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A WHOLE FOODS GROWS IN BROOKLYN

POSTED BY ELIZABETH GREENSPAN

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On Tuesday in Gowanus, an industrial neighborhood that is still somewhat affordable to artists and middle-class workers, Whole Foods Market opened its first store in Brooklyn. A rooftop greenhouse grows produce for the store, and indoor fruit displays are constructed out of wood salvaged from the Coney Island boardwalk. The in-store bar, which features sixteen microbrews on tap, will host a monthly “drink and draw” event in conjunction with a local nonprofit called Arts Gowanus. And the store stocks over two hundred products from bakers and food makers from the borough, including a

cage-free, Sriracha-spiced mayonnaise and chocolate-peppermint almond milk.

“We always want to have a local tilt,” Michael Sinatra, a Whole Foods spokesman, told me. The local approach is meant to help customers feel comfortable, and it supports nearby vendors, Sinatra said. Whole Foods’ local approach dates to its founding, in the early nineteen-eighties. The approach has received more attention over the past five years, however, as the grocer has expanded into new markets: in Detroit, where Whole Foods opened a store this summer, café tables are constructed out of old car parts. The company hopes to

reach a thousand stores nationwide, up from three hundred and seventy today.

According to Pavone, an ad agency that tracks food-and-beverage marketing, Whole Foods embodies a new kind of luxury brand, one that traffics in authenticity instead of exclusivity, or “a hip, eclectic sort of vibe that feels like a Berkeley revival with no credit limit.” But, because the company tends to cater to affluent customers, who can afford, for instance, \$4.99 per pound for organic spinach, new stores have been generating unease among residents, along with excitement over access to organic food. Even one of Whole Foods’ collaborators



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in Brooklyn told me she feels cautious about the relationship. Abby Subak, the director of Arts Gowanus, said her group decided to work with Whole Foods to reach its shoppers, who might include art buyers and supporters. But she said the group is treading “a fine line”: it wants to broaden the audience for Gowanus’s artists, but it doesn’t want to promote big development. “The concern is that, by collaborating, we are perceived as endorsing development,” Subak said. “We are not endorsing big-box development or luxury development.”

She has good reason to be sensitive. As in a lot of communities Whole Foods is eyeing, development is already transforming Gowanus. In addition to the new grocery store, a seven-hundred-unit condominium building is breaking ground. “People are freaked out,” Subak said. Residents have protested against both of these projects, part of a broader debate over how to develop Gowanus sustainably and inclusively.

Indeed, at a time when wealthier people are moving back to cities, and lower-income residents are getting displaced, debates about Whole Foods seem to double as debates over the very character of cities and their residents. Whole

Foods rejects the idea that it targets neighborhoods primed for high-end development. “People use us a gauge of the state of the community, and we don’t think that’s fair,” Sinatra said. But even John Mackey, the Whole Foods C.E.O., has acknowledged his company’s knack for identifying neighborhoods on the cusp of gentrification. In an interview with CNNMoney in 2007, Mackey said, “The joke is that we could have made a lot more money just buying up real estate around our stores and developing it than we could make selling groceries.” What’s more, Mackey is a staunch libertarian and free-market devotee, as Nick Paumgarten wrote in a 2010 New Yorker Profile, and his attacks on unions and government-supported health care have alienated some of his liberal customers.

The most sustained resistance to a Whole Foods in recent years occurred in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, where I live, a diverse and rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Boston full of young families, bearded hipsters, and immigrants from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. When Whole Foods announced in January of 2011 that it planned to open a store, a nine-month campaign followed to block it,

partly because Mackey’s conservative politics clashed with residents’ progressive politics, but mostly because Whole Foods was moving into a space previously occupied by an affordable Latino grocer. In October, 2011, the store opened despite the protests. “The section devoted to platanos was replaced by a section devoted to candles,” Glenn Jacobs, a Jamaica Plain resident and a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, observed. During my occasional trips to the store, most of the customers look like me: white, thirty-something, perhaps pushing a stroller or chatting on their smartphones.

“There is a sense of uneven—unequal—change and development,” Jacobs continued, explaining why many of Jamaica Plain’s Latinos felt threatened by Whole Foods. Jacobs is investigating the Jamaica Plain protests and the effects of the Whole Foods store on the neighborhood’s Latino residents. He said that, even though Whole Foods tried to connect to the local community—it stocked some products from South and Central America, made sure that some of its new hires came from Jamaica Plain, and donated food to salad bars in local schools—these efforts were



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not enough to assuage fears among Latinos that they were being pushed out. Two years later, the Latino population in Jamaica Plain continues to decline and, Jacobs said, many of those that remain leave the neighborhood to shop for food.

“We try to have something for everyone, but we can’t only be for one group,” Sinatra said, in response to concerns that Whole Foods doesn’t always sufficiently serve all of a neighborhood’s residents, like in Jamaica Plain. “We respect the past, but we also promote the future.”

In Detroit, which hasn’t seen the arrival of a national grocer in years, many residents seem ready for this future. This summer, when Whole Foods opened there, it consulted with numerous community groups and hired more than half of its employees from the surrounding area. It offers popular, and free, nutrition classes. But Whole Foods is receiving as well as giving: it got more than four million dollars in city, state, and federal subsidies as incentive to open the store. For some—including local business owners who don’t typically see this kind of government support—such subsidies are part of the frustration.

In Brooklyn, Whole Foods has chosen to emphasize its commitment to sustainability, reflecting the eco-minded politics of Brooklyn residents and the

store’s location on the Gowanus Canal, a highly polluted waterway and Superfund site undergoing cleanup by the Environmental Protection Agency. In addition to the greenhouse, the store features six large solar arrays and wind fans to capture energy for the lights in the parking lot. According to Whole Foods, the store will be sixty per cent more efficient than an average grocery store.

The company will undoubtedly fine-tune its locally focussed approach in coming years, as it opens its smaller towns and lower-income neighborhoods. It plans to open a store in Chicago’s Englewood neighborhood in 2016; two weeks ago, it announced a new store in Newark, New Jersey, with Senator Cory Booker in attendance. Last month, the Indianapolis city council signed off on a new store in the up-and-coming neighborhood of Broad Ripple. After the council meeting, a small group of protestors filled the sidewalk near the planned development—and near a long-standing health-food co-op—hoisting signs that read “Keep Broad Ripple Local.” The Whole Foods approach to keeping things local—with artisanal products from the community and workers hired from the neighborhood—wasn’t quite what they were looking for.

