Bridging the Urban Village and the Corporate City: The Social Hub of Boston’s Food Trucks

Senior Honors Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Undergraduate Program in Anthropology
Jonathan Anjaria, Advisor

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

by
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April 2014

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff at Mushu Street Kitchen for welcoming me onto their truck, for training me, and for answering my constant questions. Their patience, openness, and kindness allowed me to fully explore my research questions.

I would also like to thank the food truck owners who took the time out of their busy schedules to meet with me and respond honestly to my questions during our in-depth interviews. I am grateful for their contributions to my research, and their willingness to help me understand their perspectives on their work.

Finally, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Jonathan Anjaria, for his interest, guidance, and attention in overseeing the completion of this thesis. Thank you to my other readers, Professor Elizabeth Ferry and Professor Laura Miller, for reading drafts, and giving me detailed and intelligent feedback. I am very grateful for the strong support of my thesis committee.
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Introduction: The Intersection of the Urban Village and the Corporate City

It’s a cold day in February at the Mushu food truck. The service window is closed, and we are preparing for a day of service, posting to our social media sites, cooking, mixing salads, and heating soups and ciders. The food truck generator hums lightly, and music plays in the background. The overhead lights combined with the sunlight coming through the truck’s roof fill the truck with light. This is the warmest part of the shift, when we all enjoy the heat from the grill, despite the bothersome smoke.

Although it’s cold, Steve regularly visits our truck every week at the Dewey Square location. He often makes changes to his scallion-pancake sandwiches, replacing the poached-fried eggs with feta cheese or cabbage pickles. Before we begin serving customers, David, the cashier, says that he will be “firing,” (or placing an order), by calling back “Steve.” He says that it will be easier to communicate Steve’s modifications this way, and that Steve will be happy to hear David calling a personal identifier back to the cooks, showing that we all know him well.

During service, we bustle around each other in the tight space of the food truck, taking customer orders, preparing salads, and cooking hot sandwiches and soups. Eggs sizzle on the grill, David fires incoming orders (“fire Double! fire Cabbage!”), Caleb calls out customers’ names, plastic bags rustle as we stack hot food containers inside them, and music fills any quiet spaces in between. In the winter, we usually have a fast-paced lunch rush lasting about an hour. As Caleb, our manager, says, “almost everything we do before the shift is to prepare for that lunch rush.”

Steve arrives after this rush, and David is able to take the extra time to consider unique sandwich options and modifications with him. David fires “a Steve,” and we busy ourselves with making his order. I appear in the service window to deliver Steve’s sandwich, and he immediately asks, “who are you? I don’t know you yet.” He then introduces himself, and makes
an effort to remember my name. Now every time Steve comes back, we know each other, if at least by face, and greet each other with a “nice to see you.”

We often hear “Nice to see you,” or “Hey how’ve you been?” on the truck – Mushu employees build and maintain their relationships with customers each day that they “go out” to serve lunch. And since food trucks like Mushu are mobile, this kind of contact often happens right in the heart of Boston’s downtown areas. These trucks are small in size and in character – but their small quality is exactly what allows them to provide their creative meals to the eager office workers who await them. The mobility of the trucks allows them to pay for a parking spot in high-rent areas rather than a storefront. Many of the urban areas that now welcome food trucks have long since pushed out small mom and pop businesses that could not afford the high rents. Gourmet food trucks bring back a local, small-business presence that these bustling urban areas had been lacking.

In the past decade, these local food trucks have taken Boston by storm, their numbers rising from only 13 trucks in 2012 to an estimated 56 trucks last year (Marrs 2013). This dramatic growth in the food truck industry has coincided with a shift in urban governance towards reestablishing Boston’s image as a tech-savvy, innovative, fun city. How have food trucks contributed to this new image? What is the relationship between food trucks and larger efforts to rebrand Boston? What are the ethical implications of their involvement in these efforts? What do they bring to the city’s public spaces? What ideologies and associations do they bring with them? Who benefits from their new presence, and who suffers? And what are the social effects of food trucks in Boston’s communities? While food trucks appear to be simply “a fun way to get your food,” (Mitchell 2014), they are also involved in many other urban issues including urban renewal and rebranding, place-making, urban social networks, and social justice.
The “Urban Village”

Jane Jacobs describes a similar kind of intimacy between business owners and neighborhood residents in New York’s West Village in the 1960s. She wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961, partially as a response to Robert Moses’s plans to build a 10-lane elevated highway through New York City’s Washington Square Park (Beauman 2011). She protests this potentially destructive change to her West Village neighborhood and other working class communities by calling attention to the social minutiae and daily practices occurring on the ground in New York City rather than large-scale ideas of cities. Jacobs praises the natural daily life of urban neighborhoods, argues against traditional, archaic urban planning techniques, and revisits the actual uses and effects of common urban spaces such as sidewalks and parks (Jacobs 1961). She describes the daily routines of her neighbors as an “intricate sidewalk ballet” – young students walk by eating candy, shopkeepers open locks and prepare for business, businessmen and women carry briefcases, housewives pause to chat, taxis come and go (Jacobs 1961: 50). In doing so, Jacobs highlights the intricate social web of urban communities. In other words, Jacobs “emphasized the authentic human contacts made possible by the city’s old and unplanned messiness” (Zukin 2010: 12).

Where Jacobs defines the necessary social characteristics of urban living among her working class neighbors, Gans emphasizes the ethnic group dynamics of the Italian-American community in Boston’s West End. A sociologist and urban planning researcher, Gans coined the phrase “urban village” to describe the Italian-American working-class district in the West End, where he conducted his fieldwork. In the early 1960s, Gans was devastated to find that Boston would relocate the district during slum clearance. This slum clearance was part of a large movement in cities across the United States to “clean up” urban centers when many upper and
middle class Americans left cities for the suburbs (The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy 2005). The prevailing opinion at the time was that these “slums” were unhealthy blights and eyesores in American cities, and that they should be removed in order to make way for more attractive – or upper and middle class – venues.

These neighborhoods, however, often had value that urban planners and governments could not and did not see. The displaced Italian-Americans in the West End, for example, had formed an ethnic community founded strongly in family values and close personal ties in their social groups. The highly personal and social contacts that their community relied and thrived on prompted Herbert Gans to think of an urban village – an area in which the inhabitants “try to adapt their nonurban institutions and cultures to the urban milieu (Gans 1982: 4). The urban village is therefore, by Gans’s definition, a community largely based on interdependence and social connection. As one contemporary urban sociologist puts it: “…the term village was…unhitched from its rural connotations. Transported to the central city, it became a signifier of community spirit in a heterogeneous yet socially integrated neighbourhood, a Sesame Street for grown-ups, a place, in the words of the theme song for the TV show Cheers, ‘where everybody knows your name” (Whitzman 2009: 52).

Interested in Jacobs and Gans’s “urban villages,” city planners now attempt to reconstruct the vibrancy of such neighborhoods in mixed-use zoning areas. As urban populations rise and cities gentrify, planners work to devise new ways to solve common urban difficulties – in this case, the separation of commercial and residential spaces. The Urban Village Group (UVG) of Wales adopted the term “urban village,” in the 1980s to describe new “‘live, work, play’ settings,” or “high-density multifamily properties…mixed with retail and other uses” (Bohl 2002: 109-111). These areas combine corporate headquarters with residential buildings and a
“pedestrian atmosphere,” straying from the separate-use districts in many urban areas (in which a city’s downtown business district is separated from residential neighborhood districts). Tony Aldous, a member of the UVG, developed “the urban village concept” to describe the Group’s prescription for “well designed, mixed use and sustainable urban areas, with a sense of place and community commitment” (Biddulph et al 2002: 6). Many proponents of the urban village studied the work of Herbert Gans and Jane Jacobs in forging their concepts of the ideal urban environment. Therefore, the term “urban village,” has also come to define urban planners’ projects to recreate Gans and Jacobs’s urban villages: mixed-use urban areas with a strong foundation in community values.

*The Urban Village and Boston’s Food Trucks*

Food trucks have the rare ability to not only facilitate this kind of mixed-use social activity on otherwise banal urban sidewalks and squares, but also to develop personal relationships between customers and employees and between food truck owners. These social connections form several sub-communities for their participants. Food trucks also demonstrate their care for these sub-communities, and the community at large, in the social missions behind the food they serve. In this paper, I argue that food trucks present a new “urban village” on Boston’s city streets parallel to those of Herbert Gans and Jane Jacobs. In doing so, they mitigate the binary between personal, neighborhood-like environments and professional, corporate areas in Boston, and further Boston’s goals to establish the city’s hip, innovative, and upper-class city center.

Food trucks do not fit the exact mold of Herbert Gans’s or Jane Jacobs’s urban villages, however. They are not the same mom and pop bodegas that Jacobs and her colleagues fought to protect, and they do not replace the same class of people. Gans’s definition of the urban village
describes the cultural vibrancy and interdependence of an Italian-American working-class community. This community was based on a system of exchange and “togetherness” partially due to its comparative lack of resources. As he explains in his ethnography, “...for many families, problems were never far away…Thus when emergencies occurred, neighbors helped each other readily” (Gans 1982: 15). Like Gans shows, in hard times people often stick together, leaning on each other for support. Food trucks represent something quite apart from this population. Instead, they represent a new, middle-class urban village at the heart of Boston’s professional, skyscraper-dominated downtown centers. Food trucks are more desirable to city governments like Boston, which aim to replace urban working and lower class neighborhoods with middle and upper class attractions. In some ways, therefore, the new food trucks exist in opposition to Gans and Jacobs’s urban villages.

Although the community of food trucks differs greatly from those described in Gans and Jacobs’s narratives, gourmet food trucks do bring the main elements of Gans’s urban village, and Jacobs’s value of urban “togetherness” into the corporate, downtown areas of Boston. Their social value is crucial, and their main customers greet them with a smile similar to those exchanged between Jane Jacobs and Mr. Goldstein, the hardware store owner she describes in her neighborhood (Jacobs 1961: 51). They may not replace the exact kind of urban village that Jacobs and Gans rallied behind, but food trucks have a similar value – bringing the small and personal into areas dominated by the large and anonymous. They have the ability to reinvigorate the types of social contacts present in urban villages in cities’ corporate districts. Food trucks therefore incorporate Jacobs, Gans, and the UVG’s definitions of the urban village to create a new kind of urban community as they begin to bridge the gap between Boston’s urban business districts and neighborhood communities.
Therefore, while I adopt Gans’s term to describe Boston’s food truck community, I develop a slightly different definition. Food trucks create opportunities for personal interaction in the downtown centers of Boston, where such interactions are more rare, and the presence of small-scale, local businesses is even rarer. In their personal attention to customers, food truck staffs develop relationships with many of their “regulars” – middle to upper class office workers whose desks are within walking distance of the trucks. The staff on these trucks gets to know their regular customers’ names, their food preferences, or hear about customers’ interests or notable events happening in their lives. In their relationships with customers therefore, food truck staff “import” a mini urban village to these downtown areas where an indifferent, modern-city demeanor is more commonly the norm.

In addition to this value of personal interaction between customers and employees, food trucks have tremendous worth for their ability to transform space into place, and create urban social events in the city. Especially when grouped together, food trucks turn city sidewalks, parking lots, or squares into festive atmospheres filled with enticing sounds, smells, and colors. On a busy spring day at Dewey Square one truck manager told me, the lines of customers waiting at the clustered food trucks are so long that they start to intersect. Food trucks draw Bostonians out of their private homes or offices, and bring them into the city’s public spaces, creating a community ambience akin to a neighborhood potluck. The resulting social activity encourages interactions among customers much like those described on the sidewalks in Jacobs’s West Village neighborhood. In this sense, food trucks also foster an urban village among customers on Boston’s streets and squares.

The interdependence component of the food truck urban village occurs not between customers and employees, but among food truck owners. Food truck customers don’t often
depend on the trucks for favors like in Gans’s scenario. Although customers do bring truck staff small gifts, and the truck employees often offer certain items to their most loyal customers “on the house,” the majority of the urban village solidarity that goes on in the food truck community is among food truck owners as they strive together to make a good name for the gourmet food truck industry in Boston. Therefore, the urban village of food trucks consists of two main groups: that of the customers in their relationships with food truck employees, and that of the food truck staff and owners exclusively.

Lastly, the food truck urban village contains a component of community care at the heart of the businesses’ missions. Due to their involvement in their customer communities, many food trucks take great pains to contribute to and care for these communities – Mushu, for example, in their commitment to local foods, or Marley’s Grilled Cheese, in their participation in charitable events. Heather Paxson calls this combination of social and business interest “economies of sentiment,” or “practices of multiple value-making” whereby enterprises like Mushu must compromise their principles and business pragmatics (Paxson 2013: 65). While this component of the urban village often goes on “behind the scenes,” it is a crucial input to the community, and food trucks’ participation in that community. This overall interest in contribution to local communities characterizes a strong theme in the food truck community in Boston.

Boston’s urban food truck village therefore references themes inherent to the definitions of an “urban village,” but engages them in quite different ways than Gans’s ethnic communities. First of all, food trucks are businesses, and all personal goals aside, they must make a profit. Therefore, like Jacobs’s neighborhood business owners, a part of food trucks’ interest in creating relationships with customers is inevitably for the success of their business. Secondly, food trucks are mobile, and the crucial component of their social value is their presence not in
neighborhoods, but in downtown, corporate areas, where such relationships are less common. In this sense, they represent the mixed-use urban village of the Urban Village Group by facilitating social interaction, consumption, and making food in spaces typically dominated by office work activities. Finally, the food truck community represents a different class than the urban villages of Jacobs or Gans. The trucks are both serving and staffers by educated, middle-class individuals rather than the working class populations described in Boston’s 1950s North End or New York’s 1960s West Village. Food trucks therefore forge a new kind of urban village aimed at middle-class Bostonians at the heart of the city, where they diminish the division of personal residential environments and commercial areas. In doing so, food trucks partially further American cities’ goals of urban renewal – and therefore of reserving the center of the city for social elites.

Opposition to the Urban Village

The idea of small social communities in urban environments contrasts with Georg Simmel’s theory that the modern metropolis often causes desensitization to human contact, and a “blasé attitude” among urban citizens. Simmel’s argument speaks to the common discourse of, for example, New Yorkers’ fast-paced lifestyles, and their ability to turn a blind eye to the constant flurry of human activity around them. This dissociative metropolitan individuality presents a view of the modern city as a cold and alienating environment. According to Simmel, the larger the physical population of the city becomes, the more enhanced the lack of community feeling: “In the measure that the group grows numerically, spatially, and in the meaningful context of life, its immediate inner unity and the definiteness of its original demarcation against others are weakened and rendered mild by reciprocal interaction and interconnections” (Simmel 1950: 16). In this view, large cities like New York and even Boston eradicate possibilities for
close personal connections due to the large volume of people and “intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (Simmel 1950: 11).

Louis Wirth raises similar concerns with the modern city, arguing that urban areas encourage a harsh individualism in their inhabitants. He writes, “Under such circumstances [of stark diversity] competition and formal control mechanisms furnish the substitutes for the bonds of solidarity that are relied upon to hold a folk society together” (Wirth 1938: 11). In the same vein as Simmel, Wirth argues that the high population and diversity of the modern city fosters an environment of individualism where selfish needs take precedence over those of the community. This absence of social ties can also foster a sense of release from the pressure of social life. The modern “city of strangers” offers the potential for both freedom and alienation in the absence of strong social bonds within the general community.

The main flaw in these arguments, however, is their unit of analysis. Simmel and Wirth examine the city as a whole – as they would a smaller town – and find that there is little sense of community across the expansive metropolis. If they had dug deeper, however, they would have found that in such large cities, citizens often adapt, and create their own sub-communities within the large umbrella of the city. As Jane Jacobs argues, the indifferent attitude of many urban residents acts simply as a preservation of privacy (Jacobs 1961: 58). In the face of Simmel and Wirth’s arguments, therefore, I say that although this urban desensitization and individualism may be present in many urban social situations, there is still great potential for personal connection and interaction in sub-communities within the city. These connections may not occur between strangers on the subway, but instead among neighbors, co-workers, or, in the case of this project, among customers and food truck employees as they form a friendly social network on Boston’s city streets. And perhaps city dwellers form these communities partially as a
response to the anonymity of the urban social landscape that surrounds them. The intimacy of the suburban and rural social life that Simmel and Wirth evoke as the opposite extreme of modern city isolation is therefore not as contrary to the city social life as it may seem – urban sociality simply expresses itself in different forms.

*To “Have it All”: The Intersection of the Urban Village and the Corporate City*

In her study of New York City, urban sociologist Sharon Zukin shows how the authenticity of neighborhoods is often ruined by their popularity and consequent gentrification. She argues that as urban areas gain popularity for their authentic character, people flock to the area, rents rise, and finally the neighborhood loses the exact authenticity for which it became popular. To support her argument, Zukin cites Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs, juxtaposing the two urban experts’ prescriptions for urban life. She writes that the urban middle class wants to “have it all”:

If postwar mayors thought their cities could have it all, so too does the urban middle class. And in a curious way, this is where Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses find common ground: the journalist who saw the city through middle-class eyes and the autocrat who tried to rebuild the city for middle-class tastes and incomes. Their opposing views converge in the desire to have both the high-rise and the interesting neighborhood, both origins and new beginnings; both Moses’s desire to build a corporate city and Jacobs’s desire to preserve the urban village (Zukin 2010: 230).

As Zukin demonstrates in her case studies of New York’s boroughs such as Brooklyn and common spaces such as Union Square, this craving for both the “corporate city” and the “urban village” oddly comes together in the tastes of the urban middle class. She admits that a good number of Robert Moses’s buildings, highways, and public works projects modernized New York, and were therefore necessary for the city to continue to evolve. She shows, too, how the middle class appreciates the authenticity of mom and pop stores and small, “quaint” neighborhoods. As one New York Times journalist writes, “[Moses’s] vision, however flawed, represented an America that still believed a healthy government would provide the infrastructure
— roads, parks, bridges — that binds us into a nation. Ms. Jacobs, at her best, was fighting to
preserve the more delicate bonds that tie us to a community. A city, to survive and flourish,
needs both perspectives” (Ouroussoff 2006). This combination of middle-class preferences,
however, often leads to the development of multi-million dollar SoHo lofts – apartments made
up of the same bricks that previously housed starving artists for low rents (Zukin 2010: 238). The
middle class desire for “both the high-rise and the interesting neighborhood” culminates in food
tucks.

When asked what makes a good spot for food trucks, nearly every food truck owner
replied that a location is lucrative when there are few other food options in the area. Many of
them also explained that their main customer base consists of office workers getting their
weekday lunch. The designated food truck spots in Boston have also been carefully chosen to
avoid food truck competition with restaurants. Therefore, food trucks are often stationed in more
 corporate areas, where the majority of the surrounding buildings house offices and retail stores
rather than small-scale, low-priced restaurants. Their presence, then, is more unusual and
exciting, as they add a new element of small-business, creative, gourmet fare to an area more
concentrated with office buildings and franchises than local stores.

The exceptional social nature of food trucks in these environments makes them the
perfect bridge between Moses’s corporate city and Jacobs’s urban village. Food trucks are
magnets for social contact, and customers often develop relationships with the food truck staff.
This is true at Mushu, but also at most other trucks. The owner of Tuk Phem, for example, said
that at one of his food truck’s locations in Boston, the staff and the employees from the nearby
retail clothing chain joke that Tuk Phem is “the official food truck of H&M” (Lodes 2013). Food
trucks therefore begin to recreate the type of social vibrancy that corporate neighborhoods lack according to Jane Jacobs – and they do so without altering the architecture.

Food trucks’ preservation of the brick and mortar architecture is key. Food trucks are unique in their ability to change a cityscape without making a single permanent change to the concrete and brick of urban space. They bring social activity, import a Jacobian “urban village,” and then disappear, leaving the corporate landscape unscathed.

This is a crucial component in considering Zukin’s argument. She creates a paradox between the authentic and the gentrified, explaining that gentrification erases the origins of the authentic. This allows for little significant change in cities without significant consequence. And Zukin is not wrong. As Jacobs explains, cities are problems in organized complexity: “They present ‘situations in which a half-dozen or even several dozen quantities are all varying simultaneously and in subtly interconnected ways’” (Jacobs 1961: 433). The more small sections of cities change and develop, the more ripple effects occur across the whole city. Food trucks are no exception to this rule. But they are different in their ability to change a social space without physical destruction or construction; while their social effects may come to be permanent, their structures are not. Therefore, food trucks’ presence in corporate districts seems to add the aspects of the small-scale urban village to the landscape of a corporate area without largely detracting from it. In a sense, they import the “urban village” feel that many middle class office workers crave, without detracting from the overall corporate environment.

*The Pushcart War: Food Trucks Merge Small and Big Business*

Food trucks bridge the gap between the corporate and the small-scale in more ways than one. In 1964, children’s book author Jean Merrill first wrote her popular book, *The Pushcart War*. In it, Merrill recounts a fictional story about New York City pushcart peddlers and their
conflict with large, overbearing trucks. Merrill frames small informal business owners as the underdogs, a group to be fought for (Merrill 1987). As author Adam Mansbach, a contemporary fan of the book, explains:

> At the heart of the conflict lie two opposing models of business, and of thought: The trucking companies believe bigger is better, that growth means progress, and that might is right. They want to eliminate all other vehicles, and their first intended victims are the pushcart peddlers — small businesses beholden to a very different philosophy (2012).

*The Pushcart War* therefore shows how urban “peddlers” represent and stand up for small business and entrepreneurialism, a deep-seated value in American culture, but one that appears to be hard-won in contemporary business climates.

But the book also raises questions about the competition between big and small business as they clash in urban environments where practical issues of space limit the viability of these industries’ coexistence. As another fan writes,

> In the children’s book *The Pushcart War*, New York’s street vendors band together after being accused of clogging city streets, and engage in full-on warfare with the real culprits -- truck drivers. Through military and public relations tactics, the vendors force the truck drivers to compromise on the vendor’s terms, fixing the congestion of the streets and earning the admiration of millions of New Yorkers (Brustein 2004).

Brustein therefore explains how the “real culprits” of urban congestion are actually truck drivers with their large vehicles taking up space. Using the concrete parallel of urban space, Merrill makes the case for small business owners and their right to operate as essential contributors to urban business environments – and ones that have a smaller negative impact.

Through metaphor, the story also discusses a common binary of big and small business that food trucks challenge. Food trucks seem to merge Merrill’s categories of peddler and big-business vehicular mammoths. While like peddlers, food trucks are small businesses selling their products street-side and to a relatively small consumer base, food trucks are also larger, metal, industrial-style trucks that could truly clog city streets and push out smaller vendors like
Merrill’s trucks. And while like peddlers, they work out of a small space and provide food and goods to customers in a more personal way than large businesses, food trucks also require crews of employees to operate, and an efficient system in order to put out their comparatively complicated product of good, prepared food, like any larger business. The food truck therefore presents a certain compromise between Merrill’s small-scale peddler and the large, roaring truck. Perhaps it is exactly this compromise that paves the way for food trucks’ popularity and welcome presence in downtown Boston – food trucks are both emblematic of small, local business entrepreneurialism, but also of a larger, successful operation than that of an underdog peddler.

Creating the Balance: Food Trucks and Boston

This balance of the small and the large has been quite relevant in Boston’s history of urban redevelopment. In Boston, Mayors John Hynes and John Collins strived to revitalize the city in the 1950s. Following World War II, Boston’s population was falling fast, with no signs of improvement. Layoffs and inflation rose, and housing stock fell – in simpler terms, Boston was in bad shape. In an effort to revitalize the struggling city, Mayor John Hynes ambitiously began a campaign for a “New Boston” in the early 1950s, promising to “restore Boston’s good name and reputation” (O’Connor 2001: 211). In order to do so, Mayor Hynes began to develop the city with large, corporate buildings that he hoped would put it back on the map. When Mayor John Collins came into office in 1960, he continued with Hynes’s plans for a “New Boston,” and transformed the city, through city initiatives and private investments, into the refurbished, professional city that it is today (O’Connor 2001: 222-228). Residential areas made way for office buildings and shopping centers, and low-income neighborhoods disappeared in favor of new townhouses and modern apartments attracting middle-class families and professionals. The
value of the small communities for which Jacobs advocated gave way to stronger ideals of overall modernization and development in Boston.

Geographer David Harvey calls these urban renewal and revitalization efforts “entrepreneurial urbanism.” Many American cities, he explains, turned away from “urban managerialism,” or dependence on the federal government, and towards private investment and gentrification. There were benefits to this method of urban improvement, but also serious consequences. In order to “beautify” their cities, many urban governments like Boston eradicated low-income communities to make way for middle and upper-class attractions. This resulted in an unofficial “roping off” of the city as it focused primarily on the urban elite and essentially ignored the problems caused for the lower classes (Harvey 1989).

Many criticized cities like Boston for their ruthlessness in displacing their low-income communities to build more “attractive” areas. As mentioned earlier, Jane Jacobs’ book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was partially a response to Robert Moses’ plans for the development of New York City – and particularly the implications of these developments on working class and low-income neighborhoods. She dedicates a large portion of her book to considering new perspectives on “slums” and alternatives to slum clearance (Jacobs 1961). In Boston too, residents went up in arms about the clearance of the West End. After the West End Development Plan had been accomplished, Bostonians were quite bitter and resentful of Boston’s government. Observing the painful destruction and evictions, they were determined to protect their communities from the same result: “‘Not in my neighborhood!’ became the battle cry of those who opposed any more urban renewal programs” (O’Connor 2001: 219).

Modernization and development initiatives therefore did not occur without opposition. Their
effects were often harmful to vulnerable urban communities as they tore down homes and evicted residents in working class and low-income neighborhoods.

Fifty years after the clearance of the West End, food trucks mediate the binary between the corporate urban areas ushered in by modern revitalization initiatives and the community “mom and pop” stores Jacobs fought to keep. The mobility of these food trucks gives them the unique ability to bring a small-business presence back to corporate areas such as Boston’s Dewey Square, Government Center, or Boylston Street, while leaving the permanent architecture of the area untouched. Food trucks like Mushu Street Kitchen turn Boston’s downtown sidewalks and squares into arenas of social hubbub, food, enjoyment, conversation, and contact much like that of an “urban village.” In doing so, however, it is also important to question whether they support the elitism of urban centers, and perhaps unintentionally encourage support for harmful urban modernization and redevelopment initiatives.

In the chapters that follow, I aim to demonstrate how food trucks create the “urban village” so lauded by its proponents, while leaving the overall modern, corporate style of the city unchanged. In doing so, I address a few questions: Who are these trucks intended for and what are their ultimate goals in business? How do food trucks contribute to the making of a modern, cosmopolitan city? Which historical associations have they chosen to eliminate and which have they chosen to preserve and why? How do individual food trucks create value in their work and how does this value contribute to the communities they serve? Which communities do food trucks leave out or neglect in their operations? How do food trucks transform urban public spaces, and spawn social interaction?

Methods
This thesis focuses on the community presence of food trucks in developed urban areas in Boston. By means of participant observation and research of primary news sources focusing on food trucks, I delve into the daily life of food trucks and the social activity that embodies and surrounds them.

I participated in the Boston food truck scene primarily as an employee. For six months, I worked on Boston’s popular Mushu Street Kitchen food truck. The three Lang siblings started their food truck in 2011, and have since won multiple awards for their high-quality food, creative Chinese-American combinations, and commitment to local and regional food sourcing and sustainable food initiatives. Mushu won the Boston Globe award for the best food truck in 2012 and the city’s Greenovate Boston Award in 2013, commending them for their “impressive sustainability achievements and commitment to greenovating Boston” (cityofBoston.gov). With great food truck momentum behind them, Ingrid, Mary, and Arthur Lang opened their first restaurant in Boston in November of 2013.

Landing a job with a Boston food truck was not as easy as I had hoped. During the fall semester, classes occupied my weekdays, so I was unavailable to work during the typical food truck daytime lunch shifts. I was therefore not a preferred candidate for most food truck jobs. After applying to several food trucks and attending a handful of “working interviews,” I finally found a match with Mushu. I participated in an extensive interview with Arthur and Adam, and a “stage” shift on the truck. Once the Langs offered me a position with the Mushu team, they kindly accommodated my inconvenient schedule, assigning me to evening and weekend shifts, or daytime truck shifts on days off from school. During the fall months, therefore, I was rarely able to work on the truck, and spent most of my time working in Mushu’s new restaurant or at their private events. Starting in January, however, I began working on Mushu’s truck three to four
times per week, bundling up and making the hourly commute each morning and afternoon to the truck’s various locations in Boston.

Getting the job, however, was only the beginning of the hard work to follow. After the Langs hired me, I had to memorize Mushu’s menu items, participate in their extensive training session (including a test on the Employee Handbook and Cuisine Manual material), and learn all the responsibilities involved in each station on Mushu’s truck. These processes were often over-stimulating, stressful, and exhausting, but I learned a great deal about Mushu, food trucks, and sustainable food systems in the process. The experience of working at Mushu was also particularly valuable for my research as it gave me access to the food truck community. My work opened up opportunities for me to connect with the Mushu truck’s owners and employees, understand their business philosophy, and participate in creating and fostering the personal customer relationships upon which Mushu’s business thrives. In order to protect the identities of these owners, employees, and businesses, I have invented the names presented in this thesis.

Working with Mushu also helped me get in touch with other food truck owners, and hear general discourse about the food truck industry. I interviewed several local food truck owners about their businesses, followed online blogs, reviews, and posts about Boston’s food trucks and watched a collection of episodes from popular television series focusing on American street food such as *Eat St*, and *The Great Food Truck Race*. I also studied historical and technical accounts of urban street foods, urban sociologists’ and anthropologists’ work on urban communities, the phenomenon of urban authenticity, and gentrification in American cities. In so doing, I collected information on Boston’s food trucks from a wide range of perspectives.

While conducting my fieldwork with Mushu, I was often busy with learning the ropes of making food, learning the menu, and interacting with customers. Although I gained a great deal
of insight on the food truck industry by working on Mushu’s truck, I was often unable to focus my attention on the conversations and opinions of my co-workers and of visiting customers. For the majority of my fieldwork, I was also unable to make notes on my experiences in real time. Instead, I recorded my notes and observations directly after my shifts, when I had more time to reflect on my experiences from the day. This means that while the majority of the quotes in this paper come directly from in-depth, transcribed interviews, a portion of them are paraphrased opinions or thoughts that customers or my co-workers expressed during our shifts. It is important to note, therefore, that a fraction of the opinions cited in this thesis are not direct quotes straight from the mouths of my informants. Instead, they are the same opinions, but written in my own words, from memory, with careful attention that they be styled in a fashion as close to the exact quote as possible.

When I first became interested in urban food trucks, I expected to find out juicy information about food trucks’ tensions with their municipal governments. But the more I worked at Mushu, the more I noticed that the lived experience of the food truck was juicy enough. Understanding the larger tensions of food truck structure was difficult to do from my position as a part-time food truck employee, and, to my surprise, the social interactions occurring on the ground represented the “juiciest” part of my food truck experience. In the next section, I will lay out the main themes apparent in the social fabric of urban food trucks.

*Setting the Scene: A Typical Day at Mushu’s Food Truck*

By the time I get to Mushu’s truck, it’s humming patiently in the square, surrounded by three to four other trucks. Each has its large white service window closed, like a Cyclops winking. I approach our truck, slide open the cab’s door, and clamber on. I’m a “late start” employee today, and after hanging my backpack and coat on the hooks in the truck’s cab, I open
the next sliding door to join Heather and Caleb, who had arrived at the restaurant at eight thirty that morning to open the truck. We greet each other with smiles and hellos over the background music coming from the portable speakers under the counter. Usually the music we play before the shift is fun and uplifting, a “pump up” to get us all ready for service. (It is rarely Beyoncé, however, because Caleb likes to “reward ourselves” with Beyoncé at the end of a successful service.)

Food and service items fill every nook and cranny of the truck. In a previous life, the food truck was a “yogurt muffin” truck, and Mushu has since refitted it with aluminum counters, refrigerators, a grill, a steam table, three sinks, and shelf spaces overhead and below counters. We all bustle around each other in this tight space, grabbing the containers, foods, or utensils we need to complete our jobs.

The smoke from the grill irritates our eyes, but we prefer the irritation to the cold of turning on the grill’s “hood,” or opening the truck’s back doors. With all its doors and windows closed, the truck is warmest during this opening hour, and the smoke is a small price to pay for the welcome heat. During service, all the heat seems to disappear through the large open service window.

I immediately busy myself with my responsibilities for the day. The night before, Caleb sent out the “station sheet” for today, listing the day’s weather forecast, any notes for the truck openers in the morning, each employee’s “station” and responsibilities for the day, and the menu items. Today I am “working steam,” preparing the hot soups and rice porridges. Caleb had turned on the truck’s gas just moments earlier, and I crouch down to light the flame under the steam table with one of our long-tipped electric lighters. It’s cold, and they don’t light automatically as they should. I mimic the tricks I’ve seen Caleb do before, holding the metal tip of the lighter in
my fist to heat it up. Eventually, the lighter shows a spark, and I turn on the gas at the steam table and light its range.

I then consult the station sheet Caleb had emailed us the night before. I pour the soup into the “hotel” in the steam table first so that it will have time to “get up to temp,” or reach the standard food safety temperature of 160 degrees. Once it has reached this temperature, we can lower the flame below the steam table, and bring it back down to about 140 degrees. I then make sure have everything I need for “mise,” or the garnishes for the soups and porridges. Today this includes our soy-ginger braised beef, and umami tofu stew for the proteins to add to the porridge, ginger scallion oil, sliced watermelon radish, sliced ginger, cilantro, gochujang butter (or “spicy butter”), crispy Chinese crullers, bright purple cabbage pickles, and crumbled feta cheese for the soup. I bring the beef and umami up to temperature in their “half-hotels” in the steam table, making sure I have utensils to use for each one.

David clambers onto the truck just moments after me, and begins his work for the cashier station. He scans the menu and updates it with any changes, posts pictures of it onto Tumblr and Twitter with a witty sentence or two including our location and hours to inform loyal customers. He also portions our two main condiments into small, four-ounce ramekins. We offer these prepared ramekins to customers with their meals as suggested condiments on the side. David also prepares the drink station, bringing our hot cider for the day up to nearly a boil, or “until steam rips off of it,” as Arthur Lang, one of the truck owners describes it. Then David will transfer the cider into the hot holding “Cambro,” an insulated container with a spigot that allows us to pour the cider into our 12-ounce paper cups with less mess than a ladle.

David also creates our “tip competition” of the day or week. The tip competition consists of a question with two possible answers. Customers may “vote” for an answer by putting money
in the tip jar for that answer. Tip competition examples include, “Which is true? Kate Winslet contracted pneumonia during the filming of the Titanic, or the Titanic water scenes were filmed in Iceland?” or “Which is more hipster, crafting your own Sriracha sauce in Portland and selling it on Etsy, or riding a tandem bamboo bike?” or “Are there more people in the world or synapses in the brain?” Customers often comment on these questions, and make either monetary or verbal votes for their opinions. For true-false questions, many customers guess the answer and then confirm with us. The most successful tip competition illustrations are taped to the ceiling of the service window, forming a grid of colorful drawings. Adam, one of Mushu’s managers, takes pride in this grid, claiming that inventive decoration is part of what makes Mushu stand out from the other trucks.

As much fun as it is to work the cashier station, I feel lucky to be working steam table today, where the steam coming off of the hot foods acts as another source of warmth against the cold. Once the window opens, the cold temperatures have a real effect. On days when I work the cashier or fridge stations, I often feel like I need to keep my down coat on to stay warm against the cold air coming in through the truck’s window or the contact with the cold salads and dressings in the fridge. When working fridge, I would often get salad dressing or other foods on my coat. Ingrid Lang, Arthur’s sister and co-owner, laughed about this, saying, “this is when all your clothes become work clothes.”

I eventually was able to keep the sleeves of my winter coat out of salad dressings, however. In the beginning of the winter season on the truck, I felt the cold much more than I do now. Over time, I adapted more to the conditions, layering with more clothing than I thought I might need, and wearing my rubber-soled winter boots rather than thick socks and sneakers. We
have also since insulated the truck’s cold floor with cardboard and rubber mats to create a buffer between the soles of our shoes and the cold, aluminum floor of the truck.

In this welcome warmth, we continue preparing our stations for service, talking intermittently about our weekends, ideas for the tip competition, possible witty Twitter and Tumblr posts, or any recent news at the truck or restaurant. We interrupt our conversations with questions about the tasks at hand – asking for a quality taste check of a certain item, how to best handle a certain responsibility, or asking another employee to do a certain task.

When we finally open the window for service about an hour after the truck’s arrival, Heather has cooked fifty to ninety pancakes on the grill and thirty slices of bacon (according to the day), and Caleb has prepared about 25 portioned salads, ready to be garnished to order. All the cooks know their “all-days,” or stocks of individual food ingredients on the truck that day, and we are ready to serve customers.

When we open at 11 or 11:30, few people are waiting for the window to open. Usually, business is a little slow from our opening time, 11 am to 12 pm, and then picks up for a busy lunch rush from 12 to 1, and slows again between 1 and 2 or 3 pm, when we close. At our Boston University location, however, Caleb explained that we don’t have one concentrated lunch rush like at our other locations, but rather a fairly steady stream of service. This is because most of our customers at BU don’t necessarily have office jobs with a one-hour lunch break, but instead get their food during breaks between classes. In my experience, we often still have a small peak in service around lunchtime as lab employees and professors take a lunch break, but the service is usually fairly steady.

When the weather is nice, however, lunch service is entirely different. More people walk by on the street, and more customers are willing to go outside to get their lunches. Regular
customers bring friends and co-workers, and we are busy from our opening until we close.

Working with Mushu in the winter, I only got a few glimpses of such rushes on the rare 54 degree days in March.

During any lunch rush, the food truck crew doesn’t talk other than to communicate about food orders. While working “fridge station,” (making salads), Caleb also works “expo,” giving Heather (working grill) and me (at the steam table) our “all days” for prepared items. This means that he will remind us of the food orders we need to prepare in the order that we need to prepare them. For example, when Heather has more than four or five sandwiches orders “on the board,” Caleb will call them out to her so that she doesn’t waste her precious food prep time to look at the order tickets. Caleb specifies which orders have particular modifications such as added deli meats or modifications: “Four doubles all day, two reggae followed by one bacon, and one no cheese.” Caleb also calls out the orders I am responsible for in the order that they came in. If Heather or I are taking too long on an item, he will tell us which of those items needs to come “on the fly,” or as soon as possible. When we hand Caleb the prepared food orders, he then delivers them to the customer, calling their first names out from the service window.

Once we close the window, the shift has officially ended. We turn off the gas, pack up any open containers, tape the refrigerators shut, secure any loose items in the truck, and drive away. We close the sliding door to the main cabin and drive off to the commissary, where we clean, restock, and prepare the truck for the next day.

Menu

In the chapters that follow, I discuss broad themes that contribute to the identity of food trucks as they recreate an urban village in Boston’s business districts. In Chapter 2, I introduce the history of street vendors in the United States and discuss the backdrop of food trucks as they
have entered modern American cities. I also explore Boston’s motivations for welcoming food trucks. I then continue to examine possible reasons for food trucks’ recent spike in popularity such as the American cultural respect for entrepreneurial innovation.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the social meaning of food trucks, and particularly Mushu, in their direct relationships between customers and employees, and among staff members. I then consider the value of food trucks in the social connections that they facilitate in urban environments by creating a destination culture.

Chapter 4 then shows how food trucks cooperate, both indirectly and directly, as a sub-community in Boston. This cooperation only solidifies their correlations with Jane Jacobs and Herbert Gans’s close-knit communities as it demonstrates Boston food trucks’ interdependence.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how Mushu’s driving mission and principles show their concern for the well being of their community. The way that they balance their principles and business pragmatics demonstrates what Heather Paxson calls their “economies of sentiment,” or their struggle to combine their social and moral values with their business practices. In Mushu’s case, they show their strong goodwill for the local foods movement and the health of their customers and their local farmers.

In a brief conclusion, Chapter 6 discusses the future of food trucks in Boston as the volume of food trucks increases. It also considers new frontiers to be explored in the future, such as the social implications of the trucks’ mediation of developed, professional urban areas in Boston. In this section, I acknowledge food trucks’ potential role in allowing for gentrification, and possible solutions that only food trucks could provide.
Chapter Two: Why Now?: The Rising Popularity of Food Trucks

As food trucks have continued to succeed and multiply in Boston since 2011, the question arises – why now? What has caused food trucks to shuck off their previous “roach coach” identities and become popular? What made Boston decide to invite food trucks to the city’s streets with its Mobile Food Ordinance in 2011? A number of trends contribute to the popularity of food trucks, coming from food truck owners, government officials, and customers. Before discussing these trends, we must first understand the background preceding food trucks’ entry to American cities and Boston.

A Brief History of Food Trucks in the United States

The relationship between informal food vendors and city governments has long been inconsistent. While many city officials admit that food trucks contribute to the social life of urban spaces, they also criticize them for causing traffic problems, littering, and a general sense of discord on urban streets. Food vendors’ popularity with city governments has therefore been highly unstable. Describing New York City, urban street food scholars have written that: “Street vendors, throughout history, have endured a love-hate relationship with the cities in which they work” (Taylor et al. 2000). In 2004, New York City’s Commissioner on Consumer Affairs said, "The city's vending laws are like an onion. It has many layers, and after a while, one can't help but cry” (Brustein 2004). These complicated relationships are present in New York and in many other cities, including Boston. Boston’s structural obstacles for permitting mobile food units restricted most aspiring vendors from the food truck business until 2011. But this “love-hate relationship” has changed in favor of love in recent years for food trucks as they have steadily gained popularity nationwide.
This thesis focuses primarily on food trucks, but the history of these food trucks and the street vendors that preceded them are inevitably intertwined. In order to thoroughly address the topic of food trucks, it is crucial to understand the historical perceptions and connotations of informal urban food vendors as a general whole as they have set the stage for the arrival of food trucks on the street food market. In the following section, I aim to understand the rising popularity of food trucks in Boston amidst conflicting opinions of urban street food vendors nationwide. Why have food trucks regained interest in Boston? Why have entrepreneurs decided to launch mobile food businesses now particularly? What prompted Boston’s government to open the city to food trucks? To begin to answer these questions, we must first define our unit of analysis, the Boston food truck.

**Boston’s Mobile Food Categories**

The Boston government delineates four categories for Boston’s mobile food vendors: Mobile Food Trucks, Food Push Carts, Canteen Trucks, and Ice Cream Trucks. According to the municipal government, a mobile food truck is a retail food service situated in a vehicle where the “food is cooked, prepared, and served for individual portion service” inside the truck’s “complete full-service commercial kitchen” (Boston Businesses 2013). Most trucks are reused and refitted with kitchens and a large closeable window on the side of the truck for customer service. These food trucks are not to be confused with non-motorized pushcarts, which have more regulations due to their lack of handwashing facilities, and canteen trucks, which serve food outside of their vehicles. Finally, ice cream trucks serve only frozen desserts at regulated temperatures. Sanitary concerns are relatively low on ice cream trucks due to the minimal risk of contamination in their product (Boston Businesses 2013). The city of Boston puts mobile food
units into separate categories according to their setup, and imposes health and safety restrictions according to these categories.

_The History of Food Trucks_

The history of these food trucks is not so separate as Boston’s categorizations, however. The history of street food vending builds upon many different types of carts including pushcarts, wagons, and trucks. Due to their common features of mobility and operation on public city streets, the stories and developments of mobile food units are often intertwined.

Public perceptions and sellers’ techniques of mobile food vending began with pushcarts selling raw produce. In 1691, New Amsterdam (today’s New York City) began regulating street vendors’ sale of foods from pushcarts. The first regulation laws required pushcarts to begin selling goods only after public markets had been open for at least two hours, and to relocate every thirty minutes. The Thirty Minute Law was hardly enforceable at the time, however, due to the overly crowded streets in the poorer neighborhoods where the majority of the pushcarts were located (Brustein 2004; Hoffman 2011).

Many attribute the rise of American street vending to the waves of immigrants who brought European-style vending practices to American cities, marking the beginning of urban informal food business in the United States (Taylor et al. 2000). By 1707, New York City had banned food vendors from public streets in an effort to restrict street uses to traffic and to appease business owners who complained that the stands stole business from their stores and restaurants. Street vendors persevered despite these laws, however, bribing authorities and property owners to ignore regulations and to allow them to continue conducting business. Between the years of 1827 and 1846, middle and upper class New Yorkers took their shopping indoors, causing a sharp downturn for the mobile food businesses lining the streets (Taylor et al.
The lower class maintained the street vending business, however, selling and vending within their own social strata – and this has largely continued up until the arrival of the new, middle-class gourmet food trucks.

Among immigrant communities, pushcart markets provided a cultural value as well, allowing immigrants to forge a community full with the cultures and languages of their home countries (Taylor et al. 2000). For these immigrant populations therefore, mobile food units played a significant role in forming an ethnic, cultural “urban village” in the large, foreign city akin to that of the Italian-Americans in Boston’s West End. Mobile food units therefore have a long legacy of creating urban villages among patrons and sellers.

The form of the mobile food truck began to take shape in quite a different environment than New York’s pushcarts. Charles Goodnight, a ranch owner and cattlemans on the Western frontier, invented the first food truck when he refitted a government wagon as a mobile kitchen in 1866. Known as “chuck wagons,” these horse-drawn kitchens fed cattlemen on trail drives, and travelers on wagon trains crossing the Old West (Modern Marvels 2013). Where there are people working, there must also be food, and Charles Goodnight capitalized on this need for traveling cattlemen with his mobile chuck wagon.

About a decade later in 1872, urban centers caught on to Goodnight’s business tactics and the first horse-drawn freight wagon began selling lunch to customers on city streets in New England (Modern Marvels 2011). In 1893, New York City’s Church Temperance Society invested in one such wagon, serving meals from the evening late into the night to offer workers an alternative to the saloons (Brones 2013). For them, the advantage of a mobile food service was their presence on the street - catching the eyes of late-night industrial workers before the saloon did. In 1894, sausage vendors adapted these techniques to the market of college
campuses, selling sausages to students outside of major eastern university dorms. The sausage carts became known as “dog wagons,” (Myrick 2012) a term describing their hot dog fare, but also pejoratively referencing the origins of the meat (Hot Dog City). These kinds of terms evidence early popular opinions deeming food carts unsanitary and undesirable. And yet, the consumer market persisted, keeping these “dog wagons” and their counterparts in business.

Later, in 1917, the US Army began using mobile canteens, or field kitchens, to feed stationed troops (Luster 2012). Like Goodnight’s cattlemen, the US soldiers needed a food source that could travel with them in their mobile occupations. Back on the home front, the New York City “Owls” of 1890 sold hot dishes to industrial workers after restaurants had closed. Replaced by motorized versions in 1930, they continued to supply labor forces with hot meals (Luster 2012) following the mission of Goodnight, the Church Temperance Society, and the US Army’s mobile canteens. After the war, many of those unemployed during the Depression era took up street vending to earn income, selling simple products such as apples from pushcarts. In this case, food stalls provided a simple way for those with little economic means to employ themselves and generate some income during a severe economic recession. By 1930, 47,000 family members depended on income from pushcarts (Wasserman 2009: 158).

“Infestations” of Street Vendors

Despite the honorable gumption of Depression-era families’ pushcart enterprises, negative opinions of street vendors proliferated in the 1930s in New York City. In 1938, Deputy Mayor Henry H. Curran complained that:

A band of flower peddlers infests my neighborhood along Fifth Avenue from 8th Street to 12th Street. They are dirty, defiant, unlicensed peddlers, and the flowers they sell last about twenty minutes. I hear many complaints from people who live about there and whose passage along the sidewalk is actually blocked by these peddlers thrusting their wares on passers-by (Brustein 2004).
This perception of vendor “infestation” on city streets was common at the time, and persists even today (Brustein 2004). During the same period, New York City’s Mayor LaGuardia tried to restrict open-air street foods and eliminate the pushcart markets that Jewish peddlers had started in 1886. He worked to establish public markets indoors with the intention of “legitimizing” vendors in an enclosed, stationary location. This plan likely also intended to “beautify” New York City’s streets by clearing them of lower-class vendors. LaGuardia’s plan was unsuccessful, however. Vendors refused to be shepherded into such closed markets due to the required rent payments and the close proximity to their competition – vendors contended that they were far more successful on the open streets (Hoffman 2011, Wasserman 2009: 160-164).

Ice Cream Trucks

Around the same time, Good Humor started selling their signature “ice cream on a stick” from trucks in New York City and Boston (Brones 2013). The ice cream truck became an extremely popular venue, perceived apart from other “chaotic” urban street vendors. Successful in cities as well as suburban neighborhoods and beach towns, ice cream trucks proliferated from the first truck in the 1930s to the millions of trucks scattering the country today (Brones 2013). One of Boston’s ice cream trucks, Boston Frosty, is still popular and successful at its location alongside Boston Commons.

Many American childhood memories include the image of the ice cream truck, particularly in 1950s and ‘60s suburbia. In a nostalgic piece, Faye Reddecliffe writes about the iconic “ice-cream man.” She begins her piece with dismal imagery of her town – steep inclines, rust-stained bridges, smokestack mills, and the dark, imposing presence of a World War I memorial. Reddecliffe then adds a brighter feature:

…an ice-cream man with a blue and white truck that had red-striped awnings and a bell. On unbearably hot summer days, he came to distribute: ice-creams – plain and chocolate-coated; ices – pastel green and pale pink, rich brown and orange; drumsticks – sugar-coated cones and
chocolated peanuts. When small fingers let slip a chocolate cone, the ice-cream man would fix another while the chocolate pool grew hot on the cement (Reddecliffe 1971: 65).

Reddecliffe depicts the ice-cream man as a kind and generous figure, refilling “small fingers” with second ice cream cones. In her account, he is a positive memory for the children living in an otherwise dreary, industrial town.

This nostalgic account is similar to positive childhood memories that many Americans hold of the benevolent ice cream man and their excitement at finding his truck on their block. Somehow, the ice cream truck has escaped the criticism of other food trucks. As one food truck blogger writes of today’s food truck scene: “Not since the Good Humor man hung up his bells in the 1970s, have so many food trucks patrolled the streets of America’s cities” (Food Truck Daily 2009). The blogger colloquially explains how the accepted food trucks on America’s streets before the recent food truck boom were primarily ice cream trucks. This signifies that ice cream trucks were more popular among customers and city officials alike in the mid to late 1900s. This is still apparent in Boston’s descriptions of the city’s mobile food establishments. As described earlier, the Boston government defines ice cream trucks as a separate category from food trucks, indicating that they find a categorical difference between the operation of the two mobile food units. This may be due to the differences in the products that these two trucks sell, and their requirements for a mobile food license, but perhaps an ideological preference underlies this distinction in favor of the ice cream truck.

It is possible that customers’ positive memories and associations with ice cream trucks are transferable to today’s modern gourmet food trucks. In the television series Eat St., one interviewed customer at Boston’s Cardemum truck says, “We thought it was an ice cream truck. Then we ended up with these sandwiches” (Eat St. 2011). It seems that part of what makes food trucks recognizable and appealing to some customers is their association with the more familiar
ice cream trucks from their childhoods. These ice cream trucks have potentially set the scene for modern food trucks.

“Roach Coaches”

Food trucks, however, did not have such positive associations as their Good Humor counterparts in the post-war era. In the 1950s, Giovani Ducci bought a resold Army food truck and began selling pasta and sandwiches to union laborers at Port Authority in New York City (Luster 2012). Again, food trucks appeared as a meal source for urban laborers. Ten years later, the working class labor meal trend appeared again as “roach coaches” appeared at construction sites, serving meals to workers on their lunch breaks (Myrick 2012). “Roach coach” was another pejorative term for these food trucks, jabbing at the supposed insanitary conditions of the food trucks, particularly the presence of bugs due to the window on the truck’s side making it an open-air restaurant.

In 1974, Raul Martinez converted an old ice cream truck into the first taco truck in the United States. He parked it outside an East Los Angeles bar and began a trend that would make taco trucks popular among modern consumers (Myrick 2012). A few years later in 1979, “grease trucks” mirrored the “dog wagon” business plan and parked on campus at Rutgers University, selling “Fat Sandwiches” to students (Myrick 2012). The food truck scene hit a low after this, due, again, to their reputations as unsanitary traffic blockers that created more urban chaos than good food. New York Mayor Giuliani tried to ban food trucks again to “clean up the streets” in the 1990s, closing more than 100 streets to vendors including pushcarts, wagons, stalls, and the few food trucks in business. Like LaGuardia in the 1930s, Mayor Giuliani suggested that vendors relocate to open-air pushcart markets – another failed attempt to legitimize street vendors by grouping them in a defined location (Brustein 2004; Hoffman 2011).
The Rise of the Modern Gourmet Food Truck

With this mixed history as a background, the first modern gourmet food truck appeared in Los Angeles. Following the stock market crash in 2008, the Kogi barbecue truck began offering its Asian-infused Mexican tacos to customers in LA (Myrick 2012). Said to be the first modern food truck, the Kogi BBQ truck transformed the old business model of food trucks as a simple, efficient ways of feeding working bodies into a new, entrepreneurial way of producing exciting, creative foods with low overhead costs. Kogi BBQ set off a trend that spread like wildfire across the United States, particularly in Los Angeles and New York City. Mobile food units grew 8.4 percent between 2007 and 2012, and have since created a $1 billion industry (History of Food Trucks 2013).

The popularity of the new “gourmet” food truck partially lies in its market. The pushcarts and “roach coaches” that preceded the modern food truck catered primarily to working class laborers. Today’s food trucks set themselves apart by their focus on middle and upper class tastes – “fusing” ethnic foods, and cooking with high-end, unusual ingredients. Marley’s Grilled Cheese for example, sells “parmesan truffle fries” rather than regular fries, and Tuk Phem offers a “thai basil lemonade.” Pierre Bourdieu argues that class largely determines these tastes in food – and in turn that these tastes come to determine class. Using the term “cultural capital,” he explains that tastes ranging from those of “high culture” to personal (in food and clothing for example) are often shaped by class position (Bourdieu 1984). When it comes to food trucks, therefore, they are quite different than their predecessors not only in the food they sell, but also in the class-based tastes that shape these foods.

Mushu brought the truck to cater at a festival at Cape Cod Community College one weekend, selling its sweet potato and sage dumplings, apple and parsnip fritters, and scallion
pancakes sandwiches. The director of the event came and spoke with us multiple times, thanking us for coming. She said that she was grateful we came because a lot of people “wouldn’t be exposed to these kinds of food otherwise.” At first I thought she was simply being kind for our sake. But I found that many people did ask us about our menu items and ingredients – what dumplings are, or what sage is, for example. This was a big change from our typical customers in Boston, who hardly ever ask such questions. At the festival, it became very clear that the customers we cater to in Boston belong strictly to middle and upper classes as demonstrated by their tastes.

*Food Trucks in Boston*

Boston was slower to accept the new popularity of these gourmet food trucks than other US cities, lifting the city’s unofficial “ban” on street vendors as late as 2011 – three years after Kogi started the new trend. A few food trucks existed in Boston before the Mobile Food Ordinance, but under very different conditions. Food trucks were not officially banned before the Mobile Food Ordinance appeared, but the restaurant and parking regulations in place worked against them, structurally discouraging them from doing business. For example, Boston Code’s Site Cleanliness Licenses required applicants to record the “address of the lot on which the establishment is located” (Devine, pers. comm. Nov. 2013). This requirement implicitly restricted food trucks from maintaining multiple locations. However, in 1981, legislation allowed mobile food service at private, catered functions. Additionally, in 2001, the Boston City Council passed an ordinance establishing proper presentation of “food from any vehicle and/or pushcart and/or by any hawker, peddler or like transient vendor” (Devine, pers. comm. Nov. 2013). This regulation implicitly accounted for the presence of informal food vendors in Boston long before the Mobile Food Ordinance. Nevertheless, Boston food trucks were structurally discouraged
from operating in the city of Boston due to the stringent permitting requirements hardly adaptable to mobile food units.

In addition to permitting restrictions, the absence of parking provisions for food trucks largely limited their ability to operate in the city of Boston. Metered parking spots only allowed vehicles to park for up to two hours at a time, and finding a spot in the busier parts of town where the trucks would have the best business would be nearly impossible. Commercial parking was even more problematic, as commercial vehicles were allowed only one hour in the spot, and were required to be in the process of loading or unloading their vehicles while there (Devine 2013). Therefore, both permitting and parking restrictions limited food trucks to the point of an implicit food truck ban in the city of Boston.

Marley’s Grilled Cheese truck found a way around these restrictions, however, and opened their truck at Cleveland Circle in January 2011, four months before the ordinance. The truck had participated in the Great Food Truck Race, a TV series on the Food Network that showcases food trucks from around the country in a nationwide competition. Although Marley’s was eliminated in the sixth round of the competition, their motivation to run a successful food truck remained. Back in Boston, owner John Theodore studied the “slush and lemonade carts” on Boston Commons as mobile food models, and found out that Boston’s Parks and Recreation Department regulated the carts. Theodore then approached the department and asked for a vending permit for Cleveland Circle – but for a food truck instead of a cart. The department accepted, and Marley’s set up shop at Cleveland Circle, developing a clientele of office workers and families there (Theodore 2013).

Theodore explained that finagling his way into the Boston vending system was not easy – there was no road map for starting a food truck business like there is now. He said, “every step
was a learning curve,” and that Marley’s jumped through many hoops to get their spot. They passed on what they had learned however, later advising the mayor’s office on food truck regulations based on what they had seen in other cities during the Great Food Truck Race (Theodore 2013).

With Theodore’s stories and other positive food truck press fresh in their minds, Boston officials could not help but admire the booming success of food trucks in other cities, and wanted to get involved. The city tested food trucks in Boston by launching the Food Truck Challenge in the winter of 2010 to early 2011 to “establish mobile food and/or beverage vending on Boston City Hall Plaza” (Boston 2013). The three winners of the competition won spots to run their food trucks at City Hall Plaza the following spring. Participants first submitted a “12-page document summarizing [their culinary] concept and preliminary financials” (Loden 2013). The trucks then sold their food to customers, who voted for their favorite trucks in multiple rounds of online polls. The votes whittled the participants down to six finalists, each of whom conducted an in-person taste test for judges, showed a one-minute video about their concept, and presented a full business plan (Loden 2013). As one winner explained, “at a time when there wasn’t really an opportunity to get spots, that was a pretty big thing to win….it was the city’s process to get people interested in food trucks and then after that they introduced more spots in the next year” (Lodes 2013). Boston’s government therefore used the Food Truck Challenge as a pilot for food trucks in the city, controlling the numbers of winners, and gauging their success during the competition. The following spring, in April 2011, the Boston City Council developed a Mobile Food Ordinance to govern mobile food units in Boston.

In the Ordinance, the City Council established a Mobile Food Trucks Committee to review food truck applications and create appropriate rules and regulations for the trucks. Each
mobile food unit in Boston has to apply for a permit from the municipal government, and renew this permit each year. Food trucks are also strictly regulated to ensure that they report twice daily to a stationary Mobile Food Commissary for food and supplies, and to properly clean and sanitize their equipment (Ross et al. 2013). Once they have their permits, food trucks are eligible to enter Boston’s “lottery,” in which the city government assigns the trucks to designated weekly food truck spots in order to reduce competition and increase available parking for citizens. Food truck owners attend this lottery each year, and parse out the most coveted vending spots by instructing food truck owners to blindly pick a spot “out of a hat” (Theodore 2013).

The Boston City Council mentioned that another positive reason to invite mobile food units into Boston is an improved modern means of “regulating the complexities of the mobile food vendor industry including efforts to find solutions to problems created by the industry, such as issues around parking, traffic and waste disposal” (Ross et al. 2013). It is certainly true that regulations on food trucks have become more detailed and effective since the illegal food stalls of the 19th and 20th centuries.

But, despite these modern means of food truck “complexity regulation,” similar concerns persist, such as small business and restaurant owners’ resentment of the unwelcome competition of food trucks parked nearby their brick and mortar storefronts. Boston food truck operators are often frustrated with regulations as well, and some lament that City Hall “refuses to help Boston’s food trucks thrive” (Rinella 2013). Groups such as the Boston Food Truck Association and the Food Truck Freedom Project fight against the restrictions of such regulations, just as individual street vendors have done in the past.

In studying the history of food trucks and street vendors in American cities, it becomes clear that opinions about food trucks oscillate repetitively. Public opinion has flip-flopped
between positive views of food trucks as emblems of small-business innovation, entrepreneurship, and urban social activity, and negative perceptions of them as instigators of traffic congestion, noise, and social chaos on city streets. And city officials have attempted similar solutions in order to control this “chaos.” For now, Boston’s city officials and consumers are in favor of the gourmet food trucks – possibly due to their change in class orientation as they begin to cater to upscale tastes. As the Boston Mobile Food Truck Ordinance cites, the National Restaurant Association has showed that among people 18 to 44, there is an increased demand for “freshly prepared, restaurant-quality food that can be had quick and cheap,” (Ross et al. 2013) and food trucks supply this demand.

Inevitably, these frequent changes in opinion raise a few questions: Why do these food trucks become popular at certain times and undesirable at others? What do the trucks mean to their consumers? Or in other words, what ideas or ideologies do they signify both to customers and to government officials? How do these ideas compare? How has the city made compromises between food truck owners and restaurant owners to ensure fair competition? Will history repeat itself and deem mobile food units unsanitary and undesirable in urban areas? As I observe the popularity of food trucks in Boston, I hope to begin to answer these questions.

*When the Time is Ripe*

All negatives aside, Boston consumers and eager business owners were more than ready for food trucks by the time they began operating Boston. In a revised Mobile Food Ordinance, the Boston City Council mentioned a few reasons for welcoming “mobile food units” to Boston, namely increased employment opportunities and economic development, the popularity and profitability of mobile food units in other cities such as New York and Los Angeles, and encouragement for entrepreneurs (Ross et al. 2013). But it seems that those weren’t all the
reasons for which Mayor Thomas Menino became interested in food trucks. Edith Murnane, the director of Food Initiatives in Boston, explained that Mayor Menino decided to allow food trucks in Boston for three reasons: “to incubate a small business by helping it grow, to use them as a platform to talk about and provide healthier food, and as a way of activating Boston’s neighborhoods” (Carley 2013). Given the city’s efforts to revitalize Boston, including historical plans for a “New Boston” and developments of urban green spaces, food trucks came at just the right time. Seen through Mayor Menino’s eyes, food trucks were a great contribution to the long-desired revitalization of Boston and the development of middle and upper class attractions – at the cost of low-income populations.

Revitalizing Boston

Boston has a long history of revitalization efforts. In the 1870s, Frederick Olmsted aimed to enliven the city with a string of parks called the Emerald Necklace Project. In the 1920s, Boston officials struggled to accommodate the rising number of automobiles crowding their streets with the Fitzgerald Highway Project (O’Connor: 2001). In the 1950s, Boston made a serious effort to revitalize the city, beginning first with its repopulation. Following World War II, Boston became an unpopular and, suddenly, under-populated city. As layoffs, inflation, and housing stock worsened, Bostonians flocked to other cities (O’Connor 2001: 208). A Boston Globe article from the time explains that Boston had become a “hopeless backwater, a tumbled-down has-been among cities” (O’Connor 2001: 208). In an effort to change this reputation for the better, Mayor John Hynes drafted a plan for a “New Boston” (O’Connor 2000: 230).

Continuing with the “New Boston” plan in the 1960s, Mayor John Collins worked with the city’s local businesses to reinvigorate Boston, planning a new Government Center and City Hall downtown, and bringing the Prudential Insurance Center building to Back Bay, beginning
Boston’s restoration as a center of trade and world-class operations. With this series of plans, Boston eventually gained a better, more respectable reputation: “In the course of some twenty years – from about 1950 to 1970 – the city of Boston had been transformed from a poor, broken-down, old town of red-brick tenements and wooden houses into a successful, modern metropolis of soaring skyscrapers of shining glass and gleaming steel” (O’Connor 2000: 231). In twenty years, therefore, Boston made great strides in creating a more attractive city – yet at the expense of the evicted lower classes. Boston’s efforts to change the cityscape with the Big Dig and the Greenway in recent years are, in a sense, a modern continuation of this project, shaped by slightly different needs.

*The Big Dig and The Rose F. Kennedy Greenway*

In an effort to reduce traffic congestion and increase green space in the 1870s, Boston began the Emerald Necklace project, mentioned above. At the time, the leading planner, Frederick Olmsted, “intended his parks to have a ‘social role,’ offering a meeting place that reinforced ‘social discourse’” (O’Connor 2000: 116). The Rose Kennedy Greenway’s efforts mirror this goal nearly 150 years later, aiming to provide Bostonians with green spaces in which to convene, eat, exercise, and socialize in the city.

Boston’s “tangled streets” have created a literal roadblock to any urban innovation that might further its congestion. The city is notorious for its bad traffic – its old, crooked streets have caused persistent congestion problems that only worsened with the twentieth century automobile boom. As food truck owner Mitchell Green said, “one of the reasons food trucks are so difficult in Boston quite frankly is this is not a new city, this is one of the oldest cities…our streets were designed for cows and horses and not these beastly trucks” (Green 2014). The thought of adding
food trucks to this already unfortunate traffic situation naturally made city officials nervous, causing them to resist welcoming food trucks to Boston.

As discussed above, Boston governments have struggled to alleviate these problems in the past, from the Emerald Necklace Project in the 1870s to the Fitzgerald Highway project in the 1920s, to the Central Artery in the 1950s (O’Connor 2000: 23, 116, 357). The most recent project, the Central Artery/Tunnel Project or the Big Dig, aimed to fix Boston’s traffic issues for good, and was finally finished in 2007 after 15 years of construction. The Big Dig has played a large role in realizing the city’s goal to alleviate traffic problems and also to activate Boston’s open urban spaces with greenery and social activity (Amendola 2007).

As part of the Big Dig, the city replaced the old interstate structures with the Rose Kennedy Greenway, a series of green spaces ready to “accommodate joggers, picnickers, workers on lunch breaks, local residents walking dogs, and children at play” (Greengard 2007). The Greenway, owned by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, and run by the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, has made a concerted effort to foster natural beauty and a convivial social atmosphere in the center of Boston. It is therefore no coincidence that four years after these parks officially opened in 2008, Boston began its process of welcoming food trucks into the city with its Food Truck Challenge and Mobile Food Ordinance.

As evidenced by their widespread acceptance in other American cities, food trucks activate urban spaces, creating social activity where there was little – or even none – before. In a historical account of roadside diners, Jakle and Sculle demonstrate how diners transformed roadside space into place in the 1950s. Restaurants, they explain, have the unique ability of “place production – the creation of places for consumption…[with] the entrepreneur – the restauranteur, as the creator of place” (Jakle and Sculle 326-7). Food trucks possess just such an
ability in urban environments – they are “creators of place,” humming magnets for social interaction and vibrancy in the city. It is this vibrancy that pushed Boston’s city officials to incorporate food trucks into their plans for a greener, more attractive Boston. When asked what drew people to food trucks, Boston truck owner and former urban planner Peter Loden replied:

People have gotten really excited in general about food trucks because I think it fits in with the general trend towards people trying to spend more time outdoors in the cities and ... a lot of things like say the Big Dig and trying to make Downtown Boston nicer. And I think…food trucks have been an important part of trying to activate the Greenway and trying to get more people to use these downtown green spaces… (Loden 2013).

Another food truck owner agreed, saying that food trucks were a moot topic until Mayor Menino wanted to “make it happen” in Boston (Theodore 2013). Therefore, food trucks gained the favor of government officials in Boston due to their demonstrated ability to activate social space – a major goal of Boston’s government following the long-awaited completion of the Big Dig and the Rose Kennedy Greenway. Now, this social ability has flourished into an urban village community at the heart of Boston’s downtown districts.

These revitalization efforts, however, often hurt low-income populations. For example, in the 1960s, Boston tore down the West End, Herbert Gans’s urban village, to make way for higher-end shopping malls and apartments that would attract urban professionals to the city (O’Connor 2001: 218). Therefore, as food trucks partially further these efforts to revitalize the city and draw in elite populations, they too replace Boston’s lower classes, and forge new, middle-class communities. As these gourmet food trucks populate Boston’s streets, therefore, they may unconsciously contribute to an urban renewal movement that is and has been harmful to the city’s vulnerable populations.

“By Your Bootstraps”: Food Trucks and Entrepreneurial Ambition

The entrepreneurial spirit at the foundation of food truck businesses has contributed to national and regional governments’ newfound support for trucks as well. In September 2010, the
US government added “Tips for Starting Your Own Street Food Business” to its small-business website, BusinessUSA, essentially encouraging mobile food entrepreneurs to start their own trucks or push carts (BusinessUSA 2012). In January 2011, President Obama tweeted his favorite food truck in Washington: D.C. Empanadas (Myrick 2012). The United States government has therefore changed its overall opinion of street food in favor of food trucks, based partially on the trucks’ value in entrepreneurial innovation.

_American Dream_

In American culture, we tend to respect small-scale entrepreneurs working hard to make a name for themselves. The start-up, independent, self-reliant attitude lies at the foundation of the values comprising the “American dream.” Merriam-Webster’s dictionary for young adults defines the American dream quite simply as “a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful” (Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary 2014). Dunkin’ Donuts, for example, started as an extremely small-scale business idea and then spread like wildfire across the United States:

William Rosenberg opened a donut shop in Quincy, Massachusetts, in 1950. Immediately after World War II, he and his brother Leon had started selling coffee and sandwiches to factory workers off the back of a truck. In three years they built up a fleet of 140 trucks and were operating 25 in-plant cafeterias as well…In 1995, there were over 3,000 Dunkin’ Donut locations (Jakle and Sculle 1999: 200).

Dunkin’ Donuts, now a large, franchised chain operating across the country started in hard economic times, serving workers off of the back of a truck. Two small town brothers took a simple idea and ran with it, persevering to reach their goals. This demonstrates American ideals of entrepreneurialism at their finest – starting a small-scale business with a good product, working hard, and finally “making it big” and reaching success. Food trucks are a glorified version of the Rosenbergs’ pickup as they stand as start-up venues for today’s entrepreneurs.
The first gourmet food truck, Kogi, began with these respectable, hardworking values at its foundation. Owner Roy Choi explains that his family immigrated to Los Angeles from Korea in the 1970s, and struggled to get by. Comparing his mother to an “Avon lady” selling kimchi instead of makeup, Choi explains that:

The other part is being an immigrant, especially during the '70s, we didn't have any jobs. There were no jobs for us. So just surviving, just figuring things out, straight hustle. Every penny counted. And it was just a natural thing, she didn't even think about it. It was just that maternal gangsta spirit. Just go out there, make it all and go sell it….We went out to the streets and we just had to sell it like my mom when she made the kimchi (Montagne 2013).

This “hustle” attitude is a source of pride in the food truck industry for owners, and an appealing quality of food trucks for customers. Choi now enjoys great success, and is credited to be one of the foremost trendsetters of the nationwide food truck movement. In 2010, he was named *Food and Wine Magazine’s* Best New Chef. As his website bio explains, “Roy Choi was a survivor of his own risks and impulsivities and was a believer in the kind of magic that propels his career to this day” (About Chef Roy 2014). It is these stories of beginning with little else than that “straight hustle,” and working up to success that stick in customers’ minds, and also that motivate many food truck owners to start their own trucks. As the winner of one season of *The Great Food Truck Race* put it, “I really hope [our win] shows Americans that if you believe in something, you gotta go after it. You never know what will happen” (The Great Food Truck Race 2012). This is the “go-getter” attitude that food trucks stand for as they succeed across the country.

This is also a predominant attitude in Boston. Boston’s food trucks all began in the Boston area, and are still locally owned and operated. In most cases, the aspiring truck owner or owners come up with an idea for marketable food products that they want to sell. From there, they begin to go through the work of finding a suitable food truck, having it refurbished the way they need, applying for permits, and marketing their product.
Isaac Simons and his business partner “went after” their goal of running a popular food truck in Boston. When asked about the start of his business, he recounted how he and his first business partner were still working in their office jobs when they decided to start a food truck. Planning on the weekends, the Boston business partners found a food truck online, took a risk, and bought it. The truck was then located in Florida, so during one of their weekends off from work, they flew down to the “Sunshine State” and drove the truck up the coast to Boston. Isaac said that he and his partner took turns driving, sleeping on the floor in the back of the truck on their off shifts (Simons 2014).

This tireless commitment to an idea demonstrates an admirable entrepreneurial spirit involving risk, hard work, ambition, and gumption. Working over 100 hours a week, Simons and his partners found success in Boston. Soon after opening their truck, they were able to leave their office jobs and expand their business to a fleet of three trucks. In a few months, they will open their brick and mortar restaurant. In the future, Simons says he hopes to expand his business and become a nationwide food truck brand (Simons 2014). This ambitious attitude and hard work ethic is what Boston consumers admire, and what makes success so satisfying for food truck entrepreneurs.

**Hard Work**

This success is hard-won, however. The hard work required to run a successful business is part of what customers and owners value in the entrepreneurial spirit required to run a food truck – and food trucks are a tough industry. Each food truck owner I encountered explained that owning a food truck is hard work. When I asked to interview one truck owner for my research, he joked, “Why, so you can understand why we want to do this to ourselves?”
Food trucks are particularly vulnerable to weather conditions, and their business success varies greatly according to the season or even the day. Working with Mushu in the winter months, for example, is an entirely different experience than in the summer. In the winter, customers are mainly hardcore regulars coming out to the truck for their meals. Foot traffic is significantly lower, and sales drop dramatically with the cold weather. Arthur Lang told us that in the winter, they staff the truck with about four people to a shift. In the summer, however, they need at least six people, and even up to nine on particularly busy days because the volume of customers is so much higher. As a food truck owner at one of Mushu’s cluster sites said to Arthur on a sunny day in late March, “It’s pretty good out here today. But another month from now this would be dead.” He meant that while the business that day was good, it was nothing compared to the kind of business they have in the warm spring and summer months.

Boston’s cold weather makes it one of the worst places to own a food truck according to owner Mitchell Green (Green 2014). He closes his food truck, Al Fomo, for the winter months, claiming that business would be too slow, and that his restaurant business would suffer a loss. Peter Loden, owner of Tuk Phem, noticed that he catered to the same people every day at most of his truck’s sites in the winter:

[At one spot] last winter we noticed that we had the same number of customers regardless of the weather once we got into the winter and we were like, ‘ok it’s just the same exact people coming every day. Like regardless of what’s going on outside it’s the same people there.’ And then once March came around, they started bringing their friends or co-workers or whatever but the whole winter we had this core group (Loden 2013).

Although this “core group” shows the impressive dedication of food trucks’ regular customers, it also demonstrates how food trucks’ financial numbers suffer in the winter in Boston. In the warmer months, people are more motivated to venture outside, and “bring their friends or co-workers” to the truck, and business picks up immensely. As John Theodore explained, the ideal spot for a food truck is one in which there is high foot traffic and 65-degree, sunny weather
(Theodore 2013). Food trucks do their best business – and have the best social effects – when the weather is agreeable and when people are more willing to spend time outside.

The winter is not only difficult for food truck sales, but also for the employees working on the trucks. Often when I told friends and family members that I was working in a food truck, they would respond with, ‘oh that’s so cool!’ And they’re not wrong. But the work is also difficult. Mushu closed its truck on most of the days when the weather was too harsh for employees (and also customers) – either because of snowstorms or temperatures below twenty degrees. On regular winter days, though, we would still return home with numb feet and cold, chapped hands. Ingrid, one of Mushu’s owners described the truck as a big aluminum box, and said that when it’s cold outside, the metal floor conducts the outside temperature. This is definitely true, and the truck floor is littered with flattened cardboard boxes and rubber mats to prevent it. Ingrid joked that when liquid spills on the truck floor, it freezes, and the truck turns into an “instant ice rink.”

A few customers commented about how cold it was for us as they shivered waiting for their food. Others seemed indifferent, pointing out that the grill would keep us all warm enough. Luckily, at Mushu, the grill and steam stations do keep their operators warm, and a small space heater rotates on full blast for the cashier. But these only go so far, and the weather certainly takes its toll on employees. Even despite the space heater, I often found myself fumbling with and dropping credit cards or change, the cold reducing the dexterity in my fingers. The seasonal elements have a greater effect in both sales and in the quality of work for food trucks than for restaurants.

The food truck business is especially tough when running out of a commissary. While some trucks prepare their food and clean their trucks in their Boston-based restaurant spaces,
most trucks must do so from commissaries. Early in the morning before each shift, an owner or manager and a few employees travel 20 to 40 minutes to their commissary to prepare the truck – stocking it with food, cleaning its surfaces, and making sure it has all the supplies necessary to work a full shift. After the shift, they repeat the same process. A crew of two to three people drive the truck back out to the commissary, make sure the truck has enough supplies for the morning, clean its surfaces and send all dirty pots and utensils to the kitchen to be washed, and then travel home, ready to start the whole process over again. These extra steps can make for an even more exhausting day than in a regular food business.

Truck breakdowns are also common. As one food truck owner explains, “they break….There’s no generators that were ever built to handle this load. I mean most of the generators that we all use are made for camping. And they’re certainly not made for cookin’ nonstop, serving hundreds of people in a 2-hour period” (Green 2014). Every food truck owner has at least one story about a breakdown. John Theodore’s generator suddenly started giving off thick black smoke one day, for example. Mushu, too, had to close the truck for a few days for repairs. These kinds of difficulties are certainly not foreign to food truck owners, and they pose another challenge to owning a food truck business.

As restaurant and food truck owner Mitchell Green says about the food truck industry, “It’s a tough business. In some ways it’s tougher than the restaurant business” (Green 2014). Although food trucks are a financially simpler way to start a business, running one is no small feat. Food trucks require a great deal of attention, patience, and physical work. This makes food trucks a difficult business to be in, and consequently makes success in the industry all the more admirable and rewarding for owners.

Food Trucks: A “Recession-Thumping” Trend
Similar to the produce pushcarts of the Depression era, food trucks became a prominent enterprise particularly at the start of the economic recession in 2008. Food truck reviewer Daniel Smith calls food trucks “one of the restaurant industry’s most en vogue, recession-thumping trends” (Smith 2011). This is because many nationwide food truck owners are gourmet chefs who wanted to start their own business, but were unable to afford the high costs and risks of a brick and mortar restaurant (History of Food Trucks 2013). The initial costs of opening a food truck are much lower than that of a full-fledged restaurant (Muir 2011), and start-up loans are scarce during a recession. As Arthur Lang explained “opening a food truck in Boston costs about 20% of what it would cost to open a restaurant.” For Arthur and his sisters, a restaurant was not a financial possibility, but a food truck was – and it would allow them to build the capital they needed to start a brick and mortar. Therefore, as blogger Nona Aronowitz writes, “food trucks are the ultimate scrappy startup for a generation full of aspiring business owners who have an overflow of ambition and a dearth of cash” (Aronowitz 2012). Aronowitz argues that food trucks are one of the many ways in which “recession-era” business people are coping with the economic downturn (Aronowitz 2012). And many of these “scrappy startups” have helped entrepreneurs break into the food industry and realize their goals.

American entrepreneurs’ ambitions have not been entirely quelled by the recession – “in times of crisis, the idea of the American dream is remarkably strong. One reason is that faith in the power of individual action lies at the core” (A Better Life: Creating the American Dream 2014). Therefore, the recession did not necessarily deter ambitious entrepreneurs from pursuing a business in the restaurant industry, but simply prompted them to think more carefully and strategically about starting that business. Food trucks therefore have strong meaning as
innovative, start-up businesses to their owners, their customers, and the government officials who regulate them.

Roach Coach v. Food Truck

While mobile meal wagons set the scene for the modern food truck, today’s trucks see themselves going in a completely different direction than their predecessors. The food trucks operating before Kogi’s 2008 debut catered mostly to construction workers or other blue collar laborers. As Boston food truck blogger Megan Marrs explains,

You had your ice cream truck, taco trucks, hot dog vendors, but eating from ‘roach coaches’ was usually thought to be a dangerous endeavor – the trucks were believed by many to be riddled with health violations….The modern food truck is no roach coach of yesteryear – instead, you’ll find fine ethnic cuisine and specialty dishes at reasonable prices (Marrs 2012).

Food truck owners confirm this distinction between the roach coaches of the past and today’s trucks – and some acknowledge little to no connection of these older trucks with their own. This is due partially to the class distinction between these two groups of trucks. When asked about roach coaches, Boston food truck and restaurant owner Mitchell Green quickly said, “Those are lunch trucks. That’s different – that’s a lunch truck” (2014). Owner John Theodore goes deeper, saying that “people understand the difference now” (2013). He explains that food trucks cater to a different socioeconomic demographic – unlike today’s trucks, roach coaches are and were neither innovative nor memorable: “they’re just trying to feed people” (2013).

Underlying these explanations of roach coaches and “lunch trucks,” is a crucial class distinction. Food trucks are also “lunch trucks,” but now they are “gourmet,” and intended for the upper rather than the working classes. As John Theodore articulated, the old “lunch trucks” are “just trying to feed people” – and the people they’re feeding are the lower working classes, who don’t have the same taste or desire for truffle fries or herb-infused lemonades. The widespread acceptance of gourmet food trucks comes from the members of higher society, and
the older “roach coaches” are still excluded from this acceptance. Gourmet food trucks therefore depend on the refurbished, gentrified quality of “renewed” urban centers teeming with upper class tastes. And this is where today’s food trucks differ most essentially from “the roach coaches of yesteryear.”

Modern gourmet food trucks also believe that they “have the potential to be more of an actual brand” (Theodore 2013). They have ambitions of stretching their culinary skills to provide creative cuisine, of opening brick and mortar restaurants, of expanding across the country. While roach coach owners have worked just as hard as food truck owners, they seem to be credited less with American values of entrepreneurialism and gumption because, on the whole, they have not shown the same creative ambition to expand their markets and their businesses – and this was never their goal. These meal wagons, while innovative in establishing a market of consumers and very important food sources for workers, are not as concerned with gourmet cuisine and “making it big” as today’s food trucks. Instead, food truck owners today believe that these trucks were, like the “Owls” of the 1890s, meant to act like a blue-collar cafeteria, simply filling hungry bellies at lunchtime. Therefore, the two camps of mobile food owners diverge in the driving ambitions at the core of their businesses.

This separation of gourmet food trucks from their predecessors brings up the question of the authenticity of modern food trucks. Can the food trucks today be considered authentic if they see no connection between their trucks and those of the “roach coach,” or “taco truck”? Sharon Zukin explores a parallel idea in her study of gentrification in New York City. She writes that, “…rundown nineteenth-century houses and small shops are appealing to many people with middle-class cultural tastes because they embody the aesthetic distinction of objects that are, on the one hand, simple, handmade tokens of craftsmanship, and on the other, living history” (Zukin
22). Although food trucks do not fit this description exactly, they share qualities with the handmade because they are all customized and decorated differently than the next food truck. Food trucks are also living history as their physical truck bodies hearken back to the working class food trucks of the 1970s, and as they continue the story of urban street foods nationwide.

In her study of New York City’s SoHo neighborhood, Sharon Zukin explains how what began as a neighborhood of government subsidized artist housing has turned into an expensive area with multi-million dollar apartments and high-end chain stores. She argues that this kind of gentrification causes a loss of “origins,” or “a moral right to the city that enables people to put down roots. This is the right to inhabit a space, not just consume it as an experience” (Zukin 6).

Gourmet food trucks, perhaps, also lack these origins. Like SoHo’s buildings, the food truck finds its origins in blue-collar roach coaches and taco trucks. And yet the people working inside these food trucks and eating at them no longer match up with these origins. Those who put down the food truck “roots” in Zukin’s terms, are not the same people operating the new gourmet food trucks. This runs parallel to Zukin’s explanation of SoHo – the people living in the previous cheap studio lofts are no longer struggling artists, but wealthy business men and women. And the people working and eating at the new gourmet food trucks are not the same blue-collar construction workers.

This brings us back to the origins, too, of the urban village. As discussed earlier, today’s gourmet food trucks represent a middle-class population. They therefore do not recreate the “authentic” working-class urban village like those in Herbert Gans and Jane Jacobs’s neighborhoods. Instead, they forge a new version for middle-class consumers right at the heart of downtown Boston – a space deliberately constructed to attract urban elite and exclude the lower classes.
The origins of food trucks are not forgotten, however. While working with Mushu, a few customers have approached the service window asking for “a slice” (of pizza) or a hot dog. Although this may indicate customers’ carelessness or a lack of attention, it may also show how food trucks have not entirely lost their history. They are indeed pursuing different goals than the lunch trucks of the 1960s, but they would likely not exist today without them. Their ingenuity and ambition were able to take shape thanks to the blue-collar food trucks that preceded them. Food trucks are therefore inauthentic (by Zukin’s definition) in their ownership, staffing, brand marketing and in their foodstuffs, but the trucks themselves are indeed authentic. Only the food truck itself finds its origins in the “roach coach” of the 1960s.

Conclusion

Mobile food carts, wagons, and trucks have endured despite government opposition and general hardships because they are in high demand among urban workers. As city governments pushed to remove or contain the pesky carts, they persisted, and stayed in business due to loyal customers – and despite negative connotations. In recent years, modern gourmet food trucks have hit the streets in full force, serving urban laborers – this time middle-class office workers – like their predecessors.

But significantly, food trucks have also gained popularity with the governments who criticized them in the past. In Boston, the city has mobilized food trucks as part of its ongoing initiative to revitalize the city since its concerning downfall in the 1950s. But food trucks have also earned their favor among customers and governments alike for their well-respected entrepreneurial innovation and hard work, particularly during the recent economic recession.

In the following chapter, I pick up the thread of social place-making introduced at the beginning of this chapter, and discuss another meaning of food trucks for customers and employees: their value as a hub of social connections.
Chapter Three: “A Human to Human Interaction”: The Social Value of Boston’s Food Trucks

Food trucks rely on social media to communicate with their customers and other supporters. Through websites, Facebook pages, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts, food trucks share their regular weekly locations, their daily menus, and occasional news. Drawn by virtual tweets and status updates, customers arriving at the food truck are instantly involved in an environment full of direct social interaction and personal attention. Not only does the team working inside the food truck constantly work as a team to carry out orders, but the interactions between the food truck employees and their customers also give food trucks a new value of personal care.

While food trucks use these fairly impersonal social media sites to reach out to their customers, their value lies in their personal interactions and relationships with their customers, employees, and, uniquely, their ability to foster social activity in urban spaces. As Alexander von Hoffman writes in his study of Jamaica Plain: “…once established, neighborhood businesses encouraged local social ties and neighborhood allegiances. Functioning as community institutions, manufactures projected the intimate patterns of mill town life onto the city neighborhood” (1994: 91). These “community institutions” are often hard to come by in Boston’s downtown areas such as Dewey or Copley Square, or City Hall Plaza. But food trucks enliven these spaces and “encourage local social ties” as they cultivate their relationships with regular customers and build relationships with new customers daily.

Customer Service: “A Human to Human Interaction”

In an age of technology and screen-to-screen interactions, people are often drawn to the food truck, where a face-to-face interaction awaits them. Boston truck owner John Theodore explains that food trucks are popular because:
people like feeling close to the people who are cooking for them and the food that they’re eating and food trucks do that better than anything. I mean you can never be in closer proximity to people who are preparing food for you than at a food truck and watch it being made and I think people really… I think people like that (Theodore 2013).

Regular or not, Theodore argues, at a food truck, you’re closer than you’ll ever be to the chef cooking your food. When describing his own truck’s goals, John said: “it’s about creating a personal connection with people and feeling engaged with people and not just – they’re not just a number on a ticket ya know… it’s more about human to human interaction” (Theodore 2013). Therefore for John Theodore, food trucks offer a small-scale personal service interaction in which customers tend to feel a stronger sense of human connection – with both their cashier and their chef – than in larger restaurant environments.

Social interaction was a major appeal of the first gourmet food truck, Kogi, based in Los Angeles. In an interview, Roy Choi, the owner, describes this process of the technological facilitating the personal in Los Angeles, a city built around cars and private lifestyles:

There's a sight here you don't always see in car-centric L.A.: People hanging out on the sidewalk while eating, socializing and listening to music. It took the virtual world of Twitter to bring about all this face-to-face interaction. And that's exactly the point, according to Kogi's head chef, Roy Choi. ‘You have all these neighborhoods now where people come out when they usually just got in their car and went to a mini-mall,’ Choi says. ‘Now they're coming out to their streets, talking to their neighbors’ (Bergman 2009).

Therefore, the gourmet food truck began as a socializing force that brought people together in urban environments, and the legacy has not changed. Urban food trucks have a rare ability to draw people into their city’s public streets and interact with others who they might not have spoken with otherwise. In an episode focusing on Boston, a customer interviewed for the television series Eat St. commented that what drew him to food trucks was the experience: “First time I went it wasn’t because of the food, it was because of the whole thing as a spectacle” (Eat St. 2011). In this sense, food trucks are only partly about the food they sell – they also create a
social “spectacle” or event in urban neighborhoods akin to a suburban ice cream social or barbecue.

Due to the social nature of food trucks, Mushu Street Kitchen upholds a high standard of customer service on its truck and in its restaurant. As Adam, their front of house manager tells his staff, “Mushu is known in Boston for its outstanding and accommodating customer service – if someone wants something, we’ll make sure we can get it for them.” This means that as a cashier or waitress with Mushu, we should do anything in our ability to help customers get what they want, the way they want it.

A popular cashier on the food truck, David exemplifies this motto. David is so tall that he has to stand with his legs in a large triangle, his feet about three feet apart in order to see customers face to face at the truck window. He keeps a notebook in front of him at his station, filled with regular customers’ names at each of the truck’s locations, with small descriptors to remind him of who they are and what foods they normally like or request. When a regular arrives, David consults his notebook and greets the customer by name, remembering their favorite food orders and preferences. The first time this happens, customers usually grin or raise their eyebrows in contented surprise. When customers apologize for making modifications to their orders or being “picky,” David often replies with, “hey, it’s your meal, we’re going to make it the way you want it,” or “not at all – this is your food.”

David both accommodates customer wishes and makes customers feel personally cared for and “special.” This is the kind of customer service that one might not expect from a truck. But trucks become, for some, a place that they visit nearly every day or every week for their lunch breaks, and the truck’s employees often become their friends. For example, one customer at the BU East location, a professor of anthropology at the University, updates us frequently on
her research with agrarian communities in West Africa. At our location near Boylston Street, Adam introduced me to “one of their best customers,” who had brought each of the truck employees moon pies the previous week. Another customer at this location told Adam she would bring us a bag of Boston newspapers to celebrate the truck’s positive review. Milo, a regular at Stuart Street, has “been with Mushu since the beginning,” and is the truck’s best advertisement. These customers are some of Mushu’s regulars, and have come to be quite friendly with the staff on the truck.

Carson, for example, first encountered Mushu as a customer, and then started working on the truck due to his personal connection with the Mushu employees. He said that before signing on with Mushu, he worked at a coffee shop in Cambridge. After trying Mushu’s food for the first time, he started following the truck’s locations, tracking them down on his bike for his weekday lunch. Soon, Carson became good friends with Adam and the other truck employees, and began working at Mushu once a week during the summer months. After a while, he decided to quit his job at the coffee shop and switch entirely over to Mushu. He is now a full-time, salaried employee, and works mostly in the restaurant. Carson’s story highlights the extent of Mushu staff’s relationships with customers – and customers’ deep interest in Mushu.

Not all customers are like Carson, however. Some avoid connecting with the truck’s staff, and are interested only in Mushu’s food. Others simply don’t often engage socially, and remain strictly a familiar face rather than become a friend of the food truck staff. This may be partially due to the interaction time between customers and employees. During busy shifts, the cashier interacts with a customer for up to thirty seconds, and the “expo” for up to one minute. Some may find social banter unnecessary in this time frame, or even rude to the customers waiting behind them.
But even customers who choose not to socially engage, or who engage infrequently, are part of the food truck urban village. As Jane Jacobs explains, valuable urban communities often consist of continual surface-level interactions like a smile or a quick hello on the street:

The trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts. It grows out of people stopping by at the bar for a beer, getting advice from the grocer and giving advice to the newsstand man, comparing opinions with other customers at the bakery...Most of it is ostensibly utterly trivial but the sum is not trivial at all. The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level – most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone – is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need (Jacobs 1961: 56).

Therefore, the slightest contact such as remembering a customer’s name each week, or making “small talk” may seem trivial in and of itself. But overall, these “public sidewalk contacts” contribute to the creation of an urban community. Even despite the short interaction times and surface-level topics of conversation between food truck employees and customers, these interactions accumulate to create a “feeling for the public identity of people” – a sense of trust and community. Mushu is often one of the hubs in this “web of public respect and trust,” for its customers. The truck’s presence in the center of the city, therefore, is all the more precious, as it remains a locus of these public contacts so pertinent to the urban village.

Many of our most friendly customers, however, are part of the “core group” who frequent the truck even on the coldest winter days, when business is slow. During these times, we are able to have longer conversations with these customers, and to develop more personal relationships with them than standard “public contact” relationships. These relationships can develop into employment, for example, as with Carson. There are therefore different levels of relationships and contacts that contribute to the urban village of food trucks. Even in the beginning of my time at Mushu, I could tell who the more personal regulars were, because the food truck manager
would always send them a cider or side dish on the house. It is these customers, too, who follow and support Mushu throughout its endeavors.

The loyal, regular customers who have frequented Mushu “since the beginning” like Milo have shown their strong support for the business particularly in Mushu’s fundraising campaign for their brick and mortar restaurant. Mushu used Kickstarter, a fundraising website that allows creative business owners or artists to spread their ideas and collect funding. Mushu’s goal was to open a “green restaurant,” with energy-efficient lighting and kitchen equipment, low-flow plumbing, reclaimed materials for the floors, counters, and walls, and other sustainable building products. After months of fundraising, Mushu had 354 backers, and had raised 25 percent more than their original goal.

When we hosted a dinner at the restaurant for the significant backers as part of their donation package, I asked Arthur Lang whom exactly we were serving that evening. He replied, “oh, they’re food truck people.” When I asked if they were specifically customers at the food truck he said, “Oh yeah. All of them. That’s how they knew us.” This kind of support among Mushu’s customers evidences Mushu’s strong connections with their customers. As Arthur articulated, Mushu “knows” their customers, and their customers “know” the owners and employees. These relationships are valuable in developing a successful business, but more importantly in cultivating a local community or urban village in areas like downtown Boston.

*Small Truck, Small Community*

Mushu’s standard of personalized customer service depends partially on the business’s small size. The physical space inside the food truck is limited, and can only accommodate so many employees at one time. Without expanding a food truck business into a fleet of multiple trucks, the community of one food truck remains relatively small. The close-knit, “pirate ship
atmosphere” (Lang 2014) among employees is contagious, and makes customers and employees alike excited about food trucks. The resultant “human to human interaction” at and in food trucks is key to their recent spike in popularity and success.

When it comes to small business, there’s nothing smaller than a food truck. The modern gourmet food truck offers about 120 square feet of floor space to accommodate sinks, refrigerators, grills, fryers, steam tables, counter space, supplies, and the food itself – not to mention the employees. No space is left unused on the truck.

As Adam told me on my first day working at Mushu, “space is an issue on the truck,” so communication is key. We therefore regularly use a language of single words to share the compact truck space effectively. We shout, “behind,” when walking behind someone else, “between,” when walking between two people, “reaching,” when reaching above someone, “hot!” when traveling with a hot object, “sharp!” when traveling with a sharp object, etc. When someone shouts one of these words, the employees on the truck often react (silently) by pulling their hips in, closing the 6 inches of space between themselves and their counter or grill in order to make more space for the moving employee.

Food trucks aren’t only physically small, however. The small physical size of the truck means that the number of employees working on that truck is limited. Depending on the season, the truck staffs from four to nine employees at a time. In many food truck businesses, the owners work on the trucks as well. This small food truck staff becomes a familiar group for customers at a particular location. When regular customers visit their favorite truck, they are greeted with a “hey, nice to see you.” This also means that our cashiers are able to remember customers’ modifications to their meals as well. Liz, for example, visits Mushu at Dewey Square every week, and likes extra ginger on her dishes. Jen never needs a bag because she brings her own.
Nathaniel likes to add pastrami to his sandwiches. And Louis will be getting married in the next few months, and wants Mushu to cater his wedding. Knowing these details contributes to the personal nature of the trucks, which increases their appeal for both customers and employees alike.

This signifies that many people and customers may be drawn to social interactions such as these in urban environments. They come back to the trucks each time not only for the high-quality food, but also for the people. Typically small, local businesses, food trucks offer regulars and tourists alike the opportunity to socialize with staff and other customers. As one customer tells his interviewer on the series *Eat St.*, “Sometimes I’ll just sit there talkin’ to ‘em and watch ‘em while they cook the food. You don’t get that experience in a lot of restaurants” (*Eat St.* 2011).

*Social Contact and the Boston Lottery*

Boston’s vending regulations complicate this urban village community. As explained earlier, all food trucks that wish to do business on Boston’s streets must participate in the city’s lottery for vending sites. This means that each year, food trucks change their weekly vending locations. In most cases, trucks are able to keep the majority of their regular locations, but simply change the days that they will vend at those sites. For example, in this year’s lottery, Mushu kept their Dewey Square location, but now vend there on Wednesdays and Fridays instead of Mondays and Tuesdays.

Many trucks must also give up their regular locations, however. Mushu, for example, had to give up their spot in the Seaport district this April, which, as Caleb said, “is a shame because they love us.” On our last day, Caleb instructed me to use one of our chalk signs to write a warm goodbye message to our Seaport customers. When asked about difficulties in changing locations
and maintaining customer bases, Peter Loden explained his disappointment at losing Tuk Phem’s Belvidere spot: “At Belvidere last year…nobody wanted it, it was a…one-truck spot so we took it three days a week…We flyered a lot around the area and put a lot of effort into trying to build that site up” (Loden 2013). Tuk Phem won’t get to keep the Belvidere site next year even though they put a lot of investment – both economic and social – into the spot. In these cases, the Boston lottery limits trucks’ ability to form the public contacts and lasting relationships that make them so valuable to urban communities.

The trucks are often able to maintain these communities, however. First of all, their new locations are often not very far away from their previous locations. Mushu’s new vending spot on Fridays is at Dewey Square, less than a mile from their old Seaport location. Secondly, this schedule change often means that regular customers simply change their own lunch schedules – visiting Mushu at Dewey Square on Wednesdays instead of Mondays, for example. Other customers don’t change their schedules, and continue to frequent their regular locations – and forge relationships with the staff at new trucks. Finally, as Mary Lang explained, the lottery decisions are not entirely final. If a truck dislikes a certain location, it can often initiate an informal trade with another truck with the city’s approval. Therefore, while the Boston lottery system may inhibit food trucks’ ability to maintain their community presence long-term at certain locations, many trucks find ways to retain these relationships at other locations, at the same locations on different days, or through informal site trades with other trucks. And if the trucks can’t find a way to keep their favorite locations, the trucks that replace them also replace their role as hubs of “public contacts.”

Employee Communities
Personal relationships don’t only occur between customers and food truck staff, however. The small nature of a food truck also facilitates close relationships between employees. During one shift, I talked with Adam, a customer service manager at the truck and the restaurant, about his demeanor during my job interview. I remember him being very serious and intimidating during the interview – words that I would not use to describe him now. He explained that, “once someone joins the Mushu team, he or she becomes a part of my family. But getting into that family isn’t easy.”

Mushu started as a family business, too. Ingrid, Mary, and Arthur Lang combined their skills of food service, entrepreneurship, and hospitality, respectively, to create their own business in Boston, their hometown. Pictures of the three siblings – both personal and published – cover the truck’s service window. The truck’s name, too, means “little sister” in Chinese, after Arthur’s two younger sisters and the truck’s co-owners, Ingrid and Mary. This foundation in family ties is contagious in Mushu’s business. Although the Langs expect professional, hard work from all their employees, they also invite their employees into their business as if they are members of a sub-family. For example, each of the employees has met the Langs’ mother at least once. When Arthur had his first baby boy in January, Heidi hand-sewed him a mini hat with Mushu’s logo on it. When asked about balancing his personal and home life as a new father, Arthur said it has been easy, since he trusts all his employees to do quality work without him there. Although the closeness of the personal relationships within this family varies – particularly between part-time and full-timers – the team sentiment and “pirate-ship atmosphere” is constant.

I felt a strong sense of the personal care that Mushu extends to its employees when I encountered some difficulties with my work schedule. I was struggling to balance my student life with my work on the truck, especially given the long commute to Boston from Waltham. I was
nervous about asking Ingrid for a change in my hours, especially because I was already working part-time. But when I finally did ask, Ingrid was extremely open and accommodating. She followed up with me immediately, and asked me to send her my ideal days, times, and number of hours so she could work around them in the schedule. I joked with her that I felt lucky that they had hired me at all because my commute made me a rather inconvenient employee. She laughed and said, “Well we’re very fond of you so we’ll do anything we can to accommodate you.” In this moment, and in many others, Mushu has demonstrated their strong attention to their employees’ wishes, comfort, and happiness.

For example, when I sent Arthur an email about working on the truck one day, he answered my questions and then added a “dress warm!” at the end. This kind of fatherly care is common for Arthur, too, when he is the manager on the truck. He often sends his employees a text when the truck will be late to its location, telling us exactly where to wait inside so we won’t have to wait in the cold. At the beginning of our shifts with Arthur, too, he routinely asks, “Anybody hungry?” Arthur therefore takes on a fatherly or “big brother” role with many of his employees, making sure they have what they need and are comfortable during their shifts.

The “family,” “pirate-ship” dynamic is plain to see when working in teams on the truck, too. When a shift gets busy, employees do not work solely at their designated stations for the day. We are constantly helping each other, working towards the same goal of an efficient day of service, with orders prepared and in the hands of the customer in under five minutes. This teamwork hearkens back to the essential interdependence of urban villagers. At the end of one busy shift, Caleb reviewed what we had done well. One of the things he mentioned was that we picked up each others’ orders, and worked as a team to have a successful service rather than remaining glued to our specific stations. This teamwork dynamic is crucial to food service, but
particularly to work in a food truck, where space and time are limited. Personal relationships are therefore necessary and present among employees, and represent another subset of the urban village in food trucks.

*Transforming Urban Spaces*

As discussed in Boston’s historical revitalization efforts, food trucks draw people into city streets, transforming space into place. Food trucks post their locations on their websites and social media outlets, citing cross streets and nearby landmarks to narrow down their exact location. Mobile smart phone apps like “Street Food Boston” locate the trucks on a map for customers who want to see all the food truck locations at once.

Without these points of reference, many of the individual food truck spots would be undiscoverable for a first time truck visitor because they are in what seem like random locations in Boston. Dewey Square, the Rose Kennedy Greenway, or the SoWa Market parking lots are relatively easy to find – you just follow your nose. But individual locations are not so easy to spot without prior knowledge or help.

Once customers gain this knowledge, however, the street comes alive. Long lines of customers snake down the sidewalk as food trucks turn a parking spot into a gentrified party. The presence of a food truck, its window flung open to the sidewalk, enlivens urban spaces with good smells and social activity.

This social enlivening is particularly evident at cluster sites. A “cluster site” is a spot that supports two or three food trucks at a time, activating social space and creating a convivial environment full of social exchange, banter and laughter. Clustering, in other words, livens areas, causing the previously ordinary spaces to become particularly “festive” – a place for people to meet, talk, exchange thoughts – to become socially vibrant. Food truck cluster sites therefore
create a “destination culture” (Zukin 2010: 237). Spaces that are normally banal become a social hub when groups of food trucks arrive.

The SoWa Market

The SoWa market provides a great example of just such a cluster site. The SoWa food market’s large size and festival-like atmosphere allows for enhanced “cluster site” qualities. The SoWa (South of Washington) Market has constructed a cluster site but on a much greater scale, hosting up to 12 trucks on a given Sunday afternoon during the summer and fall months. The market consists of three lots in South Boston, hosting artisans in one lot, a farmer’s market in another, and food trucks in the final lot. The SoWa food truck parking lot comes alive on Sundays with the roar of food truck generators, the shine of the sun on their brightly-painted exteriors, and the constant stream of customers walking through the two aisles of trucks, talking and sitting on the bleachers and benches. This large-scale cluster site draws “destination customers,” or those who travel to seek out a specific truck or site. The food truck market therefore becomes not just somewhere to eat but something to do, an event in which to participate.

The lot’s transformation evokes a sense of a marketplace, filled with intriguing food options and people. Three buildings hug the lot on each side, a street slightly separating one of them from the lot. They are brick, and two of them feature faded industrial logos, hearkening back to the history of South Boston as a waterfront. This history makes them fashionable and unique, contributing to the food truck market’s “festive” sense of place. The buildings are well kept, however, and look handsome as a backdrop to the trucks. Contributing to the nostalgia of the faded logos, the arrangement of the trucks elicits images similar to those of a marketplace. Customers get food, and then eat it sitting at a nearby picnic table, on a bleacher, on windowsills
of the adjacent buildings, or even on curbs. The SoWa food trucks therefore present the idea of an “old-fashioned” marketplace created anew as an urban-style picnic where customers take away food, and find a place to eat it while clustering with their companions. This produces a sensation of excitement and fun as urban entrepreneurs repackage old traditions of both market and picnic to create a mini urban village.

The SoWa market therefore transforms a “regular” parking lot into a lively scene filled with conversation, transaction, gustatory pleasure, and a sense of “fun.” Visitors feel like they are participating in something, or attending a social event. In this way, the market recreates a vehicular “coat closet” into a lively event worth marking as a destination.

The association of food trucks with this festive atmosphere attracts people to them even when the trucks are not in a large cluster setting such as SoWa or Dewey Square. Food trucks have the association of being fun and festive whether they are at a festival or not. As restaurant and truck owner Mitchell Green says, “At the end of the day, the food trucks are fun…you’re so close to the person cooking your food, you’re interacting with people, it’s just a fun way to get food” (Green 2014). Therefore, food trucks have gained a reputation of being fun, lively places to eat partially because of their potential for place-making.

**Conclusion**

This social place-making is precisely what makes food trucks valuable in connecting big, downtown areas with small business. Food trucks enliven the hard stone and cement of Boston’s squares and sidewalks by creating a new place to be sought out, and by paying careful attention to the quality of the relationships between employees and customers, and among staff. In the next chapter, I study food truck owners, the second sub-group of food trucks, and their means of creating their urban village through interdependence.
Chapter Four: A Sub-Community: Cooperation Among Boston’s Food Trucks

“Excuse me, where did you get this nice-looking corn?” he says. The couple answers, pointing, that they got it “just two trucks down.” He thanks them and makes a beeline for the truck, eager to “have what they’re having.” As he waits in line, the parking lot is alive with food trucks – about twelve of them, generators roaring and bright façades glinting in the sunlight. It’s a social event, a hubbub of sun, crowds, and a variety of unusual, casual foods. A constant stream of customers mill through the two aisles of trucks, talking, laughing, sitting on bleachers and picnic benches, leading dogs and strollers.

The more I observed the food truck scene at Boston’s SoWa market, worked with Mushu, and talked to food truck employees, the more I became curious – how competitive are Boston’s food trucks? In what areas do food trucks help each other? In what areas must they compete? What do their competitive and cooperative stances say about the food truck community? What I was surprised to find is that food truck owners maintain a fine balance between expected market competition and collective cooperation in drawing customers and fostering reputations for the food truck industry as a whole. In doing so, they foster an overall sense of the food truck business as a sub-community working together to create a successful industry. According to my observations, the balance of cooperation and competition is largely due to the outdoor nature of food trucks, their small community and rapid appearance in the city, and their shared regulations imposed by the city of Boston.

The feeling that food trucks form a friendly sub-community contributes to their role in recreating the urban village within corporate areas. Food trucks’ deliberate and indirect cooperation, too, represents the interdependency crucial to the making of Jane Jacobs’s and Herbert Gans’s urban village. In Jane Jacobs’s “ballet of the street,” neighbors and customers
lean on each other and local business owners, leaving their apartment keys, for example, with Joe Cornacchia, the owner of the local delicatessen (Jacobs 1961: 60). In Gans’s neighborhood, he explains that among “West Enders,” neighbors often leaned on each other due to the frequency of hardship: “…for many families, problems were never far away…when emergencies occurred, neighbors helped each other readily” (Gans 1982: 15). Although food trucks do not suffer the same hardships as the Italian-Americans of the West End in the 1950s, food truck owners do exhibit a similar interdependence within their community. Food trucks embody these exchanges, therefore, but in a different way. Instead of forming a community of interdependency between truck staff and customers, food trucks more often depend on each other, both directly and indirectly, for the success of their own businesses, and for the success of the overall industry. This community represents another defining group within the urban village of food trucks.

The balance between competition and cooperation becomes more complicated when it comes to Boston’s rules for food trucks, where competition becomes much more prominent particularly with the lottery system and food truck spots. In these areas, cooperation wanes because, as one food truck owner puts it, “it’s either we get [the spot] or they get it.” Therefore, at the SoWa market’s food truck lot and at Boston’s smaller cluster sites, food trucks cooperate in attracting customers, but they must also compete strategically over the limited number of available vending locations at reserved sites in Boston.

**Passive Cooperation at Cluster Sites**

The enhanced social qualities of Boston’s food truck cluster sites highlight aspects of the arenas of competition and cooperation within the Boston food truck community. Regular business competition operates in this environment as trucks vie for customers. At the same time, however, each truck at the “cluster site” actually helps the other trucks attract business by
contributing to the overall ambience of the site. Although some of these contributions may be unintentional, the outdoor, close quarters of food trucks facilitate this cooperation all the same. As Peter Loden, the owner of the Tuk Phem Vietnamese-American food truck said, working at cluster sites “can kinda cut both ways but I think generally it’s a plus” (Loden 2013). Mitchell Green, Isaac Simons and John Theodore agreed, saying that their ideal food truck situation would be to be in a location with foot traffic, good weather, and other trucks (Green 2014; Simons 2014; Theodore 2013). These trucks draw customers to the destination that the trucks create and also offer them a mini food court, with many food options to choose from. Therefore, as a large number of trucks work side by side in one space, they all seem to benefit from the consequent large draw of customers and interest.

“Trying” the Trucks: Food Trucks as a General Category

The nature of the food truck cluster environment also causes discourse about food trucks as a general category in Boston. While visiting the SoWa market, I heard snippets of conversations indicating that many customers at such food truck “festivals” think of food trucks under one umbrella, consequently blurring the lines between the individual trucks themselves. Arriving at the food truck lot, one woman with a brunette bob haircut turned to her friends and said, “Kelly [her daughter] had one near MIT and I used to ask her ‘did you go to the food truck today?!’ because the food trucks are so cool!” By saying that “the food trucks are so cool,” Kelly’s mother indicates that she tends to think of the trucks interchangeably, that all of them are undeniably “cool” despite possible variations or differences. On another occasion, a SoWa visitor said to her companion, “well you have to get something while you’re here.” This comment seems to show a similar grouping effect by emphasizing the act of “trying” the food at the trucks as a general category – no one truck in particular. These ideas of “trying the food
“trucks” and “going to the food trucks” also contribute to thought of the food trucks as a general entity, blurring differentiations between trucks.

This general category was perhaps partially constructed by the way that food trucks came about in Boston. As noted in the second chapter, food trucks were structurally restricted from Boston streets until the city developed provisions for them in the Mobile Food Ordinance in 2011. The deliberate introduction of food trucks to enliven Boston’s open spaces brought a large influx of food trucks to the city at one time – in 2012 the city boasted 13 food trucks and by the spring of 2013 the number had risen to 56 trucks (Marrs 2013). This dramatic introduction may have contributed to Bostonians thinking of the trucks as one category of food options rather than individual vendors. This contributes largely to the mental grouping of food trucks among customers at food truck festivals, and a phenomenon of “snacking” at the trucks, or “trying” them – and therefore eating at multiple trucks during one visit to a cluster site such as SoWa.

In order to try “the” food trucks, SoWa customers commonly snacked at trucks, trying a few different things at a variety of trucks, and consequently contributing to the cooperative atmosphere of cluster sites. As previously discussed, food trucks have a low start-up cost, and therefore allow for “a broader range of experimentation…and more quirky ideas” (Loden 2013). This often causes customers to want to “try out” many of these different food varieties surrounding them at cluster sites rather than choosing one truck at which to have a full meal. At cluster sites such as SoWa, therefore, food trucks can share customers, making for a more cooperative atmosphere – just because one food truck attracts a customer, this doesn’t mean another truck can’t also serve that same customer.

*The Food Truck Reputation*
The grouped thinking of food trucks also motivates truck owners to create a good reputation for the industry as a whole. Due to food trucks’ arrival en masse to Boston’s city streets, each truck has worked hard to forge a good reputation for food trucks as a group. One truck owner recounts that:

Regarding most of the owners…I mean trucks are still a pretty small part of the overall restaurant industry so I think…we’ve a lot more common interest than…competing interest. I’ve never really felt like any of the owners are really the competition and in a real sense like that I think that if some of the trucks are doing well or putting out a really good product that helps all the trucks (Loden 2013).

Therefore, a part of the cooperative ethos of the food truck community finds its origin in the effort to maintain and improve the reputation of food trucks. Since many people think of the trucks interchangeably, their reputations also become interchangeable. Food truck owner Isaac Simons supports Loden’s opinion:

we don’t really compete with other food trucks. I think if anything other food trucks help us because it raises the overall profile of the industry. So instead of thinking ‘oh all food trucks are roach coaches and they sell…fried chicken and hot dogs,’ the better quality trucks are, the more people associate food trucks with quality and the more people eat there. So often people are like ‘hey, ya know, I’ve never had a food truck until I came to you guys, and I now I eat at food trucks a lot.’ And I’m sure we’ve probably been the beneficiary of that with other food trucks, and then they try us after that (Simons 2014).

When one food truck does well, therefore, other trucks also benefit as they “raise the overall profile” or reputation of food truck businesses in Boston. Arthur Lang also supports this idea.

When asked about the new trucks opening in April this year and the possible competition they may bring, Arthur said that yes, food trucks are competition, but that “if they’re decent, they make the industry look good.” This general reputation of food trucks links them in their endeavors and gives them the common interest of promoting their industry, a goal towards which they must work together.

Just as a good product can boost food truck reputations, food poisoning or bad sanitary practices can lower patronage for all trucks. Ingrid, one of the owners of the Mushu truck, was
very serious when explaining the health and safety guidelines to us as new employees. At our training, she told us that hand washing was of the utmost importance since there was “an issue with food borne illness and food trucks this past year.” She explained that bad press is common for food trucks, and that any small glitch or mistake can cause a major illness – meaning personal discomfort for the customer, and also bad press and reputations for the truck. Health inspections are posted online for public availability through the city of Boston. This media outlet can be dangerous for the reputations of trucks if they are not “up to code.” Following the outbreak of salmonella at one of Boston’s trucks, local food truck blogger Megan Marrs reported that: “Regardless of fact or fiction, the [food truck’s] salmonella incident damages food trucks all over Boston, as efforts to perpetuate the safety and benefits of food trucks are overshadowed by this incident” (Marrs 2013).

The fear of a bad general reputation for food trucks is not an erroneous one – food trucks struggle against associations of unclean conditions. In fighting these associations, trucks today work to maintain not only their own reputations, but also those of local gourmet food trucks as a whole. In this sense, they must collectively strive to forge a good name for the food truck community in Boston. Food truck vendors therefore cooperate in the areas in which a few or all trucks will benefit, and in which their own trucks will not suffer.

*Engaging the Senses and Fostering Conviviality*

Individual food trucks also help others’ business through their individually attractive qualities, particularly those that engage the senses, such as sound, smell, and customers’ visual advertisement. At SoWa, John Theodore’s grilled cheese truck and one of the two taco trucks played music, creating an atmosphere conducive to social gathering and lucrative business for their own truck, but also for other trucks. The enticing smells at SoWa and other cluster sites are
also crucial in leading customers by the nose to buy food from the trucks. The outdoor nature of the food trucks comes into play here, as their sounds and smells cannot be contained, and contribute to the ambience of the entire area.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of food truck cooperation at a cluster site is that of the “visual menu.” As customers wander around in the SoWa lot, they often make at least one lap through the food truck aisles before deciding what to eat. They look carefully at what others are eating as well as the trucks’ menus and décor before making their choices. The trucks create an outdoor food court, each truck offering a different category of food.

Mitchell Green describes this “food court” as a modern-day automat. The automat was a row of categorized food choices in which New Yorkers would insert a nickel and receive a hot meal or beverage. Similar to vending machines, these automated cafeterias broke food up into recognizable categories such as sandwiches, pies, coffee, etc (Green 2014; New York Public Library 2012). Today’s categories are much more varied – Vietnamese sandwich, asian taco, or chicken and rice – but the concept is similar. Customers can scan a cluster site and recognize what type of food a truck sells – and whether they want to eat that food – within a matter of minutes.

The trucks’ customers, however, are their best advertising schemes at cluster sites – they distribute the foods’ smells and show off how it looks. Prospective customers “shop” their options by observing what those around them are eating and then going to find whichever item looks and smells most appealing to them. Customers essentially advertise for the trucks’ foods by showing how they look “in the flesh,” by modeling their consumption, and distributing smells.
While working with Mushu at the small, indoor Boston Craft Beer Fest, Adam had me use this technique deliberately in order to attract customers, requesting that I walk a roundabout circle around the room to pass the smell of our featured dish under their noses, and to display its mouth-watering appearance. Customers would speak to each other about the item as it passed by, saying “oh what is that?” and then seek out our vending table later in the evening.

This idea of customer modeling and advertising is where the idea of the food truck “market” as a social event becomes important. People appear unfazed when others (like the man in the opening anecdote) ask them where they bought the food they’re eating. Instead, they are often enthusiastic in explaining where they ordered it and how good it is. This contributes to the creation of a sort of urban village community among the customers as they help each other “try” the food trucks and inadvertently advertise trucks’ products by modeling them for others. In this way, the SoWa site creates a space where customers create a collective menu for the area as they inadvertently display the food items available for purchase in that space. Food trucks therefore create their own “ballet” as they foster conviviality among customers as well.

**Deliberate Cooperation**

*A Food Truck Sub-Community*

In addition to the somewhat unintentional cooperation at cluster sites, food trucks often deliberately cooperate in order to maintain business. During a February snowstorm, for example, the crews from the Tuk Phem and Mushu trucks shoveled out the parking spot that they would both use that day. In this scenario, the two trucks cooperated in order to make sure that both their businesses could operate despite the obstacles of the snowstorm – the trucks cooperated for their mutual benefit.
Similarly, at a the Craft Beer Fest, the Mushu table staff helped the owner of Marley’s Grilled Cheese set up his poster, and chatted amicably with him throughout the evening. The owner later posted an emphatic tweet about how much he loved the dish Mushu served that night. When writing our own Twitter post for the Mushu table at the festival, our manager told us to tag Marley’s Grilled Cheese. In this sense, food trucks deliberately cooperate on a very practical level, banding together to push through weather conditions, and also to advertise for each other via social media.

During Halloween, too, it seemed that the trucks banded together to facilitate business and create a particularly festive atmosphere at the SoWa food market. Each food truck sported decorations in the Halloween spirit, with crepe paper marigolds and skulls hanging from the service windows. One truck displayed a stuffed scarecrow, while another had arranged assorted pumpkins outside its window. Most employees wore costumes or Halloween garb, including face paint and impressive makeup. This festivity contributed largely to the sense of community among food trucks, and also greatly enhanced the jovial atmosphere of the SoWa market. A festive atmosphere like this one facilitates business and causes customers to feel more like they are engaging in an event – this time one with a specific holiday theme. It is this festivity that causes customers to think of food trucks as a “fun” way to get food. Observing a sub-community of business owners thrive in such a social and celebratory way draws customers to the food truck industry as a whole. This holiday-party environment also requires the participation of all those involved. Therefore, the food trucks collaborated in a way that created an environment conducive to business from which they all benefited.

_Unintentional Cooperation and Deliberate Competition: Food Truck Sites_
In the case of parking spots at individual sites, however, competition steepens between food trucks. As one food truck owner succinctly put it, “if one truck’s there, then another truck isn’t there.” Boston’s government has devised a way to manage this competition via a lottery system in which spots turn over on an annual basis. Representatives from each truck attend and choose among the sites remaining according to the randomly picked numbers of their turns. One Tuk Phem employee said, “Yeah I went to this for the first time last year and it’s… kind of a bizarre concept. It’s like everyone gets their own lottery number and you… go through all the numbers and everyone picks…their favorite spot from like the tier 1 then the tier 2 then the tier 3.” Ingrid, of Mushu, described the process as similarly strange, calling it the “food truck draft.” She told her trainees that at the “draft,” Boston allocates parking spots for food trucks and distributes them via a lottery. She explained that at these lottery meetings, a few representatives from each truck gather in one room with government officials. As soon as the first truck owner picks his or her spot, the rest of the owners discuss strategy, and call other owners and managers for consultation on what they should pick next. She jokingly acted out this scene as she spoke, giving an example of Peter Loden from Tuk Phem choosing the Copley spot. She then imitated herself and Mary as they responded to his choice, scribbling down notes and hurriedly calling Arthur for his input on their next move. This shows how trucks compete strategically to have the best business for their personal trucks by vying for lucrative sites. As Peter Loden explains,

we…probably compete more over spots than over like people ... I think the times that we’re very like sensitive to the other trucks are when it comes to ... our plans for locations and...if we feel giving out information about... where we wanna be or where we’re gonna be is gonna like help another truck or something like that (Loden 2013).

There is therefore a limit to the cooperation that trucks can engage in before they begin to hurt their own business – in the allocation of food truck sites in Boston, they must compete.
Peter Loden, the owner of Tuk Phem again articulated the divide between collectivity and competition in an interview at his commissary. He explained that he wrote a permitting guide for Mushu’s truck to help them get their business up and running in a timely manner. He explained that “there’s no reason not to be helpful to other trucks in that way” (Loden 2013). He countered this by saying that he would not want to help Mushu by showing them the best spots in Boston as they would then be competing more directly with Tuk Phem and potentially hurting his own business. He said, “…but then I didn’t want to give them advice on what spots to go to, you know cause…we’re all kinda after the same spots so that’s…a little bit harder to be unbiased about.” While Peter was willing to support Mushu in their endeavor to start their business quickly, he protected his own business by remaining strategically competitive, keeping his advice on lucrative locations to himself. Therefore, the acceptable and reasonable areas of competition and collectivity among food trucks are contained within specific categories. In this case, due to a limited number of lucrative spots, lottery sites are areas of competition.

The motivations behind these cooperative and competitive actions can perhaps both be traced back to self-interest in business. In order for a business to survive, it must compete against other businesses offering a similar product – in this case, street food. However, the small community of food trucks in Boston has realized that in order for their micro-enterprise to survive in Boston, they must band together in some areas and support each other for the good of the food truck community as a whole. The trucks at the SoWa market, for example, would draw less business if fewer trucks attended the event. To repeat Loden’s phrase, working in a cluster site “cuts both ways, but generally…it’s a plus” (Loden 2013). The trucks therefore engage in collective activities that promote the food trucks as a general group, but also peel off from the
group in order to succeed as an individual vendor and make personal profit in other areas such as Boston lottery sites.

**Conclusion**

The conviviality among food truck owners is crucial in creating their reputation and in attracting customers. Since these trucks have such a high social value for their customers, their cooperation and the resulting sense of community increases their popularity among these customers for the industry as a whole, and for individual trucks. Food truck owners’ cooperation contributes to the formation of a general idea of food trucks as a sub-community of the restaurant industry in urban areas. When food trucks coordinate Halloween decorations, for example, they create a strong sense of community amidst the tall buildings that surround them. In this way, food trucks recreate Herbert Gans’s “urban village” despite the surrounding corporate structures. Their cooperation and interdependence as a community play a large role in creating this “urban village” feeling, for customers and owners alike.
Chapter Five: Food Trucks and The Creation of Value: Mushu’s Social Mission

Many of Boston’s food trucks reinforce this sense of a small-business driven “urban village” in their focus on a certain mission or fundamental principle. Mushu, for example, bases its business on a strong value of locally and regionally sourced food products. Mushu’s owners believe strongly in the sustainable foods movement, and engages their business partially as a means of contributing to this movement. In doing so, Mushu demonstrates their care for their communities, both urban and rural, and the future of those communities. This small-business community conscience only enhances Mushu’s identity as a major player in Boston’s urban village of food trucks.

Ingrid Lang is one of the main leaders of Mushu’s commitment to sustainable food system. Ingrid spent a few years in high school living and working on a farm in Vermont. She and her partner Michael Hunter are dedicated to “the sustainable and humane production of food” (Lang et al. 2013). Running a food truck and restaurant are important to Ingrid and her siblings not only as a profitable enterprise, but also as a means of mobilizing their support for locally, regionally, and humanely produced foods.

Mushu aims to make a difference in the food industry by getting the majority of their food products from local and regional farms. Their commitment to “old-fashioned” farmers as Ingrid calls them, runs deep. As Ingrid tells her employees, the local food movement allows Mushu and its customers to access a stronger connection to their food, and to support the autonomy and economic success of the “little” farmers. In order to support their local farmers most effectively, Mushu sources their staple ingredients locally. This, Ingrid told us, makes the biggest statement, and the biggest difference in the local food movement. Ingrid said that some restaurants make a dish with non-local products, garnish it with local herbs, and market it as a
local foods product. She rejects that method of business, and says that Mushu is proud of its commitment to local staple sourcing because it maximizes the effects of Mushu’s purchasing power and makes a much more significant contribution to the local foods movement.

The effects of Mushu’s sourcing practices are impressive. Since their opening in 2011, Mushu’s truck alone has sourced more than 50,000 pounds of local and regional food from small farms and family businesses. With the opening of the Mushu restaurant in November of 2013, this number has inevitably skyrocketed (Lang et al. 2013). The local sourcing of Mushu’s foods is clearly popular – whether customers are buying Mushu’s food to support their local foods philosophy or even just for the higher quality taste.

Even if customers are unaware of Mushu’s local foods commitment, the staff strongly supports it. Most of Mushu’s staff care deeply about food issues, and were drawn to Mushu for the business’s support of the local food movement. Mariana, one of Mushu’s customer service employees, currently studies nutrition at Simmons College in Boston. Terrance, a full-time prep cook, recently came to Mushu after working with an organization to develop local food gardens in vacant lots in urban and suburban environments. David, the cashier described in the Introduction and Chapter 2, works part time with the Northeast Organic Farming Association and came to Mushu to do something more “hands on.” Mark, a line cook, became interested in Mushu after meeting the Langs while volunteering with the Food Project in Boston. Alexa, a new server, works part time at Mushu, and spends the rest of her time studying food sustainability initiatives as part of a graduate program at Tufts University. The list of employees dedicated to Mushu’s food mission goes on. The point is that Mushu’s values do not stop with its sourcing practices. Clearly there is a strong value at the base of Mushu’s food service work for many of its employees – there’s something more at stake for them. Ingrid and her siblings have
built a staff of people who believe in the local foods movement, are proud of Mushu’s work to support local and regional farmers, and communicate Mushu’s values with great energy.

As Mushu articulates in its handbook, they have “cultivated an incredible staff of smart, dedicated, and fun people” (Lang et al. 2013). And cultivated is exactly the right word. Mushu places a strong focus on employee training. About three weeks after I was hired, Mushu planned a training session for new employees including those that were part-time, or might need a refresher on information about the business. Ingrid prepared an employee handbook, a cuisine manual, and a practice test for all employees to study in preparation for our tests. The handbook included common information about Mushu such as the locations and names of the farms from which Mushu sources specific products, Mushu’s weekly locations, ingredients and allergens in each main menu item, cleaning procedures, and more. On our test day, Ingrid pushed six square tables together, and sat at the head, with all the employees seated around it, like at a family dinner. Ingrid read through the entire handbook and manual with us, elaborating on certain sections as she went along. We employees read along with our own manuals in front of us, making notes and asking questions as they arose.

Ingrid explained that Mushu “wants everyone to take pride in working at the truck,” and that knowing the menu is part of showing that pride. While my college friends teased that I was studying for “the food truck GRE,” and found the concept of taking a test for a food truck job quite foreign, I found myself learning a great deal of information that was useful when working on the truck. The information we were required to learn went above and beyond what I expected I would need to know as an employee of a food truck. Not only did we learn about fundamental ServSafe sanitation practices, but we also learned a lot about where Mushu’s foods come from. After the test, I found myself feeling ready to brag – to customers or otherwise – about the high
quality of Mushu’s food. Through this kind of detailed training, Mushu instills a certain
dedication in their employees, and a loyalty to Mushu’s mission – starting with a solid
foundation of knowledge about Mushu’s main ethos of sustainable foods. In doing so, Mushu
affords their employees stronger roles in their urban village as they, too, gain a sense of care for
their direct and indirect communities.

*Balancing Principle and Practice: “Economies of Sentiment”*

In their commitment to their values of local and regional sourcing and sustainable foods,
Mushu must balance principle and practice in order to run a viable, successful business. As
Ingrid explained at our employee training, Mushu struggles to “make compromises between
[their] beliefs and [their] economic realities.” And the economic costs of this compromise are
significant. As Mitchell Green, owner of sustainable foods restaurant and food truck Al Forno
explained, “We have a passion to source locally...It’s our mission. Listen, we’re in a business to
make money. That’s why people go into business – we’re certainly not running a charity. But
I’m willing to make less money in order to do what I believe is right” (Green 2014). He then
explained that the food business has the tightest profit margins of any other industry – “it’s all
nickels and dimes” (Green 2014). He walked me through an example, showing me that restaurant
owners lose tens of thousands of dollars of their own personal salary when choosing more
expensive, but better, sustainable ingredients, over mass-market, lower quality ingredients.
Therefore, the compromise between “doing right,” and running a successful business has real
costs and sacrifices.

In her study of American artisanal cheesemakers, Heather Paxson describes a similar
predicament on many cheese farms. Many of the artisanal cheesemakers she spoke with
struggled to balance commercial business practicalities and their own personal motivations for
making cheese. She explains that a large part of this struggle can be characterized by “projects of multiple value-making,” or “economies of sentiment” (Paxson 2013: 65). At the foundation of these projects of value-making lies the idea that economic market interests are inevitably intertwined with nonmarket, social relations:

Economic activity is social activity, and so it is not surprising that craft farmers and artisan food-makers are simultaneously ‘motivated by social fulfillment, curiosity, and the pleasure of mastery, as well as instrumental purpose, competition, and the accumulation of gains,’ as Stephen Gudeman writes. Market rationality is one organizing principle of economic activity, but not the only one...Through exploring how cheesemakers identify and confront their own particular challenges, we gain a better sense of how the economy of farmstead cheesemaking is guided by a mix of qualitative and quantitative values, of moral sentiment and business sense (Paxson 2013: 65).

Therefore among Paxson’s cheesemakers, economic activities rarely go unalloyed. In many small-scale enterprises, too, economic activity depends on social activity, and business owners must find a way to blend their “moral sentiment and business sense.”

Mushu guides its business by a similar “mix of qualitative and quantitative values” to that of Paxson’s cheesemakers. As discussed earlier, many employees at Mushu find strong meaning in the work they do. They see their customer service or food preparation work not as a simple food service job to “pay the bills,” but instead as a meaningful, hands-on way to put their beliefs about food and sustainability into practice. This makes them strong contributors to the urban village community surrounding Mushu as they engage their care for the environment and the future of food sustainability in their work.

The problematic kale salad demonstrates Mushu’s struggle to balance principle and practice. The kale salad is one of Mushu’s best selling products. One customer even called it magical, coining its menu title, “The Magical Kale Salad.” The kale that Mushu uses for the salad, however, is locally sourced, and therefore is a seasonal product. This means that Mushu cannot source its kale locally if they want to offer the salad in the winter. Mary, Ingrid’s sister
and business partner, explains that, “The kale salad is a truck special that is missing in the winter months because we just can’t get kale locally. We’re unwilling to compromise on something like that” (Carley 2013).

But the decision not to offer the kale salad has serious drawbacks when it comes to profit. Many customers come to the truck asking for the kale salad. After the disappointment of finding that we don’t have kale, they often continue to ask when it will be back. Although the cabbage salad on the truck is advertised as “the winter version of the Magical Kale Salad!” many customers still don’t bite, and walk away. This likely reduces Mushu’s overall profits and popularity in the winter months, when sales are already lower due to bad weather. The decision was not an easy one for Mushu, but the three Lang siblings and their staff decided that the principle of local sourcing was one that they were willing to stick to, despite the consequences for their business.

While Mushu puts its foot down on local produce and vegetable sourcing, it must compromise in other areas. For example, Mushu’s scallion pancakes, a staple for all of their sandwiches, come from Taiwan – a sourcing location that is about as non-local as it gets. As the cuisine manual explains, the scallion pancakes are part of Mushu’s Chinese pantry items, that are not sourced locally, “either because it is not possible or not practical price/prep-wise” (Ingrid et al. 2013). In this case, it seems that it would be easy to switch from scallion pancakes to locally sourced bread. For Mushu, though, this would be an enormous compromise of their food’s identity, which is greatly defined by a basis in Chinese cuisine. When it came to scallion pancakes, Mushu was forced to choose between the values of its brand and food identity and its value of sustainable, local and regional food sourcing. And a large compromising factor in this
choice was business pragmatics. Mushu must therefore pick its battles in deciding when to stand by its principles of sustainability, or of practical business concerns.

Mushu calls these balancing factors “integrity.” In the employee handbook, one of the most important sections for the new hires to learn was that of Mushu’s “core values,” including “Integrity and Self-Reflection.” In this section, Mushu defines integrity not as standards, but as, one’s ability to conform to that high standard unwaveringly, without compromise. Of course, in practice, it’s nigh impossible to have integrity all the time. What it comes down to in real life is basically making a distasteful or inconvenient decision because it hews more closely to one’s established values. Though we cannot always afford to make those kinds of decisions, we value the constant self-reflection and evaluation that comes with trying to maintain our integrity” (Lang et al. 2013).

Mushu, like Paxson’s cheesemakers, is therefore very conscious of the struggles they must face in order to balance their beliefs with their business, and they want their employees to be conscious of this as well. Mushu’s open self-reflection demonstrates their strong commitment to their beliefs, and the complications they feel when forced to compromise those beliefs for the sake of practicality. Like Al Forno, Mushu is “certainly not running a charity,” and profit is crucial to their business – so that they can pay their farmers, their dedicated employees, and continue their mission. However paradoxically, Mushu must compromise that mission sometimes in order to make sure that it may continue.

Small Business Ethics vs. Large Business Ethics

Sustainable food missions like Mushu and Al Forno’s reinforce the community involvement crucial to Jacobs’s urban village. The care that goes into these principles makes these food trucks major contributors to their communities – both in Boston and in its surrounding farmlands. And as discussed above, Mushu and its sustainably focused counterparts are certainly not flimsy in their dedication to local and regional food sourcing practices; they make great sacrifices to uphold their principles.
These progressive motivations mean that there’s something more to running a food truck than basic profit and expansion for their owners. Business owners like the Langs and Mitchell Green use their food trucks and restaurants as a means of making a living but more importantly as a way to make changes for what they believe in. The changes that they strive to make are hardly selfish – Mushu aims to support local and regional foods and the potential they hold for healthier eating, stronger communities, and a sustainable environmental future.

This concern for customers, farmers, local communities, and the future of these communities most often characterizes small businesses rather than larger nationwide enterprises. In addition to bringing small business into corporate areas, food trucks such as Mushu and Al Forno bring with them a sense of community in their missions to create positive changes in their communities.

Mushu’s care for the local “family” farmer and for a sustainable future supports arguments that advocate for “buying local.” Many of these proponents argue that taking customer purchasing power to local, independent stores will revitalize communities as they regain strength after the blows of the recession. A strong part of the argument appeals to the personal values of customers, claiming that one of the main values of shopping locally is that of the interpersonal experience and customer care. For example, in an article advocating for “buying local,” the first image before the reader depicts a middle-aged male hardware store owner in Ohio wearing a brown plaid flannel and overall jeans, pulling a length of receipt paper out of his cashier machine. The storeowner runs a small, local hardware store akin to Mr. Goldstein’s in Jane Jacobs’s neighborhood (Jacobs 1961: 51).

As the journalist William Powers writes in the article that follows, “it’s easy to forget how crucial small, independent businesses are to our collective well-being” (Powers 2013). In
the six reasons he cites for why to shop locally, Powers’s fifth is: “Get Happy.” Under this heading, Powers explains that, “Shopping at local stores, where the person serving you is frequently the owner, is a terrific antidote to our impersonal, screen-driven work lives” (Powers 2013). One reader confirmed this idea, commenting that as a small business owner herself, the biggest advantage over other businesses is “the homey feeling that comes from being a truly family-run store…I work with other small businesses too, and this is almost always the ‘special sauce’ they bring to the community. No matter how nice the big-box employees may be, it doesn’t beat a business with a heart” (Powers 2013). This “special sauce” of “a business with a heart” perfectly describes Mushu’s mission for sustainable foods, and also the care for customers and local food suppliers that this mission engages.

Even without a commitment to a specific movement such as that of local food sustainability, this kind of personal care for customers and the community is a common streak among local food truck owners. John Theodore, the owner of Marley’s Grilled Cheese in Boston, said that his mission for the future of his business is to expand, but maintain its personal quality. When asked about his advertising techniques, he said:

My whole ideal is rather than paying to advertise you can take that money and you can put it back into the community in different ways, whether it’s sponsoring events or just participating…like if we do Bacon and Beer Fest, that raises money for Lovin’ Spoonfuls, it might cost us two or three hundred bucks worth of food and labor to do that event but that’s so much more valuable than putting a two or three hundred dollar ad in the newspaper. Because people see your brand and they understand it. They can be there right next to it they can taste it and it’s just so much more valuable that way. And we do – we just do a lot of that stuff so… (Theodore 2013).

In advertising for his truck, Theodore’s principles and practices line up – he finds both personal and economic value in sponsoring charitable events in the Boston community. His care for his community is clear. Even though sponsoring charitable events and “just participating” benefit Theodore’s business, his motivations are not purely economic.
Theodore takes pride in the fact that his business caters to families as well as the “office worker crowd.” His motivations as a small business are, as Paxson would describe it, based both in “business sense and moral sentiment.” He finds value not only in the economic gains and progress of his business, but also in its potential to make personal connections and contribute to the community. As he says, contributing to a community event is more “valuable” than an advertisement in the newspaper. These community values apparent among food truck owners are crucial to their recreation of an urban village in today’s modern cities.

Conclusion

Food trucks’ missions and social consciences contribute to their “urban village” identity by showing their care for their direct and indirect communities. Like the “mom and pop” stores or bodegas of Jacobs’s urban village, food trucks like Mushu and Al Forno in their passion for local and regional foods, and Marley’s Grilled Cheese in its involvement in community charities, take a “hands-on” approach to making progressive social changes in their direct social environments. In order to participate in such practical forms of community involvement, however, food trucks must balance the realities of running a viable business with the fundamental principles of their social missions.
Chapter Six: Conclusion: The Future of Food Trucks

In considering the social value of food trucks, it is important to think about the future of the industry. Food truck space is limited, and more and more new food truck businesses sprout up each year. How will the city cope with the high volume of trucks?

In the same vein, it is worthwhile to consider the effects of food trucks and urban modernization on future populations in Boston. In allowing the urban middle class to “have it all,” how do food trucks participate in harmful modernization practices for low-income populations? How could they now mobilize their power for social justice for these communities?

The Future of Boston’s Food Trucks

As gourmet food trucks become more and more popular, more entrepreneurs enter the food truck ring, hoping to find success like their predecessors. But as these trucks crowd the streets, we approach what food truck owner Peter Loden calls “the cliff”: a point where the city becomes over-saturated with food trucks – a point where they can’t possibly all have success. In simpler terms, this is a point where “something’s gotta give.” In terms of both physical space and customer base, there is a limit to the number of food trucks that can operate successfully in Boston.

The number of food trucks has skyrocketed from about three private trucks in 2010, to almost sixty food trucks this year in Boston (Marrs 2013). Although not all food trucks participate in Boston’s program, the majority of trucks build their business through the program, and operate on public city property. Peter Loden, the owner of Tuk Phem and a retired city planner, believes that for food trucks, “there’s a cliff coming. There is a limited amount of space for food trucks in Boston – in other cities, there’s a limited number of permits, but here there’s just a limited amount of space” (Loden 2013). Loden predicts that just like before the Mobile
Food Ordinance, the growth of the food truck industry will be limited not by an explicit ban, but instead by structural limitations of space.

This brings Boston’s regulation of food trucks into question. Are city officials aware of and accounting for the large volume of food trucks? Food truck owner John Theodore claims that they are not, and that older food trucks will eventually be pushed out:

The way the City works is that they’re not creating more spots but they’re inviting more trucks to participate in the program. So what that’s gonna do is push everyone’s capacity down. And it’s eventually gonna push out the people who’ve been here the longest. Cause someone like me, the first year, we…existed before the lottery, and the first year we probably got eight different locations and last year we got five and we’re gonna get three this year maybe? Maybe? So it really… it makes you question the sustainability of having a truck in the city (Theodore 2013).

Therefore, Theodore argues that while food trucks are a (relatively) easier business to start, they might also have a shorter business life in Boston. This is yet to be seen, but the insecurity of food truck owners increases as the streets become more and more saturated with mobile vendors. As discussed earlier, the main source of competition for Boston’s food trucks is over vending sites.

This may be an enriching test for Boston’s government. As city planner Dr. Eran Ben-Joseph said, “Food trucks are the greatest tool to test the urban scene because we have to ask ourselves: do we direct them, or do we let them happen naturally?” (Carley 2013). During interviews with Boston’s food truck owners, many owners said that they found little to no competition with brick and mortar restaurants. When asked if his food truck had experienced any competition with restaurants, John Theodore replied, “no, it’s too regulated [for that]” (Theodore 2013). Similarly, truck owner Peter Loden thinks that, “the spots tend to be chosen so they’re not near a restaurant, at least that’s their intention” (Loden 2013). And indeed, Boston has limited direct or unfair competition between the city’s food trucks and brick and mortar restaurant locations. But with the rising number of food trucks, how will Boston mitigate its commitment to
protecting fair competition between restaurants and food trucks and the pressure to keep allowing more food trucks in the city?

One answer would be for Boston to create or encourage more weekly food truck “food courts” in vacant parking lots such as SoWa or on the Greenway like at Dewey Square. These spots allow multiple food trucks to do business at once, without great interference with restaurant businesses. Another answer would be to cap the number of trucks in Boston. But how could the city suddenly arrest the trucks’ entrepreneurial innovation that it had previously encouraged?

Food trucks are valuable assets to a cityscape such as Boston. They possess remarkable abilities to activate social space, foster interpersonal connections, engage progressive missions, and bring the small-scale to increasingly big-business-focused urban areas. They help allow struggling cities like Boston to develop their commercial industries and gain a global presence while also maintaining smaller-scale, local value and flavor in mini urban villages across the city. But there might not be enough space in Boston for all the trucks’ ambitions. As the industry gets bigger and space gets tighter, Boston’s government must find a solution that will encourage food trucks to continue, but also quell the industry’s growth. Food trucks are important for what they do in Boston’s urban communities, and the city would suffer significantly if it were to lose them.

_Social Implications of Modern Urban Development_

Despite all that food trucks do for Boston’s middle class consumers, however, they cannot replace the displaced low-income communities that used to occupy present-day Boston’s business districts. While Boston’s food trucks do help maintain the modern city’s balance of the large and small, they do not mitigate issues of urban poverty that have worsened as cities like Boston and New York have modernized and “flourished.” In his biography of Robert Moses,
Robert Caro criticizes Moses for catering to the middle and upper classes at the sacrifice of low-income New Yorkers in his plans for the beautification and modernization of the city (Caro 1974). In Boston, Mayor John Hynes and later Mayor John Collins, planned projects for a new, modernized city following World War II. In their efforts to modernize the city, however, the mayors replaced several low-income neighborhoods with more “attractive” buildings and centers for the middle and upper classes (O’Connor 2001: 207-228).

David Harvey describes this phenomenon as “urban entrepreneurialism.” He argues that since the 1960s, many struggling cities have shifted their urban governance from a stance of managerialism to entrepreneurialism. In other words, urban governments (like those of Hynes and Collins) have moved away from dependence on federal management, and towards the development of their cities’ images via “gentrification, cultural innovation, physical up-grading of the urban environment, consumer attractions, and entertainment” (Harvey 1989: 9). This urban entrepreneurialism depends on “public-private partnerships” focusing on investment and economic development rather than federal support.

Rebuilding the city with such attractions, however, has great consequences. Although these attractions can often strengthen the city’s economy as a whole and sometimes (but rarely) increase employment, Harvey explains that these developments essentially amount to:

> a subsidy for affluent consumers, corporations, and powerful command functions to stay in town at the expense of local collective consumption for the working class and poor…A critical perspective on the contemporary vision of urban entrepreneurialism…should recognize that behind the mask of many successful projects there lie some serious social and economic problems and that in many cities these are taking geographical shape in the form of a dual city of inner city regeneration and a surrounding sea of increasing impoverishment (Harvey 1989: 12-16).

While urban entrepreneurialism beautifies cities like “New” Boston, it also has great consequences for the “unsubsidized,” working class and poor. In improving the images of their cities, these governments made a choice to attract middle and upper classes at the unfortunate
expense of the poor. As Harvey articulates, this leads to a “dual city,” and pushes low-income communities farther and farther out to the city’s peripheries.

In a “urban entrepreneurial” plan, Mayor Hynes focused on building an attractive, world-renowned city, and jumped at the opportunity to offer Boston’s Back Bay land to the Prudential Insurance Company for its northeast regional office (O’Connor 2001: 216). The building of the Prudential Center marked the beginning of Boston’s new image. When the Center had finally been scheduled for building in 1960, the tower’s taxes were lowered because Back Bay qualified as a federal-defined “blighted area,” and therefore the project counted as a “public project” rather than one of private enterprise (O’Connor 2001: 222). Once built, the BRA hoped that the tall, shiny Prudential Center would attract more outside developers to the city of Boston and improve the “blighted area” and those surrounding it.

Improving these “blighted areas,” came at the expense of the poor, however. In 1958, Mayor Hynes launched a project to “renew” Boston’s West End, an area he and his colleagues perceived as a slum area. At the time, the West End housed one of Boston’s oldest communities, made up of a melting pot of immigrants including Irish, Italians, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Poles and Russians (O’Connor 2001: 217). Most inhabitants of the West End actually enjoyed living there, regarding it as a “warm, friendly, and familiar community in which to live and raise their children” (O’Connor 2001: 217). Indeed, Herbert Gans discovered that the community was much more vibrant and valuable than he had originally thought (Gans 1982: 12). The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), however, disagreed, and tore down the neighborhood in order to fulfill its mission for a revitalized Boston. As O’Connor puts it:

[The West End] was sacrificed to the misplaced technology of those who believed that this part of Boston would be better off with high-rise luxury apartments, modern shopping centers, massive garages, and sprawling parking lots that would attract “quality shoppers” back from the suburbs to a new and modernized downtown Boston (O’Connor 2001: 218).
Bitter feelings and strong pushback from Boston locals kept the redevelopers away from other low-income neighborhoods like the West End for a while. But eventually, Mayor Collins’s plans for New Boston found it necessary to revitalize these valuable locations and build modern apartment buildings with the hopes of attracting “middle-class families and well-to-do professionals back to the city” (O’Connor 2001: 226). Areas like Charlestown, Allston-Brighton, and Roxbury soon came under threat of redevelopment. Although many of the BRA’s plans to renovate these areas never came to full fruition, the ethnic minorities and low-income residents of these neighborhoods became furious, and began to voice their needs. Understandably, they wanted the city government to pay more attention to the poor conditions of Boston’s slums rather than to the revitalization of Boston’s shiny downtown centers (O’Connor 2001: 228).

Hynes and Collins’s “New Boston” plans changed the city permanently. The significant modernizations that ensued put Boston back on the map as an attractive, successful city in the eyes of middle and upper class consumers. Developments such as the new Government Center, the War Memorial Auditorium, the 29-story Sheraton Hotel, the renovated Christian Scientist Church, and the John Hancock Insurance building in Copley Square set off a wave of reconstruction in Boston that attracted other banks, law firms, and large companies to set up camp in the booming city (O’Connor 2001: 225). These developments greatly improved the cityscape and brought economic prosperity to the elite as well as an attractive worldwide image to Boston.

These improvements came at great costs. They pushed out Boston’s low-income and working-class communities, and turned the city’s center into a high-rent corporate neighborhood filled with jutting skyscrapers and commercial buildings. Herbert Gans coined the term “urban village” when describing the valuable, low-income communities that Boston lost in its West End
Modern urban developments erased these urban villages to pave the way for a new, developed, “respectable” Boston. In doing so, they also erased valuable personal networks specific to these urban neighborhoods. Gans does not argue that these neighborhoods were romantic nor that they had all positive qualities. Instead, he shows the hardships the residents faced, and also their means of enduring them through community support (Gans 1982: 4).

Now, in Boston’s commercial spaces like Dewey Square, food trucks replace the missing values of small business and social activity for middle class Bostonians, but they certainly cannot replace the vibrancy of communities like the West End. Food trucks bring relatively low-priced, creative foods to the elite occupants of these behemoth buildings. While they have the unique abilities to foster community interaction and involvement, they also contrast harshly with the communities that inhabited the working-class neighborhoods for which Jacobs, Gans, and Caro advocated. Food trucks cannot and do not reproduce these areas. The middle-class owners and employees represent instead a middle-class urban village amidst the high-rent, corporate areas of the city, and contribute to Boston’s goal to attract “quality shoppers” while unconsciously excluding the lower classes.

*Potential for Social Justice*

In his plans to invite food trucks to Boston, Mayor Thomas Menino aimed to mobilize food trucks as a part of the city’s plan to provide healthful food in the city’s poorer neighborhoods. Boston magazine journalist Colin Kingsbury writes, “In other words, we’re trying to shoehorn [food trucks] into less-profitable and desirable locations, such as Ashmont Station or Egleston Square” (2012). While these locations would indeed be less profitable, the motivations behind Menino’s ideas are honorable. Mitchell Green’s statement about the need for profit as a food truck owner rings true here: “we’re certainly not running a charity.” But the need
to support Boston’s lower-income residents and include their demographic in the movements modernizing Boston is important. Food trucks certainly cannot afford to serve their fare pro bono to hundreds of hungry customers. But it would be worthwhile for the Boston government to devise a plan to subsidize food trucks to encourage them to operate in communities where healthy food is not as easy or cheap to buy.

Fresh Truck has shown how food trucks can significantly service Boston’s neighborhoods suffering from a lack of food access. The large bus brings fresh, high-quality produce and whole grains to neighborhoods with a severe lack of food access, most of which are also low-income. Due to their community partnerships and lack of overhead, Fresh Truck is able to sell their produce at 20 percent less than the traditional markets from which they source their products. Set up like a mini-supermarket, Fresh Truck stops often at a supportive living community for elders in Dorchester. One of the residents told a Boston Globe interviewer that the truck is much more convenient than the bus ride to the distant supermarket, and that the truck’s ingredients are also much fresher (Pyenson 2013).

The owners have raised a great deal of money to operate their business, and have claimed the status of a non-profit. Their business model is therefore quite different than that of a for-profit food truck. But Fresh Truck has great value as it paves the way for other food trucks to latch onto similar concepts, and engage their commitments to high quality food and their unique capacities for social change.

Therefore, as we look towards the future of food trucks in Boston, it is important to consider how they can harness their unique abilities for social place making, meaningful personal interaction, entrepreneurial innovation, and social conscience to not only bridge the gap between
corporate and local Boston, but also the large gap between Boston’s social classes. With the right resources, food trucks have the potential to create a whole new kind of urban village.

*More Than Their Food*

When explaining this project to inquiring friends or acquaintances, I could feel them wondering what exactly I could be writing about. And, like many researchers, I myself did not know the answer to this question when I first stepped onto Mushu’s food truck in October. But as the days unfolded and my shifts rolled by, I found myself discovering that food trucks represent much more than the food they sell. Not only are they implicated in fascinating issues of urban space and place making, but they also hold great value as the hub of an urban sociality in Boston. For urban planners, too, they are valuable and exciting for the creation of mixed-use, elite urban areas in contemporary cities – with consequences for those cities’ low-income populations. Urban food trucks are therefore pertinent to the study of street food, but also to the study of urban anthropology as they play their role in balancing separate urban environments.

When I asked David why he makes such an effort to remember customers’ names on the truck, he said, “because it makes a big difference to them.” Greg chimed in saying, “yeah cause people come with friends and they’re like, ‘this is my place.’” Like Mitchell Green said, “food trucks are just a fun way to get your food” (2014). But food trucks are also “someone’s place,” and they open the door to place making as well as community making to recreate a middle class urban village amidst the shiny skyscrapers and glimmering franchises of downtown Boston. So the next time you see a food truck, think not only about the delicious smells or exotic fare, but also the social community and sense of closeness that they bring to the space around them.
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