

In Brooklyn, we measure change in food. The throes of gentrification begin not with a rent increase, but with more subtle signs: soymilk on bodega shelves; the sudden availability of locally brewed beer; a coffee shop where the source of the beans is not only known, it's a mantra. After the coffee shop opens, it's only a short time before the bar arrives, usually followed by or in tandem with a small, hand-renovated restaurant serving American classics that shift with the season.

Like Detroit, the Bushwick area of Brooklyn has a history of white flight, severe decline in industry, and a long period of emptiness and disinvestment, in terms of both population and commerce. Bushwick's low point came in the late 1980s when, after severe arson throughout the 70s, the neighborhood was plagued with drug-related crime and gang warfare. Since the early 2000s, however, Bushwick has primarily received attention for its increasingly visible population of artists: New York City's favorite indicator that a once undesirable neighborhood is moving through renewal to gentrification.

For *Detroit: A Brooklyn Case Study*, Mitch McEwen and I have forced a comparison of two cities that are increasingly in the public light. Detroit is seen as an example of failure: a city gone to waste, where foliage is slowly encroaching on buildings that once housed people, where not just blocks but entire acres are vacant, and jobs are no more. Brooklyn has been exemplified not only as a success, but as a globally marketable brand. From Brooklyn Industries to Coney Island to images of Williamsburg circulating worldwide, Brooklyn is in its Golden Age, surpassing Manhattan and becoming The Place To Be.

Yet as the following comparative case study of Roberta's and Slows Bar BQ demonstrates, in some ways Detroit may be superior to Brooklyn -- if not quantitatively ahead, then at least demonstrating a greater possibility. In Detroit, despite unemployment, foreclosure, and decay, things are more possible. Some of the very virtues that allowed Brooklyn to become what it is today (more space for less money, leading to a rise in the creative class, allowing for the development of cooler, more marketable neighborhoods featuring independent businesses) are available in Detroit in spades, to the degree that makes Brooklyn itself seem like an upstart for even trying. Is this an over-simplification? Of course. But it is perhaps no worse than seeing Brooklyn as an endless Williamsburg; which is to say, it is through these limiting synecdoches and comparisons that we can begin to grasp what else exists in each place, and what has developed from that which fits outside the box.

Roberta's opened on a formerly industrial stretch of Moore Street in January, 2008. Surrounded by converted loft buildings, empty lots, and a concrete processing plant, the restaurant seemed both surprising and totally of-the-moment, harnessing the gentrifying neighborhood's need for more upscale dining while simultaneously becoming a symbol for the DIY food passion that is still emblematic of Brooklyn. Similarly representative of a movement in contemporary eating (i.e. "Slow Food", which is the return to heritage production at the level of both farming and preparation), Slows Bar BQ opened across the street from Detroit's famously abandoned Central Station in 2005.

Both Slows and Roberta's straddle the gap between high-end and old-school. Pizza is perhaps the quintessential Brooklyn dish, at least from a historic/nostalgic viewpoint; barbecue, while associated traditionally with the American South, holds a

place in Detroit's heart due to the relocation of workers from the South during the boom of the automobile industry.

Slows also serves a vegetarian chicken sandwich and boasts beef sourced from Niman Ranch – two marks of trends in eating often considered upscale: vegetarianism, and, where flesh is required, humanely raised and sustainable meats. Roberta's, alongside a fantastic and simple margarita pie, changes its menu by the season, topping pizzas only with what is fresh and available. Salumi is cured in house, and salad produce comes either from the backyard, or, at the furthest, a rooftop farm in Queens.

In spite of New York Times reviews and plenty of local exposure, both restaurants have elements of being for those in the know. Roberta's features only a sign above its door, with no flashy lights or telltale plate glass windows. A Yelp review of Slows begins, "when we first got there, we could not find the door. It was sort of hidden. Really cute, from the start." Rather than being a deterrent, the secrecy makes the dining experience even more appealing. Increasingly, despite being situated in neighborhoods that have long been avoided, Slows and Roberta's are becoming destinations. The reasons for this are numerous, but the appeal of being part of a secret club is no doubt high on that list. Roberta's attracts Manhattanites who always want an early-in on the Next Big Thing. Slows lures those who have long left for the suburbs back into downtown Detroit.

Slows, at least according to its recent New York Times profile, has the added advantage of appealing to Detroiters across race and class lines. Fair prices help with this, as does the restaurant's choice of menu. Roberta's boasts no such success, appealing primarily to the white middle class, with a heavy emphasis on twenty- and thirty-somethings. Still, due to the number and variety of projects hosted through or by Roberta's founders, the restaurant's sphere of influence has been wide.

What both Slows and Roberta's make incredibly clear is that, at least in urban areas seeking revitalization, we want more from our restaurants than food, ambiance and service. Roberta's may have started out as an ambitious pizza place in an unexpected location, but it quickly gained attention not only for its menu, but for its reach. Within six months of opening, owners Chris Parachini, Brandon Hoy, and Carlos Mirarchi were approached by Patrick Martins of the Slow Food movement. He wanted to run a food-focused radio station; Heritage Radio was subsequently installed in shipping containers in Roberta's backyard. On top of the shipping containers, herbs, tomatoes, lettuces, and greens are grown to supply the restaurant, funded by a seed grant (pun intended) from the *grande dame* of sustainable food, Alice Waters. When demand for local produce far surpassed what the initial garden could supply, Roberta's garden manager and a handful of volunteers opened the Brooklyn Grange: a 40,000 square foot rooftop farm in Long Island City that supplies not only Roberta's, but a handful of other sustainably focused restaurants throughout New York. Roberta's bread can now be purchased with food stamps at two farmers' markets in Bushwick, bringing the local food movement to residents more economically representative of the neighborhood. Chris Parachini next intends to open a banquet hall that can accommodate Bushwick events and community gatherings.

Roberta's efforts, where massive, have remained largely focused around food, with some steps into agriculture, urban planning, and media. All of these are logical extensions of a restaurant business: each project starts from and returns to what we

eat. The success of these endeavors, which earned the restaurant's owners a write-up in New York Magazine's recent spread on the "Most Powerful People in New York" is not to be underestimated, but it reveals a limited focus. Slows, on the other hand, has ventured far beyond the scope of food in its associated community outreach.

Slows owners Ryan and Phil Cooley initially intended to start an entertainment venue in the buildings they purchased adjacent to their restaurant. Now their plans are more ambitious: in addition to opening a coffee shop (Mercury Bar), that briefly served as a gathering place for Detroit's hipsters, and Slows To Go for barbecue take out, Phil Cooley also serves on the board for the Detroit Works Project, the ACLU of Southeastern Michigan, and a handful of other organizations. Using the profits from Slows, he is looking to fund parks projects. He is known not only as a restaurateur, but as an ambassador for the new Detroit.

This kind of public philanthropy seems to exist in conflict with the mildly secret aesthetic of his restaurant. Yet it's also indicative of a larger shift in urban renewal: what both Detroit and Brooklyn need are not only splashy public initiatives instigated by local politicians, but serious grassroots efforts made by engaged contemporary citizens -- efforts by people, for people.

Community organizing through restaurants is a simple equation: give customers something they want (a place to eat, drink, and make merry), and turn that participation into a series of larger projects that benefit both the diners, and the residents who may never enter the restaurant. Crucially, Slows and Roberta's bring middle class people, who don't necessarily need the kind of low-income reinvestment projects that governments develop in decaying urban sites, to areas previously avoided. These patrons represent not the negative elements of class shift and gentrification but, quite simply, cash flow: money for the meal and more to support further initiatives.

Yet in Brooklyn, there is little room for financial risk-taking. Even in neighborhoods in transition, competition for space, customers, and media attention drains money away from investing in projects that don't immediately benefit a business.

If Bushwick is one end of the spectrum in this respect, Detroit is the other. In downtown Detroit, the availability of space and relatively low incidence of new major projects allows for a surfeit of both business and attention that can easily carry over into seemingly unrelated arenas -- especially when making the argument that anything bringing people back into the empty urban center is probably good for the restaurant. Slows is a vision of what Brooklyn has become, but better.

The work in *Detroit: A Brooklyn Case Study* reflects Detroit's potential while still allowing it to remain essentially Detroit: a city measured by itself, not by the expectations of other places. Freeland Buck's *Superdivision Detroit* envisions Detroit in 2060, projecting not a utopic future of reinvestment, but rather one of increasing emptiness, conforming to Detroit's current status as a shrinking city. Their project does not view this shrinkage as failure; instead, over time shrinkage takes on a growing stability, as neighborhoods become denser and the space between them greater. There is hope inherent in this process: 2060 Detroit is connected by a network of urban trails, assuming both the presence of structured urban greenery, and the existence of a population to utilize these paths with foot traffic. *Superdivision Detroit* allows for emptiness and linkage to co-exist, not paradoxically but optimistically.

Erin Kasimow's project *Some Assemblage Required* examines the existing

Detroit dilemma of nature reclaiming the city. She offers an alternate solution: utilizing controlled demolition as a site of interpersonal convergence. Through the strategic ecological destruction of the Packard Plant, Kasimow harnesses what she refers to as Detroit's lawlessness: a condition not frightening, but inspiring. Kasimow's introduction of a convention center to host timed events in conjunction with the building's decay introduces deconstruction's connective powers. Detroit is not sorrowfully abandoned, but fecund in its changing state. Demolition is a medium for discussion, giving renewed purpose to a seemingly deactivated space.

Similarly, in *Please Describe*, Amanda Matles reveals the conversational and social potential of a ruined site. By asking passersby to engage with and describe a famously empty building (the James Scott mansion), she conducts community organizing through observation. Matles desires to display Detroit as inhabited, even in areas of much-photographed abandonment. Her understanding of urban space as essentially human endows Detroit with a quality more associated with Brooklyn: population as a driving force of cultural determination.

Finally, there are the purposefully nostalgic projects. Brent Birnbaum's *The Worm 2 The Butterfly Effect* examines the reliquary as a form of civic pride: finding remnants of Detroit to honor and making them worthy of display. While Dennis Rodman's Detroit tenure has long come to an end, Birnbaum structures his artifacts as a taxonomy to interpret Detroit's current state. By engaging popular culture, Birnbaum, like Matles, asks the average citizen to become activated: opening up personal collections, recalling common moments, and building civic pride through exhibition -- making art from the ordinary.

Instigated investigations of Detroit must move from the macro to the micro and back. The powerful simplicity of uniting people through food and drink (or objects and conversation) is by no means the only example of engaging the city at various levels simultaneously. The LOVELAND project makes investing in Detroit real estate accessible to nearly anyone: at \$1 per square inch, we can all be owners. The sale of each inch demonstrates a commitment to the future of Detroit: as any homeowner knows, the power of ownership suddenly makes clear thousands of decisions and desires previously unimagined by the temporary tenant. LOVELAND is an economic marketplace, a space for individual expression, and a community network.

SUPERFRONT's purchase of a 5 inch by 5 inch square through LOVELAND allows our Detroit abstractions to become a physical reality. Imposing the limitations of space and money on the Request for Proposals (the winning project must be constructed with a \$125 budget) became a way to expand possibilities: Detroit does not suffer from lack of available land, but viable, replicable interventions for the city must be constructed with its economy in mind.

Ellen Donnelly and David Karle's jury-selected first prize submission, *LIGHT UP!*, literally displays the somewhat troubling metaphor of bringing light back to a darkened city. What Detroit requires is not a beacon of hope, but the continued exposure of conduits of light and energy either already in existence, or now in development. Each inch of Detroit allows us to build: a project, a block, eventually a city, but without linkage, none of these efforts matter.

Believing in Detroit is taking a risk. Believing in Brooklyn is taking a risk as well: Brooklyn's rapid development and gentrification at a moment where all bubbles seem

destined to burst leaves little to hold on to. Success is slippery. Detroit need not become bigger than itself. From within and without, our imaginations of Detroit are powerful. Ultimately, however, we must work with what is there: one inch at a time, one building, one conversation, one collection, one path, one customer who will come back for more. Detroit as it is has allowed these elements to be there; it is through examination and expansion of what there is that we learn what the city will become. We must see the city singly and without limitations.

Chloë Bass

Director, SUPERFRONT Detroit

Co-Curator, *Detroit: A Brooklyn Case Study*