

*Hunters Point: Death by Capitalism*



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*Capitalism knows only one color: that color is green; All else is necessarily subservient to it, hence, race, gender and ethnicity cannot be considered within it.*

*- Thomas Sowell (American Writer and Economist, b.1930)*

In the book *Death by Chocolate*, the French culinary master Marcel Desaulniers shares recipes and creatively writes about the essence, complexities and multi-dimensional abilities of the quintessential ingredient, chocolate. Desaulniers ties a more perilous mental health state to each chapter with each ascending degree of chocolate indulgence. Chapters can be benign as “Singular Sensations,” and leads quickly into more menacing and more chocolate obsessed chapters, “Chocolate Demise,” “Double Chocolate Madness” and “Chocolate Devastation.” The final chapter, “Chocolate Dementia” is a mind numbing stage of over indulgence where the consumer loses his soul in gluttony (Reed Business Information).

My neighborhood, Hunters Point, is in the Queens West section of Long Island City, New York. According to John Roleke, author and guide to Queens, the boundaries of Hunters Point run from the East River to Newtown Creek. To the west is Manhattan, with the United Nations headquarters and the Chrysler Building a stone’s throw apart. South is Newtown Creek and Greenpoint, Brooklyn. To the east are the rail yards and Sunnyside, and north is Queens Plaza and Dutch Kills. Hunters Point is deep in the throes of gentrification and is akin to the chapters in *Death by Chocolate*, in that each stage of gentrification becomes more overpowering and the soul becoming lost forever due to our own quintessential ingredient, capital. Hunters Point is almost in a parallel universe with, “Chocolate Dementia.” Capitalism has quickly overtaken the mind, heart, soul and individuality of those who partake in its indulgence.

When traveling from Grand Central Station, I take the number seven train, under the East River which separates Manhattan and Queens, one stop east to Vernon and Jackson Boulevards. Upon exiting the subway on the Vernon Boulevard side, where I find myself in a quaint public area occupied by park benches, cafes and wine bars. The hulking edifice of the 108<sup>th</sup> New York Police Department stands guard at the gateway to my neighborhood. The precinct, with its

mantra “to protect and serve,” seems to be transforming its mission from community based policing, to being the soldiers of corporate and capitalistic interests. Police officers loaf around the subway stairs with their lattes in hand. They frequently make small talk with the over glamorous and cosmetically enhanced corporate females; poised to pounce on any homeless, African-American or Latino *thug*; ready to weed out those who do not fit the corporate manifesto they now follow. In the many retail stores that line Vernon Boulevard, loss prevention associates are taught to provide a fictitious, “How can I help you?” to the suspected shoplifter. The 108<sup>th</sup> precinct has implemented these skills well to weed out those who don’t belong.

Heading north along Vernon Boulevard, a sign of an economic recession is clearly visible, a gated parcel of land which waits its turn to become yet another condominium complex. As I continue my stroll, the first bodega is empty of customers, occupied by only by a sleepy Arab merchant who stands guard. The store reeks of cleaning chemicals and very loud hums of refrigeration units long past their prime. No air conditioners quell the humid summer temperatures, only the overhead fans above. I look at the deli counter menu, overlooking the sandwiches misspelled because of plastic block lettering, some missing or warped. No one is shopping here and in post 9/11 hysteria why would they? I smile and nod to the Arab merchant, who despite his weathered and faded dreams, has obviously not given up. The old standby of bodegas, “Hershey’s Chocolate,” no longer appeals to the community.

Ironically, the next bodega past “Hershey’s Chocolate,” is “Ghirardelli.” E&I Deli has a wall of beautiful flowers and eucalyptus plants ready for purchase at the door. Inside, some of the hallmarks of a neighborhood undergoing gentrification are present: organic produce, a Naked Juice cooler, more kinds of bottled spring water that I ever knew existed and of course the deli. More than thirty different kinds of deli sandwiches can be found. The upgrading of the basic deli

sandwich is mastered here. One has a choice of trendy ingredients, organic mesclun greens, basil, fresh or smoked mozzarella and the choices of sun-dried tomato, harvest wheat or spinach wraps. Famished, I ordered a California Dreamin' wrap. When I went to purchase my wrap using my VISA debit card the clerk scolded me and said, "ten dollar minimum," I guess my \$8.99 wrap didn't qualify. I guess this was an upgrade from the Arab store which only accepts cash. The Korean family that owns this store is business savvy and in touch with the changing *tastes* of the gentrifying neighborhood. I wonder how much they pay the Mexican laborers in the store - they never seem to smile.



Next on Vernon Boulevard, is Tuk Tuk, a Thai restaurant. On the sidewalk in front of the restaurant a sign proclaims, "Bring your own wine, no cork fee." The sign also peddles specials such as tuna honey wasabi, Sake infused sea bass, steamed red snapper with yellow curry served with mango sticky

rice. Everything that is classic Thai food has been upgraded into a trendy culinary concoction resembling the luxurious tastes of the gentrifying neighborhood. Being a Thai food aficionado, I order dinner at this restaurant often; this being my, "Singular, Chocolate Sensation." Once while waiting, the owner stated that they owned another takeout Thai restaurant in Long Island City. Since she was aware of where I went to school she said I could pick up some pad see ew, pad Thai or salmon with curry on my way to class. She gleefully volunteered more information, "No brown, jasmine or mango sticky rice, but if you can deal with white rice and white plastic silverware, the prices are cheaper and the recipes the same." Maybe this is some kind of reward for my wallet being raped ever so often.

Across the street, there is Saint Mary's Roman Catholic Church which caters exclusively to the Mexican immigrant community that works in Hunters Point restaurants, cafes, stores and buildings. On Sunday mornings, this block of Vernon Boulevard booms with amplified Spanish church music that is reminiscent of an evangelistic service. At one time, this church catered to the blue collar Italian immigrants that toiled in unsafe factories that littered the Hunters Point landscape. Saint Mary's was once the heart of the community which housed a parsonage and a parochial school. In 1893, there was a great fire that destroyed Saint Mary's and its steeple fell to the ground. The fire engulfed many blocks, burned down stores and left many people homeless (New York Times). The 1893 newspaper article, which so poignantly stated, "The burned blocks included grocery, dry goods and paint stores, and a number of tenement houses. The inmates of these escape uninjured." The new condominiums that house those who chase the capitalistic "American" pipe dream are the current inmates.

Further down Vernon Boulevard are trendy restaurants that line each side of the street. Cuban, Mexican, tapas, *new* southern comfort food and a regional Italian restaurant with a wood fired brick pizza oven are among the many such restaurants. Having lived in this neighborhood for over a year, I have seen meal prices grow as classic entrees like mac and cheese become transformed into trendy and artistic creations, mac and cheese with chipotle which is supposed to reflect the price increase. The restaurants are always packed, so even in an economic recession the residents of the neighborhood more than happily pay for their trendy and hip meals. As the neighborhood gentrifies, "yuppifies," and seeks to cater to the new breed of capitalists moving into the neighborhood; culinary recipes, restaurant interiors, menus and wine lists must parallel this change to remain relevant. There is a pizza place that claims to be a historic landmark, a family owned business for generations, now it sits devoid of customers with an ice cream cone

shaped sign advertising probiotic and low carb ice cream. The new breed of neighborhood consumer wants the complete trendy package: exposed brick interiors, brightly colored exteriors and cutting-edge menu items, not just new ice cream. This begins the “Chocolate Demise” of the neighborhood. There are too many kinds, variants, versions and fusions of culinary classics (chocolate) here that only the affluent can afford. What happened to chocolate in its simplicity? Was it not as sweet and satisfying?

Making a left down 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue the stark transformation of Hunters Point can be felt. In 1891, Hunters Point was a transportation terminus where train travelers disembarked the Long Island Rail Road and boarded ferries to Manhattan. Then with the relocation of factories, such as Steinway and Sons to cheaper land across the East River there was a growing need for a bridge to Queens. The Queensboro Bridge, built in 1909, promoted relocation for residential, commercial and industrial interests from over-populated and cramped Manhattan. Soon Hunters Point became a center of industry and commerce. The deindustrialization in the 1970’s and 80’s left numerous derelict factories throughout the area, carcasses of American industrial prowess. The area became a brownfield of abandoned factories and warehouses until the redevelopment of the late 1990’s, which aided the revitalization of Hunters Point with condominiums and lofts (Jackson and Melnick).

The new 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue is lined with overpriced residential buildings and is the gateway to Gantry Plaza State Park. This avenue is lined with basketball, handball courts, a kiddie playground and over-priced residential units. The amenities of Gantry Plaza State Park are frequented by African-American and Hispanic youth blasting rap, hip-hop and reggaeton. Girls with outfits that would make Nicki Manaj blush wait with baby strollers for their *baby daddies*. The capitalistic sheep on their way home from Manhattan quickly rush pass the basketball and

handball courts. Once I overheard a young yuppie couple telling their kids, “be careful of the outsiders.” The median priced asked for houses or condominiums in 2008 was \$540,142 and paradoxically, the percentage of neighborhood residents with income below the federal poverty level was 26.8 (City-data). These figures show that there are polarized classes of people. This polarization consists of the new affluent residents and the working poor trying desperately not to be pushed out by gentrification. This area, once heavily populated by blue collar Italian immigrants now has a first born population of 1,372 persons (City-data). The area has a huge unreported Mexican immigrant community which stands in a stark contrast to the elites moving in. With so many groups of people flocking to this neighborhood one must wonder, “Who really are the outsiders?”



The Avalon Riverview North rental development can be found on the north side of 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue and creates a superblock. The “community” features 39 floors, 578 rental units, outdoor swimming pool, and a rooftop terrace with garden, five story parking garage, fitness center, club room, dry cleaning service and concierge (NYBits). Avalon Riverview North studios start at



\$2,115 per month and escalate to a three bedroom price of \$6,406 per month (Avalon Bay Communities). City-data’s 2008 figures state that there are 8,445 renter occupants and this is equivalent to 87% of the real estate market in Hunters Point, which based on my observation appear to be correct. According to City-data’s 2008 figures, which claim only 141 people paid over \$2,000 a month in rent, based on my



research, this particular statistic is incorrect because Avalon has 578 rental units with a starting rent of \$2,115 per month, which is more than four times the amount claimed by City-data. A lot has changed since 2008; gentrification is making housing costs soar and pushing those who can't afford the overpriced rents out of the neighborhood. Most of the newly constructed buildings of the area are skyscrapers, constructed in a modernist architectural style and dwarf the two to three story brick homes of the old Hunters Point (Emporis). When modern architectural styles change the landscape of the neighborhood and old homes are being demolished to create these behemoths this would be considered, "Chocolate Devastation," whereas all the buildings look similar with lack of character.

Avalon Riverview North is mirrored by hulking retail operations on 47<sup>th</sup> Road. A Duane Reade drug store with its sign, "we now sell organic, imported and micro brewed beer" sits in the window. This Duane Reade priced a Poland Springs water bottle at \$1.99 whereas the same spring water bottle near Grand Central costs \$1.59. Also, the drug store has recently remodeled their aisles and now has a complete spa section and high-end cosmetic department. Duane Reade obviously caters to the residents of Avalon and other surrounding upscale buildings then increases their prices accordingly. Duane Reade shares the superblock with Food Cellar. Food Cellar claims to be a neighborhood food market. It is full of organic foods, rare imported items, gelato, an olive bar, hand rolled sushi, orchids, expensive French cookware and bio-degradable cleaning supplies. The prices here are often more expensive than Whole Foods. Food Cellar charges a bottle deposit, but refuses to take back the bottles. Yes, Food Cellar is a neighborhood food market but only for those who live in the *new* behemoth of Avalon and not for the *old* neighborhood. Duane Reade and Food Cellar are a monopolizing commercial force in the neighborhood and can be considered, "Double Mocha Madness." Those who are savvy enough



to spend their grocery money elsewhere choose to do so by using an online service called Fresh Direct. Trucks from this online merchant are found parked everywhere seven days a week and of course the Mexican laborers are with the trucks.

At the end of 47<sup>th</sup> Road is the future site of Hunters Point Library. The 32,000 square-foot plot of contaminated land, where the library is to be built, was supposed to be remediated by January 2010. The costs for cleanup of the environmental toxins would be shared by the real estate developer, TF Cornerstone, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. In addition, the New York State's Queens West Development Corporation is in a litigation nightmare with Honeywell International over the \$5 million to \$10 million cleanup costs (LIQCity). Regardless of the huge remediation costs and the legal impasse, the estimated building costs are \$32 million for the 32,000 square-foot library. According to library CEO, Tom Galante, only \$14 million of the \$32 million dollars required has been collected from city and state officials. The library, which is to be the icon of the new Hunters Point, was the urban planning idea of New York City Councilman, Jimmy Van Bramer (Belden).

Councilman Van Bramer is a democrat who represents Queens District number 26. For a decade he has served as the Chief External Affairs Officer of the Queens Public Library. This position allowed him to be the library's link between community members and New York City government. According to New York City Council, Councilman Van Bramer sits on are the following committees: Civil Rights; Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International Intergroup Relations, Chair; Finance; General Welfare; Health; Lower Manhattan Redevelopment; Parks & Recreation; Transportation; Public Housing. Councilman Van Bramer has failed in his

obligations to the neighborhood regarding cultural affairs and libraries. Someone with such an affinity to libraries and who once was in a position of library leadership should become the powerbroker and help obtain the remaining \$18 million dollar balance needed for construction. It is also expected of him to resolve the conflicts over remediation costs. Councilman Van Bramer represents the corporate interests of the neighborhood well by socializing with TF Cornerstone, but fails to represent the sustainable needs of the community.

Next to the unconstructed Hunters Point Library, at the foot of 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue, is the western end of Gantry Plaza State Park. Phase I of this urban planning initiative was completed in 2001 by landscape architects Thomas Balsley in conglomeration with Sowinski Sullivan and Lee Weintraub. Phase I's purpose was to create an urban waterfront oasis amongst the gantries of Long Island City. With Phase I completed, its cobblestone paths, elegant fountains, wooden piers, interpretive gardens and lawn promontory, is impressive if only on the surface. This project won the 2001 Environmental Design Research Association Award and the Waterfront Center's Grand Award (ASLA). According to the press release produced by Thomas Balsley of the American Society of Landscape Architects:

*From this garden, where the railroad's past is more literally expressed with embedded rails and interpretive signage, huge split-faced granite blocks step down the river embankment, giving the public a rare direct access to the edge of an urban waterfront. Two more pier follies poke into the river. The first is furnished with distinctive chaise lounges for stargazing and sunbathing; the second features a wave bench and fishing table that elevate fishing to a social sport of family and community participation.*

While Balsley claims that chaise lounges and fishing will inspire community participation, in truth, the chaise lounges are rarely ever used; occasionally an old man fishing can be seen. This urban planning initiative has all the hallmarks of Daniel Burnham's *City Beautiful Movement*, which is a fancy window dressing to the polluted East River. Balsley also claims that this project will, "give the public a rare direct access to the edge of an urban waterfront." Unfortunately, like Burnham, Balsley fails to take into consideration the functionality of waterfront access. The chaise lounges, for star gazing and sunbathing, are to benefit whom? Those who are *laissez-faire* and can afford to spend their time in such leisurely pursuits.

The new residents of Hunters Point are fully enthralled in *conspicuous consumption* – a capitalistic product of lavish spending on goods and services to display income, power and status (Fordham University). Balsley reinforces the irrelevant waterfront project with the key phrase, "...to the edge." In my perspective, true waterfront access means citizens can actually use, feel and make relationships with their river and waterfront environment. Gantry Plaza State Park is another Burnhamesque failure, beautification but no true functionality or use that appeals to all demographics.

Walking back east from Gantry Plaza State Park along Hunters Point Avenue shows the mosaic of a neighborhood in transition. A line up of newly constructed lofts soon transition to historic Italian immigrant brownstones and single family homes. Many of the older homes along Hunters Point Avenue are decaying, left behind in a time long past; impeding a capitalistic deluge. Those who can afford to have kept up with gentrification and have invested tens of thousands of dollars in remodeling, and those who cannot, like the dilapidated homes are also left behind on Hunters Point Avenue.



Just past 5<sup>th</sup> Street, is Andrew Grove Park, named after a famous Hungarian-American computer engineer and who was a 1960 City University of New York graduate (Grove). Andrew Grove Park is a product of the *Green Streets Movement* and is administered by the New York City Parks and Recreation Department. This park is consistently filled to capacity with children using the swings, elderly playing chess, and people enjoying picnics. This is in stark contrast to Gantry Plaza State Park which is full of fancy amenities but no real functionality. The New York City Parks and Recreation Department has had to reduce their operational budget by eleven percent or \$40 million dollars (Benepe) and the New York State Parks Department has also had to make reductions as well to close an \$8.2 billion deficit (Shorenstein, Larrabee and Keefe). Well-funded functional parks are needed to create a sustainable future for the neighborhood and the State of New York's lack of vision and foresight with Gantry Plaza State Park is creating a high use capacity for Andrew Grove Park. Finally, I conclude my walk by reaching Vernon Boulevard near the subway station I started from.

In conclusion, the culinary classic *Death by Chocolate*, Marcel Desaulniers eloquently states, "The ultimate pleasure of chocolate lies in the layering of flavors. The richest, most decadent desserts involve melding flavors of hazelnut, pistachio, pecans, espresso, raspberry, rum, brandy and other ingredients--even humble peanut butter--with chocolate." The richest, most decadent desserts are reserved for the elitist lifestyles of capitalization and conspicuous consumption. The melding flavors are the racial, ethnic, religious and cultural components of the neighborhood, exploited to make chocolate even more epicurean.

Hunters Point, according to 2000 census data, has a total population of 25,595 where 39.5% is white, 25.2% black or African-American, 10.4% Asian and the remaining being mostly of another race (Social Explorer). These are in the flavors of the neighborhood that are used to create the most lavish chocolate desserts. During my survey in my neighborhood conducted in the summer of 2010, the white and Hispanic populations seem to be increasing while other groups seem to be rapidly diminishing. The Hispanics are being pushed out by increasing rental and real estate prices. The elitist white majority that has been rapidly gentrifying the neighborhood needs the Mexican immigrants to provide labor to fuel their lavish lifestyles.

Hunters Point has now reached “Chocolate Dementia,” where individuality of the neighborhood has been harnessed to create more gluttonous chocolate – *conspicuous consumption*. Every day, I watch the elitist march like a capitalistic military with their lattes, laptop computers, donned in the latest fashions and BlackBerries rush to and from the subway; playing their role in the rat race. This daily routine like clockwork so predictable and routine beats to its own drum, the drum of capitalism.

The Oxford Dictionary defines dementia as “a chronic or persistent disorder of the mental processes caused by brain disease or injury and marked by memory disorders, personality changes, and impaired reasoning, has its 18<sup>th</sup> century Latin origin from demens, dement - ‘out of one’s mind.’” All the ingested fats and sugars of chocolate take a toll on the body and the brain. The residents of Hunters Point, now clearly in a state of *dementia*, will finally end up being done in by their own quest for the capitalistic *American* dream, their own *Death by Chocolate*. Chocolate just like capitalism can be too much of a good thing, but in small amounts and moderation, especially the dark kind can provide antioxidants and occasional pleasures (DeNoon).

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