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## *Gastronomic Identities and Urbanism*

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#### Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

Culinary heritage, an edible identity, is a manifestation of the culture and urban life of a place. Most traditional food practices continue to flourish in historic urban settings as a result of the interplay between the spatial design and the socio-cultural practices. This essay explores these interconnections between gastronomic and architectural heritage through the lens of traditional urbanism. It emphasizes the importance of gastronomic culture within wider urban networks, bringing vibrancy and community engagement to traditional shared public spaces which host a wide range of activities. This symphony of traditions can also help us to achieve a sustainable and richer cultural life. They could become a model to upgrade modern spatial design practices, which are usually based on mere convenience or individual benefit.

La herencia culinaria, una identidad comestible, es una manifestación de la cultura y la vida urbana de un lugar. La mayoría de las prácticas alimentarias tradicionales siguen floreciendo en contextos urbanos históricos como resultado de la interacción entre el diseño espacial y las prácticas socioculturales. En este artículo se exploran las interrelaciones entre patrimonio gastronómico y arquitectónico a través del prisma del urbanismo tradicional. Asimismo, se destaca la importancia de la cultura gastronómica como parte de otras redes urbanas más amplias, aportando dinamismo y participación ciudadana a los espacios comunes tradicionales donde se celebran actividades diversas. Esta sinfonía de procesos patrimoniales contiene importantes enseñanzas para conseguir una forma de vida sostenible donde la cultura tenga mayor presencia. Estos procesos podrían también contribuir a mejorar las modernas prácticas de diseño espacial, que normalmente se basan en la mera conveniencia o el beneficio particular.

O património culinário, uma identidade comestível, é uma manifestação da cultura e da vida urbana de um lugar. A maioria das práticas alimentares tradicionais continuam a florescer em cenários urbanos históricos, como resultado da interação entre o desenho espacial e as práticas socioculturais. Este estudo explora estas interconexões entre o património gastronómico e arquitectónico através da perspectiva do urbanismo tradicional. Enfatiza a importância da cultura gastronómica como parte de redes urbanas mais amplias, trazendo vitalidade e envolvimento comunitário para os espaços públicos partilhados tradicionais que acolhem diversas actividades. Esta sinfonia de processos patrimoniais contém ensinamentos importantes para alcançar uma vida mais sustentável e culturalmente mais rica. Podem contribuir também para actualizar as práticas de desenho espacial modernas, que se baseiam geralmente em mera conveniência ou benefício individual.

Food, basic for human existence, has always been an integral part of urban life and social practices. What, how and where we consume food is evolving with changing lifestyles and urban morphology. Amid these changes, many traditional culinary legacies have survived the journey over time and space; however, they are poorly recognized as part of our tangible cultural heritage, and their relevance to the continuity of a particular kind of urbanism is hardly acknowledged. The regional gastronomic culture differs across the globe according to geography, built form, climate, history and traditions, thereby forging disparate identities in each region. "Food is an intrinsic and defining aspect of a city's identity; its smells, textures and tastes manifest a city's cultural heritage, define its social habits and bring vitality and joviality to its streets" (Lim 2014: 63-64).

The true essence of a city's culinary heritage lies in both home and street food. There is a rich diversity in the method for preparing food, the utensils used, the way food is consumed and how it is disposed of. However, traditional culinary practices are subject to the combined effects of globalization and urbanization, giving rise to a pluralistic food culture. While this might be helping cosmopolitan cities to become more inclusive, it is also altering and leading to the extinction of indigenous food cultures and traditions, which become progressively homogenized.

Nevertheless, the traditionally designed parts of our cities still hold some of the most authentic food practices. This is deeply related to the urban life these areas facilitate and their kind of urban fabric. However, food in traditional urban spaces like streets, markets, shops and local restaurants remains a hardly explored topic.

As local dishes are gradually becoming restricted to more private spaces, the study of food heritage and spatial design becomes an important topic, especially when "food heritage runs so much deeper than the recipes you find in restaurants (...). It provides the earliest knowledge of locality, interconnectivity and sustainability that enabled our ancestors to thrive and trade internationally" (Pant 2017).

India is a country with a particularly varied and rich culinary palette and history, as a result of its varied geography and the continuous cultural exchanges between the indigenous and migrant communities over centuries. Food is thus central to understanding the diverse cultures and communities of India and is a way of tasting the history of its cities and regions. Many of them have still retained their culinary legacies and some of them have even become significant components of the gastronomic map worldwide.

Several locations in India have been analysed to identify the connections between local food culture and each particular urban setting.

1: Charminar Public Square with varied informal activities including food stalls overlooking Mecca Masjid and Unani Hospital

2: Bustling market in front of Char Kaman leading to Pathargatti



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## Charminar Precinct in Hyderabad, Telangana

Hyderabad, a city with 400 years of history, was recently awarded the title of Creative City of Gastronomy by UNESCO. Hyderabad cuisine, also known as Deccani cuisine, is a beautiful patchwork of Mughal, Turkish and Arabic, along with the influence of native Telugu and Marathwada cuisines. It is responsible for 12 % of the city's working population (Nomination Dossier, City of Gastronomy, Hyderabad, 2019). That itself demonstrates the importance of food in the overall economy of the city. While globalization and tourism have brought new food trends to this area, often referred to as India's Second Silicon valley, its traditional cuisine is still preserved in the lanes of its old city, as well as in many high-end restaurants celebrating this legacy.



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- 1: Charminar Heritage Precinct
- 2: Quaint shops of Naan
- 3: Informal vendor selling irani samosa around Charminar
- 4: Informal food joints around Charminar (Dosa and other South Indian food items, Shaik Nizamuddin Laeeq, 2019)

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William Whyte, in *The social life of small urban spaces*, noted how “if you want to seed a place with activity, put out food. Food attracts people who attract more people” (1980: 50-52). Street food brings conviviality and makes cities more inclusive and liveable. This is very evident in the extremely dynamic and complex urban ensemble of Charminar and Char Kaman, with its Islamic architecture providing an environment for over 1,000 food joints, with fabulous aromas of *Biryani*, *Haleem* and many more. It attracts people from all religions and economic backgrounds, especially during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, with its *iftar* parties (gatherings to break the fast together).

Apart from Ramadan, the everyday life around the Charminar and the old city of Hyderabad is equally exciting and vibrant. The axial street with the backdrop of the historic Pathargatti (stone arcade) market, leading to Charminar, is full of shops selling pickles of all varieties, *chaat*, ice creams and fruits stalls, along with old markets of other items. The built fabric of the streets, which allows for various activities, creates a very vibrant enclosure well-suited to human activity. The sounds of the *azaan*, the muezzin’s call to worship from Mecca Masjid, floating through the air, enhances the experience of this rich historic setting. Small quaint shops of *naan*, bread made of wheat, of different shapes, evoke the taste and aroma of a distant land and of a distant time in history (Vijay 2020). Visitors can also stand at an old Irani café, taking a sip of Irani *Chai* with Usmania biscuits and Irani *samosa* while enjoying the iconic presence of Charminar and Mecca Masjid. There is an all-around aura of joy in the air with a palpable excitement. The area becomes a celebration of everyday life and of culture.

### ***Koliwad*s of Mumbai, Maharashtra**

Traditional culinary practices also relate to the urban network of food production, distribution, consumption and disposal in public spaces. The *Koliwad*s, the 500-year-old indigenous fishermen villages of Mumbai and its historic docks are examples of a traditional chain of places for catching, auctioning, storing and drying fish. This traditional occupation is intricately woven into the life of these communities, with most of them in the area of Mumbai still making their living off the sea, despite a very different world emerging around them on land and drastic changes occurring under water. The *Kolis* (fishermen) were the first inhabitants of the seven islands of Mumbai. They settled near the coast, with Mangalore tiled sloping roof houses painted in colours as bright and vibrant as their attire. Originally every *Koli* house had an *oti* (veranda) for weaving and repairing nets, along with other household spaces. The principal public spaces in these communities are the markets and dockyards where their daily economic activities take place. Sassoon docks and Bhaucha Dhakka (also known as Ferry Wharf) are some of the old docks still open to the public. They are charged with energy, colour, texture, smell, tradition, and magic right from sunrise.



Worli Koliwada settlement plan



These are the kind of spaces where the communities carry out their daily trade just as they have been doing since the 1800s.

This is also a deeply religious community, of different faiths. They never recommence fishing after monsoons without offering coconut, rice, and flowers to the sea on the day of *Narali Purnima*, an important festivity marking the beginning of the new fishing season.

*Koliwad*s, literally meaning “homes that open to the sea”, are made of colorful houses up to three floors high, which provide a strong contrast to the contemporary urban development of high rise buildings engulfing these settlements.

This community faces many threats, such as overfishing, competition from foreign large-scale operators and, most importantly, the pressure of redevelopment of the coastal land, which is in growing demand. The lack of clear government policies to preserve this culture is making them vulnerable. A recent proposal for a coastal road is being contested due to its evident threat to the livelihood of this native community and because it benefits only a few elites. All these factors have resulted in new generations abandoning this source of income and switching to white collar jobs. Preserving this food culture in the long-term will help to conserve these communities and their architecture, so it needs a comprehensive plan.

### Udupi Temples, and the journey of Udupi food from Karnataka to Mumbai

The Dravidian-style temple complex of Udupi, Karnataka, consists of eight *mathas* (monasteries), different temples, a holy pond, a temple kitchen and a *Bhojana Shale* (dining hall). This is a large-pillared hall with a skylight in its centre. The authentic Udupi cuisine, in the form of *Prasadam* (holy offerings), is served in this hall to almost 5,000 pilgrims every day, and up to 1,000,000 on special festivities. This colorful cuisine is served on lush green banana leaf and consists of salads, chutneys, curries, *payasam*, *dosas* and *appams*. These are made from local ingredients like rice, coconut, jackfruit, spices, *brinjal*, etc. The Sri Krishna Temple, set up by Madhavacharya in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is the most famous temple and is well known for its *sattvik* food too.

Mumbai is a metropolitan city, a home for a number of migrant communities who have also brought their food, thus giving rise to a pluralistic food culture. Udupi cuisine is an example that came to this city and the world as a whole from the Udupi temples when industrialization led to a large migration to cities. This food was adapted to the streets of big cities like Mumbai or Bangalore

1: The historic Sassoon Dock - The boats dock below to unload their wares, while the buyers position themselves directly above waiting for the day's catch to arrive (The Kolis, one of the oldest fishing communities of Mumbai, face an uncertain future. *Firstpost*, Schapova, Polina, 2020)

2: Bhau Cha Dhakka Fish Market

3: Worli Koliwada settlement against the high rise development around (Worli Koliwada and Worli Fort, a fishing village obscured by the city's only highway. *Minor Sights*, 2014)

4: Narrow alleyways of Worli Koliwada (Worli Koliwada and Worli Fort, a fishing village obscured by the city's only highway. *Minor Sights*, 2014)



through the Shettys and the Nayaks, the first caterers who took Udupi cuisine to various parts of India, making some of its dishes an integral part of our everyday meal in metropolitan cities and serving a fast pace life, very different to that of its origin. This seems to have started in the 1930s, when Rama Nayak, a young boy who had migrated from a small village in Udupi established his own stall in Matunga, a central Mumbai locality with a strong Tamil and Kannadiga population. He was selling *idlis* and *dosas*. Later on, in 1942, he is said to have established the first Udupi restaurant in Mumbai. Since then, Fort and Matunga eventually emerged as hubs for Udupis that serve fresh, steaming breakfast and tea-time snacks to those working in office areas, and every city in India hosts Udupi restaurants.

Though Udupi cuisine has travelled the world and dishes such as *idlis*, *dosas* and *sambar* have been adjusted in each place to the local availability of ingredients and their substitutes, the Shri Krishna Temple and the eight *mathas* in Udupi still produce the most authentic flavours of this cuisine, preserve a variety of indigenous recipes, and feed thousands of pilgrims every day.

- 1: Udupi Temple Precinct with Shri Krishna Temple, Bhojan shala and Tulu Astha Matha
- 2: Pilgrims waiting outside the main temple
- 3: Pilgrims savouring *prasadam* in Bhojana Shaala
- 4: Temple cuisine served on lush green banana leaf
- 5: Dishes served in Udupi restaurants across the globe (A Rama Nayak's Udupi Idli House, justdial.com)

### Velleppangady street, Thrissur, Kerala

Regional food has a deep connection with the moral values and the societal structure of each place. The ethnic composition of a place also influences the kind of food that is consumed in that region. Velleppangady market street, in the city of Thrissur is a good example of how ethnic composition is reflected in both the urban structure and the food culture.

This 200-year-old market of twelve to thirteen rundown shops is located in the proximity of Puthanpalli church (Our Lady of Dolours Basilica), Asia's third tallest Gothic church. *Appams* are an integral part of local Christian cuisine and the population living around the church is



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predominantly Christian. The soft, fluffy *velleppams* -type of *appams* – gave the name to this street, Velleppangady (which means *velleppam* market). For generations, every shop of this food hub has been making 500-1,000 *appams* a day in the traditional way, on portable mud-hearths, fueled by coconut shell embers. *Appams* from this area are often served in weddings and other services and this business thrives during festivals.

The main ingredient of this snack is rice, which is produced in the same region of Thrissur. The Kole wetland of Thrissur produces up to 40% of the rice of Kerala state.

The rice used in Velleppangady is bought from the neighbouring Ariangady (which means rice market), in the commercial historical centre of Thrissur, Erinjeri.

The mixed-use built structures of both Velleppangady and Ariangady have shops on the ground floor or road facing part of the houses, with upper floors serving as residential spaces. These are good examples of Kerala vernacular architecture, with steep roofs and wooden windows and balconies. The ground floor shops spill onto the verandas, lining the street with white fluffy *velleppams* and other snacks.

The urban composition of the area, including the church, the *velleppam* market and the rice market, supported by the geography of the region and the cultural composition of the neighbourhood has sustained both this old street and its most famous recipe.

## Conclusion

The profound relationship between food heritage and traditional built form, along with other social, economic and cultural practices, is evident in all of the case studies presented. What they share is traditional urbanism, which allows “the everyday interplay between food and people in public spaces” (Parham 2015: 72) and promotes sociability.

With food as the central or supporting element, these traditional townscapes host diverse activities within densely built walkable communities. Food streets hosting a variety of activities may often be regarded as “chaotic” and “dirty” from a contemporary perspective, but this is the traditional urbanism that brings vibrancy and provides multi-sensory experiences. The principles of Jane Jacob and Leon Krier, emphasising the importance of compact, permeable, mixed-use, human-scaled environments are reflected in these urban forms. They allow such creative clusters to flourish together over time and space.

1: Puthanpalli Church Precinct and Vellappam Street and Rice Market, Thrissur

2: Paddy Fields around Thrissur (Kole Wetlands Of Thrissur, Paddy Fields Kerala, *World Around Me*, 2016)

3: Ariangady market, Rice Bazaar road (New city centres needed to decongest Thrissur, *The Hindu*, Najeeb K.K., 2015)

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There is a lack of sensitivity towards these ingredients of urbanism in many contemporary development strategies, where food-oriented shared public realms are replaced by compartmentalised private designs like malls, supermarkets and restaurants, becoming places of exclusion which fail to provide opportunities for community engagement.

As Susan Parham points out, “the nature of food's relationship to spatial design has significant capacity to support or undermine our cities as sustainable and convivial places” (2015: 269). There is a need for a contemporary urban practice which is able to recreate a holistic dialogue between the built and the unbuilt and to achieve a more balanced and culturally enriching urbanism. The places discussed in this essay provide important lessons to be incorporated into such a practice.

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