



Susan Parham. *Food and Urbanism: The Convivial City and a Sustainable Future.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Illustrations. 376 pp. \$122.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-85785-452-0.

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The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen food, its production, modification, preparation, and consumption become an integral aspect of almost every part of our daily lives. Our fascination with food seems to know no end as meals are snapped and uploaded before consumption, while the media bombards us with endless advice on cooking and the latest “super foods.” This interest in food in the popular media has been paralleled by a burgeoning academic interest in food. One has to wonder why it has taken so long for this interest in food to emerge given how central food is to our lived experience. It was perhaps that very ubiquity that made us overlook it for so long. Thus Susan Parham’s *Food and Urbanism: The Convivial City and a Sustainable Future* is an interesting addition to food scholarship; it brings together food and urbanism and focuses on the fundamentals of that relationship. One of Parham’s aims is to break down disciplinary boundaries around the studies of food in an urban context, particularly at “the intersection of design and social science” (p. 268). Parham’s concern with transcending disciplinary boundaries to bring together research with a variety of perspectives is a recurring theme in this book. While I cannot question her experience, my observations with regard to food-focused research in New Zealand is that it already transcends disciplinary

boundaries, perhaps a reflection of our experience as an export-oriented food producer. This does highlight the difficulties in producing a book that addresses any issue in a consistent manner across the globe.

It is important at the outset to acknowledge that this is a comprehensive exploration of food and urbanism. It provides insights on how food and food-related activities might be better integrated into our attempts at achieving more sustainable urban spaces. In its 362 pages it traverses how food has been produced, marketed, and consumed not only in the present but also in the past. The historical insights Parham provides create a thread of experiences and practices that connect our past to our present expectations of the production, marketing, and consumption of food. For anyone new to urban history or seeking a background to present-day issues, this book will be a trove of useful material. That historical overview also helps to highlight the central role that food has always played in our urban areas. Given the centrality of food in human settlements, it is clear that the role of food changes as cities grow and global populations become more and more urbanized.

The book is divided into three parts which broadly focus on different aspects of food and the city. Part 1, “Food, Domesticity and Design,” looks

at food and its role and development in the domestic and local context. It is an exploration of everything from community gardens to cafes and supermarkets. Ambitious in its scope, something that is a hallmark of the other parts, part 1 establishes the groundwork on which later chapters are built. It provides insights that urban academics and practitioners may find useful since they fashion the residential neighborhoods in which these roles and processes are played out.

Part 2, “Gastronomy and the Urbanism of Public Space,” as the title suggests, looks at food in the public realm. Here, food becomes part of the culture of cities and urban areas and part of the defining of the character of that urban area. The street food of Asian cities and the food markets, such as Melbourne’s Queen Victoria Market, have become essential to the character of those cities, and are well exploited in tourism marketing. It is these aspects that encompass the convivial aspects of food in the city. In chapter 5, Parham addresses suburbia, the part of the city that many academics find problematic but that provides homes to significant parts of any city’s population. Here, she finds suburban foodscapes that offer the opportunity to produce food but also a space that has produced the stultifying mall where food is sanitized and prepackaged. Malls and supermarkets abound, often displacing traditional small local shops and markets. Since it is set in a historic framework, particularly Ebenezer Howard’s garden city ideas, chapter 5 provides some interesting insights regarding how the city has commodified and confined food. This part ends on a more positive note by focusing on how food can be grown in cities through the emergence of urban agriculture, community gardens, and convivial green space policies. Here, the connections to the World War II “Dig for Victory” campaigns that Allied forces used provide clear evidence of the potential for food production in the cities, particularly in the suburbs where land is readily available.

Part 3, “Food Space and Urbanism on the Edge,” looks at food on the edge of the city and shows how these peri-urban areas often produce the food that cities need to survive. This is a genuine issue in many countries where urban expansion is a threat to the daily food needs of the city, especially the production of market garden crops, such as salad vegetables. This issue lies at the heart of urban suitability, given that the loss of this land means that cities need to import more and more food from further and further away to feed themselves. Since some of this food will be air freighted, this has significant implications for dealing with climate change. Again there are some more positive chapters in this part, including those that look at regional food systems. These systems are explored through such concepts as “terroir,” where distinctive foods become the basis of food tourism and in turn support traditional markets that are explored in earlier chapters.

As noted at the beginning of this review, this book is a comprehensive exploration of food from an urbanist viewpoint. This thoroughness, however, makes it an incredibly dense book and not a book that can easily be read from cover to cover. This seems to be the product of the book’s “long gestation” (p. xi), which confirms that this is very much a labor of love that has been developed over many decades. That long gestation means that Parham has accumulated a wealth of material that she generally uses to good purpose. However, at times the material overwhelms the text, creating some very dense writing. Sometimes the length and complexity of sentences, where adjective is piled on adjective, leads to the loss of the main ideas being communicated. At times the book would have benefited from a stronger editorial hand. Parham acknowledges the potential issues with the density and complexity of this book in the conclusion, where, unusually, it includes a summary of the content of each chapter. While this is useful it does overshadow the role of a conclusion in tying together the multiple threads that make up the work. In the end, the “Final

Thoughts” chapter is preoccupied with the theoretical and research aspects of food studies rather than addressing what all this material about the intersection of food and urban spaces can tell us. It is a rather lost opportunity.

The density and complexity of parts of this book may be challenging for some readers and undergraduate students might require some careful direction to get the best out of it. Due to its diverse contents, the book could be used to explore different threads that the relationship of food to urban living and urban space creates. One of this book’s strengths is the consistent mapping of the historical origins of different aspects of the relationship between food and the city. This is often an overlooked aspect of urbanism and the material in this book will surely be welcomed by planning and urban historians. The illustrations are also generally disappointing, which is a pity since this is a book that would have benefited from some images to illustrate the text. They are generally very small and in black and white, in many cases making it difficult to discern what is being illustrated.

It is a book that will find a role as an essential reference for anyone with any interest in food and a positive gold mine for any postgraduate student starting on their research into any aspects of food or urban-food relationships. The reference list is comprehensive, covering some seventy-two pages, and doubtlessly it will be usefully mined by students and researchers alike. Parham also fulfills her desire to break down disciplinary barriers as she consistently provides diverse viewpoints on food issues and demonstrates how and why disciplinary barriers can be traversed to create new and novel insights. As she shows throughout this book, using different perspectives on food and its role in urban systems can enrich our understanding of how cities work and how they might be transformed.

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