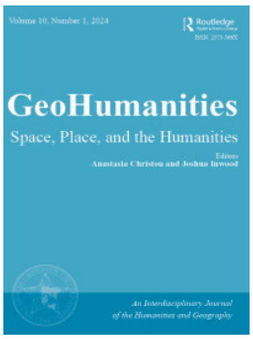

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PRACTICES AND CURATIONS

Another Provision: Co-Designing Communal Food Infrastructures in East London

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In the UK, one in five households live in food insecurity—this increases to one in four among households with children (Food Foundation 2023). The compounded effects of austerity, lockdown, inflation, and the cost of living crisis have meant that the numbers of those facing difficulty in obtaining sufficient and nutritious food have steadily risen over the past decade. There is an urgent need to rethink the way the food system is organised in the UK to ensure access to quality food, as well as sustainable production. Scholars note that the most pioneering work on food transitions currently takes place at the urban level (Battersby and Watson 2019; Blay-Palmer et al. 2018; Ilieva 2017; Morgan 2015), with some even referring to it as the "optimal scale" for systemic change (Sonnino, Tegoni, and De Cunto 2019). However, as in many arenas of political debate, those people most failed by the current urban food systems are rarely included in discussions about how these systems can be improved.

Another Provision is the collaborative practice of the authors, urban researcher Hanna Baumann and artist Johan Arens. We share a deep interest in the public realm and the role of infrastructures in maintaining urban social life. In our work, we pay particular attention to the way in which public spaces and infrastructures can bring people together (or keep them apart). Located at the art/research intersection, our practice thus aims to recognise the value of public services and at the same time draw awareness to the way they are shaped. This is because who has a say in decisions on the public realm has repercussions for who is considered part of "the public," who can partake and who feels that they belong. We initially connected as part of University College London's Trellis programme, which funded Another Provision as a public art commission in East London beginning in 2021. In this short article, we reflect on a participatory process around communal food infrastructures that we led with a range of East London partners, first and foremost the National Food Service—London (NFSL), between 2021 and 2024.

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During the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, we had noticed how community food systems had become a form of social infrastructure in our respective London neighbourhoods. The numerous mutual aid groups that arose during the crisis seemed to provide a system of social support that became about more than the provision of calories alone. Therefore, our project focused on food as a basic human right, and sought to envision what it would mean for food to become a Universal Basic Service (UBS, see Coote and Percy 2020)—a resource provided free of charge to all at the point of delivery.

Working with a community network campaigning for such an approach to food, we developed an infrastructure for communal meals through a process of participatory research and co-design with both volunteers and patrons of the food service. Our guiding questions were: What would a de-stigmatised space for free meals look like, and how can it best facilitate encounters and community through shared eating? How do we activate such a space to jointly envision more just and sustainable food systems at the urban scale, foregrounding the voices and needs of those with lived experience of food injustice?

In April 2021, we began working with the London branch of the National Food Service, a UK-wide network of community-run food groups aiming to eliminate food insecurity and tackle the interconnected issues of social isolation and food waste; that is, to focus on food justice and food sovereignty. This includes a vision of food as a basic service that should be free to all—hence the NFS name, echoing that of the National Health Service. During the lockdown period, the NFSL, which was founded in 2020 in direct response to Covid-19, delivered over 25,000 meals to 750 people through its emergency food programme. The service was especially useful to people who were not referred to conventional food banks—migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, people without recourse to public funds and those in temporary accommodation.

We started by volunteering with NFSL to understand how the organisation works. At this stage, a year into the emergency response, a network of volunteers organised the delivery of donated surplus food, as well as the cooking, packing and distribution of meals and groceries. These efforts were run from community centres or gardens around Hackney, with the distribution hub always moving from location to location, as NFSL had no permanent space. We were struck by the care volunteers operating the phone hotline took to get to know patrons' needs and preferences. We found that the packing lists assembled for each recipient (see Figure 1) offered a vivid sense of the varying personal circumstances of the people in need of food aid.

These packing lists, which we have edited slightly to ensure anonymity, give insight into patron's living situations restricting the possibilities of eating: Many lacked a stove or cooking pots. Some lived in shared accommodation where their food often went missing, while others were quite isolated, as they were shielding for medical reasons. The lists reflect a range of cultural backgrounds and associated food practices, including halal and Ital, and also give a sense of the recipients' personal quirks, such as a preference for only certain brands.

Between the lines, one can also read the ethos of care adopted by the mutual aid organisation, and the significant labour that underpins it. NFSL volunteers took time to get to know patrons and to respond to the needs and preferences articulated. They did so not only by delivering meals that were culturally appropriate and responded to individual preferences, but by recognising the importance of food for a sense of dignity and enjoyment. For instance, one hotline volunteer made a note of a patron's upcoming birthday and sought to source a birthday cake for them.

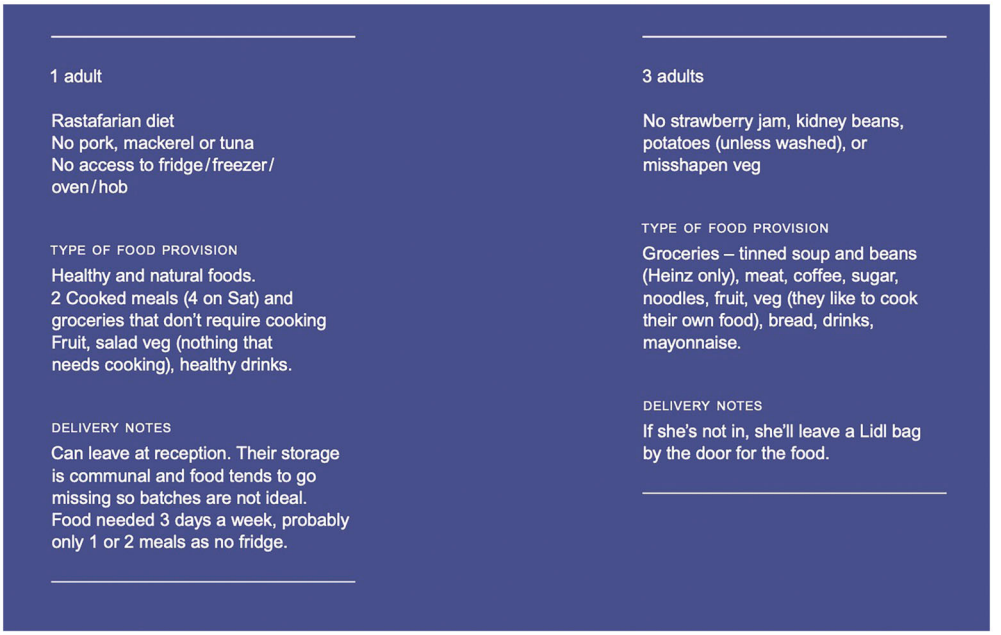

FIGURE 1 Packing lists from *Another Provision* (Baumann 2022).

Food is essential to our survival, these packing lists seem to say, but at the same time, it is about much more than maintaining health and bodily functions. It encapsulates personal memories, it facilitates community and a sense of belonging. Since it is such an important marker of identity, it can also serve to draw boundaries between the self and the Other. This means that food also plays a role in social exclusion. When those in need of food assistance are offered meals they do not find palatable or cannot eat for cultural reasons—as is often the case in standardised food bank parcels—their marginalisation is compounded. The shame already attached to asking for support is furthered through food that appears tainted, like overripe, unwashed or misshapen vegetables. This is why giving members the ability to make specific requests was so important for NFSL: a sense of self-determination and agency is preserved, so that even in a situation where people are reliant on others for support, they are not passive recipients. The National Food Service therefore refuses to see itself as a charity, building its vision of community food systems on solidarity instead (cf. Spade 2020).

As lockdown eased and funding flows for emergency food provision ceased, NFSL engaged in reflections with its members. By this time, that membership, consisting of both volunteers and patrons, also included us. One way the NFSL sought to move towards its vision of food as a Universal Basic Service was to offer weekly free-of-charge community meals. But the lack of a permanent space in London[1] presented a key challenge. As NFSL searched for a permanent home out of which to base its activities, our work sought to contribute to the shaping of that imagined space.

CO-DESIGNING A DE-STIGMATISED SPACE FOR COMMUNITY MEALS

In October 2021, we convened two workshops with members of the food service to jointly think about how design can reduce the stigma so often attached to receiving free-of-charge food (Bruckner et al. 2021; Garthwaite 2016). We learned from participants that the food banks they frequent operate out of functional spaces such as community halls; these often have linoleum flooring and fluorescent lighting as well as a plethora of institutional signage prohibiting a range of behaviours. Those picking up food often leave as quickly as they can, as the institutional atmosphere adds to the stigma of relying on aid. Outdoor soup kitchens too, are impromptu spaces where people rarely stay on for long, especially in the cold. We aimed to jointly imagine a space that would invite people to partake, contribute, linger, and to get to know one another—to overcome isolation while building community, and perhaps even political momentum.

The labour that goes into sustaining mutual aid networks spanning people with a wide range of different backgrounds was essential to both the movement building and the preparation of our workshops. The relationships that NFSL had carefully cultivated through its emergency food provision helped ensure the necessary participation of people with lived experience of food injustice in the creative process we facilitated. Vulnerable participants were not (only) invited by Instagram or email, but called on the phone, provided with directions, and compensated for their participation in workshops. Only because these participants already had a trust-based relationship with NFSL were we able to create an atmosphere where they felt they could share their experiences of food injustice and their hopes for a more just food system openly.

As we got to know the participants, we heard from one young woman who didn't have space to eat at home, and often took meals perched at the edge of her bed. Others wished they had a dining table in their flat so they could invite friends or family to share meals. One participant who ate with his hands due to his cultural heritage, said he preferred eating alone as he felt ashamed to eat in front of others in the UK. Another workshop participant, who came to the UK as a refugee and is now an active member of the group, told of his outrage at the institutional food provided in a Home Office hostel, which was not only culturally inappropriate but unpalatable to him. He argued that care is a key ingredient in meals, especially when people rely on them for survival—careless food aid can make the recipient feel discounted and even worse than when they were merely hungry. Lack of appropriate space to cook, eat and share meals, then, isolated those living in food poverty. At the same time, loveless communal food spaces were seen to contribute to the process of stigmatisation.

In order to develop a de-stigmatised space for free-of-charge meals, we asked participants to build models of their ideal setting for communal eating, using a range of design elements of different shapes and colours, which could be plugged in to each other or connected using wire. Importantly, we encouraged them to explain their design decisions (see Figure 2). The spaces they jointly imagined and modelled aimed to bring people together—but considered different ways of doing this. At first, several groups of participants envisioned one long table, at which everyone would be equal. But through discussion, they modified their approach, preferring instead to offer a range of spatial options to meet everyone according to their differing social, psychological, and physical needs. Thus, participants proposed spaces that would have different types of seating for different bodies, and spaces for different activities and personalities: quiet corners to be alone or observe, as well as spaces for interaction and exchange. It was also crucial, our participants argued, that the threshold for entry would be lowered because of the shame

FIGURE 2 Participants discuss their models for a de-stigmatised space for community meals during a workshop, October 2021 © Johann Arens.

attached to making use of a free-of-charge meal service. They thus proposed that the entrance should be inviting and that someone should meet each new arrival and give them a small task, like setting a table or refilling glasses with drinks. That way, they would be drawn into the event and feel an active part of a joint project, rather than having the sense they were asking for charity.

These valuable insights fed into Johan Arens's ultimate concept for a mobile installation which could accommodate the various needs and adapt to a multitude of locations. The installation references the formal language of public interiors, which so often gets taken for granted: safe, rounded corners, robust and solid surfaces, sturdy and durably-coated metal frames in primary colours (see Figure 3). But rather than mimicking these formal traits, Arens made a sculptural reading utilising the same material qualities for a poetic reimagining of public spaces. What would be merely functional powder-coated railings in a public building or on public transport becomes a longwinded net of vertical sculptural gestures which cut through and redefine the open space. As all pipework was hand-bent by the artist on a CNC-bender, the result is much like a manual drawing, light, joyful and impromptu, qualities no industrial fabrication method can achieve.

The same is true for the resilient Formica-coated table layers which define the horizontal space. These elements were also hand-drawn, resulting in shapes that oppose the anonymised design process of most public furniture. While the wooden elements still function as tables for serving and eating shared meals, they also have numerous round holes. Many of these are

FIGURE 3 The mobile, modular infrastructure for communal eating at The Art Pavilion, May 2022 © Johann Arens.

functional and allow the pipework structures to be attached; others fit pots, dishes and utensils. But further holes seem to be more open for play and interpretation, allowing the insertion of spice jars, vegetables or whichever objects participants bring along.

The resulting installation can be understood as an infrastructure for community meals: it provides the material conditions that enable social eating, including tables and chairs, and a set of

FIGURE 4-6 Different activity spaces of the infrastructure for communal meals in use, May 2022 © Johann Arens.

coloured pots. Seats are of varying heights and additional chairs or wheelchairs can be pulled up to the installation. Some parts facilitate social interaction, and invite people to take part in the organisation of the meal, while others allow people to contemplate or observe (Figures 4–6).

The fact that the installation can be de- and re-assembled in any location meant that it could travel to different temporary venues, but also that we could use it to connect with other initiatives. Thus, in 2022–24, the installation went on a "tour" to eight different venues in and around

FIGURE 7 Meal following discussion on food and land rights with National Food Service and People's Land Policy at Garden of Earthly Delights, June 2022 © Johann Arens.

East London, serving as a platform for workshops alongside free-of charge community meals made from surplus food, in community gardens, food coops, churches, as well as art and activist spaces (see Figures 7–9).

Its modular nature allows the installation to be adapted not just to site-specific conditions, but also to the social requirements of a particular event. The installation process is simple enough that non-experts can participate in its setup. As suggested in the initial workshop, we thus drew in participants by asking them to help plug together its various components, make decisions about customising the installation to the space and needs of the event, as well as uninstalling it afterwards. By involving the meal and workshop participants in the kind of care and maintenance work that usually takes place "behind the scenes" of an event, as well as meal preparation and washing up, we sought to facilitate active participation as well as new encounters, building the social infrastructure while setting up the physical.

The shared responsibility for creating the space also set the tone for the conversations that took place during the events. Engaging different communities, these ranged from discussions on the links between land rights and food justice (with People's Land Policy), to histories of radical food practices (with Antiuniversity), to the role of communal food growing in areas under redevelopment (with Pudding Mill Allotments and Mobile Garden). As the installation allowed us to link up with different organisations, and bring together various actors, it became a platform

FIGURE 8 A workshop on "rethinking our food systems" and meal with National Food Service and Mothers of Hackney at Old School Rooms, Hackney Round Chapel, July 2022 © Johann Arens.

for building solidarities, a physical focal point that bundled a wide range of discussions, agendas and visions through the lens of communal eating.

PREFIGURING FOOD AS A UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICE

Our public services are a physical manifestation of who is deemed eligible for collective support. They are also the way we "care for each other at scale" (Chachra 2021). Expanding a community-built infrastructure to users who usually fall through the cracks of state provision was therefore an essential aspect of our work. Like the NFSL's care-ful engagement with its members we thus sought to use a "care" framework in our artistic process (cf. Davis 2022). This meant that the food infrastructure of the installation was shaped by attentiveness and responsiveness to people's specific needs, but also adaptability to particular conditions of different sites and changing needs over time. The co-design process allowed us to understand what is needed to de-stigmatise public food services and create a sense of community among disparate users. In jointly developing a vision for a more just food system in this manner, the events, debates and solidarities built around the installation enabled a prefiguration of food as a Universal Basic Service.

Of course, our limited intervention, with a total of ten workshops and free-of-charge community meals in 2021–24, was not able to turn food into a Universal Basic Service, even at a very

FIGURE 9 Discussion on alternative knowledge production around food with Cooperation Town, Blueprint Architects and National Food Service at House of Annetta, June 2023 © Johann Arens.

local scale. However, it created a space for imagining such a system, and rehearsing what it might feel like, in order to fuel longer-term action towards more systemic transformation. Throughout this process with the NFSL, our joint project was one of articulating a vision of another type of provision (hence the name of our practice). We imagined a city where people have the time and resources to provide for themselves and others in their communities. These infrastructures of care are different from a social safety net in that they don't only kick in when an emergency has already occurred. Instead of charity, this provision is based on solidarity. On breaking down the dichotomy and hierarchy between provider and beneficiary. On enabling people with different lived experiences to jointly articulate their needs and visions of more just food futures. The publication resulting from our workshops (Baumann 2022) gathered some of these bottom-up visions of food as a Universal Basic Service—including guidelines on how to initiate community supermarkets and a proposal for transforming the typical English Sunday Roast from a weekly visit to the pub to one to a public canteen.

As such, our events practiced a form of prefigurative politics for Universal Basic Services, where the "desired future social relations and practices" are experimentally implemented "in the here-and-now" (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). The installation sought to provide a spatial framework for what Cooper (2014) calls "everyday utopias"—spaces where everyday life is done differently in order to actualise transformative politics. While in no way a complete urban infrastructural network, our installation served as a pilot project illustrating what a scaled-up

universal basic food service might look like. Trans-disciplinary and experimental design approaches have been seen as particularly promising for imagining alternative food futures (Baibarac-Duignan and Medeşan 2023; Brons et al. 2022; McGreevy et al. 2022). Because this process itself was social, sensorial and joyful, it also enabled us to imagine transforming food systems and spaces that exacerbate oppression and exclusion into "life-affirming" infrastructures that are "conducive to life, safety and joy" (Rehearsing Freedoms 2023).

The case for Universal Basic Services is frequently made by arguing that UBS will enhance wider community capacities, including by reducing income inequalities, increasing solidarity, and freeing up time and resources for community benefit (Coote 2021; Coote, Kasliwal, and Percy 2019). However, existing UBS analyses and proposals primarily understand universal food provision as a social safety measure (Portes, Reed, and Percy 2017, 11). Yet our work confirms what food policy scholars have long argued: that food's conviviality (Fabre Lewin, Gathorne-Hardy, and Adams 2015; Parham 2015) has a "convening power" (Bedore 2014; Morgan 2009) that brings together disparate groups and bundles a wide range of political issues (Bagelman, Silva, and Bagelman 2017). In this way, communal eating can serve as an entry point for building community and lay the groundwork for addressing wider challenges beyond access to nutritious meals (Blake 2019). As discussions drew wider circles, participants linked the injustices they experienced in the everyday to larger systems of oppression. Food here merely became the entry point to challenge wider existing social relations, and shared eating also built capacity for "the next fight and the next fight" (Spade 2020).

The fact that the "care collective" (Alam and Houston 2020) we worked with in London was part of the wider network of the National Food Service meant that it not only plugged the gaps in state provision on a local level. Instead, the joint work connected to a broader vision for systemic change, and local experiments and experiences could be shared with activists across the UK. We continue this work in new configurations and with different artistic, research and community partnerships, in order to connect with debates and initiatives beyond London. We have since taken the installation to different UK and international contexts. In the summer of 2024, it formed the centrepiece of the exhibition *Municipal Kitchens* (nGbK n.d.) which we co-curated at nGbK, a Berlin gallery located on the site of a former McDonald's fast food restaurant. Here, the installation and accompanying event programme allowed us to connect international artists showing their work in the exhibition with local food activists and policymakers in order to experiment with different ways to bring the preparation and sharing of food from the private into the public realm.

CONCLUSIONS

We drew a number of conclusions from this four-year collaborative social arts practice: The process of co-designing the infrastructure for communal meals was as important as the physical outcome. Organisers and participants learned together and from one another in ways that were only possible in carefully prepared encounters. In safe settings grounded in a relationship of trust that preceded our project, we learned about the spatial and infrastructural challenges many people face in relation to food. We also came to understand the qualities that are important for de-stigmatising free-of-charge food provision. They include accommodating people's varied physical and social needs, adapting to different community spaces, and facilitating encounter so everyone can actively partake. The design of welcoming spaces, it became clear, had to be supplemented by an activation of the space that was equitable and inclusive.

Thus, the process of developing the notion of food as a Universal Basic Service did not end with building the installation. Instead, the structure formed a centrepiece for food events in which discussions about alternative food futures—more just and sustainable ones—were a key ingredient. This allowed us to contribute to the debate around UBS, which is currently held mainly amongst heterodox economists, through bottom-up visions emerging from activist practice and everyday life. The fact that a social artistic practice formed the basis for this "everyday utopia" in which visions for future practices could be rehearsed highlights the fertile shared ground between participatory arts and prefigurative social movements (cf. Cathcart Frödén 2023).

By utilising the conviviality and convening power of food, the development and activation of the *Another Provision* installation allowed us to establish new alliances and solidarities. This contributed a small piece to the extensive work needed to reimagine and transform public services so that they are free for those who need them at the point of delivery. Thus, we found that physical infrastructures like our installation can support and amplify the social support structures that mutual aid provides (cf. Alam and Houston 2020; Latham and Layton 2022). They can foster certain atmospheres, create focal points and platforms for bundling disparate groups and activities, and—perhaps most importantly—act as pilot projects illustrating what much larger systems of collective care might look like.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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NOTE

1. In other areas of the UK, where space is not as expensive, this was not the same obstacle. Foodhall, the founding branch of the NFS network, for instance, ran successfully out of a large space in the centre of Sheffield for over five years. See www.foodhallproject.org.

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JOHANN ARENS is an artist working with installation to survey how shared infrastructures impact our communal life and shape civil behaviour. These site-related installations take place in facets of the public domain; at community centres, schools, hospitals, digital learning centres, internet cafes and local markets and are tailored to be platforms to celebrate and mushroom forms of communality. He has realised a number of large-scale public art commissions assigned by Arnolfini Bristol, Bold Tendencies London, Jerwood Space London, Kettle's Yard Cambridge. Website: www.johannarens.com.

ANOTHER PROVISION is the authors' shared art/research practice, which focuses on public infrastructures and urban solidarities through collaborative engagement. Some of the insights from participants in the process described in this article are collected in the publication *Another provision: Food justice and communal infrastructures of care*, which is available upon request.