

## **Pop-ups as Spatially Mobile Practices and their Energy Implications**

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## Abstract

Pop-up food vending is a distinctive retail practice, which can be defined in terms of its temporal and spatially mobile nature, a unique business model and special skills and competencies that make it a transient activity. As the public domain is now seen as a food space eating on the street or buying from hawkers and especially pop up cafes and food trucks is no longer seen as inappropriate in Western cities. The paper below takes into account the different elements of pop-up practice and frames the discussion around how the temporal and spatial mobility of practices can achieve different results for sustainability and energy demand in different spaces. This paper draws from a qualitative study that has yielded information about students' practices in and around the RMIT University's city campus, their relationship with the food provisioning and consumption spaces at the campus and other practices that intersect with them.

Using Schatzki's (2002) site ontology, this paper conceptualises spaces as sites of social action and therefore made up of practices. Therefore, this study of pop up practices and the 'third place' that they open up also includes other practices and arrangements that intersect with them temporally and spatially like students' eating practices, University policies and urban sustainability in order to understand energy demand. This paper argues that the pop-up practice negotiates and helps open up spaces through their spatial and temporal flexibility and through innovating and bending the social norms that govern mainstream food provisioning and consumption. Moreover, the pop-up practice interacts with other practices and arrangements in these spaces and the spaces that the practice becomes a part of and shapes energy demand. This gives a point of intervention for affecting and reducing energy demand.

## Introduction: Spatialising Food Practices

Food related land uses have long been associated with sustainable urbanism not only in terms of spatial planning and design but also in terms of intensive energy and resource consumption along the industrialized food chain (Audsley et al. 2010; Blay-Palmer et al. 2013). Practices that can encourage multiple points of reconnection with the food system, the environment, landscape, local economies and our communities are essential when reviewing the planning, structure and organisation of cities as they not only contribute to urban sustainability but also encourage low carbon futures (Bremner 2010). This is because the effects of unsustainable urban food practices such as over consumption of resources and overproduction of waste contribute to a negative feedback loop that makes energy intensive demands on agricultural land and environmental resources (Parham 2015).

This positions the mobile food vending practice as an essential part of spatial design and planning. From filling in empty un-tenanted spaces to presenting new and innovative business ideas, pop-up cafes and food trucks have become increasingly commonplace in urban food environments. Pop-up food vending is a distinctive retail practice, which can be defined in terms of its temporal and spatially mobile nature,

unique business model and special skills and competences that make it a transient activity. Where permanence and stability may once have been the norm, in today's new age of social media, globalisation, spatial mobility and fast paced emerging innovations, pop-ups create and make spaces that are spontaneous, vibrant, and unexpected.

The 'third place' created by pop-ups (Parham 2013) is an important site of study and can entail different kinds of energy consumption. This paper uses the term "third place" as coined by (Oldenburg 2001, p. 14) to denote "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work". This concept of third place has been explored in food and retail literature to study social camaraderie (Rosenbaum 2006), conviviality (Parham 2013) and consumer loyalty (Oliver 1999). Mobile food vending practice opens up an identifiable third place that is fast becoming a part of the eating practices of students at RMIT city campus and many other campuses internationally, such as the M.I.T campus in the United States (Matts 2013). It is important to investigate how this practice, the space it constitutes and the third place it opens up may shape energy demand and sustainability.

Using Schatzki's contention that practices also open up their own spaces, in this case one of those being the 'third place' created by pop ups, this paper explores how spaces are both created by practices (e.g. mobile food vending) and how they may shape practices (e.g. of eating). This idea furthers understanding of the relationship between practices and space and offers insights for energy demand in food provisioning by exploring the role of these third places in shaping practices and having energy demand implications. This also uncovers the dynamic relationship between the campus, its urban nature and practices that constitute them. The purpose is to explore the potential of such spaces in shaping future energy demand. Exploring how the spatiality of mobile food vending practice constitutes forms of innovation and adaptation that could have energy implications does this.

This paper draws on data collected as part of a broader investigation being conducted at the city campus of RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia that asks how food provisioning and consumption spaces in urban academic institutions contribute to achieving sustainability goals in the eating practices of students. It draws from a qualitative study including ethnography of the city campus and semi-structured expert interviews. In a focus group conducted with University students, the participants drew food maps and uploaded photographs of their food and places they ate in for the next few weeks after the focus group. This phase of data collection explored how students' eating practices in and around the RMIT University's city campus intersect with other practices such as the practice of mobile food vending and yielded information on how the spaces are being used by the students. A second phase of data collection is ongoing in a similar way and this paper is part of the initial analysis of the data collected.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first section provides a brief background regarding the origin and development of pop-ups. The second section lays out the conceptual framework on space and practices while the third section analyses how spaces and the pop-up practice and other practices that constitute the space may be related and have energy implications. The fourth and final section discusses how these

energy implications are related to the elements within the pop up practice and to the arrangements and other practices in the social space where these practices are situated.

### The Emergence of Pop-ups

According to the marketing company Vacant's website the concept of a pop-up shop began in New York City in 1999 as a way for fashion retailers to promote their stock and sell excess stock at reduced prices (Davis et al. 2015). A pop-up is established when businesses, governments, universities, community groups, individuals or brands temporarily activate places and spaces for selling, promoting, trialling or sharing resources (Wessel 2012). The possibilities for types of pop-ups existing today are endless encompassing cafes, restaurants, shops, events, galleries, theatres, bars, markets, gardens, hotels, food trucks, flash mobs, performances and libraries (Davis et al. 2015). According to the Pop-Union website pop-ups can no longer be looked upon as a trend but rather as a concept, which holds its own place in an ever-changing, global marketplace (Wessel 2012).

Western cities have embraced the public domain as a food space and eating on the streets or buying from hawkers is no longer seen as inappropriate. This reflects in the fact that in the United States as in Australia and other countries, food trucks and pop up cafes have become extremely popular, as have guides to developing such businesses, food truck recipes and smartphone applications to track where the food trucks are. The key element for pop-ups is discovery. For example, they have been conceptualised as a means to help communities discover new ways to engage, interact and progress (Sobel & Agyeman 2013). Low overhead costs result through the efficient use of energy, water, food and resources, leading to lower energy demand that is a hallmark of constrained resources, space and time (Corvo 2014; Strengers & Maller 2012). Moreover, keeping menus concise eliminates waste and increases efficiency in these mobile food outlets (Corvo 2014). While this practice has been attracting the positive attention of entrepreneurs and city planners alike, current literature shows that it has also attracted criticism.

Critics have accused mobile food vending practices of food trucks and consumption practices around it of leading to gentrification of food provisioning and promoting "cool capitalism" (Luckman 2015, p. 152). They claim that demand and access for healthy and sustainable food is limited to an elite group of citizens and a majority will remain unequipped with knowledge and skills necessary to grow and procure food through so called Alternate Food Networks (AFN). Cool capitalism comes from the fact that these spaces of food retailing and consumption makes individuals responsible for their own adjustment(s) to economic restructuring (Luckman 2015). While this facilitates distribution of fresh food in urban food deserts while building the entrepreneurial skill set of participants, critics argue that this approach perpetuates a neoliberal rationality by locating solutions to social problems within the market rather than the state (Alkon & Mares 2012; Holt-Giménez & Wang 2011). At the same time the financial burden on pop-up vendors to keep moving and the volatility of the business model is a negative consequence and Luckman (2015) in her analysis of small craft economies thinks it needs to be reconciled with its other characteristics

and requires some trans-disciplinary research. All the above aspects of the mobile food vending practice informed the analysis of mobile food vending practice at RMIT University.

In order to study mobile food vending practice at RMIT city campus, it becomes important to discuss the spaces that this practice occupies, not only on campus but also the spaces it creates by its activities. According to Schatzki (2015), in order to study any social phenomenon, practices and their arrangements that make up the space they occupy and create, along with their relationship with other practices and arrangements also need to be discussed. This, he claims, has been largely ignored in individualistic and structuralist analyses of social phenomenon. The following section illustrates how studying these sites of social action make the case for empirical investigation of social phenomenon easier. It gives more depth to the investigation into the causality of space and activities by taking practices and their arrangements on the site as their unit of inquiry (Schatzki 1991).

### Investigating Practices Spatially

Mobile food vending is conceptualised as a social practice that is defined as “organized human activities where each is an open-ended set of actions linked by pools of understandings (pertaining to action), a collection of rules (explicit formulations), and a “teleo-affective structure” (a range of normativised, hierarchically ordered ends, projects, and tasks, to varying degrees allied with normativised emotions)” (Schatzki 2003, p. 18). It draws on a body of literature in consumption and sustainability research called social practice theories, which take practice instead of the individual or social structure as its basic unit of inquiry (Schatzki 2003; Shove 2010; Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). Examples for such practices are religious practices, political practices, economic practices, baseball practices and cooking practices (Schatzki 2003).

In their review of studies on space in geography, anthropology, sociology and linguistics, Stock and Jonas (2015), conclude that these disciplines are only now recognising the importance of the spatial dimensions of practices (Goodman, Goodman & Redclift 2010; Mansvelt 2005; Thrift 2004). As a strong proponent of a spatial, practice and material turn in the social sciences, Schatzki (1991) in his introduction to a spatial ontology, introduces space as not just objective but social; as a nexus of human activities and both shaping and being shaped by each other. He considers space firstly as a practice or activity that determines its physical nature, say a room first seen as a space for sleeping. By using Schatzki’s (2002) concept of site ontology, this paper conceptualises spaces as sites of social action or where social phenomena occur and as made up of a mesh of practices and material arrangements.

This conceptualisation of social practice includes the spatiality of practices to understand social life, which has been disregarded in many social analyses as well as confined to single sites, like home, in many social practice analyses (Barr, Shaw & Coles 2011; Stock & Jonas 2015). Moreover, this framework of the spatiality of food practices also explores the connection of food with spatial design and urbanism,

which has been limited in food studies as well as urban design principles (Parham 2015).

Practices therefore are just one dimension of the site of social life (Schatzki 2003). The second dimension of this site is material arrangements of people, artefacts, organisms, and things (Schatzki 2003). Therefore, pop-up food vending practice and the space it opens up and constitutes is studied in terms of material and infrastructure that is a part of the arrangements, like the food trucks and pop-up carts, the cooking and serving equipment used in it, fuel and water used in the preparation. It is also defined in terms of understandings, rules and teleo-affective structure associated with the practice such as making a monetary profit, food provisioning, discovery, spatial and temporal flexibility and mobility and making use of constrained space, and rules on organising the business (Thompson 2012).

The spaces at RMIT University are thus seen as the setup in which food provisioning and consumption practices take place with mobile food vending practice being one of them. Moreover, the site or space is not only made up of practices but is also created or opened up by practices (Schatzki 2003), in this case third place opened up by the mobile food vending practice. The consumption of resources is deemed to occur as a moment in almost every practice as the “organisation of the practice and the moments of consumption are enjoined” (Warde 2005, p.146). This makes spaces along with the practices important targets to study energy demand.

Therefore, this study of mobile food vending practice on the urban university campus of RMIT and the third place that it opens up allows for consideration of other practices and arrangements that intersect with them temporally and spatially, such as students’ eating practices, university policies and the urban setting. The discussion below explores how spaces are both created by practices (e.g. mobile food vending creating third place) and how they may shape practices (e.g. of eating). It does so by highlighting the elements constituting the pop-up practice, such as spatial and temporal flexibility and the arrangements it intersects with within the RMIT city campus. It explores how this practice’s interaction with other practices and arrangements affect different outcomes for energy demand, short term and long term.

### **Managing Energy Demand Spatially Through Pop-ups**

As the name suggests, RMIT University’s city campus is in the heart of Melbourne’s Central Business District (CBD). Its buildings are spread all over the city centre and are enmeshed with the urban fabric. Lately, the campus has been in a state of upheaval due to construction and renovations across the campus. This has led to the closure of food outlets and student lounges, resulting in food trucks and mobile coffee carts being used for transient food provisioning. In addition RMIT has also used its own versions of pop-up food outlets. There are pop-up events sponsored by the RMIT Student Union (RUSU) that give away free food at weekly barbeques and bi-weekly breakfasts, and other food trucks and carts with fresh local produce, and environmentally sustainable food stuff. Social enterprises are also encouraged to participate. New development proposed for the main campus, under the New

Academic Street (NAS) project, opens up the buildings flanking the main arterial street of the city centre towards the outside. As a part of that design and in an attempt to use the space flexibly and seasonally, built spaces that accommodate pop up practice have also been conceived, making the practice a permanent feature of the built space.

The spaces opened up by pop-up practice at RMIT University create new urban commons that makes them agents for neighbourhood change. This is illustrated in the Old Melbourne Gaol area, previously a part of the city, but now acquired by the University (Murray-Smith & Dare 1987), which hosts the RUSU events. These spaces challenge the mainstream market-driven spatiality of the city, instead reframing them as activators of neighbourhood change or as drivers for wider public agenda settings. High value property within the city is generally used to attract retail, so becomes market oriented. Pop-up practice at the Old Melbourne Gaol creates a space that represents other values such as social enterprise and environmental sustainability. As the pop-ups advocate social justice and non-profit enterprise, with many selling organic, or local produce and using recycled infrastructure, they are in many ways a form of “hybrid hospitality” which Parham (2013, p. 256) argues involves not entirely commoditized retailing. The teleo-affective structure of pop-up practice is changed as instead of just making monetary profits, the ends it pursues also include social service or environmental sustainability as is seen at RUSU events.

At RMIT University, pop-ups and food trucks are not about just “gratification of different tastes” (Cook & Crang 1996, p. 136) but about basic food provisioning for all students and have the potential to make sustainable and healthy food spatially accessible. Therefore, the third spaces opened up by pop up practices also have the potential to shape other practices such as the eating practices of students. According to a focus group participant, “*It becomes difficult to bring food from home, especially because I live far away (Point Cook) and for the whole day, as I prefer studying at campus*”. As a universal strategy pop ups might seem like they are a passing trend and are situated within the existing food provisioning and consumption scenario. Put into the context of this study as a strategy for food provisioning, pop-ups bring food to the students where they can easily access it. Furthermore, they can be designed to match the temporal rhythms of not only the University but also food production (by encouraging seasonal foods). This demonstrates the potential of mobile food vending practices in shaping food provisioning and energy demand strategically by increasing access to food as required temporally, reducing the need for creating unproductive and resource intensive permanent spaces.

Mobile food vending also facilitates the efficient use of space and resources by being temporally flexible. Due to the permanent spaces that they have leased at the RMIT University campus, food retailers are forced to open and operate even in times of low footfall leading to not only financial losses but also resource waste (electricity, water, food etc.). According to the retail strategist at RMIT, “*the food vendors complain as there is no business when the semester is out*”. Pop-ups at RMIT have been envisioned in future building designs and ongoing construction to accommodate the seasonal cycles of semesters and peak study periods, taking into account the business woes of the brick and mortar food vendors (RMIT 2015).



By encouraging the above, RMIT University demonstrates “distributed governance” (Schatzki 2002), an understanding of a form of governance that allows policy actions from institutions, organisations and local governments. The University has shaped arrangements and practices that intersect with pop-up practice to open up spaces for hybrid hospitality. This leads to urban and environmental sustainability and a long-term reduction in energy demand by promoting conviviality and shaping the food production, provisioning and consumption patterns that encourage low resource and energy practices (Parham 2013) that are inherent in the pop up practice, like concise menus and low resource use due to constrained space and time. Although, not all of the inherent elements of pop ups encourage energy efficiency but these complexities within the practice are negotiable within the space as discussed below.

Complexities of energy consumption arise from the same pop-up practice as it includes less energy consumption activities and energy intensive activities and materials. Take away cups are encouraged in pop up practice, showing that the same practice that induces less energy consumption, either through constrained space, time and concise menus also encourages the use of these resource hungry single use containers. Also, studies around social media use and food trucks have shown that people follow the trucks around and while good for business, is known to have increased the distances travelled to access them (Wessel 2012). This shows that different norms of convenience, comfort and cleanliness are conducted in the same practice that demands different intensities of resource uses. But research at RMIT University shows that by making pop-up practice a part of basic food provisioning at RMIT University campus and making it easily accessible to students, the problem of travelling distances is reduced. This illustrates the potential of spaces occupied by practices and the material arrangements enmeshed in them to shape energy demand associated with the practice.

The next section discusses the implications of these findings in exploring how a third place might be created to support energy reductions and how practices might be encouraged that generate such spaces.

### **Pop-ups as Sites of Innovation and Change**

By making pop ups a part of the design of its built space RMIT has demonstrated what many urban researchers have observed, that all spaces are unstable or can be made so (Parham 2013). Observing the pop ups and mobile carts packing up at the end of the day, gives an idea of how all spaces are temporary, thus implying that resources and energy demand can be restructured with the design of spaces to accommodate requirements. As in this case, peak demand time of food vending is structured around the layout and design of spaces that are flexible enough to accommodate pop-up retail practices. In this way energy demand created at peak semester times, can be managed and negotiated spatially, through designing for mobile food vending.

A common trait of pop-up practice is its inherent innovation. Innovation in practice, according to Pantzar and Shove (2010, p. 451) is a product of “making and breaking links between elements and this making and breaking depends on disturbing the three

identified circuits of reproduction, within the practice, within systems of practice and thirdly the temporal dynamics and path dependency factors”. Pop-ups, by being spatially and temporally flexible help create a third place that can make “the people feel comfortable doing precisely what is considered undesirable behavior by the mainstream of the fast food culture” (Oldenburg 2001), like eating on the streets or even having easy access to healthy sustainable food. Discovery forms an important part of people’s food journeys and goes hand in hand with innovation, as “contrary to fears of homogenization, people possess sophisticated food cartographies in which unpredictability is a prominent trope” (Ashley et al. 2004, p. 118). By negotiating space creatively, by interacting with other practices and arrangements innovatively and by providing an element of discovery to the students that eat from them, pop-ups create a distinctive practice that challenges the mainstream or norms that are a part of conventional eating practices.

Expanding this further, the point of difference for pop-ups is the ease with which environmentally sustainable and socially oriented themes can become a part of the understandings and rules of the practice making these an inherent element of the practice. This takes from “communities of practice” where “specific competencies and experiences” become a part of the uniqueness associated with the practice (Gherardi, Holti & Nicolini 1999). The uniqueness of the pop up practices helps break the path dependency of existing practices, such as the eating practices of students on a site, creating opportunities for intervention to shape energy use. Even simple interventions in the form of making healthy, sustainably produced food, or fresh seasonal food (as part of a permanent mobile food vending practice) made easily accessible on campus as a part of general food provisioning may go a long way in shaping students’ eating practices.

Pop-up practice negotiates and helps open up spaces through its spatial and temporal flexibility and through innovating and bending the social norms that govern mainstream food provisioning and consumption. The complexity with which mobile food vending interacts with other practices and arrangements as illustrated in this paper can both increase and decrease resource consumption. This makes pop-up practice an important site of intervention for affecting and reducing energy demand. By making the practice permanently a part of the food provisioning and consumption space at the campus the teleo-affective structure of the practice is changed from just monetary profit to hybrid hospitality. The inherent temporality and spatial mobility and flexibility of pop-ups that are the rules and understandings of the practice also bring opportunities to negotiate peak demand periods and spaces and shape energy demand and sustainability in food provisioning and consumption.

Lastly, the positive connection of mobile food vending to spatial processes and sustainable urbanism is illustrated by the making of a third place that is constituted by hybrid markets that explore new food practices, provide easy access to healthy food and contribute to the making of urban commons (Parham 2015). All these characteristics display some or the other form of sustainable urbanism principles like human scale, compactness and mixed land use, signifying a fundamental connection between food practices, spatial processes and sustainability.

*Word Count: 3940*

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