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The Kitchen Culture Project: A Center for Food and Culture

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**THE KITCHEN CULTURE PROJECT:
A CENTER FOR FOOD AND CULTURE**

A Thesis Presented

by

ANDREW S. TOOMAJIAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Architecture + Design Program
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University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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Architecture and Art History

DEDICATION

To my wife, Jessie, for her patience and endurance, and for her loving reminders of who I am, and what I am about, for knowing me and loving me, and, finally (and not least of all), for the idea for this project.

To my son, Llewyn, for helping to keep my priorities in check.

To Professor David Dillon, for helping me remember the importance of narrative, and for expanding my sense of the architect as citizen and civil servant.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to everyone who has ever cooked for me and shared a part of who they were over a meal – you have fed me more than you could know.

Thanks to my mom, Sara Penn-Strah, for teaching me to value trying new things and meeting new people, and to my dad, Bill Toomajian for patience, trust, and support through a lot of adventures that probably weren't his idea of a good time.

To Joe Kennedy, Steve Beck, Kendall Dunnigan and Richard Heinberg, my teachers at New College of California, for their foundational guidance and the compelling lives they lead.

And, finally, to my thesis committee, Sigrid Miller-Pollin and Kathleen Lugosh for leniency, trust, and steadying guidance along the way, and to Joseph Krupczynski for providing inspiration and valuable practical input throughout. There is always room for you at my table.

ABSTRACT

**THE KITCHEN CULTURE PROJECT:
A CENTER FOR FOOD AND CULTURE**

SEPTEMBER 2011

ANDREW S. TOOMAJIAN, B.A. NEW COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA

M.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

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Food is a primary aspect of daily life, and it's preparation and consumption function as accessible markers of cultural heritage and as a vehicle for cultural exchange. The Kitchen Culture Project seeks to create a Center for Food and Culture that will function as an aggregator for a number of different programs and organizations working to promote cultural awareness and community development through culinary education and exchange. The focus of the project will be the design of a building on a site in Greenfield, Massachusetts; to house these combined programs and a study of their potential interactions in the community.

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CHAPTER 1

SIGNIFICANCE & JUSTIFICATION

1.1 Food and Culture Are Inexorably Linked

The way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds."

- Michael Pollan

"First we eat, then we do everything else."

- M.F.K. Fisher

Cooking is a primal human activity. The procurement and preparation of food for oneself and one's family are daily activities for people the world over. In the subtle differences in how this plays out from region to region or nation to nation, we find one of the most direct and potent expressions of culture. The United States proudly defines itself as a melting pot, a nation of immigrants. One of the joys of this is exposure to many different cultures, and one of the easiest ways to access this diversity is through food. Simply put, cooking and sharing food is one of the most direct and immediate ways to share culture, heritage, and identity.

Cooking also represents an easily accessible method of income generation. Many informal economies spring up readily around food: people selling food out of a cooler to workers on a job site, bake sales to raise funds for schools or community organizations,

or extra garden produce on a card table by the side of the road. As eating is an activity most of us engage in multiple times a day, businesses that cater to this need by providing affordable, tasty, and healthy food stand a good chance of success. Just as food is a primary vector for cultural exchange, it serves a primal function in the economy, to the extent that the exchange of food itself has often supplanted currency.

1.2 Incubator Kitchens

Incubator Kitchens are an economic development model gaining in recognition nationwide as their success in growing small businesses is proven. Their most basic function is to provide affordable access to a commercial kitchen that is certified to meet all food safety regulations, allowing entrepreneurs to develop a culinary business without taking on the costs involved in developing a certified facility. While informal economies around food are often quite successful, food safety regulation limit their scale and prevent advertising or other forms of publicity, and also entail a degree of legal risk for the entrepreneur. Incubator Kitchens offer a way for



Figure 1 - Incubator Kitchen interior at La Cocina, San Francisco (credit: LaCocina)

a food business to operate entirely above-board, typically serving as a springboard to an independent registered and licensed business. Typically, the incubator will not only provide certified facilities, but also some level of consultancy in developing a business plan, securing financing, marketing, and similar issues – much as any small business development program would. This expertise can help food entrepreneurs avoid expensive mistakes and provide the necessary support to bring a quality product to its intended market.

In some instances, incubator programs are more ambitious, bringing in specialists in a number of food-related areas to help potential entrepreneurs refine recipes, source ingredients, plan menus and develop other strategies specific to a culinary business. In these cases, the incubator program itself may carry a level of branding on the project – essentially marking it with a stamp of approval that lets potential customers know that they can expect the level of quality they have seen in other businesses started as part of the project.

Regardless of the level of service involved, the kitchen incubator model is consistently seen to be of great benefit for the entrepreneurs and for the local economy. However, they have faced struggles in becoming self-sustaining, as start up costs are high, continued use means high utility costs and repair costs, and a lot of administrative time is eaten up by negotiating time and scheduling with short term users and managing frequent health inspections. As this is a new form, clearly there is a lot to be learned by examining both the successful models and the ones that have failed. I believe there is also

an important opportunity for a thoughtful design process to help promote the success of such an enterprise.

1.3 Broadening and Linking Programs and Goals

Pioneer Valley entrepreneurs currently have access to a small Food Processing Center in Greenfield, operated by the Franklin County Community Development Corporation. A number of successful businesses have started out here, but the center seems to mostly serve the upper Pioneer Valley, and it isn't as well known or public as it could be. I believe that the Pioneer Valley would benefit greatly from a kitchen incubator program with a specific mission to target entrepreneurs to develop culinary businesses using local products and celebrating local culture and heritage.

I'd like to push this program even further, developing a Center for Food and Culture for the Pioneer Valley, cited centrally, that would include an incubator kitchen, and also a number of public programs, including a food and culture education component, a series of cooking classes, a retail store, participatory exhibits, and more.

The development of such a center can be seen as a smart growth strategy for its community, as it offers the potential to develop a stronger local economy from the ground up, without detrimental impacts on local communities or cultures. This model treats cultural heritage as an asset, maintaining its integrity while integrating it into the larger (read: white/euro) culture and economy, it celebrates diversity rather than negating it or viewing it as a liability.

A range of other culinary programs could be employed in conjunction with the Incubator Kitchen, which could both compliment its work and expand its reach into the community. Rising obesity and diabetes numbers point to a need for programs promoting nutrition and balanced diet, especially cooking classes. School lunch programs have come under scrutiny as children's health has declined, I am interested in exploring whether this facility could also function as a central kitchen for a school district lunch program that would focus on healthy food, local ingredients, and promoting cultural education through it's menus. Existing programs in other communities, like Mission Pie in San Francisco, use a culinary business as a as a vehicle for youth advocacy and job training – this type of program could be ideal here. There is also a potential for tie-in with the strong farming community in the area, and organizations such as CISA (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture). A program that promotes farming on heritage crops, teaches people how to cook with these foods, and hosts a seed bank to preserve heritage crops from different cultures could be a great tie between culture and agriculture.

The research component of my project will examine the kitchen incubator model, it's failures and successes and the reasons for both. It will also look at the links between food, culture, and economy, and examine models of economic generation that serve to strengthen and preserve cultural heritage. It will also involve close examination of existing examples of the form, looking at programming, materials, equipment and other aspects of current kitchen incubators. As the form is still fairly new, and my proposal

involves expanding its reach, I'll also look at precedents in other areas that are relevant to the project – culinary training programs, retail food spaces, museums, and education facilities.

CHAPTER 2

GUIDING GOALS AND PRINCIPLES

2.1 Celebrating Cultural Heritage

While the Pioneer Valley does not share the level of cultural diversity found in major cities, a wide range of cultural and ethnic heritages can be found. Long-standing communities of Irish, Polish, Italian, German, and French heritage exist, as well as newer communities of Hispanic and Puerto Rican origin, and African-American, Native American, and Asian populations. A quick sampling of food businesses in downtown Amherst alone shows the opportunity to sample African, Thai, Japanese, Mexican, Lebanese, Italian, French, American, Indian, Chinese, and many other cuisines. The colleges and universities in the area also bring in students from many nationalities and cultures – both people from other regions in North America and from abroad.

Cultural diversity is a thing to be celebrated. Our differences are not a liability to be overcome, but an asset, they make us strong. This community is more diverse than many of us might realize – and creating opportunities to bring that diversity to the surface brings out hidden knowledge. A primary guiding principle for me in this project is to create opportunities to use food as a vector for sharing and celebrating cultural diversity.

2.2 Cultural Studies, Culinary Studies, and The Knowledge Corridor

One of the major economic engines of the Pioneer Valley is education – the area is home to the Five Colleges (Amherst College, Smith College, Hampshire College, Mt. Holyoke College, and The University of Massachusetts) as well as a region of smaller schools, including Greenfield Community College, Springfield Technical Community College, and Holyoke Community College. We are also in close proximity to a number of other schools, Williams College in Williamstown, Western New England College, Worcester Polytechnic, and many more.

With education such a vital force in the region, it seems natural to explore the prospects of an academically focused component of a Center for Food and Culture. Many area schools offer programs in cultural studies, and some offer culinary education and training. Nutrition is also an area of study at some schools. A Williams College professor, Darra Goldstein, edits *Gastronomica*, a scholarly journal of Food and Culture. A Center for Food and Culture could work in partnership with academic institutions and rely on them for some of its funding.

2.3 Celebrating Agriculture

2.4 Social, Environmental, and Economic Sustainability

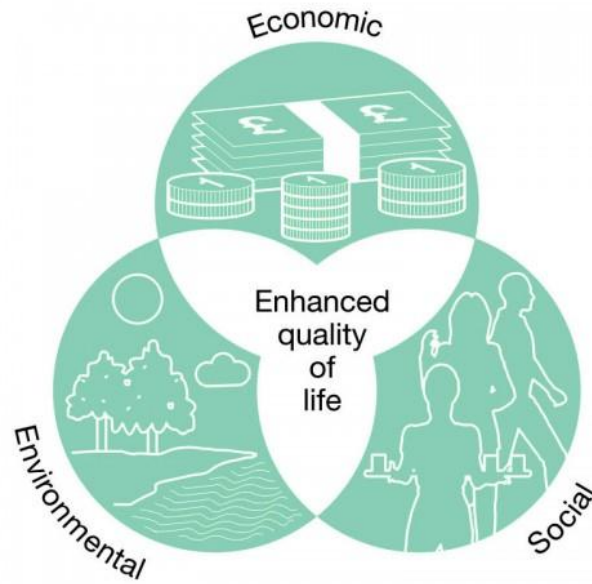


Figure 2 - William McDonough's Triple Bottom Line
(credit: www.era-environmental.com)

One area I would like to investigate further in the project is promoting sustainability, specifically as defined by William McDonough's concept of the "triple bottom line". McDonough encourage us to evaluate projects not just on environmental criteria but also to look at social and economic impacts.

Looking at building performance issues relevant to this climate, I'd like to push energy efficiency, and in particular, the passive, affordable, low-tech aspects of this. Passive solar design can really push the envelope of what we expect in terms of building

performance, and can improve building daylighting as well. Heat exchange systems would be of great value here as well, and carefully placed operable ventilation could serve to mitigate heat loads created by cooking spaces.

2.5 The Triple Bottom Line of Food

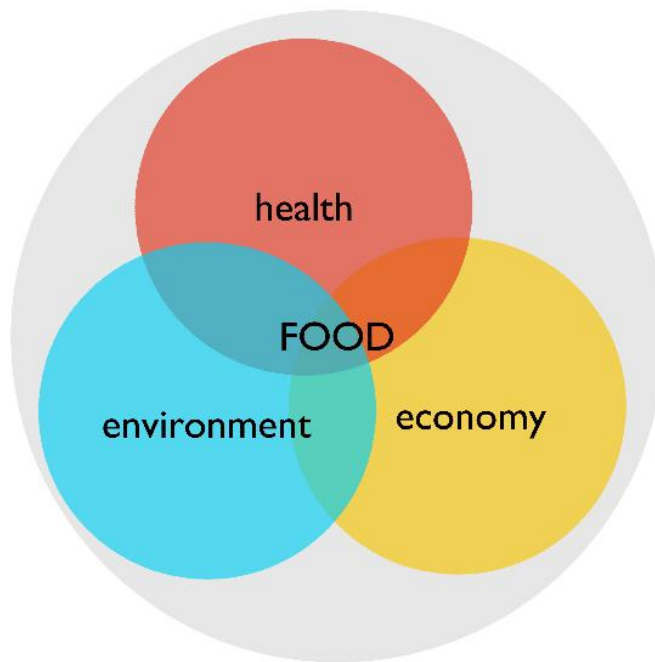


Figure 3 - The Triple Bottom Line of Food (credit: author)

2.6 Site: Why Greenfield? Why Franklin County?

Franklin Cty is poorest in the state but has a wealth of community resources and resiliency. Home to NESEA, Franklin CDC kitchen and other CDC programs, Free

Harvest Supper, Town Farm, lots of Ag land, UPingill, local grains, ?. Has urban density but not the wealth / rent prices of Northampton – Bank Row urban renewal is exciting, new businesses and restaurants – lots of opportunity for new people to startup – low rents in turners and Greenfield, farmland, etc – forgiving population, close to 91.

This can be a place for things to happen – Greenfield harvest supper, food festivals, etc. Serve as a community center and demonstration . education facility. Many cultural celebrations are centered on food – list “suppers” from paper – polish steak roast, strawberry supper at church, thanksgiving, also eid? purim? what else?

META OUTLINE:

- 1. ideas – rationale and justifications**
- 2. site conditions and community realities**
- 3. design proposals**
- 4. future thinking-what comes next, what is undone**
- 5. backround, precedents, etc.**

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