eight thirty at United Church. They serve you vegetables and soup. And then somehow I end up here [a drop-in centre] at ten o’clock and eat here. Then I go
next door to the Look Out [drop-in centre]; then I go to the United Church or Union Gospel [Mission]. It’s the Hastings shuffle. [Aboriginal man, 40s]

As Cloke et al. (2008: 252) note in their study of homeless people in Bristol, England, soup lines and free meals, “act both as significant nodes in the daily journeys of homeless people in the city and as strong regulatory influences on such movements …”. Thus, the “Hastings shuffle” and the Bristol “food route” are both examples of the daily rounds that the homeless and marginally housed make to access food and other services. The specific character of these rounds depends upon the economic and housing circumstances of those involved, as well as their past experiences negotiating the rules and expectations of charitable food providers, their understanding of the opportunity structures in which they operate, their social networks, gender identities, and health status, among other factors.

Within the micro-sites of the food programs themselves, governance of the poor is enacted through rules, regulations, and line-ups. Residents may be banned from certain food providers because they were using drugs or acting intoxicated, and some religious charities require that participants attend services in order to receive a meal. In other instances, individuals did not fit into the client categories – age, gender, disability or ethnicity – defined by the food provider, which created divisions and exclusions within the wider community. In one instance, Suzi, an Aboriginal transgender woman and sex-worker, recounted how she was unable to access food at a program for female sex workers because she did not always appear “female”.

When you go [to a woman-only food program] now, you have to be dressed to the hilt. Trannies have to have high heels on and be dressed as a woman. You can’t just go there like I am right now. I am transgender. I am on hormones but I can’t go there just like this. I have to have boobs in, hair-up, make-up on.

Thus, while this particular program welcomes some of the most marginalized and stigmatized people on the Downtown Eastside, it also excludes others who do not appear to fit into its definitions (see also Miewald et al., 2010).

Food line-ups, which are a common sight along Hastings and neighboring streets are the most visible and stigmatizing manifestation of the rules and regulations around charitable food. Standing in line for food creates anxiety and sometimes conflict, a situation that is highlighted in Jimmy’s, description of line-ups: “You spend so much time in line, it’s awful…there are fights
in the line, it’s horrible” [White man, mid-30s]. Those with physical limitations or addictions may not have the ability to wait and therefore are excluded from these spaces.

While residents noted that the quality of charitable food is often limited and lacking in variety, they also commented that it “fills you up” and while “not really the healthiest diet…it’s better than no diet”, they acknowledged that most food providers were constrained in their ability to provide healthier food. For example, Paul said that while he “could do without sandwiches for a while” he also understood that charitable organizations are often struggling financially. He went on, “So you can’t complain. Beggars can’t be choosers.” [Aboriginal man, 40s] While the charitable food sector has been critiqued for providing inadequate nutrition and failing to address the structural causes of food insecurity (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2012), it also provides spaces of care, sustenance and survival (DeVerteuil and Wilton, 2009; DeVerteuil, 2012a) for low-income residents that serve as “zones of encounter” between individuals of differing class backgrounds. As such, these elements of the foodscape provide opportunities for governance of the poor as well as increased understanding across class lines (Lawson and Elwood, 2013).

While some programs are limited to providing meals and enforcing sobriety among participants, others operate with few barriers to participation and some offer spaces where residents can access showers and phones, take yoga or art classes, cook together in community kitchens, and interact with both staff and neighbors (Cloke et al., 2008; Masuda and Crabtree, 2010). Where residents chose to eat is often a reflection of where they felt they received care in the form of good food and sociability, where they felt safe, and where they were treated well by staff. For example, many women said that they favored women-only food programs, which they identified as safer and providing better quality food. When asked why she chose to largely eat at a women-only program, Kate responded,

Well first of all it’s a women’s center and I don’t have to worry about guys bugging me and it’s a safe place to eat. They have a lot of other services there and it’s just a nice place to go. [White woman, 30s]

Having a “nice place to go” instead of standing in an often-rainy sidewalk line-up provided a greater sense of safety and caring for Kate and other women.

While the focus of most geographical research on urban poverty and survival has been on sites where social services are provided, an examination of the foodscape sheds light on places beyond these institutions. The inexpensive diners, pizza stands and corner stores that dot the
Downtown Eastside serve as alternatives to the charitable food sector because they are less restrictive, allowing for greater control over when and what to eat (see also Gaetz et al. 2006). These places are often overlooked when it comes to understanding the social dynamics of low-income foodscape (but see Bedore, 2010, Alkon et al., 2013), or are viewed as sources of poor nutrition and therefore in need of intervention to increase the amount of healthy foods they sell (O'Malley et al., 2013). However, residents of the Downtown Eastside are able to buy ice cream, chips and candy for a few dollars at corner stores and inexpensive cafes, while Chinese take-outs are known to provide large portions at cheap prices. James explained that although he had limited financial resources, he did occasionally “splurge” on a restaurant meal as a special treat.

There’s Flowers [Café]…it’s just one of the inexpensive restaurants. If you live down here, you don’t have a whole lot of money to spend on restaurants and stuff like that so I use that one and then there’s a Chinese place over in Chinatown. You get a fair amount of food there for four dollars. [Aboriginal man, 40s]

Yet, while restaurants and corner stores offer respite from charitable meals, they too can be sites of regulation. One must have the financial resources to purchase food and, increasingly, these locations are policed by private security guards who eject those who do not appear to be “paying customers”. Therefore, some residents rely on an underground economy to access food, often buying or trading for it on the street, thereby avoiding the regulations of both the charitable and private sectors.

### Food, inequality, interaction, and exclusion in a gentrifying neighbourhood

The longstanding absence of the state in food provision to low-income people, in favour of the charitable food sector, is compounded by the Downtown Eastside’s proximity to Vancouver’s CBD and waterfront. Currently undergoing significant gentrification, as a result of past disinvestment, its lower rents have been a key factor in a push to ‘revitalize’ the area, epitomized by a chief city planner’s urging of Vancouver’s condo developers to turn their attention to developing the neighbourhood (Blomley, 2003; Beasley, 2004). A prominent element of this gentrification has been the promotion of a high-end ‘foodie culture’ (see Johnston and Baumann, 2010), evident in the growing number of upscale cafés, bars, bistros and restaurants that have emerged in the last decade and the media-driven rebranding of the
neighbourhood as the next foodie destination featuring a cadre of ‘top chefs’ (e.g., see Scout Magazine, 2013; also Burnett, 2013; Aiello, 2014).

This ‘foodie gentrification’ involves the displacement of the inexpensive diners and corner shops that once thrived in the neighbourhood. Municipal efforts to create “social mix,” via the conversion of privately-owned SROs into more expensive hotels and the displacement of affordable amenities, means fewer affordable places for people to live and eat (Funk, 2012). The newer spaces are not only unaffordable, but also represent social and symbolic exclusions that produce dehumanizing effects for those excluded (see Hannigan, 2010). Gentrifying spaces are thus labeled “zones of exclusion” by many residents and anti-poverty activists, who describe experiences of exclusion as an “internal displacement” resulting in, “the feeling of being out of place in one’s own neighbourhood” (Marquez et al. 2011). Charitable organizations also feel threatened by the rapid gentrification of the neighbourhood where rising rents and gentrifier NIMBYism increasingly constrain their abilities to provide services (see also DeVerteuil, 2012b).

Exclusion in high-end foodscapes is not determined by economic factors alone, but also by cultural and symbolic factors like comportment, aesthetics or décor, and menu legibility. Yet, those owning and operating high-end restaurants tend to argue that their contact with a broad spectrum of low-income resident neighbors is characterized by respect, rapport, and even an active inclusivity. Nonetheless, while arguing that they do not practice exclusion, they also describe how they understand their spaces to be exclusionary and detail circumstances where they enacted multiple forms of exclusion. As one owner of a higher-end restaurant explained:

… but yeah we honestly have a really good rapport with local people around here. If it be residents, or general street people. You know we have to go over rules with them, and stuff like that … I’ve told them they can’t be coming in and out, using the washroom, and that sort of thing, and they are totally respectful. But the low-income people can’t really afford to dine here. I mean we do go out and give food out sometimes.

This tension between exclusion and inclusion was common across most interviews with restaurateurs. As another owner below insists, no one has ever been turned away from their establishment. This assessment however does not include those residents who would not try to enter because they perceive the space is not meant for them. Nevertheless, respectful cross-class relationships were central to most restaurateurs’ perspectives on the neighbourhood foodscape.
We never deny access to anybody ever. You know, I sat there with a dude, two weeks ago, a guy from the street, he drinks his rubbing alcohol everyday with his crew, and he came in here [to ask for food], and I didn’t charge him … Obviously, if it becomes an open door policy, I’m going to get overwhelmed with guys thinking they can come in here and get a free meal, but there is a balancing act that can be played with respect.

Despite narratives of convivial, neighborly life, research fieldnotes in this gentrifying foodscape indicated a more complex reality. While there were moments of inclusion that corroborated gentrifiers’ narratives, there were more often strongly contrasting examples of exclusion, such as the violent removal of visibly poor or racialized residents from bars, or practices of “catching people at the door” if they were assessed to not belong before entering. Even when interactions are not physically violent, they are often antagonistic and humiliating. Further, these examples of exclusion are not only experienced at points of contact with gentrifier owners or workers, but extend often through the consumers visiting the neighbourhood. For example, one evening of participant observation described the nightscape of a Downtown Eastside street dotted with many restaurants and bars, watching a partygoer throw his pizza crust to the ground and suggest to a man panhandling nearby that if he eat it, he would be given a ‘real slice’.

As different forms of violence, these examples should not be interpreted as aberrant moments of nightlife in the city. Instead, they are some of the many ways that high-end spaces for consumption play a role in the control, constraint, and diversion of ‘unwanted’ people. Indeed, while restaurant owners’ direct control over space technically extends no further than the property limits of their establishments, including their entrances and patios, many of them identified the street as a space over which they feel they have influence. For some, their attempts to remake the neighbourhood streets in their own image was intentional, for others it was a secondary outcome of their business practices. Thus, as sites of encounter, restaurant spaces highlight the deep contradictions and tenuousness of inclusion, various practices of exclusion, and the instrumental role food-related commercial upscaling plays in the contested class transformation of urban neighbourhoods.

Drawing connections between issues such as persistent rent increases and their combined effect on access to affordable food for low-income residents, Downtown Eastside activists have been strident in their position that restaurant or foodie gentrification is to be resisted. Famously,
a months-long picket in 2013 targeted PiDGiN, a new restaurant with a “champion” chef that opened across a narrow street from historic Pigeon Park – a space where many homeless and low-income residents congregate daily. The action was sparked in part by an opening-night review by a local blogger that praised PiDGiN’s large windows, looking onto the park, offering diners a, “wide angle view of the oft-sordid goings on across the street … [while] supping foie gras rice bowls and sipping Negronis in heated, cloistered comfort ….” “[T]hat’s the reality of Vancouver,” he continued, “and I dig that they’re framing it instead of running from it” (Scout Magazine, 2013). That same summer, similar protests focused on a second restaurant, with pickets holding signs including one saying, “Stop Boutique Restaurants” (Lupick, 2013). Indeed, these developments have provoked an increasingly antagonistic politics between activists on one hand, and producers of foodie culture on the other, all the while in a constantly shifting foodscape.

The narratives above highlight the varied and distinct geographies of food and exclusion in this particular urban neighbourhood – one that many low-income residents traverse everyday. Attention to the classed foodscape thus provides useful insight into the myriad ways that low-income residents can be displaced from much-needed amenity spaces through the making and remaking of restaurant spaces. Given the centrality of food to urban survival, and the quickly unfolding pace of upscale foodie culture in Vancouver, these narratives and experiences provide a strong indication of how micro-level practices and boundary-making work to produce neighbourhood change. It remains to be seen how gentrification will ultimately affect this broader geography. While government-funded social housing and well-established social services may be able to maintain their footing as the gentrification frontier advances, questions remain as to whether the often-vulnerable charitable system and retail establishments with lower prices can cope with rising rents.

**Community food programs: contact zones, politics, and the right to food**

While resistance to gentrification is one form of action around food in the contemporary Downtown Eastside, others seek to reimagine the neighbourhood foodscape in social, nutritional, and physical terms and to increase the range of alternatives to charitable food. Community food security programs, including community gardens and kitchens, sliding scale food stands and coupon programs at farmers markets have emerged. Unlike charitable meals, community
programs engage participants in activities like food production or cooking and often have some skill- or community-building aspect (Heynen et al., 2012). They attempt to both improve the quality of food and, in some instances, address wider structural issues of income inequality. For example, the Hastings Urban Farm operates as a social enterprise, providing employment and training, a horticultural therapy program, and a source of fresh produce for meal programs. As McClintock (2014: 148) notes, “Urban gardens … arise within the interstices and margins of both the food system – by providing food where markets have failed – and of the built environment itself – arising on vacant lots and other urban fallow.” By advocating for greater community involvement in food production and equitable distribution, these projects attempt to subvert both industrial food production and charitable food distribution.

Yet, urban agricultural projects such as the Hastings Urban Farm also reflect the “contradictory processes of capitalism [in that they] both create opportunities for urban agriculture and impose obstacles to its expansion.” (McClintock, 2014: 157, his emphases). These urban gardens and farms are often the result of tax incentives to developers who are encouraged to ‘land-bank’ lots that they are not ready to develop but which will likely be built on in the future as part of what Quastel (2009) terms ecological gentrification. Therefore, while they may provide food and skill-building in the short-term, the long-term viability of these spaces as part of the foodscape is far from secure.

Thus, on the one hand, these initiatives represent the insecurities that emerge from reliance on the private sector to provide space for urban food production and have been critiqued for “reproducing neoliberalism in placing the economic needs of producers above food provisioning, for turning to market mechanisms to increase food access rather than demanding it of the state” (Alkon and Mares, 2012: 350). Yet, they also represent the potentialities of alternative food production models since they allow residents to participate in food production that would have otherwise been impossible, given their living conditions and lack of access to land. Nonetheless, their small scale and tenuous finances mean that, unless they are scaled up to reach a larger number of food insecure people and provided with secure funding and facilities, they are unlikely to redress the inherent inequalities that structure the food system (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2009; Dowler and O’Conner 2012).

In addition to the role they play in involving community members in food production and provisioning, these community food programs can also serve as “contact zones” between
individuals from differing class positions can give rise to cross-class and cross-ethnicity/race solidarities and politics (Lawson and Elwood, 2013). Because they are often based on philosophies of empowerment and engagement, rather than reproducing the strict class divisions that are often replicated within the charitable food sector, community food programs have the potential to create new politics of food. One example of this is the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House (DTES NH), which takes the politics of food further by focusing on the “right to food,” “urban food justice” and “food sovereignty” to link food access to issues of democracy, citizenship and environmental justice (cf. Bedore, 2010). The organization’s operating philosophy is directly political, identifying it as “activist, reformist and non-violent, critical of the poverty mentality and its handmaiden the charity model” (Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House a, n.d.).

According to the organization’s Food Philosophy (Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House b, n.d.), the “right to food” is central to their efforts and it directly critiques the contemporary charity model by advocating for healthier food provided in a dignified manner. In its efforts to reshape the neighbourhood foodscape, the DTES NH, through its Kitchen Tables Project³ (http://dteskitchentables.org/), not only provides support for a number of community kitchens and a mobile smoothies program, but also works to empower residents through the Right to Food zine (http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine/) and the Right to Food Mobile Mural Project which outlines their food philosophy, including the statement “Dignifying food = more food @ more places with no lineups.” This statement actively critiques the charitable food model – where those receiving meals are subject to the humiliation of standing in line, often on the street – with a more equitable system where food is produced, prepared and consumed in welcoming and inclusive spaces.

Similar to radical food organizations such as Food Not Bombs (Heynen, 2010; Wilson, 2012) the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House directly challenges the charitable food system by providing an alternative discourse to the institutionalized ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ paradigm by “[o]ffering people a choice of the foods they ingest”. Beyond provisioning, its politics challenge the “commonly held myth that those living in poverty don’t have nutritional knowledge or aspirations” by acknowledging “food to be a communicative instrument and hence [using] its offering as an instrument of community building” (Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House b, n.d.). In this respect, the organization is attempting to work to both
improve the quality of food provided in the short-term as well as work on long-term efforts to re-envision the foodscape (cf. McEntee and Naumova, 2012; Wilson, 2012).

Indeed, residents in our study spoke about the wider food justice movement in the Downtown Eastside, of which the DTES NH is one part, and argued that it had made a difference in recent years. While cakes, muffins and donuts where once the primary foods provided, there is now more fresh produce served and, increasingly, organizations are moving away from line-ups in favor of a more open door approach. Residents also expressed an awareness of the connection between food and dignity, and, as noted above, strived to eat at places where they were respected through the attitudes of staff, the quality of meals, and the way in which they are served. Yet, all programs remain constrained in their abilities to improve food quality by a lack of adequate funding and, as long as the reliance on donations persists, these organizations will be limited in their abilities to reform an entrenched system.

**Conclusion: spaces, scales and sites of urban food studies**

The geographies of food in cities involve both zones of encounter – providing the potential for alternative claims on the city – and sites of marked exclusion. In this chapter, we argue that ‘foodscape’ is a concept that allows us to think through food-place relations in reference to the politics of class relations and their mutually-constitutive connections to urban built environments and socio-economic conditions. What, then, might be some of the implications for urban studies of an effort to reposition food more centrally in our studies of urbanism and urbanization? What can the concept of ‘foodscape,’ with its emphasis on society, space, and scale, add to urban studies scholarship? As our case study suggests, urban food studies must emphasize on not only food provision, but also questions of existing power structures and possibilities for future change. Such studies must also focus on the contestation and negotiation of urban food production, provision, and consumption spaces. In the remainder of this chapter, we specify three ongoing discussions in urban studies that invite, and can benefit from, a foodscape perspective.

First, positioning foodscape more centrally in urban studies resonates with longstanding debates over how (and for whom) urban *space* shapes and is shaped by power, politics, governance, and policy. The existence of community kitchens, gardens and other alternative spaces of food provision and production is both a matter of governance and policy and of urban
imaginaries enacted by citizens who are working to create food systems that fall outside of, or in opposition to, corporations and the charitable sector (Colasanti, et al. 2012; Wilson, 2012). For example, alternative and, in some cases, autonomous food spaces are seeking to create sites of food production and consumption that are located “beyond capitalism” (Wilson, 2012). This may include alternative food provision models, such as Food Not Bombs, as well as often hidden sources, such as discarded and traded food, and their related informal economies. Where, how and when these spaces are created as well as how they, in turn, shape cities are concerns that can guide ongoing research agendas in urban studies. These spaces highlight negotiations and struggles over both the “right to food” (Riches, 2002) which is based on equitable access to healthy food and the “right to the city” (Harvey, 2003; Mitchell, 2012; Mitchell and Heynen, 2009), grounded in equitable access and control over space. The intersection of these rights highlight the reality that marginalized urban residents are increasingly alienated from sites of food access that sustain their lives. Thus, a key question is: who is able to decide how urban space is used and in whose interests are those decisions made? The creation of spaces that challenge the dominant system of food production and provision, such as the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House, suggest both more equitable food provision and also proclaim greater access to spaces that enact the right to food within the city.

An attention to foodscapes not only highlights the socially and spatially uneven place of food in urban life but also suggests the importance of thinking about the scalar constitution of these geographies. Not only is most food produced elsewhere – calling to mind a whole series of environmental and ethical questions – but the governance of food production, provision, and consumption in cities is also scaled. Analyses of foodscapes, whether focused on hunger and food insecurity, on opulence and high-end consumption, or on the way these two aspects are produced and experienced relationally, must then see beyond the food (Passidomo, 2013). This entails approaching food access as defined, but not determined by, a set of surrounding institutions, of which government spending priorities, from the local to the national, housing provision, urban development, and public health-care are only some of the most salient. An attention to scale also allows for an analysis of how the influence of alternative food provision must extend beyond the context of the neighbourhood to argue for broader systemic changes to the food system, including calls for greater food sovereignty on a national and international scale.
Finally, an attention to the sites where food is produced and consumed evokes the notion of contact zones. These organizational and institutional sites lie “between the micro-level of face-to-face human interaction and the macro-level of society’s structural properties” (Philo and Parr, 2000: 517). Charitable food programs, restaurants and community gardens are grounded, peopled, and enacted social products in themselves and research might investigate how they are made available for engagement and change at ‘street level’ as much as through written policies (Proudfoot and McCann, 2008). These are spaces where people from different class positions and ethnic/racial backgrounds come into contact with one another. Thus, the foodscape is produced through actors from various class backgrounds. These interactions can serve to reproduce power structures and inequalities, they can result in conflict and struggles over space, or they can produce new urban imaginaries and alliances. These relationships, in turn, shape the foodscape by creating new spaces for food and erasing old ones. As residents navigate the Downtown Eastside for food, for example, they are involved, along with staff, restaurateurs and activists, in making “‘everyday rationalities’, the effects of which then travel beyond the local instants of their production to become generalized as agreed ways of getting things done” (Philo & Parr, ibid: 519). In this context, the possibility of agency by both those receiving and providing food within an overarching hegemony is worth recognizing. At the same time, the ability to shape the foodscape of an urban neighbourhood is hardly equitable and many residents risk losing their claim to a place in the city as more and more of their neighbourhoods are gentrified. Urban studies research will, therefore, continue to critically interrogate contemporary development trends. We argue that this critical perspective can be enhanced by combining questions of a right to the city with those regarding a right to food.
References


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Notes

1 The research on low-income foodscapes in this chapter is also discussed in Miewald and McCann (2014). The research on restaurant gentrification draws on a wider project discussed in Aiello (2014).

2 There is however, no food bank depot in the neighbourhood although some programs do provide canned and packaged food to their participants. Therefore, the primary source of food is meal programs.

3 The Kitchen Tables Project is jointly run by the DTES NH and the Potluck Café Society, a social enterprise that provides food skills training to residents as well as meal programs and a community kitchen (http://www.potluckcatering.com/).