

The Garden of Auburn:

On The Use of Food Work & Hospitality
Towards the Maximization of Civic Potential

A Brief Analysis, Proposal & Petition for
Research Support

By: Raven Gibson

With regards to the wealth of history and impact of the African American community, the Auburn Avenue neighborhood in Downtown Atlanta is one America's most historic communities. In 1956, Fortune magazine named Auburn Avenue "the richest negro street in the world". (1) Much of the measurement was specific to physical capital and socioeconomic advancement. However, the thriving nature of the neighborhood reflected heavily in the strength and function of other cultural institutions - such as churches, gyms, and various store fronts. This resulted in a significant cultural capital that translated to the ability to engage with other stakeholders in the city on a political level. John Wesley Dobbs' ability to establish and facilitate relationships with empowered members of the Atlanta community at large provided an opportunity of empowerment for not only himself - but the entire neighborhood. While Auburn Avenue itself spans no more than "a mile and a half", it became home to countless African American owned businesses and other establishments. (2)

In addition to professional organizations, media outlets, and institutions of higher learning, a Black finance triumvirate emerged to further edify and legitimize the neighborhood's foundation. The first church for African Americans in Atlanta was established in the neighborhood in 1847. (3) "The nation's largest and oldest national organization representing African American physicians" was founded here as early as 1875. (4) The Atlanta Daily Word - the nation's oldest Black-owned daily publication- was founded here in 1928 as well. Even with the influx of Black citizens in the 1840s, the core of Black population doesn't begin to take root until the early 1890s. Auburn Avenue was actually

named Wheat Street up until 1893. (3) By 1900, there are at least 10 African American owned businesses - including two professionals purveying services to the community. (3)

Over the course of the next 75 years, the Sweet Auburn District would fulfill and exceed the expectations of its famed moniker. During that timeframe, countless events span the African American social chronology - but fewer of greater significance than that of Dr. King's birth. He was born in the heart of Atlanta's Black capitol in 1929 and would later return to propel the American Civil Rights movement into the national imagination from the very same locale. However after years of progress and innovation, the neighborhood began to suffer and has descended into a rapid, seemingly relentless decline.

According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the district's downward spiral began in the 1980's and continued to an extent that saw the neighborhood added to the National Trust's list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. (5) The National Park Service attributes the deterioration of one of America's most sacred Black neighborhoods to a "lack of investment, [and] crime and abandonment, [being] compounded by highway construction that split it in two" (6). As many of the environments of our physical world undergo irrevocable change, many organizations are realizing that sustainability - in its various forms - will be absolutely critical to the success of its products and offerings.

Our current health crisis has shed immense light on the volatility of many major industries. Many of the financial consequences incurred by the various

industries is merely in addition to the initial challenges posed to launching a successful business model. According to Full Service Restaurant, “60% of restaurants don’t make it past their first year” (7). The pandemic has only made operational circumstances even more dire. Forbes estimates that “... the total shortfall in restaurant and foodservice sales likely surpassed \$145 billion during the last four months.” (8)

With these things in mind, as Good Food & Company, LLC prepared to undertake the challenge of introducing a new food concept to an “endangered” neighborhood, a reasonable amount of risk assessment was necessary. As an emerging hospitality institution, Good Food & Company’s approach was predicated on establishing solutions that supplement its business objectives - but also demonstrate a thorough understanding of the obstacles posed and how to address them.

While it is, and was, important to specifically evaluate the potential of the restaurant concept, all stake holders involved were able to come to a shared consensus; the restaurant’s success would be contingent on a primary factor: the overall health of the neighborhood - and thus the quality of the location. In the context of our location, the Sweet Auburn Historic District, there was/is a significant amount of gravely necessary revitalization that can and should take place. In an effort to organize the approach to the improvements, a scientific parallel was drawn between the present elements. How do we study this? What does this research look like? Where do we begin?

Keeping the prominence of location in mind, for the parameters of this particular scientific-style analysis, we redefine our location as an ecosystem. In this instant, one does have to determine what qualifies as an ecosystem? While the connection appears merely convenient, it is accurate to the denotative extent. According to the National Geographic Society, “an ecosystem is a geographic area where plants, animals, and other organisms, as well as weather and landscape, work together to form a bubble of life” (9). As with all ecosystems, the relationships and processes being maintained and facilitated within the system are not only essential - but ultimately life sustaining.

Ecosystems also include both abiotic (non-living) and biotic (living) factors and these factors “[depend] on every other factor, either directly or indirectly” (9). There are two other identifying qualities of an ecosystem that help us visualize the challenges the Sweet Auburn Historic District currently faces. Not only is “matter recycled in ecosystems”, “energy flow is unidirectional”. (10) It is quite historically obvious, the Sweet Auburn Historic District is capable of tremendous growth potential and development. However, to further contextualize our view of the neighborhood using the ecosystem model, it appears we may be in the rupturing nucleus of a significant and prolonged disturbance - or disruptive event that affects and ecosystem’s composition. For various reasons, over the course of the past several decades, Auburn Avenue has failed maintain any of its equilibrium. Its composition and identity have not remained generally constant - with the exception of the pervasive destitution of the last 30+ years. (10) If an ecosystem is failing or its function is being

negatively impacted to any degree, its organisms are not only suffering; they will ultimately die as certain disturbances "... could lead to permanent alteration or loss of the ecosystem". (10) Even with nearly 20 million dollars invested over the past five years, the neighborhood's biotic and abiotic elements remain in relatively rapid decline. (11) The compact region is full of "derelict" and "dilapidated buildings" and is now one of the city's most prominent food deserts - which is defined as an area with "at least a 20% poverty rate and one-third of its residents live a mile from a grocery store". (12) (13)

Among the additional observations that can be made, it is quite clear that the Auburn social ecosystem, the garden of Auburn if you will, is - and has been - in disarray for a considerable amount of time. In our desire to reinvigorate the neighborhood for our own commercial purposes, Good Food & Company, LLC has also been able to ascertain that another purpose is at hand. We believe the Sweet Auburn Historic District is an immensely fertile garden - having yielded rich social, commercial, and cultural over the past two centuries. Objectively speaking, however, the garden is dying. In addition to the aspirations held for the individual business, we recognize a historical, geographical, anthropological, commercial, and sociological responsibility to restore it. To leave any of our history, our people, imaginatively or cognitively behind is a forfeiture of our inner human agreement to be the mere bridges between our mistakes and successes of our past and our the potential and capacity of our future.

Good Food & Company, LLC is deeply interested in launching a collection of efforts - professional and academic in nature that focus specifically on maximizing the civic potential of the Auburn Avenue Historic District.

Having come to the consensus amongst our stakeholders group that the Auburn Avenue neighborhood is not fulfilling its civic potential, we recognize our role in its improvement. As highly qualified hospitality professionals, we realize that what may be the most readily available course of action for our company, may be the most generally effective. Through our collective work, we deeply believe that food - in its various forms, and coupled with other resources, is the most sustainably impactful tool that we can use in the interest of restoring the Sweet Auburn neighborhood. There are many channels of utilization in terms of integrating food into a community's overall wellness schema. Our particular pathway is restaurants. At first glance, restaurants are not nearly a viable enough device to change an entire neighborhood, but we dissent with this notion based on the emerging scientific nature of our work and its outcomes. Through the relationship between several philosophies, we will take a look at our company's strategic and intentional embarkation upon the social progress of our new business home.

Food affords several different advantages as a method of investment in the future of the Auburn Avenue neighborhood. As food professionals, it is readily available to us. As citizens, it is a highly visible, accessible, wide-spread need that we have to the capacity to fill. To an extent, we are seeking a sort of civic self-actualization for the neighborhood. As noble as it may be, there is very much a

chronology that must be adhered to so that a type of true civic fulfillment takes place. Following Maslow's school of thought, food is among the foundational needs that all humans have (14). In the first instance, the Auburn Avenue neighborhood is in desperate need for high(er) quality nutritional options. Good Food & Company's new restaurant, while by no means the paramount remedy, is one of many steps in a more sustainable, physiological direction. The mere presence of the option for fresher, more ethically prepared food products introduces a scenario of new possibilities for residents and tourists alike. To have access to the resources to acknowledge and address the ever-present food need is to immediately provide access to the next level of need hierarchy. Citizens can more fluidly move from one social/human objective on to the next in a way that encourages agency and - quite possibly innovation. Should that not be the case, "...these basic physiological needs must be addressed before humans move on to the next level of fulfillment" and the same can be argued for larger collections of humans - specifically neighborhoods.

With the inarguably, essential nature of food and nutrition in humans' lives, hospitality affords an incredibly unique method of delivery. As a collection of hospitality professionals, we endeavor to be as acutely aware of our the influence product has on our consumer(s). We engage rather closely with the individuals and families that patronize our establishments and perform an inconceivable amount of socializing duties for those around us. Restaurants, unlike other transactional engagements, have the potential to teach people a great deal about social conduct and expectations. In addition to money, an

incomprehensible amount of information is exchanged in restaurants as well. That information, could produce a body of data useful to comprehending the social habits and customs of a given community. As citizens fulfill their lower level needs, there are ramifications that could be more useful to businesses – and the community at large.

Hospitality in its current iterations include a type of proximity to others. There is a great deal of emotional and cognitive activity available to study and learn from. For example, restaurants are reasonable place to study the influence of psychological concepts like mirror neurons. A 2002 paper by Vittorio Gallese posits that “a shared manifold of intersubjectivity” is undergirded the presence of mirror neurons. The discovery of these mirror neurons in adult individuals shows that the very same neural substrates tend to activate when certain expressive acts are both executed and (visually) perceived. (15) He argues that this neuro-chemical provision creates pathways to see a version of ourselves in others’ experience - which lays a biological framework for empathy. While this particular document doesn’t intend to delve too deeply into the science laid forth by Gallese’s work, we will rely on his claim that our cognitive infrastructure affords us the opportunity to - not only empathize, but also implicitly understand them through the mirror matching mechanism.

To be curious as to what this has to do with restaurants is a plausible concern to have. However, there may be innumerable scientific possibilities available in the confines of food service environments. In taking care of others throughout goal driven engagements (the acquisition of food for the guests and

wage-earning work for guests), the chance at empathic practices/activity increases significantly for all parties involved. Over the course of a shift in a high volume restaurant, there could be countless “mirror matching mechanism” moments that consciously or subconsciously activate the structures of empathy in our minds. Of course, it is by no means something we can be entirely sure of. However, it is something, that like most things can be designed and studied. A healthy, ethical and professional hospitality environment could be an ideal location to educate - even if subconsciously - on the expectations of social engagements. They also could potentially create domains of noticeably more empathic public spaces that could carry over into other realms of public life.

The residual effects of healthy hospitable centers/spheres are not so easy to determine; that does not mean they do not exist. In addition to construction these landscapes, we are equally as intrigued at the study of them through a series well-formulated experiments (an example of which is included here later). While creating more pathways for basic need fulfillment in highly empathetic commercial environments, one could argue that a type of fiscal energy can be converted into a type of social energy. Very similar to ecological ecosystems, the initial form of energy comes as one thing: light, and the comes out as another form: heat (10). Whatever we determine the energy is or is called, we do believe in its conservation. We intended to employ the Law of the Conservation of Energy to create closed systems of social energy changing from potential to kinetic with as much regularity as possible. For the purposes of work of ideation, if there is an environment of commercial empathy being perpetuated, physics, even if to a

symbolic degree, teaches us that the "... energy is not created or destroyed, but merely changes forms..." (16) For a community that faces the plethora of issues current day Auburn Avenue faces, alternate forms of energy could be exactly what the neighborhood needs. Food energy, through providing employment prospects, could transform into increased spending or commercial energy. The energy of hospitality could turn into tourist/investment energy - creating progress in the business sector. With "90% of serotonin receptors located in our gut", nutritional energy provided by higher quality ingredients could very well turn into improved moods, physical activity, and performance energy (17). As one of the primary producers in our Auburn ecosystem, it is imperative that we remain as aware of our role in the energy exchange as possible.

Among several others, awareness is our primary responsibility. We are responsible for the food concept we have chosen to introduce to the Sweet Auburn Historic District. We are responsible for the various manifestations of our footprint in the neighborhood as well as its overall health - being now included in what contributes to that metric. In acknowledgment of that responsibility, we approach the task of renewing such a distinguished neighborhood as dynamically as possible. Through interdisciplinary evaluation and principles such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the Law of the Conservation of Energy, and the presence of "mirror neuron", we intend to sustainably craft centers of social learning, innovative commerce, and community progress. Upon the successful, deliberate, and consistent interjection of ethical food practice, we aim to continue enhancing every facet of life in the Sweet Auburn Historic District. To that end, I

am interested partnering with your organization on the extended dialogue and development of the aforementioned endeavors. Should you be interested in supporting our research please contact:

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Experiment Design:

Question: Does food actually make people happy enough to be nicer to others?

Hypothesis: Guests will be more inclined to perform an act of charity or service after a satisfactory food service/hospitality experience.

What will be measured: Guests will rate their own happiness on a scale of 1 - 10.

What will be changed?: Variable group subjects will not have a meal prior to charitable request.

What will stay the same: Subjects will be asked to engage in charitable act.

Materials:

1. Charitable Acts Actor (1)
2. Pens
3. Pre-Service Surveys (100)
4. Meal Experience Data
5. Food Service Environment
6. Post-Service Surveys (100)

Method:

Guests will conduct a pre-service survey. 25% of subjects will not receive a meal prior to receiving a charitable solicitation. 75% of guests will undergo the Atlanta Breakfast Club dining experience. Upon concluding the dining experience, guests

will receive charitable solicitation. Guests will be given a post-service survey as well.

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