

# Cooking and eating together in London: Food sharing initiatives as collective spaces of encounter

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## ABSTRACT

Commensality, the act of eating together, is an important human ritual that benefits beyond the biological need for food and it is well established amongst food studies scholars. At the same time, novel forms of social eating are emerging in urban contexts, especially mediated by new technologies. Yet, ICT-mediated urban food sharing and the moments of commensality they generate have received limited attention to date. In response, this paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork with three urban food sharing initiatives in London – a city which exhibits an active and dynamic urban food sharing ecosystem, to explore the experiences of commensality that are produced. By employing qualitative methods of enquiry, I illustrate how these initiatives go beyond the food offered by engaging with the material and affective elements of cooking and eating together and how they attempt to nurture collective spaces of encounter. Social isolation and loneliness emerge within this research as central drivers for participating in food sharing initiatives. The paper concludes that these collective spaces and the affective qualities that they generate are particularly vital in urban contexts in times of austerity, as these initiatives have capacity to embrace social differences and to facilitate the circulation of ideas and practices of care and hospitality. They operate as provisional bridging mechanisms between people, communities, projects and services, providing the connective tissue in ways which are hard to measure through simple quantitative measures and, as a result, are rarely articulated.

## 1. Introduction

London is one of the world's most affluent economic centres, ranking first for past six years in the Global Power City Index, which assessed variables such as economy, research and development, cultural interaction, liveability, environment, and accessibility (Yamato et al., 2017). However, London is affected by profound social inequalities. Indeed, one in five jobs pays below London Living Wage<sup>1</sup> and low incomes coupled with high housing costs mean that the poverty rate for families in London remains higher than in any other UK region (Gentleman, 2017). Policies of austerity led by spending cuts and welfare reform have also been associated with inequalities (Briggs and Foord, 2017) and have profoundly impacted on the lives of many in the

UK (Hall, 2015; Clarke & Newman, 2012).

Food insecurity, defined as “the state of a person or household being, or at risk of being, without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food” (Mayor of London, 2018:39), has become emblematic of urban inequality at times of austerity. In response, the UK capital has been pioneering new strategies for feeding its urban residents. In 2006 the London Food Board, a commission of experts whose purpose is to advise the Mayor on local food issues, published the first London Food Strategy (Reynolds, 2009), which was determined by the partnership between the Greater London Authority, local councils and initiatives working with and around food. Stakeholders from the third sector<sup>2</sup> played a vital role in this implementation process, collaborating with city government and local councils. This synergy became

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<sup>1</sup> “The London Living Wage is an hourly rate of pay [...]. It is calculated independently to reflect the high cost of living in the capital, giving a worker in London and their family enough to afford the essentials and to save (London City Hall, 2017).”

<sup>2</sup> According to the National Audit Office the third sector “includes voluntary and community organisations (both registered charities and other organisations such as associations, self-help groups and community groups), social enterprises, mutuals and co-operative” that are “‘value-driven’ [...] motivated by the desire to achieve social goals (for example, improving public welfare, the environment or economic well-being) rather than the desire to distribute profit; and reinvest any surpluses generated in the pursuit of their goals.” (NAO, 2017).

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evident in campaigns such as Good Food for London and Capital Growth, developed by Sustain,<sup>3</sup> which promoted healthy food access and urban food growing networks. Despite these developments, food insecurity is still a major issue for the city. Food banks, ‘designed to be an emergency intervention, providing food for people in the short-term while they await support from other services’ (Lambie-Mumford, 2013:74), are the most widespread form of food sharing in response to food poverty (Garthwaite et al., 2015). Nonetheless, they have recently reported their struggles to meet the rising demand (The Trussell Trust, 2017). In London only, food banks distributed 110,000 food aid packages in 2015 and 9% of children say they sometimes or often go to bed hungry (Sustain, 2016). In 2017, the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan himself expressed concern about the ‘big challenges’ presented by a city of 8.6 million, where ‘every day many Londoners don’t have enough to eat’.<sup>4</sup> The latest “Beyond the Food Bank” report (Sustain, 2017:2) clearly recognises the complexity of factors behind food insecurity, articulating the need for “societal and political solutions” that address its root causes rather than the resulting symptoms.

At the time of writing, the second “London Food Strategy” by the Mayor of London (2018) is open for public consultation. Its draft emphasises that poverty and inequality affect many Londoners’ ability to eat well. The latest Mayor of London’s strategy recognises the pivotal role of food banks in responding to this emergency, however it also warns that food banks cannot and should not constitute a long-term solution. The role of local institutions is highlighted by urging each borough to develop its own food poverty strategy, which will be financially supported by the municipality. Moreover, organisations focused on the collective growing of food in the city, redistributing surplus or organising cookery classes within the local communities gained an unprecedented prominence within the 2018 “Food Strategy” as key players, working towards a more holistic solution to food poverty.

This paper engages directly with these initiatives, which facilitates the sharing of food in the urban context. As highlighted in previous research (Davies et al., 2017a), London presents a vibrant landscape of urban food initiatives. Food sharing includes more than the exchange of food, it comprises the sharing of food-related skills, stuff and spaces (Davies et al., 2017b). Within these organisations, food sharing is intended as a form of social action, engaging citizens in cooking and eating together. As a matter of fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the specific challenges when it comes to encounter in global cities and food sharing can become an act of conviviality, exactly for its ability to be ‘more than’ distributing food.

With a few exceptions (Le Grand, 2015; Julier, 2013), the vast body of literature on commensality, defined as eating together at the same table, has yet to engage with urban food sharing, and does not take into consideration the new forms of sharing meals that extend beyond traditional forms of kinship and friendship in contemporary affluent countries. It is therefore of importance to investigate these new forms of social eating (Masson et al., 2018) “to explore the way in which solidarity mechanisms operate in society with respect to uniting its members, imposing rules, and creating identity” (Giacoman, 2016:460). Yet, commensality does not always engender convivial atmospheres, which are related to a sense of ‘becoming with’ that facilitate an open and unpredictable encounter. As previous research has shown (Caplan, 2016; Candea & Da Col, 2012), the guest/host dynamics generate a series of critical questions about inclusion and exclusion, power relations and social difference. Calls for more conviviality in urban settings often depict commensality as a cure, but there is little empirical evidence about the processes that it entails (Sobal and Nelson, 2003). This is the gap that I am trying to address, by asking how such food sharing initiatives seek to enable encounter.

This paper will focus on a type of commensality created by bringing together diverse participants beyond kinship relations and celebratory feasting, the predominant focus of commensality studies to date. Employing qualitative methods of enquiry and analysing the creation of the meal ritual, I argue that these initiatives go beyond the food offered by engaging with the material and affective elements of cooking and eating together, which indicate “the nature of the relationships being created” (Julier, 2013:207). This generates temporary collective spaces of encounter and hospitality.

In more detail, I will examine the moments of cooking and eating within three London-based food sharing initiatives: The Skip Garden and Kitchen, Be Enriched and Community Shop. Despite the diversity of the initiatives’ goals, the case studies all share kitchen spaces and knowledge around food and cooking, facilitating the formation of social relationships between staff, volunteers and participants.

After laying out the concerns raised by scholars tackling food poverty and austerity in the UK and introducing literature interrogating commensality, conviviality and care, the research methodology is described and the implications of my positionality outlined. In this section, I will also depict the case studies initiatives and their main activities. Ethnographic data from fieldwork is then examined to establish what type of commensality emerges from these initiatives. I first canvass how the material and spatial elements are manipulated to try to alleviate the distance between donors and recipients and I describe these collective kitchens as spaces of engagements that seek to stimulate interaction and social relationships. I also extend the discussion to the impacts of sitting at the same table, consuming the same food. Then, I focus on the attempts to foster an affective atmosphere via commensality to contrast social isolation and loneliness. This is linked to the motivation of people’s involvement in the initiatives at all levels: as guests, volunteers or staff and I conclude by exploring the complex network of collaboration, in which the food sharing initiatives are embedded in.

## 2. The ambivalence of austerity: disaffection and care

To understand how food sharing occurs in London today, it is essential to point out some aspects of the political context in which food sharing takes place. Since the results of the referendum on EU membership in June 2016, London has been facing a phase of profound uncertainty. Although 60% of Londoners voted to remain, the ‘leave’ campaign won nationally by 52% (Toly, 2017). Morgan (2017) makes an interesting point when she addresses the issues that helped to trigger Brexit, which included inequality, social mobility, democratic accountability and social cohesion. These societal issues do not represent a new phenomenon: the reform of the welfare state with its gradual hollowing-out of state-provided care and responsibility can be traced back to the time of Margaret Thatcher, has been perpetuated under consecutive New Labour governments (Levitas, 2012) and extended following global economic crisis of 2008 characterised as a period of austerity policies (Briggs and Foord, 2017). After winning the General Election in 2010, David Cameron not only made appeal to the British society to ‘share the pain’ of austerity, but he also launched a campaign under the name of the ‘Big Society’ to fix ‘Broken Britain’ by means of community empowerment, public service reform and social action (Briggs and Foord, 2017). This approach has been staunchly criticised as a ‘philanthropic fantasy’ (Slater, 2014:948) and as an “attempt to get necessary social labour done for nothing, disproportionately by women, by pushing work back across the market/non-market boundary. (Levitas, 2012:322).“

The era of austerity accompanying the UK coalition government of 2010 has also been identified as one of the factors increasing social isolation, especially of vulnerable populations (Briggs and Foord, 2017). Social isolation and loneliness have also been identified as factors contributing to poorer general health and to food poverty (Griffiths, 2017). Loneliness “can be understood as an individual’s

<sup>3</sup> Sustain is a UK based charity, advocating for better food and farming.

<sup>4</sup> Extracts from my own recording and transcription, December 2016, inaugural speech of the London Food Awards.

personal, subjective sense of lacking desired affection, closeness, and social interaction with others” (Davidson and Rossall, 2014:3), with social isolation defined as “a lack of contact with family or friends, community involvement, or access to services” (Davidson and Rossall, 2014:3). According to the British Office for National Statistics, “social participation decreases with age, along with the increasing likelihood of ill health, living alone and bereavement” (Office for National Statistics, 2015:11). About 5 million elderly people in the UK say that the television is their main form of company, while 9 per cent reports that they feel cut off from society (Davidson and Rossall, 2014). Social isolation is not only recognised as a main issue among the elderly populations (Office for National Statistics, 2015), but also among young people (ACEVO, 2015).

Despite the uncomfortable role of filling a welfare gap left by a withdrawing state, Williams et al. (2014:2799) observes that the third sector “can be re-evaluated in terms of [its] potential for developing progressive collective responses to neoliberal excesses, reflecting renewed forms of democracy, solidarity, and embrace of difference.” Similar sentiments have been articulated by Cloke and Williams (2016) with respect to emergency food provision such as food banks, but concerns remain that they may serve to reinforce rather than resolve the institutionalization of food poverty and the de-responsibilisation of governments in the fight against hunger (Kneafsey et al., 2013, 2008; Poppendieck, 1999; Riches, 1997, 2011). There is general agreement that the rise of food banks has been a consequence of neoliberalism, but their actions only deal with the symptoms, rather than the causes of social inequalities (Lindenbaum, 2016, Garthwaite et al., 2015). However, while a critical analysis of the configurations of meanings around food banks is needed, it is also essential to attend to the cracks opening up within neoliberal governance (Williams et al., 2014:2810) and the innovation of grassroots action that emerges through them.

In this regard, Cloke and Williams (2016) introduce a significant qualification of the negative criticisms of food banks. They acknowledge the relevance of the neo-liberal political economy in the geography of food banks, but also draw attention to “some of the more progressive possibilities arising in and through spaces of food banking and wider welfare and care (Cloke and Williams, 2016: 2).” By doing so, they emphasise the way food banks function as provisional “spaces of care that potentially serve to articulate a newly emerging and not yet fully formed ethical and political response to welfare ‘in the meantime’ (Cloke and Williams, 2016:2).” Cloke and Williams focus on food banks only, which rarely involve moments of commensality, but such considerations can be extended to the growing diversity of spaces and moments for accessing food and eating together in cities, as research on ICT-mediated food sharing has shown (Davies et al., 2017a, 2017b). These novel forms of food sharing need to be subjected to further scrutiny and more specifically the processes they adopt to create spaces of encounter.

Amin (2010:10) has fostered debate on the difficulty of building solidarity in urban contexts due to “the many local separations, dispersed geographies of attachment and qualified proximities between strangers that characterise modern urban living”, nevertheless he also realises that many attempts are being made to widen opportunities for being with others to inspire collective spaces of ethical responsibility (Popke, 2009). According to Amin (2010:3), the interaction between people in urban contexts requires the “active intermediation by third parties”, facilitating a politics of encounter indispensable to build an ethics of care.

Care can be defined as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto and Fisher, 1990:40). Following Schwartz’s theory (2009, in Tronto, 2013) that combines social solidarity with care, Tronto clearly states that “caring with” is about building collective and self-interests in a long-term perspective; to engender greater trust and capacity to care for “res publica,” this public thing (Tronto, 2013:XII). This notion is particularly relevant to contexts

of urban food sharing, as also demonstrated by Midgley (2016). In her study, organisations offering food to rough sleepers seek building trust to connect individuals to support networks as well as providing food (Midgley, 2016:10). The act of building trust becomes crucial in the case of inviting strangers to eat together, which as Grignon (2001:31) stressed, it is always “a confrontation, a reciprocal challenge, which allows each to test the other [...]”, as the next paragraph will illustrate.

### 3. Commensality and convivial atmospheres

Before moving on to examine these novel forms of food sharing, I would like to look back at how commensality has been examined through history. Commensality, defined as “eating at the same table” (Fischler, 2011:529), has a long lineage of research and has been regarded as one of the milestones of human civilization (Flandrin and Montanari, 1999; Bloch, 1999), helping to form bonds both within and beyond immediate family groups (Kerner et al., 2015). A distinction is made between everyday commensality and exceptional commensality (Giacoman, 2016). Giacoman (2016) summarises the characteristics of both exceptional and everyday commensality, stressing the relevance of three main dimensions: first, eating together is regarded as interactional, as an act of communication between participants; second, as already remarked by Douglas (1975), shared meals entail a normative dimension, “the staging of norms carried out by diners and the control over those norms” (Giacoman, 2016:463); and finally, commensality involves a symbolic dimension, embracing the wide range of meanings attributed to eating together in different societies.

Everyday commensality is described as private and domestic and offers valuable insight into studying the reproduction and creation of kinship (Grignon, 2001; Rozin, 1999), as well as the gendered division of labour within the households (Van Esterik, 2015; Valentine, 1999; DeVault, 1991). Families have conventionally been regarded as ‘commensal units’ (Bloch, 1999), however, in recent years, the frequency of eating together as a family has been in decline (Masson et al., 2018) as progressive individualisation of eating practices has emerged in many affluent countries (Sobal & Nelson, 2003, Fischler, 2011, Yates and Warde, 2017). Consistent calls for a return to family meals have been prominent in both the US and UK public health discourse (Wilk, 2010), with media regularly dedicating coverage to this phenomenon (Moorhead, 2015; Peck, 2013). This ideal of family meals stems from a nostalgia; a romanticisation of family (Murcott, 2012) that does not consider the changing nature of contemporary households (Valentine, 1999), subjecting working parents, especially mothers, “to intense moral scrutiny” (Brannen et al., 2013:418).

Exceptional commensality has also received widespread attention by social scientists, mostly in the forms of public feasts and acts of feasting (Dunbar, 2017; Hayden and Villeneuve, 2011; Jones, 2007; Montanari, 1992), which have been analysed in relation to their functions of establishing exchanges, social hierarchies and a sense of belonging to a group. The table of the feast becomes a physical and symbolic place, where social inclusion and exclusion are exercised and power hierarchies are played out (Montanari, 1992). In his account about the history of commensality, Montanari (1992) also highlights how offering food can be symbolic of economic and social power. Whilst commensality can unite and consolidate relationships, it can also offer an occasion for differentiating and excluding social groups (Grignon, 2001).

Commensality does not always generate conviviality (Giacoman, 2016). The word ‘conviviality’ can be traced back to the Latin *convivium*, which indicated the banquet, composed by *cum vivere* – living together. The term associates eating together and living together as one concept, however it has recently been used in relation to cultural differences in urban contexts (Wise and Velayutham, 2014; Wise, 2011, Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006). While a variety of definitions of conviviality have been suggested, this paper will avail itself of the definition suggested by Wise and Velayutham (2014:425), who see

conviviality as an atmosphere and an affect, in which social dimensions enmesh with material, sensory and spatial ones. The concept

“captures something more embodied, habitual, sensuous and affective that carries over beyond the moment [...] produc[ing] a sense of ‘more than’. This atmospheric ‘more than’ is not something that can be replicated in a programmatic way because they are the result of complex assemblages. (Wise and Velayutham, 2014:425)”

Convivial atmospheres are related to a sense of ‘becoming with’ that allows an open encounter. In *Deciphering a Meal* (1975:260), Douglas explained that the meal ritual separates order from disorder and the meaning of the meal was to be found ‘in a system of repeated analogies’. Wise (2011) extends Mary Douglas’ classic interpretation of the meal (1975) to the unpredictable encounter with difference, suggesting that the shared meal is able to determine, at least for its duration, “a sense of ‘we-ness’ in difference” thanks to its order, ritual and hospitality. As a result, the ritual of the meal can make encounter safer, by reducing anxieties related to differences, but does this occur in collective cooking and eating beyond friends and family? This point relates deeply to the daily activities of urban food sharing initiatives and my aim is illustrating how through an analysis of the material, ritual and social settings in which food is prepared and consumed (Wise, 2011).

As far as commensality is concerned, material and spatial aspects constitute features to be manoeuvred in order to obtain a convivial atmosphere and the spatial arrangements of the kitchen and the table play a poignant role in this process. Addressing commensality, social scientists looked not only at the symbolic significance of the types of food shared, but also at the means of preparation (Fischler, 1988, 2011; Bloch, 1999). Consequently, commensality cannot be studied without linking what happens at the table to the dynamics occurring within the kitchen. A consistent body of literature explores the connection between the kitchen space, the senses and affects (Meah and Jackson, 2016; Sutton, 2001; Seremetakis, 1994). Lately, domestic kitchens have been analysed as a site of memory (Meah and Jackson, 2016; Longhurst et al., 2009), in their affective potential and as emotional spaces (Meah, 2016).<sup>5</sup> Giard (in De Certeau, 1998:157) reminds us that the “[t]he process of culinary production [...] requires a multiple memory: a memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures, and of consistencies.” This approach calls for an analysis of kitchen spaces and how they are arranged, organised and experienced, even if temporarily as in the case studies I will present in this contribution.

## 4. Research context

### 4.1. Methodology

This paper directly draws on an ethnographic research carried out between January and April 2017 in London. The case study initiatives considered here – Be Enriched, Skip Garden and Kitchen and Community Shop – were selected to include a range of different food sharing types (in relation to what is shared and how) within the city. During this period, I interviewed the main stakeholders of the initiatives: staff – interpreted in this research as paid members of the organisations –, volunteers – unpaid – and the participants in activities, who were the main recipients of the food.<sup>6</sup> I also volunteered and attended events regularly during this time. Analysis of participant observation notes, interviews’ transcriptions and secondary data, including websites, blogs, and newsletters has been carried out on NVivo.

<sup>5</sup> For a full review of the relationship between domestic kitchens and gender subjectivities see Meah (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Quotes from interviews and fieldnotes will be highlighted using a different formatting within the text. The 26 open-ended interviews have been anonymised. I also transcribed fieldnotes and informal conversations from 35 user engagements.

While drawing predominantly on the ethnographic material collected during fieldwork, I also avail myself of my prior knowledge of London’s emerging ICT-mediated food sharing landscape. Before conducting the research, I spent 10 years in London as founder and member of a social enterprise that transformed surplus food into gourmet meals. My positionality has methodological implications that I will briefly discuss. First, this wealth of grassroots involvement could be regarded as my apprenticeship and helped in terms of gaining access to the field of my research in London. Secondly, my cooking skills enabled me to actively contribute to daily activities of the initiatives, whilst also acquiring new knowledge and expertise through my participation. Finally, my previous experience and knowledge about cooking on a budget and with surplus allowed me to enter the flow and the messiness of each initiatives’ daily activities (Goodale, 2006), aiming to develop an embodied understanding of what happens on the ground (Brady, 2011) in these spaces. To a certain extent, this meant including in the ethnography the sensory experience of the everyday work of these initiatives, as I was part of the cooking team on most occasions. My own body as an Italian woman cooking, negotiating recipes, discussing ingredients and cooking techniques became part of my research (Longhurst et al., 2008). As for my nationality and ethnicity, the implication of being identified as a European migrant often initiated conversation about Brexit, migration, racism, precarity and the uncertainties of the future. Due to the popularity of Italian food in London, my identity also induced my interlocutors to speak of food quality and taste preferences and these conversations were often the pretext to embark on more personal matters, such as the motivations for participation in the events, the housing situation with special reference to domestic kitchen arrangements, the feelings and the sensory perceptions related to food within the initiatives and more in general.

### 4.2. Food sharing Initiatives

The three cases studies were: the Skip Garden and Kitchen, Be Enriched and Community Shop.

The Skip Garden and Kitchen is a temporary food growing space within King’s Cross urban regeneration site, a 67 acres development project predominantly run by King’s Cross Central Limited Partnership<sup>7</sup> (KCCLP). When the planning permission was granted in 2006, a space was reserved for the educational charity Global Generation as part of the developer’ strategy for sustainable innovation and community involvement. The site is located between the councils of Camden and Islington and “[b]oth Councils [...] supported regeneration initiatives addressing the themes of social exclusion, education, training and employment (Kamvasinou, 2017:190). Global Generation established the movable ‘Skip Garden’, where food is grown in up-cycled skips donated by the redevelopment’s construction company. Alongside the vegetarian café, run as part of a wider strategy to produce more independent income, each year, the Skip Garden organises the Junior Chef Club for kids residing in the King’s Cross area. This is a ten-session programme where they learn about seasonality, ‘farm to fork’ philosophy,<sup>8</sup> and about diverse culinary traditions. They also run the fortnightly programmes ‘Friday Night Out’, where kids aged 8–14 are encouraged to develop a healthy attitude towards sports and food by playing football, cooking and eating together. Meanwhile, at Lunch and Learning, kids meet employees from different local businesses and participate in workshops before sharing lunch together. All these

<sup>7</sup> KCCLP brings together Argent, Australian Super, London & Continental Railways, and DHL.

<sup>8</sup> Most culinary activities of the Skip Garden are informed by ideas around sustainability and farm-to-fork philosophy. With this term they intend not only privileging the consumption of local food, but being more aware about the processes involved in the production of food from farming to cooking and eating.



**Table 1**

Mission statements, activities, type of space where they take place, groups of people involved in the initiatives of each case study.

	Skip Garden and Kitchen/Global Generation	Be Enriched	Community Shop
Mission Statement (as in the initiative's website)	"Global Generation is an educational charity, which works together with local children and young people, businesses, residents and families in Camden, Islington and Southwark to create healthy, integrated and environmentally responsible communities."	"We develop programs which balance inequalities whilst building community cohesion and developing skills in young people." "We believe in enriching local life through connecting people, cultivating respect, whilst sharing skills and developing community initiatives."	"Community Shop is a social enterprise that is empowering individuals and building stronger communities, by realising the social potential of surplus food. Members of Community Shop can shop for good food at great prices – easing pressure on family budgets – but also gain access to professional, personal development programmes [...]."
Activities	Community garden, café, environmental education, cooking classes for kids	Community kitchens and canteens, cooking surplus food	Community hub offering training for people below the poverty line, surplus food shop (social supermarket), cooking classes for kids and adults
Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Temporary space within King's Cross redevelopment site.</li> <li>– Rented through a "meanwhile lease"</li> <li>– The garden has been relocated twice within the site.</li> <li>– It is not clear what will happen to the project once the redevelopment is completed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Temporary spaces.</li> <li>– The weekly canteens are hosted in kind within premises belonging to different organisations:</li> </ul> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. London Cooking Project in Battersea;</li> <li>2. The Crossways Church in Elephant and Castle;</li> <li>3. Tooting United Reformed Church in Tooting, where also the main offices of the charity are located</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Long-term rent from the council</li> <li>– Located behind the council recycling centre</li> </ul>
People involved	Mainly young people, often from disadvantaged backgrounds Local residents – kids, adolescents, families Local organisations Kids with learning disabilities Asylum seekers	Local residents Vulnerable population and people experiencing financial difficulties Disadvantaged young people and young offenders Kids with learning disabilities	People below the poverty line, already receiving a welfare support from the council

initiatives are free of charge and open to the local youths. At the Skip Garden, most staff members and volunteers are women from different ethnicities and backgrounds and there is a social and ethnic diversity among volunteers and participants too. As it is clear from the charity's mission statement (see Table 1), the Skip Garden's diverse team works with local schools, businesses, and restaurants, as well as local residents, to advance a strong focus on community, conviviality and new ways of living together in the respect of nature. Food plays a vital role in the charity's daily activities and it is integrated into every educational action: lunch is not only served during or after each workshop, but staff members sit together to consume a shared lunch every day.

Be Enriched, located in South London, is a charity that runs three community kitchens, serving free weekly vegetarian meals to approximately 175 guests, who come from all walks of life. The ingredients include surplus donated by local food businesses and supermarkets with a small budget for dry goods that are not donated. An internal survey run each year reports that the canteens are attended by a prevalence of elderly guests and by a community of people with a range of diverse ethnic backgrounds: British Asian, British Afro-Caribbean, European and South American. The charity has a database of about 1200 volunteers that joined its activities via a range of networks, such as sign-up.com, Project Dirt, do-it.org, or Team London, the volunteer hub run by the Mayor of London. Cultural diversity is also present among volunteers and staff. However, Be Enriched does not target a specific population, as, despite the charity's main goal to fight food poverty, there is a concern about perpetuating stigmatisation and social exclusion around eating donated food. Each canteen is located in different neighbourhoods and hosted within the premises of other organisations. The Graveney Canteen in Tooting serves lunch each Friday at Tooting United Reformed Church, where the charity's main offices are located. The Church hosts a variety of community initiatives, supplying services to the local residents. These include programmes for parents in recovery from drug abuse, music school for children, narcotics anonymous, postnatal drop in and playgroup, and playgroup for children under 5 years old. Be Enriched takes over the kitchen space on Friday morning, starting food preparation early, to serve a hot two-course meal around 1 pm. Coffee and tea are also available before and during

lunch. After the meal any surplus food not utilised in the cooking is redistributed to the guests and among volunteers. The Castle Canteen is hosted within the Crossways Church in Elephant and Castle, a newly refurbished building with a small professional kitchen and a large dining area. Lunch made of ingredients donated by a local supermarket and by a greengrocers from Borough market is prepared by a team of volunteers and by students with learning disabilities.

At Battersea Canteen, Be Enriched serves dinner every Monday evening within the London Cooking Project in Battersea, which is a pop-up venue that can be rented out for events. Volunteers usually start cooking after 5 pm in the spacious professional kitchen and prepare the tables to serve dinner around 8 pm, arranging them into two long rows. In 2017, Be Enriched has also started CooksForce, a community kitchen project to teach young people and kids how to cook healthy meals on a budget. The programme promotes zero waste cooking and aims to show participants how to prepare dishes with simple ingredients with food parts that would normally be discarded, such as herbs stalks or chicken carcasses.

The Community Shop in West Norwood, also in South London, is the recently established charitable initiative of Company Shop, the largest for-profit redistributor of surplus food in the UK, set up in 1985. Community Shop provides access to surplus food by offering it at discounted prices to residents, already receiving Government income support. West Norwood was chosen as the London location because it was particularly disadvantaged according to the government indices of deprivation (Company Shop, 2014). Community Shop also functions as community hub, offering courses, training and social opportunities and running programmes with personal development plans to empower locals. A dynamic component of Community Shop is the café that pairs the offer of hot breakfast and lunch with free classes, such as the Cook Club, a training session where members learn how to budget for food and how to use leftovers; the Melting Pot days, where people prepare dishes from their own cultural background; and a Kids' Cooking Club, teaching local youths basic cooking skills. Community Shop partners with a variety of stakeholders, such as the supermarket chain Marks & Spencer, which not only donates surplus produce, but also offers training and employment opportunities to Community Shop's members.

These initiatives all focus on building stronger and more resilient communities. However, they differ greatly in terms of what they believe can make a community more cohesive. The Skip Garden and Kitchen stresses the importance of environmental education, promoting a reflection about a more harmonious human and non-human interaction, sustainable diets and the environmental impact of food choices. Be Enriched's main objective is to reduce social and health inequalities by redistributing surplus and by providing training to vulnerable populations. Community Shop guarantees access to good food at affordable prices along with opportunities for professional development. Yet, as part of their strategies to pursue their goals, all initiatives implement moments of collective cooking and eating and the following sections illustrate the processes involved in this endeavour.

## 5. Commensality towards a convivial atmosphere

As I have already suggested, food sharing and food distribution become imperative at times of austerity, nonetheless, they raise questions around poverty stigmatisation and social exclusion. In response, shared cooking and eating have been developed in an attempt to build more dignified moments of commensality and conviviality, as in the initiatives I examine in this paper. The type of commensality emerging within these case studies constitutes a complex hybrid, because it carries elements of both public and private, exceptional and everyday commensality, for instance meals do not occur in a domestic setting, but they maintain a higher degree of informality in comparison to a feast or a banquet. They retain, however, some celebratory elements of feasts, thanks to a festive atmosphere obtained for instance through music, often accompanying the meal or the food preparation; or to the sensory atmosphere enveloping the space, dominated predominantly by smells, such as freshly baked bread at the Skip Garden, fruit crumbles at Be Enriched or the complex spicy fragrance of lamb byriani at Community Shop. All three initiatives celebrate festivities with special dishes, for instance pancakes for Shrove Tuesday or they throw parties for Christmas and Eid al-Fitr. Cakes are brought in or baked on the premises for birthdays of staff members or of regular participants. This jovial setting was described by one of the participants, when thanking the volunteers at the end of a meal:

“It is so nice here. So different from soup kitchens. It makes me feel more human. Here it is not important who you are, what you do. You guys feed everyone. I ate so much. I had seconds of everything. Every time I feel like it is Christmas. Thank you, guys”

Meals also incorporate some features characterising food consumption in commercial settings, especially regarding food safety and hygiene, since these initiatives should respond to the same set of regulations of food businesses.<sup>9</sup>

By several means, including the ways the space is organised and food is prepared, served and consumed, the initiatives try to alleviate the asymmetrical relationship between those who donate or prepare the meal and those who receive it. This type of relationship and the power asymmetries that the donation elicits have been criticised, mainly in the context of food banks (Caplan, 2016). According to Caplan, the food parcel can be regarded as a ‘pure gift’, which is intended as a gift that

does not imply any form of reciprocity. Caplan explains that this type of gift does not produce relations between the giver and the receiver, because the different statuses remain unvaried throughout the exchange. But how are social relationships and forms of reciprocity established through food sharing and how these initiatives try to shorten the distance between host and guest?

The first element to be analysed is the kitchen space, as a material and symbolic aspect that contributes to the commensality setting. In all case studies, the food preparation occurs before each meal is served and the kitchen spaces are visible to everyone. This trend can also be seen in commercial kitchens, where it is utilised as a deliberate strategy to achieve more transparency and to build trust around food quality, safety and hygiene by choosing to showcase the space of food preparation, which was in the past kept from view. Creating a safe context is necessary to enable people to trust that the food is safe and edible. At Be Enriched, for example, in Tooting (Fig. 1) and in Elephant and Castle (Fig. 2) the kitchens have windows which open directly onto the dining area. These windows and the kitchen doors are always left open.

The fact that the food preparation is visible not only aims to instil a sense of trust in the quality of the prepared meal, but it also endeavours to enable social interactions between the guests and the kitchen teams. Bloch (1999:147) highlighted that the process of sharing food not only involves individual experiences, “but also accepting the authority of those whom one can trust about the edibility of certain foods”. The sustained encounter with the people preparing the food simplifies this process. It is common for the guests to enter the kitchen or to lean from the window to greet staff and volunteers. In Battersea's London Cooking Project (Fig. 3) where the space is open floor plan, people are free to enter the cooking area without obstruction. Be Enriched's kitchen co-ordinators encourage guests to participate and they often join the volunteers to help washing dishes or serving the food.

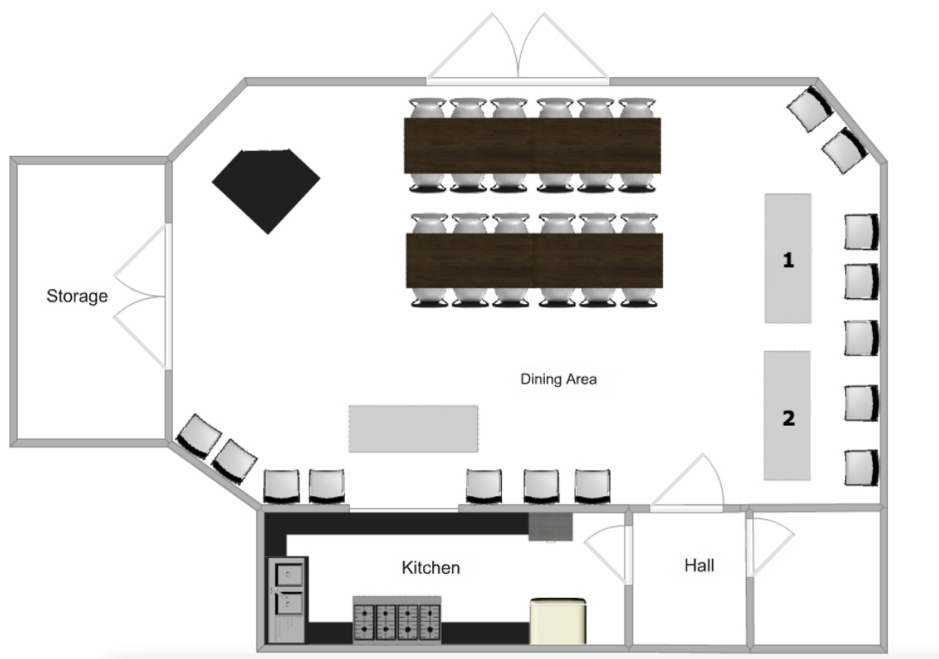
Although at Community Shop a hot food counter physically separates members and kitchen staff (see Fig. 4), there is still a constant, informal and cheerful communication between the chef and the members, who partake in the food preparation by harvesting produce from the shop's garden or by directly helping in the kitchen. At Battersea canteen, guests can contribute food they have prepared at home or produce from local allotments and community gardens. Their contribution increases the sense of involvement in the event and the participation of guests in the creation of this ritual complicates the “power differentials of the traditional guest host relation (Wise, 2011:102)” by blurring the boundaries between host and guest.

At Graveney canteen (see Fig. 1), when guests arrive and volunteers are still in the kitchen preparing the meal, some of the guests assist in setting the tables and preparing the hot drinks station. They then sit down, drinking tea and chatting, while waiting for the meal. The meal time depends on how long the food preparation takes and the changing meal time increases the chances of interaction between guests and volunteers. Be Enriched's guests are all served at once at the table, not in shifts or turns. They do not need to stand to wait for the food, since volunteers bring food to the table. These norms of commensality contribute to a sense of intimacy and a familiar atmosphere. When I asked Evelyn, an 83 years-old lady attending regularly the canteens, if she liked the food, she answered:

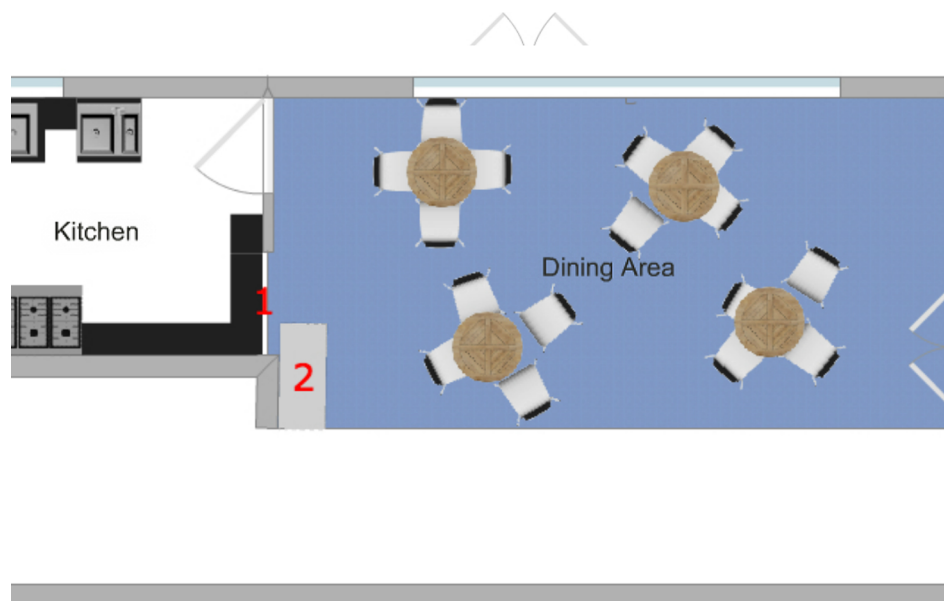
“Sometimes it is better, sometimes a bit worse. But that happens at home too. I tell the volunteers though. I come regularly, so I know everyone and I go to the kitchen to give my opinion. They know I eat well, because I want to walk until I die”.

Similarly, at the Skip Garden, the kitchen space takes the shape of a collaborative workshop (see Fig. 5), where the bustling activity ranges from experimenting with pickling techniques, baking, trying out new recipes, tasting and commenting on the outcomes. It is a lively environment that at times feels crowded and chaotic with customers placing their orders, while volunteers go back and forth to set up for lunch. Both in the outer and inner space of the Skip Garden, there are

<sup>9</sup> Be Enriched and The Skip Garden made the choice to serve only vegetarian food, avoiding higher risk food to ensure that the hygiene and food safety standards are respected. The nature of the two initiatives' premises also contribute to these concerns. Handling meat or fish would require a more efficient and controlled refrigeration system that due to the limited space and funds would not be feasible. Be Enriched is mainly hosted by local churches and by a supper club venue in Battersea, they cannot invest in professional equipment until they have their own permanent kitchen. Furthermore, both initiatives have volunteers or trainees to join cooking sessions and it would be problematic to ensure that animal products are handled correctly and that cross-contamination is avoided.



**Fig. 1.** The Graveney Canteen within the premises of the Tooting United Reformed Church. The plan shows the kitchen area with a window onto the dining area; the dining area set up every Friday, it is the area destined to the celebration of the mass, when the church is in use. Number 1 indicates the area where the food surplus not used by the kitchen is displayed and redistributed at the end of the meal; number 2 is the hot drinks station, where guests can help themselves to coffee or tea throughout the event.



**Fig. 2.** Castle canteen. Number 1 points to the window separating the dining room and the kitchen and number 2 is the hot drinks table.

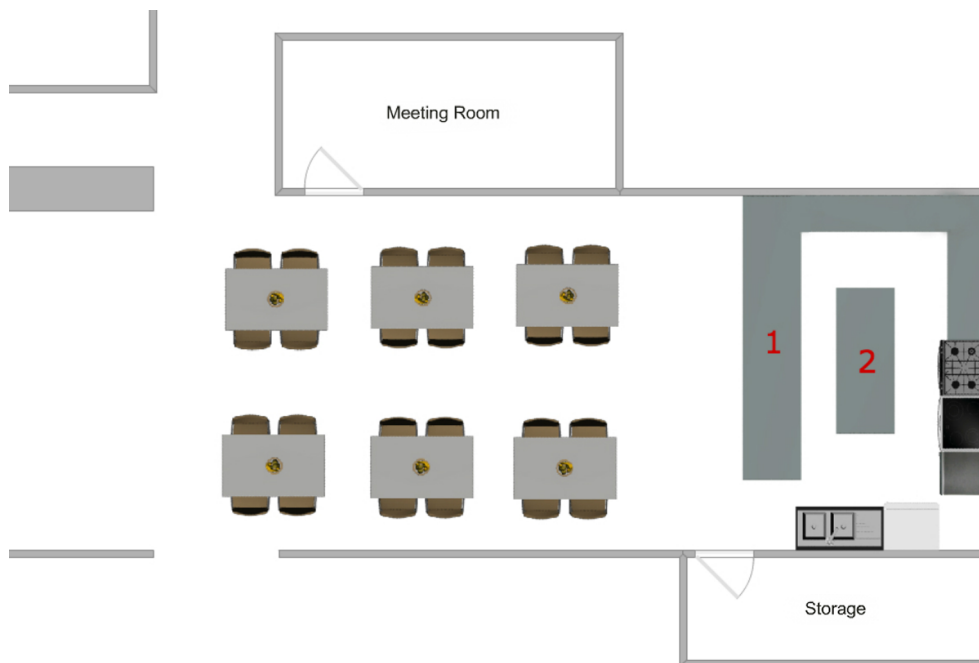
long tables where food is placed. Volunteers, guests, staff and participants can take their time, talk and eat, while they help themselves to the hot dish from the same pot, passing around corn bread and sharing the roasted vegetables or the salad leaves just harvested from the garden's polytunnel.

Although hosts and guests are separated, the borders of the kitchens remain flexible in all initiatives. Anyone who helps serving the food or setting the tables can enter the kitchens, which are connected to the dining areas through a flow of goods, people, sensory stimuli and verbal interactions. The kitchen is transformed into a relational space that allows interaction between staff, volunteers and participants and these relationships enable a closeness, a “negotiation of intimacy” (Julier, 2013:27) that constitutes a significant component of hospitality. It is the quality of the social interactions that plays a fundamental role in the collective and collaborative creation of the meal ritual.

Social relationships are also facilitated by the sitting together at the same table. When looking at the history of commensality, sharing the same table and eating the same food “seem to offer a relative degree of security against attempts at poisoning” (Fischler, 2011:536). It is possible to draw a parallel here, since eating the same food suggests that the quality of the food is acceptable and trustworthy. It translates into a practice that goes in the direction of sharing the risks and the benefits of eating together. At Be Enriched and the Skip Garden, staff and volunteers sit down at the same table to consume the same meal that is served to other guests. The sitting together is one of the factors that drives the guests at Be Enriched canteens to distinguish soup kitchens from these events, where the type of commensality changes the whole experience's perception, as the following extract from a conversation between guests and volunteers at Battersea canteen demonstrates:



**Fig. 3.** The open plan space of the London Cooking Project in Battersea. The table arrangement is depicted as organised every Monday night by the kitchen coordinator of Be Enriched and by the volunteers.



**Fig. 4.** The café area at Community Shop. The kitchen area is located on the right and the dining/common area on the left. Number 1 indicates the food display counter and number 2 the kitchen island where most of the food preparation takes place.

John: “I don’t like the other place.”

Mark: “Are you referring to the church’ soup kitchen?”

John: “Yes, it is so depressing. Everyone is poor, or miserable. My mood gets down. Also there I take a portion of food, I sit down on my own and I eat it. End of it.”

Mark: “You are right. I love it too here. I love the conversations we have, while eating.”

Initiatives that are not targeting exclusively people in need, but are open to anyone manage to provide a different sociality during the meal. Guests are extremely conscious of the stigma, provoked by isolation, as John exemplarily describes:

John: “It is like the day centre, where I go sometimes. We do lots of stuff. Painting, for example. You can choose what to do.”

Tom (volunteer): “That sounds like a very positive way to spend the day. Why don’t you like it?”

John: “We are all with the same problems. Mental issues. So it is depressing to see only the same kind of disease. We are all not normal there. Here it is all mixed. I speak to you and what do you do normally during the day?”

Tom: “I am a tutor for pupils.”

John: “You see. That is interesting. And she is a researcher. We speak with you and it is not boring. I like it.”

Tables are another material aspect that can be easily manoeuvred by organisers to fabricate a more inclusive atmosphere, as it is described by the kitchen coordinator at Be Enriched:

“One week one of the volunteers laid the tables as separate tables and actually all of us were like, ‘No, no, no, no. They have to be all together,’ – because that’s a big part it is everybody’s sitting together. It’s not you go and sit in your little corner and eat your meal. It’s about eating with other people and that community sort of engagement.”



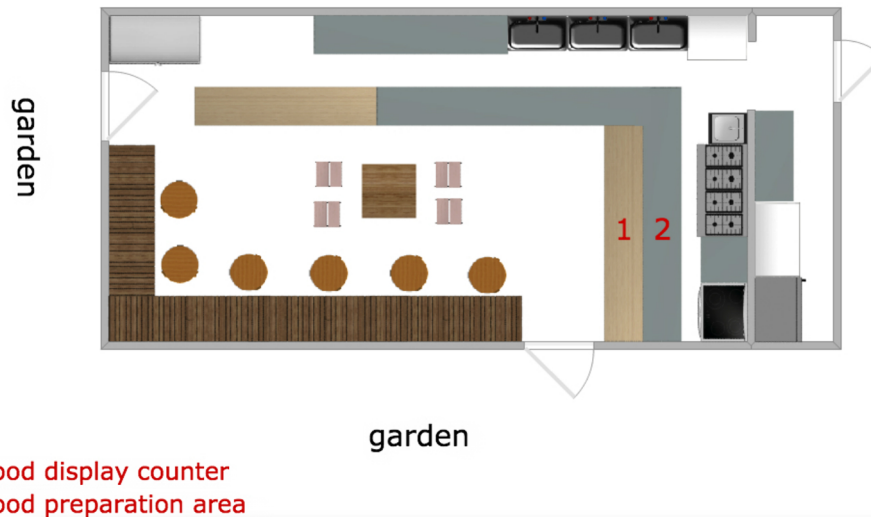


Fig. 5. The Skip Garden Kitchen and Café plan. On the left, the kitchen separated from the consumption area by the food preparation area and the display counter; on the right, a wooden counter with stools and a low table with chairs.

At Battersea canteen, for example, the table set-up of the weekly canteen differs from the fundraising events that the charity occasionally organises at the same location. For the supper clubs the tables are separated, resembling the table arrangement of a restaurant, while for the weekly canteen they are arranged in two rows in order to form big communal tables. The spatial and material aspects of commensality proved to be organised to facilitate a collaborative and familiar atmosphere, which reduces anxieties around the quality of the meal and fosters a sense of togetherness for the duration of the meal (Wise, 2011). In the following section the affects and effects of these rituals are interrogated.

## 6. Affects, effects and convivial atmospheres

Throughout this research, it became clear that despite the differences in the initiatives' objectives, participants and operational structures, all three case studies see sharing food as a significant communicative and interactional practice necessary to establish social bonds (Giacoman, 2016). In the interviews, organisers describe food variously as a 'tool', 'a language', 'an end', and 'an easy way to talk to one another' and they explicitly think of commensality as a way for creating a positive affective atmosphere to contrast loneliness and social isolation. When talking with participants, they would frequently explain the way they felt during the meal, describing the atmosphere as 'positive', 'warm', 'non-judgemental', 'open', 'safe', in direct contrast with daily city life that is characterised as 'dry', 'cold', 'without human interaction', 'lonely', 'sad'.

Social isolation and loneliness emerge undeniably as primary drivers for participating in food sharing initiatives across social differences. According to a national survey conducted in 2015, London was rated loneliest region in the UK (ACEVO, 2015). The feeling of being socially isolated was highlighted by participants and volunteers, who looked for opportunities to engage with the local communities, as this extract from my interview to a Skip Garden volunteer demonstrates:

I come from a smaller town and when I came to London, I felt a loneliness that was new to me. It was the lack of familiar face, it was anonymity. I needed to get to know my neighbours. That's why I started volunteering here. Well, and I also love food."

Parents of kids participating to the Skip Garden' activities describe the garden as "the perfect antidote to our city urban lifestyles", because some kids don't 'normally [...] want to leave the house' (Global Generation, 2016). This issue emerged during my interviews with the

Skip Garden' staff members, who stressed the absence of safe communal spaces, precluding social aggregation within the council estates around Kings' Cross. For many participants, Be Enriched community canteens constitute the only weekly occasion for leaving the house, as guests often affirm during meals. Both Be Enriched director and the kitchen coordinators agreed that guests come for the food at first, but then they would return for the company, for the social interaction.

Despite the different material and economic needs, the volunteers' motivations, as a matter of fact, did not vary greatly from the recipients. Eating together was curtailed by the limited space of domestic kitchens and the dynamics of flat sharing with strangers were identified as causes for eating alone, often in the bedrooms. While difficulties to meet people outside of the work networks constituted another key reason for loneliness, specifically in moments when people felt it was not easy to keep up with the city's pace. Among the volunteers, I met many, who found out about the initiatives online, while searching for ways to meet people and to get more involved with the local community. London sees indeed a proliferation of networks for participating in charitable initiatives, many of them enabled by new technologies and targeting specific needs; for example, I spoke with women, who signed up to help at fundraising supper clubs, via the online platform "Good Deed Dating", a social enterprise organising volunteering events for single people.

During my participant observation, guests and volunteers were comfortable sharing personal experiences, they often communicated the way they felt about their life. It was not uncommon to encounter emotional responses, such as a volunteer breaking into tears during a communal lunch at the Skip Garden, because she was dealing with too much pressure at work. The episode was not received with suspicion or embarrassment, quite the opposite. After listening to the volunteer's outburst, a commensal gradually tilted the discussion toward the therapeutic power of spending time in the garden or in the kitchen and volunteers and staff exchanged experiences around how their participation to the charity's activities helped them to endure stressful moments. This did not constitute an isolated occurrence within the Skip Garden: the adoption of participatory methodologies, creative writing and reflective techniques are all conducive to an environment that allows not only self-expression, but also the sharing of personal matters and of their correlated emotions. Similarly, during a Melting Pot Friday, the chef at Community Shop would provide details about her own daily struggles to demonstrate that it was appropriate to discuss such matters as a way of gaining mutual support.

The ability of accommodate and to welcome personal vulnerabilities

render these spaces safe for sharing experiences. Many of the emotionally charged episodes I witnessed during fieldwork were related to financial issues and to the strain and uncertainties of making a living in London. Staff members and volunteers often declared having been through rough times before getting involved with the initiatives. In conversations during meals I attended, many participants across the case studies talked of how they experienced mental health issues at some point of their lives; indeed, feeling depressed was commonly listed as motive for attending and for volunteering at food sharing events. To exemplify this, Ian, one of the regulars of Be Enriched canteen, started sharing his story with the volunteers during dinner. He had previously worked for an insurance company in the city, where he had what he defined ‘a proper job in an office, one of those where you need to wear a tie’. Ian explained how his daily life became very stressful and, during the financial crisis of 2008, he had a nervous breakdown. After being committed to the psychiatric hospital, he lost his job and many of his relationships collapsed too. When one of the volunteers asked him how he felt now, Ian had no doubt that he could never go back to a ‘normal’ life and said:

Ian: “At the psychiatric hospital... well, they helped me and now the council helps me too, but I will never go back to that life. [...] Now I can’t even afford to cook, but more than anything I am lonely. When you lose your job, your money, your health, you lose your friends too.”

Joseph [*the man sitting next to him – answered*] “In some cases, people can be lonely also with a job and money. Look at me! [*Joseph turns towards me, explaining, since he knows I am new and I don’t know his story*] I am a lawyer. I have a nice flat. Some friends here and there too, but I am lonely. I come here to share a meal with someone, not to eat alone every single night in front of the TV. I always think about that. I think about how many people in this city eat alone. How much loneliness surrounds us? You see [*talking to me*] this evening is special. We sit down all together, we have a chat and we just enjoy good healthy food.”

The quality of the food consumed alone and in front of the TV has also been a recurrent topic of discussion during meals. Volunteers and guests juxtapose the food eaten alone to the one eaten at the collective meals organised by the initiatives. In more than one case, participants spoke about ‘eating in front of the TV’ as a lonely, sad habit, regarded as the antithesis of social eating, as in the extract below:

Tom [*volunteer*]: “I eat in front of TV too. It is not great, but I do it too. This is much nicer.”

Laura [a disable woman sitting across the table, stepped in and said]: “I do it all the time. I have no cooker, so I warm up a meal in the microwave and eat it watching telly. This is one of the few places I have access too [*pointing at her wheelchair*] There are no stairs, I just cross the road, you see that block of flats [*indicating the council estate outside of the window*] I lived there for more than 20 years. I like coming here because I eat with people, but I also eat good food. You know, you guys [*looking in the direction of the kitchen, still crowded of volunteers*] you cook a curry from scratch. It tastes so much better, because someone put the time and the love in doing that.”

Tom [*volunteer*]: “It is so great that you enjoy. I also never cook these dishes at home. They take too long.”

According to participants, the food consumed in front of the television would be a ready meal, warmed up in the microwave. This confirms Yates and Warde’s findings (2017:113), which showed that “lone eating is more rapid and requires less cooking”.

Furthermore, the act of cooking collectively allows to prepare more complex recipes, since the cooking time is reduced by dividing the tasks among volunteers. Guests and volunteers enrich the repertoire of dishes by sharing recipes from their own cultural backgrounds, bringing in ingredients and occasionally taking over the collective kitchens to cook

for special events. The meal and its preparation become an occasion for exchanging knowledge and creating memories around culinary production (Giard in De Certeau, 1998).

Within these food sharing organisations, there is an effort to involve the residents that are usually excluded or that might be alienated by urban processes, such as regeneration sites in the case of the Skip Garden or gentrification in the case of South London. For instance, Be Enriched and the Skip Garden offer training for kids with learning disabilities, who join the kitchen team and the volunteers to prepare and serve the meals. In a number of occasions, I happened to share the kitchen with men and women, who were activists within the LGBT community. These elements facilitate encounter between people from all different paths of life, enabling the sharing of social differences. As one of the volunteers described, it is possible to have a banker sitting next to someone who was sectioned under the Mental Health Act, and a judge next to someone who’s just been out of prison, but it occurs in the safe and limited space and time of the meal. An environment where ‘everyone is different’ thanks to the presence of different minorities results in a ‘space of safety’ (Wise and Noble, 2016:429), similarly to Wessendorf’s findings (2016) in her analysis of Hackney’s superdiversity.

The initiatives connect participants to a broader social context as well, liaising with a wide range of stakeholders, collaborating with local businesses, public services – such as citizen bureau, job centre, health care services – and other charities and organisations – such as Capital Growth, Edible Lambeth, Food Cycle. Community Shop’s staff constantly provides information to link members to already existing initiatives happening within the local community or in London in general that might grant additional support in participants lives, such as mental health charities, financial advice centres or employability services. In the interviews, Community Shop’s manager felt much of the charity’s work rests in connecting individuals to the right resources and supporting members in terms of follow up. Skip garden’s programmes are tailored to connect young people with businesses, but also to facilitate access to information or to places where they would normally not have access to. These tactics seek to reduce social exclusion, but they also increase the resilience and the impact of the initiatives themselves.

In this web of collaborations, the initiatives function as connective tissue between citizens, civil society and public services, generating a provisional response to social needs that Cloke and Williams (2016) would characterise as ‘welfare in the meantime’ for its “engagement with the phenomenology of need, the possibilities of in-commonness, and the development of communicative publics in which ethical conversation provokes new practice-based normativities (Cloke and Williams, 2016:5)”.

## 7. Conclusions

The ethnography of the food sharing initiatives demonstrates that despite years of austerity rhetoric in the UK, ideas of care and hospitality still circulate “as significant organizing principles in social and political life” (Clarke and Newman, 2012:314). Food sharing initiatives have the ability to nurture this “politics of possibility within the vicissitudes of neoliberal governance” (Williams et al., 2014:2811), creating emergent and dynamic spaces of encounter through social eating.

The analysis of the meal ritual revealed a complex and hybrid type of commensality, in which elements of public and private, exceptional and everyday commensality converge. I described the collective kitchens of the food sharing initiatives as relational spaces, where the host/guest dynamics are complicated by the contribution of guests in the creation of the meal ritual and by the closeness between them and the kitchen teams. The spaces that I consider in this paper constantly and actively pursue ways to shorten the distance between those who prepare food and those who consume it, by involving participants in food preparation and by creating an atmosphere that fosters the sharing of experiences.

Another material element that contributes to more intimacy is the sitting together at the same table eating the same food, which not only increases trust around the edibility of the meal, but it also engenders social relationships thanks to the sustained encounter between participants. The ritual of the meal reduces anxieties about encounter of social differences (Wise, 2011) and it is instrumental to the creation of a space of safety (Wise and Noble, 2016).

By exploring the motivations for participation to food sharing events, I highlighted that social isolation and loneliness emerge as sentiments across social difference. Going back to the notion of care by Tronto and Fisher (1990), these spaces can help repairing wounds from social isolation by delivering a space of safety for social differences and for the expression of vulnerabilities, personal experiences and affects. These initiatives do not only respond to a variety of needs of vulnerable populations: their capacity to embrace social and cultural differences extends to offering a space for minorities and for people with learning, psychological and emotional difficulties.

When discussing with Jane Riddiford, the Skip Garden's founder, about the final goal of their work, she quoted "The Myth Gap" by Alex Evans (2017), which reads as follows:

"we need new myths that speak about who we are and the world we inhabit and help us work through the grief for what is happening around us, both to the natural world and to people."

Evans, 2017:XX

"And this is where movements can be so powerful and disruptive, not just telling new stories, but in creating 'congregational spaces' where these stories can be incubated and lived out."

Evans, 2017:12

'Congregational' might not be the right word in this case, especially for the religious connotation that it evokes, however, I argue in this paper that food sharing initiatives do provide a space of possibility (Gibson-Graham, 2008) where to engage citizens though cooking and eating together. Food sharing's collective spaces and the affective qualities that they evoke are particularly vital in urban contexts at times of austerity, as these initiatives operate as a bridge connecting people, communities, projects and services. This interconnectedness can help to address complex societal challenges such as food poverty and social isolation and it can also initiate a much-needed reflection on the causes of urban inequalities. In the face of complex issues, these initiatives, if not granting a solution to conflicts, do act to ameliorate the negative aspects of contemporary life in London. They certainly stimulate moments of social dialogue around these issues, with cooking and eating together explicitly employed as strategies to create spaces of encounter, facilitating communal ways of thinking and acting. Nevertheless, these initiatives all incorporate a great degree of flexibility in their activities, seeing their local communities in flux, experiencing precariousness and uncertainties in their everyday urban lives. As a result, they are liminal for their uncertain nature and for their positioning at the margins of society, in temporary spaces, with scarce financial resources and reliant mostly on free labour.

As a concluding remark, I would like to stress that evaluating the impact of these initiatives cannot be based on how much food they grow, distribute or donate. We need to consider unmeasurable variables and more complex connections, such as the ecosystem they contribute to generate.

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