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Recommended Citation
Gottlieb, R. (2010, September). The Right to Place: Food, Streets and Immigrants. Pat Brown Institute, 1-6.

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POLICY BRIEF
THE EDMUND G. "PAT" BROWN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

THE RIGHT TO PLACE: FOOD, STREETS AND IMMIGRANTS

by Robert Gottlieb, Urban & Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College

"When emphasizing place-based associations, policymakers and advocates would be best served if their approach elevated place not only as a guide but also as a right and if it framed their initiatives by emphasizing the concept of the right to place."

For the past several years, policymakers, philanthropic organizations, and community organizers alike have come to focus on the concept of *place* as a guide and a framework for policy and action. The Obama Administration, most recently, has sought to elevate place-based initiatives as the centerpiece for establishing cross-cutting approaches to tackle such issues as poverty, lack of affordable housing, and educational performance. Even the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco has become engaged in looking at place-based initiatives, co-sponsoring with the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change a two-day conference in March 2010 around the theme "Improving the Outcomes of Place-Based Initiatives."

The concept of place as a guide to policy has most frequently been associated with geographic locations (neighborhoods, communities, even regions) that have particular problems but potential assets that could be mobilized to overcome, or at least address, such problems. But place can also reference a physical environment (soil, climate), environmental attributes (a watershed), or cultural and social characteristics that may recapture place-based associations across borders or even across oceans. What is perhaps most attractive about place as a guide, whatever the reference, is the emphasis on how change can be grounded in particular social, cultural, environmental, physical, economic, and geographic connections. When emphasizing place-based associations, policymakers and advocates would be best served if their approach elevated place not only as a guide but also as a right and if it framed their initiatives by emphasizing the concept of the right to place. This brief elaborates on place as a guide to action and policy change and on the *right to place* concept in three critical areas: food systems, streets (their design and purpose), and migration.

Food: Redefining Local in the Context of Place and Food Justice

Place-based arguments about food have broadly entered public discourse and have even made their way into policy arenas. The idea is that food grown and sourced locally – items grown and made accessible within a region that become part of that region's diet – is preferable to long-distance food grown, processed, and transported through an increasingly globalized food system. The preference for local food has assumed many forms. It has emerged, for example, as an oppositional argument to globally sourced food, including industrially grown and highly processed food dependent on ingredients secured from multiple locations. Thus, food taking pathways straight from the farm and direct to the eater becomes part of rather than disconnected to an area's cultural make-up. Food grown locally also tastes better, its champions declare, helping eaters better appreciate the source of their food and increasing the consumption of fresh and healthy food, thereby improving the diet and health of community residents.

More broadly, the local food argument is often situated in its cultural, social, environmental, community development, and place-based contexts. The concept of food grown locally is, for example, strongly connected to the idea of a place-based "land ethic," first put forth by Aldo Leopold and further elaborated by such diverse advocates as Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, Fred Kirschenmann, and Michael Pollan. In this way, a contrast can be made between industrial agriculture, which views the land for its commodity value and as a type of production-related input, and a local or sustainable place-based food perspective, which situates the producers as land stewards, includes an "agroecology" viewpoint (land connected to biological diversity and ecosystems), and champions a place-based perspective with the producer, whether regional farmer or urban backyard gardener, a key part of the community in which he or she is located. "Food is the product of a region and what has happened to it, of the people who live there, of its history, and of the relations it has established with other regions," slow food guru Carlo Petrini argues, asserting that "one can talk about any place in the world simply by talking about the food that is produced and consumed there." The local preference argument, then, sees the growing of food within a region as a place-based connection to the land and to the community.[1]

From a community perspective, the local food argument resonates as a way to rediscover the pleasure of food grown locally. Farmers' markets, the most visible community manifestation of local food, exemplifies that type of place-based connection to local foods. The shoppers interact directly with the farmers while also getting to explore a wider diversity of foods as compared to the industrially grown and long-distance food generally available in food retail markets. As one of the few public places in many urban areas, farmers' markets establish an association of local food as part of a community fabric and create new spaces that allow for community interaction on a continual basis. One of the interesting debates among farmers' market advocates is whether a farmers' market should simply be a place where local and regional farmers sell their food directly to community residents or whether the market can be expanded to include a range of other food and nonfood activities (e.g., sale of prepared ethnic foods or pony rides for children, as some farmers' markets provide). Both goals, however, are critical to the complex of arguments about the place-based value of local food: food directly available from local farmers as good food and farmers' markets as community gathering places.

There is a food justice concern about the local preference argument: namely, its potential to speak to some, but not all, communities. When the term *locavore* (a variation of the local food preference concept) was first introduced in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article in 2005, it was immediately picked up by other media and quickly caught on. But instead of simply providing an argument about local preference, the word came to be used by some in the context of eating *only* local foods, and defining *local* as within a certain distance. The Bay Area advocates coined the term *locavore* (from two Latin roots – locus (local) and vorare (eating)) for the *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter who was profiling their campaign to eat locally for a month. The advocates had been inspired by Gary Paul Nabhan's 2002 book, *Coming Home to Eat*, which chronicled his effort to try to eat within 250 miles of his home in Arizona for a year. Nabhan argued the importance of reclaiming native diets and to eat "from species that were native to this region when the first desert cultures settled in to farm here several thousand years ago."[2]

Thanks to the attention generated by the *San Francisco Chronicle* article, the Bay Area locavore advocates soon began to popularize the idea of a 100-mile diet (eating only foods grown within 100 miles) but, unlike Nabhan's place-based argument about the connection between local food and particular cultures (in his case, native cultures and the diet and community health implications of the loss of local foods, which has contributed to the astronomical obesity and diabetes rates among Native Americans), the

[1] Carlo Petrini, Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, and Fair, New York: Rizzoli, 2007, p. 37; see also J. Baird Callicott on how Leopold's land ethic argument leads to an agro-ecology perspective in In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.
[2] Gary Paul Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*, New York: Norton, 2002, p. 38.

100-mile diet came to be applied by some as a *universal* concept, shorn of its social and cultural context. That, in turn, generated a debate about whether one could successfully eat only foods within 100 miles rather than the broader argument about the importance of a place-based local preference approach, as embedded in such programs as food-based community economic development, Farm to School, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), and other innovative alternative food and food justice programs.

Most local food advocates, including those promoting the 100-mile diet campaigns, have sought to identify both the benefits of local food and the negative environmental and social consequences of an export-oriented, industrial agriculture system. But the 100-mile diet concept revealed the vulnerability of the local preference argument as benefitting primarily those who could afford such a diet. Farmers' markets, for example, came to be identified as serving primarily a niche, middle-class, or upper-middle-class clientele, despite their recent origins in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in Los Angeles and elsewhere, as serving low- to moderate-income neighborhoods such as South L.A. and Gardena, the first two established in the L.A. region. Some media representations served only to reinforce the idea of the elite connotations of local rather than a reorientation of how food is grown and consumed. For example, a *New York Times* article about the growing popularity of home gardens as a source of healthy and nutritious food (and the penultimate local food argument – grow your own) identified a trend toward what the reporter called "the lazy locavores – city dwellers who insist on eating food grown close to home but have no inclination to get their hands dirty." Instead of gardening themselves in their home plots, these middle- and upper-income home owners would hire others to garden for them – a type of home garden work force. Similarly, the reporter pointed to a program of the New York Plaza hotel, where guests could purchase a 100-mile menu of food (for $72) grown at the caterer's organic farm.[3]

Local food also came to be promoted by large retailers such as Whole Foods, which intensified the reputation that "local" really meant "for the wealthy." At the same time, the absence of a place-based and food justice context for local preference has created a type of "greenwashing" (or manipulation of the local preference argument) by such global food system players as PepsiCo (with its "largest ever marketing campaign" for "Lays Local" potato chips in 2009), Wal-Mart (with its marketing-oriented decision to source locally), or McDonald's (which claimed to be "the global brand with a local heart" by sourcing within a country in places such as India or the UK to complement its imported, standardized operational philosophy and menu fare).[4]

With the concept of local food entering the mainstream, some food justice and alternative food advocates have sought to recapture the argument about the social context for a local and sustainable food approach. This would require not simply addressing where or even how food is grown, but by whom and under what conditions, including how and by whom it is processed, manufactured, transported, made available, priced, and sold. Just food, or *good food* as it has also come to be called, means living wages for all who work throughout the supply chain as well as their right to join unions, food that is sustainably grown within a region, food that is accessible to all and made affordable through various strategies, and food that is healthy. This *justice-oriented* value chain approach is at the heart of a food justice perspective with regard to local food, and where the concept of good food for all is consistent with the notion of a right to place.[5]

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[3] Olivia Wu, "Diet for a Sustainable Planet: The Challenge ¬– Eat Locally for a Month (You Can Start Practicing Now)," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 1, 2005; Jessica Prentice, "Locavore: The Origin of the Word 'of the year')," May 19, 2008, available at http://www.chelseagreen.com/content/locavore-the-origin-of-the-word-of-the-year/; Kim Severson, "A Locally Grown Organic Diet With Fuss but no Muss," *New York Times*, July 22, 2008; "CPS Events at the Plaza Celebrates the 100 Mile Menu," available at http://media.delawarenorth.com/article_display.cfm?article_id=534.

[4] Frito Lay's blog Snack's Chat – http://www.snacks.com/; Kim Severson, "When 'Local' Makes It Big," *New York Times*, May 12, 2009; "McDonald's to Boost Local Produce," June 7, 2005, at http://www.fwi.co.uk/Articles/2005/07/06/88064/mcdonalds-to-boost-local-produce.html

[5] G. W. Stevenson and Rich Pirog, "Value-Based Supply Chains: Strategies for Agrifood Enterprises of the Middle," in *Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing an Agriculture of the Middle*, edited by Thomas A. Lyson, G. W. Stevenson, and Rick Welsh, Cambridge; MIT Press, 2008, p. 120.

Transportation: The Living Streets Approach

When New York City Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan spoke in March 2010 at the L.A. Street Summit hosted by the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute, she pointed out that Transportation Departments in cities such as Los Angeles or New York are the largest land-use planners in a region, given their operational and policy role governing thousands of miles of *streets*. That association barely registers for policymakers, public officials (including transportation planners), or even for community groups who bear the brunt of a land-use approach where streets are simply, if not exclusively, designed for cars that pass through rather than streets that blend into a community. In some ways, planning around streets can be considered the opposite of a place-based approach: cars use streets to go through places quickly without much regard to people (pedestrians), nonvehicle transportation (bicycles or even transit), or landscape. Indeed, streets become the place where the car becomes the hunter and the pedestrian becomes the hunted or the prey, to use French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's bitter comment in his book *The Right to the City* (1967).

Reconceptualizing the use of streets and their place-based associations has come to be associated with what has been called the "living streets" approach, with Sadik-Khan as perhaps the most noteworthy public official promoting this approach. Most simply put, the living streets approach identifies noncar uses and functions – pedestrian- and bike-friendly street design, open and public spaces without car traffic, new landscaping strategies on and parallel to streets, broader rather than narrower sidewalks, public plazas, transit corridors, traffic-calming strategies, and more – as essential to overall street design. Cars share rather than overpower other uses and users; in doing so, car drivers and riders also get a chance to experience place rather than destroy it. Living street approaches also emphasize the idea of urban infill rather than suburban and exurban development, which shortens rather than lengthens the point between destinations, whether job and home or home and shopping or recreation. Living streets also reduces reliance on parking as another part of the land-use equation, which also has immediate impact on such core needs as affordable housing (parking significantly increases unit costs) or inner-city food market development (land costs related to parking represent a major barrier in urban core areas).

From a policy perspective, a place-based living streets approach, as Sadik-Khan argues, is not only eminently doable but economically viable. Car-related street costs are formidable, particularly when streets become highways and freeways. Protected bike lanes, or new urban oasis-type plazas, as Sadik-Khan argues, can be little more than the cost of some paint and innovative place-based design. Like the arguments about local food, the living streets approach can be (and must be) a justice- or equity-based approach as well; those who are most vulnerable in the current car-centric street system are those low-income communities such as Boyle Heights or Westlake in Los Angeles that would most benefit from a living streets approach. The right to place, in this instance, becomes the right to the street.

Migration: Transnational Citizens and the Right to Place

In my book *Reinventing Los Angeles*, I argued that many of the immigrant communities in Los Angeles, whether in places like Boyle Heights, Pico Union, or Monterey Park, had become "new types of battlegrounds regarding the search for and re-creation of community." Often migrating from rural places in their countries of origin, whether from Mexico, Central America, South Asia, or Africa, immigrants in Los Angeles and other parts of the United States have come to settle and become concentrated in urban neighborhoods, helping redefine the urban experience as a place-based experience. While transnational in many respects, whether in relation to issues such as the use of streets or the experience of food, the immigrant sense of place is clearly more urban than low-density suburban, providing a notion of community that Saskia Sassen has called "a networked politics of place" that is at once local and global.[6]

[6] Saskia Sassen, foreword to Victor M. Valle and Rodolfo D. Torres, *Latino Metropolis*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, xi.

Take streets, sidewalks, and homes that look out at streets. Many of the immigrant communities are characterized by an active form of the living streets approach, providing an ethnic and transnational frame of reference to particular notions of place. This might include new public spaces, busy commercial street life (street vendors), greater pedestrian and sidewalk activity, and homes with porches that face outward. Street life in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco have long been associated with the immigrant experience, dating back to the late nineteenth century where the "networked politics of place" flourished, whether in New York's Lower East Side or Chicago's 19th ward, where the settlement house took root among its polyglot population. In today's immigrant neighborhoods, immigrants walk, bike, take transit, occupy public places, interact publically, and create a new culture of the streets. Instead of recognizing and celebrating immigrant street life, transportation planners, policymakers, and public officials alike seek to contain and ultimately undermine this living streets culture, whether placing restrictions on street vendors, allowing trucks to barrel through neighborhoods as they do in Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights, or failing to create public spaces like parks or plazas that would be heavily used. The right to place, in this instance, involves a recognition of the value of the immigrant experience.

Food provides another illustration of the place-based immigrant experience. There is an adage used by Thai immigrants who migrated from farming communities in their country of origin: "Eat what you plant; plant what you eat." Writer Patricia Klindienst, who has chronicled the experiences of immigrant and ethnic gardeners, argues that "garden metaphors have always been used to describe the experience of migration." Instead of associating immigrants as "transplants" (similar to plants) who have been removed and replanted, Klindienst suggests we understand the immigrant "as a gardener – a person who shapes the world rather than simply being shaped by it."[7] Immigrants are indeed gardeners, and they have come to represent the fastest growing constituency of community gardeners in places such as Los Angeles. The community garden provides a vibrant, defining sense of place. Yet community gardens at best represent an afterthought of policymakers, an irritant when it comes to the politics of real estate and land use. Yet community gardens, particularly in places that had been vacant or abandoned land, enhance the economic as well as the place-based value of the land. But once that occurs, once community gardens become valuable places, the area becomes attractive to real estate development, whether commercial, industrial, or residential. Community gardens, like their immigrant placeholders, are considered transient, temporary, expendable. A place-based approach would not only value their role in bringing environmental, economic, and social and cultural value to those places but would also seek to ensure their viability and permanent status as a public good. Making community gardens and the immigrant gardeners who inhabit them a part of the urban fabric also defines a right to place.

Similarly, immigrants (Latino and Asian in California, but Brazilian, Somali, and numerous other immigrant populations in other areas) now constitute the fastest growing number of local and regional farmers in the U.S.; that is farmers who serve and help sustain a local and regional food system. This is partly due to the transnational nature of the experience; immigrants are recent refugees from the land who bring not only the experience of how to grow food but also a cultural affinity to the type of food grown. This extends to the rapid increase in ethnic food markets and restaurants that serve communities but also help change the urban connection to food. Rather than define this food experience as counter to or, as some would have it, the need for greater assimilation, immigrant food culture helps change the American food experience, blending, reframing, transforming it into a hybrid, a new connection to food that is at once, as Sassen puts it, local and global.

Immigrants are and always will be part of the American experience, helping transform it while still rooted in the sense of place. Immigrant status – historically and particularly today in the virulent anti-immigrant politics that

[7] Patricia Klindienst, *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006, p. xxi.

have so influenced the public discourse and policy approaches that criminalize rather than celebrate immigrants for their contributions to that sense of place – denies basic human rights, whether in the form of uprooting families and neighborhoods or other core human rights. By defining *immigration* in terms of legal status rather that the language of rights, we ultimately undermine our capacity to establish viable, effective place-based initiatives. Among those rights are the right to place, a building block for creating a more socially just, livable, and rooted society, and the range of communities and experiences where the right to place is valued rather than denied.

Robert Gottlieb's latest book, *Food Justice* (coauthored with Anupama Joshi), will be published October 2010 by MIT Press. He is the Director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute and Professor of Urban & Environmental Policy at Occidental College.