

## How Food Shapes Our Cities

### Part 1

How do you feed a city? It's one of the great questions of our time. Yet it's one that's rarely asked. We **take it for granted**<sup>1</sup> that if we go into a shop or restaurant, or indeed into this theater's foyer in about an hour's time, there is going to be food there waiting for us, having magically come from somewhere.

But when you think that every day for a city the size of London, enough food has to be produced, transported, bought and sold, cooked, eaten, disposed of, and that something similar has to happen every day for every city on Earth, it's remarkable that cities get fed at all.

We live in places like this as if they're the most natural things in the world, forgetting that because we're animals and that we need to eat, we're actually as dependent on the natural world as our ancient ancestors were. And as more of us move into cities, more of that natural world is being transformed into extraordinary landscapes like the one behind me—it's soybean fields in Mato Grosso in Brazil—in order to feed us. These are extraordinary landscapes, but few of us ever get to see them.

And increasingly, these landscapes are not just feeding us either. As more of us move into cities, more of us are eating meat, so that a third of the annual grain crop globally now gets fed to animals rather than to us human animals. And given that it takes three times as much grain—**actually ten times as much grain**<sup>2</sup>—to feed a human if it's passed through an animal first, that's not a very efficient way of feeding us.

And it's an **escalating problem**<sup>3</sup>, too. By 2050, it's estimated that twice the number of us are going to be living in cities. And it's also estimated that there is going to be twice as much meat and dairy consumed. So meat and urbanism are rising hand in hand. And that's going to pose an enormous problem. Six billion hungry carnivores to feed, by 2050. That's a big problem. And actually if we carry on as we are, it's a problem we're very unlikely to be able to solve.

Nineteen million hectares of rain forest are lost every year to create new arable land. Although at the same time we're losing an equivalent amount of existing arables to **salinization**<sup>4</sup> and erosion. We're very hungry for fossil fuels, too. It takes about 10 calories to produce every calorie of food that we consume in the West. And even though there is food that we are producing at great cost, we don't actually value it. Half the food produced in the U.S.A. is currently thrown away. And to end all of this, at the end of this long process, we're not even managing to feed the planet properly. A billion of us are obese, while a further billion starve. None of it makes very much sense.

And when you think that 80 percent of global trade in food now is controlled by just five multinational corporations, it's a **grim picture**<sup>5</sup>. As we're moving into cities, the world is also embracing a Western diet. And if we look to the future, it's an unsustainable diet. [. . .]

### Part 2

Here we have food—that used to be the center, the social core of the city—at the periphery. It used to be a social event, buying and selling food. Now it's anonymous. We used to cook; now we just add water, or a little bit of an egg if you're making a cake or something. We don't smell food to see if it's OK to eat. We just read the back of a label on a packet. And we don't value food. We don't trust it. So instead of trusting it, we fear it. And instead of valuing it, we throw it away.

One of the great ironies of modern food systems is that they've made the very thing they promised to make easier much harder. By making it possible to build cities anywhere and any place, they've actually distanced us from our most important relationship, which is that of us and nature. And also they've made us dependent on systems that only they can deliver, that, as we've seen, are unsustainable.

So what are we going to do about that? It's not a new question. 500 years ago, it's what Thomas More was asking himself. This is the frontispiece of his book **Utopia**<sup>6</sup>. And it

<sup>1</sup> When we “take something for granted,” we don't appreciate it at the time. J.J. Abrams also used this expression in his TED talk.

<sup>2</sup> Students should note that Steel corrects her statistic here. She first mistakenly says “three times.”

<sup>3</sup> An “escalating problem” is one that is getting worse and worse.

<sup>4</sup> The process of salinization involves putting salt into something, usually water.

<sup>5</sup> A “grim picture” is a very negative situation.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Moore's book *Utopia* was the first time the word “utopia” was used. It is now a common word for talking about an ideal place.

was a series of semi-independent city-states, if that sounds remotely familiar, a day's walk from one another where everyone was basically farming-mad, and grew vegetables in their back gardens, and ate communal meals together, and so on. And I think you could argue that food is a fundamental ordering principle of Utopia, even though More never framed it that way.

[. . .] *Utopia* was actually a word that Thomas More used deliberately. It was a kind of joke, because it's got a double derivation from the Greek. It can either mean a good place, or no place. Because it's an ideal. It's an imaginary thing. We can't have it. And I think, as a conceptual tool for thinking about the very deep problem of human dwelling, that makes it not much use. So I've come up with an alternative, which is *Sitopia*, from the ancient Greek, "sitos" for food, and "topos" for place.

I believe we already live in Sitopia. We live in a world shaped by food, and if we realize that, we can use food as a really powerful tool—a conceptual tool, design tool, to shape the world differently. So if we were to do that, what might Sitopia look like? Well, I think it looks a bit like this. I have to use this slide. It's just the look on the face of the dog. But anyway, this is—it's food at the center of life, at the center of family life, being celebrated, being enjoyed, people taking time for it. This is where food should be in our society.

But you can't have scenes like this unless you have people like this. By the way, these can be men as well. It's people who think about food, who think ahead, who plan, who can stare at a pile of raw vegetables and actually recognize them. We need these people. We're part of a network. Because without these kinds of people, we can't have places like this. Here, I deliberately chose this because it is a man buying a vegetable. But networks, markets where food is being grown locally. It's common. It's fresh. It's part of the social life of the city. Because without that, you can't have this kind of place, food that is grown locally and also is part of the landscape,

and is not just a **zero-sum commodity**<sup>7</sup> off in some unseen **hell-hole**<sup>8</sup>. Cows with a view. Steaming piles of humus. This is basically bringing the whole thing together.

And this is a community project I visited recently in Toronto. It's a greenhouse, where kids get told all about food and growing their own food. Here is a plant called Kevin, or maybe it's a plant belonging to a kid called Kevin. I don't know. But anyway, these kinds of projects that are trying to reconnect us with nature is extremely important.

So Sitopia, for me, is really a way of seeing. It's basically recognizing that Sitopia already exists in **little pockets**<sup>9</sup> everywhere. The trick is to join them up, to use food as a way of seeing. And if we do that, we're going to stop seeing cities as big, metropolitan, unproductive blobs, like this. We're going to see them more like this, as part of the productive, organic framework of which they are inevitably a part, symbiotically connected. But of course, that's not a great image either, because we need not to be producing food like this anymore. We need to be thinking more about permaculture, which is why I think this image just sums up for me the kind of thinking we need to be doing. It's a re-conceptualization of the way food shapes our lives.

The best image I know of this is from 650 years ago. It's **Ambrogio Lorenzetti's**<sup>10</sup> "Allegory of Good Government." It's about the relationship between the city and the countryside. And I think the message of this is very clear. If the city looks after the country, the country will look after the city. And I want us to ask now, what would Ambrogio Lorenzetti paint if he painted this image today? What would an allegory of good government look like today? Because I think it's an urgent question. It's one we have to ask and we have to start answering. We know we are what we eat. We need to realize that the world is also what we eat. But if we take that idea, we can use food as a really powerful tool to shape the world better. Thank you very much.

*This is an edited version of Steel's 2009 TED Talk.  
To watch the full talk, visit TED.com.*

<sup>7</sup> Something that is a "zero-sum commodity" is one that one group gains while another one loses. Steel believes modern food production makes food a zero-sum commodity that humans gain from while the planet's environment loses.

<sup>8</sup> A "hell-hole" is a terrible place.

<sup>9</sup> The term "little pockets" is used here to describe small areas where certain things are happening.

<sup>10</sup> Ambrogio Lorenzetti was an Italian painter who lived in the 1300s.