

Food as Urban Infrastructure: Human-Centered Perspectives on Governance, Culture, and Everyday Life in Cities

Abstract

How do cities shape food systems, and how do food practices shape urban life in return? This paper approaches food not simply as a matter of supply, security, or agriculture, but as a central interface through which urban residents experience governance, inequality, culture, and belonging. Examining food systems—particularly food waste—offers a powerful lens for assessing whether contemporary cities are genuinely human-centered. How cities manage surplus, loss, and waste reveals not only technical capacities, but deeper assumptions about care, responsibility, and whose lives and labor matter. Drawing on prior applied research conducted in New York City, including analyses of institutional food systems, distribution networks, recovery initiatives, and policy interventions, the paper shows that food waste emerges less from scarcity than from governance failures. These failures include misaligned incentives, fragmented coordination across agencies and sectors, and the persistent invisibility of workers across the food value chain. Food waste thus appears not only as an environmental or logistical problem, but as a civic and moral one.

Placing these findings in dialogue with comparative insights from Latin American cities—particularly Buenos Aires—the paper advances a human-centered governance-by-design framework for urban food systems. This framework integrates three dimensions: (1) human capabilities, emphasizing real access to nutritious food, dignified work, and participation in food-related decision-making; (2) urban commons, treating food recovery, redistribution, and circular practices as shared civic resources; and (3) governance-by-design, highlighting how policies, data systems, and infrastructures encode normative choices about efficiency, care, and value.

By reframing food systems as a form of urban infrastructure—simultaneously social, cultural, and technological—the paper contributes to interdisciplinary conversations on food, cities, labor, and inequality.

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Dr. Sergio Mastrogiovanni is a postdoctoral researcher at IAE Business School, Argentina, where he studies human-centered approaches to smart cities, urban governance, and digital transformation. He is also an adjunct professor at New York University, teaching courses at the intersection of data, technology, and urban innovation, and was a researcher focused on food waste at NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business. His research bridges social theory, urban studies, and applied policy, with a particular focus on Latin American cities and comparative perspectives across global urban contexts. His current work examines how emerging digital infrastructures shape everyday urban experiences, participation, and inequality.