The Compact City and Public Markets in Barcelona, Spain

Manel Guàrdia¹, Nadia Fava², José Luis Oyon³
¹Universitat Politécnica de Catalunya, ETSAV Spain
²Universitat de Girona, EPS, Spain

Abstract

From the nineteenth century the system of public markets, acquired importance and was considered one of the basic infrastructure networks of a metropolis, in urban planning policy and in the actual construction of the great European cities.

Despite this, liberal policies, new modes of transportation, delivery and selling, along with suburban growth and the relative commercial "sprawl", arising first in cities in northern Europe and in the United States, undermined the development and conservation of this traditional public element, associated with the compact city.

In Mediterranean cities, public markets are functional landmarks. In Barcelona, they have proven their urban potential. In the 1980s, the extensive networks of neighbourhood markets were seen as effective focal points for restructuring a retail sector that was in crisis. Since then, municipal intervention in the reorganization of the city’s markets and their surroundings has formed part of an urban planning vision integrated into the defence of the neighbourhood structure, and the compact city. Barcelona has a clear policy of limiting oligopolies, and large commercial areas are seen as a threat to the equilibrium that allows for the coexistence of the traditional city and a high population density that helps support public spending for the administration of public markets, but also to enjoy the derived benefits.

Now, when recent European Directives suppose a menace to public markets in Europe, the resilience and resurgence of markets can be a useful tool against this orientation, liberalistic and deregulatory and now in crisis.

Keywords: public markets, Barcelona, consumption, social-economic sustainable urban policies, urban planning strategies, urban history.
1 Introduction: The Return of Markets

Even though they have often been condemned by urban history, public markets are now considered a completely modern day tool for urban planning strategies, in order to recover the logic of proximity and conserve or re-establish some fundamental values that contemporary cities have lost. Since the nineteenth century in the United States, where new systems of distribution had converted the old public markets into relics of another era, there continues to be a revival of farmers markets which demand another environmental model. The model, which also follows some of the basic premises of contemporary New Urbanism, includes the proximity between the areas of production and urban consumption, the quality of the products sold, and another manner of living in the city, in accordance with more socio economically sustainable urban policies.

Barcelona has conserved an extensive system of markets and, like other European cities, has developed in the last decades an active policy "to manage, administer and modernize municipal markets", as valuable central focal points useful for stimulating the commercial network of neighborhoods, maintain the vitality of the consolidated compact city and reinforce social cohesion.

Both cases concern policies which attempt to return, as Michael Sorkin demanded, a more authentic urban reality, a city based on physical and cultural proximity as well as the freedom of movement. It is an appreciable chapter in the recuperation of public space.

Towards this goal, the paper delineates, following an historical analysis, the relation between public markets and urban policies aimed at providing food for the city. After laying this groundwork, the remainder of the paper presents various aspects by which selling through public markets aims at a more sustainable system, based on local commerce and creating a relationship of proximity. It is concluded that Barcelona is a remarkable case study due to the fact that its vast public market system (see Figure 1) has, and has had, a fundamental role in the city's urban policies to maintain social cohesion and create public spaces from the 1980s up until the present day.
2 From the Traditional Market to the Market as A Commercial Facility

Interpretations on the economic base of cities have traditionally shown preference for productive activities. A vision probably induced by the experience of the city of the industrial age that does not respond to historical reality, or to the current conditions of cities. According to J.R. Lasuén (Lasuén, 2007), many of the shortcomings of urban policy are caused by the limitations of its basic assumptions. Among them, the priority given to productive activities, understood as production of tangible goods that are easiest to measure. For Lasuén (Lasuén, 2007), the origin of cities was in fact, “consumption in common, not joint production”. In recent years, there are warnings of a growing attention to anything that affects consumption, but there are still few works that enrich our hindsight (Deutsch, 2005). Examining the history of the relationship of markets with cities can be, in this regard, a good exercise for reviewing some aspects that
significantly affect the problem of economic, environmental and social sustainability.

In his classic thesis, Henri Pirenne (1927) attributed the rebirth of the medieval city to merchant activity and the long distance trade of sumptuary goods. Today, however, we think that the process was fed by the countryside farmers and that the modest trade in local markets boosted the long growth cycle of medieval Europe (Bois, 1991, 1992; Guerreau, 1990; Verhulst, 1991). The great commerce and the birth of capitalism would only be later consequences. This original and generating function of local markets is readable in the shape of the cities of medieval origin. In their growth process, markets were the generator focal point of many cities and the irradiating centre of their commercial fabric. The very morphology of the traditional city, in both the north and south of the Mediterranean, reveals the extent to which markets and the commercial network were, and still are, the backbone of urban structure. Thus, it is not surprising that in their character of universal models, Christaller considered markets the raison d'être of cities and structuring agents of the rural world.

Wrigley (1987) recognizes two distinct phases in the fracturing process associated with the so-called Industrial Revolution: a first phase of modernization of an “organic economy”, which is theorized by Adam Smith and other great classical economists, and a second of the development of an “inorganic industrial system”, characterized by the use of new energy sources and especially fossil fuels. Although this second phase took its first steps in the middle of the first half of the nineteenth century, it made its effects felt in a growing manner in the second half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, and is the main cause of the great ecological imbalances.

The first market renewal, in the second half of the eighteenth century, was closely tied to new enlightenment attitudes and to an emerging new “urban knowledge”, that in some way, was anticipated by the ideas of Voltaire (1749) about city embellishment. He thought that it was not only a question of aesthetics, but depended essentially on the development of a set of facilities, based on numerous, easy and safe communications, and on the homogenous distribution of markets, theatres and churches.

These ideas, in the field of architecture, were developed by Laugier and Patte and joined the progressive medicalization of urban space. The theory and practice of the Administration or "Police", the new mapping tools (geometric maps), systematic alignments and the extending of the economic point of view to the territory belonging to engineering "des Ponts et Chaussées". Thus, an urbanistic type of thought that took form and flight with a revolutionary rupture (Monclus, 1989).

In the France of 1790, manorial rights were abolished, and markets became the exclusive responsibility of municipalities. The expropriation of ecclesiastical and emigrated nobility plots allowed the substitution of the old structures by the new state institutions. The centralized organization of the French State made the substitution process unique in its coherence and amplitude. Under the
supervision of the "Conseil des Bâtiments Civils", a homogenous technique of management and a programmed method of evaluation of necessities, distribution and construction of spaces were adopted (Teyssot, 1980; Lepetit, 1988). City facilities became signs of institutional and technical modernity. The market spaces and buildings, such as market halls, public granaries, and abattoirs were considered facilities as were prefectures, hospitals, public schools, judicial establishments, jails, police stations, theatres, museums and religious buildings, which since then have been understood as public services.

This idea of the market as a facility is already implicit in the 1801 Parallèle by Durand and his Précis de leçons d'architecture of 1817. It is especially evident in the Collection des Marchés de Paris of 1813 that the engineer of Ponts et Chaussées, Bruyère, devoted to the markets of Paris. Hence, in his urban inscription, from the smallest markets - constrained by the vicissitudes of the urban fabric - to the newest extensive projects designed for the Empire, there is the implicit idea of associating a market with a certain area of influence in the city. Traditional markets were thus fully included in the economy, a scope in which the "demands of yield, effectiveness, and satisfaction of necessities" wove a network of practices, rules and laws that influenced the layout of buildings. The new liberalizing laws maintained, however, strong public control over the markets governed by the moral imperative of ensuring the livelihood of a growing urban society.

Important changes took place in cities and in retail marketing throughout the nineteenth century. In the early decades, one of the main preoccupations of the city council was supplying basic subsistence. Whereas in latter decades, the abundance of supply was guaranteed and consumption habits had completely changed, the main problem was prices rising over the wages of the working-class. A sign of this change is the progressive vanishing of public granaries. In France, for example, numerous public granaries were built in the early decades of the nineteenth century. They concentrated the increasing production, they ensured a regular supply, and they were showcases that gave security to an urban population that still remembered recent crises. In 1840, however, when many of these buildings were just finished, several doubts arose about their utility, because there were already other distribution channels. In 1849, the Chambre de Commerce of the city of Tours considered the construction cost of a granary useless 'in view of the habit of the population, even in the countryside, that cooked its own bread less and less and preferred to buy it already prepared' (Bailly, 1998). Cerdà in his Theory of the Construction of Cities of 1859, considered granaries as very important facilities, whereas in 1867 in his General Theory of Urbanization, he wrote, "We are no longer at the time when the Public Administration had to build great public granaries to take care of the common subsistence of the citizens (...) The freedom of trade now includes everything, even basic needs...". The systematic increase in the flow and the fluidity of trade would be harnessed, in the second half of the century, by the generalization of new transport systems.
3 Ironwork Markets, “Street Markets” and Wholesale Markets

The increasing abundance in supplying of cities stems from, on one hand, more efficient use of agricultural land surrounding urban areas but also, for some products, it is aided by a significant expansion of the radius of supply through new means of transport driven by fuel fossils, railways and steam navigation, which meant a general acceleration that fostered the rapid renovation of trade channels and profoundly changed habits of consumption. These changes coincide with the consolidation of the new generation of covered markets, and their conversion into modern facilities in most cities of the Western world.

The rising population of cities and the gradual expansion of transport also led to the consolidation of wholesale markets (Guàrdia, Oyón, in press). This is a general trend, readily observable in the evolution of prominent examples such as Les Halles in Paris, or Covent Garden in London. The desire to connect central markets with railway lines soon appeared. An underground connection for the Parisian Halles was scheduled, but it never materialized. After the inauguration of the major central markets of Smithfield in London, served by rail, many of the new wholesale markets tried to ensure their connection to the rail system in the late 1860s. A system of eight markets was built in Berlin between 1886 and 1891 and the large central market, which possibly followed the model of the central market of Smithfield, was linked to the Alexanderplatz station and had underground rail sidings for loading and unloading.

In Barcelona in the late nineteenth century there was also great concern to set up various wholesale markets (meat, eggs and poultry, fish, and fruits and vegetables). According to the 1902 yearbook, “(...) Barcelona is a city in the world where the greatest amount of chicken is consumed, which generally comes from Russia, Turkey, France, Italy and Portugal (...)” (Amurrio Estadístico de Barcelona, 1902). The radius of supply had grown enormously over half a century, and this was not exclusive to Barcelona. There was, however, still a very strong dependence on the immediate surroundings. In those decades, Kropotkin, who had clearly focused his analysis on consumption, rightly considered the city as the place par excellence of consumption, and understood that it followed a trend toward gradual socialization that clearly manifested in what were later called “municipal institutions”. He suggested, moreover, ensuring self-sufficiency in the cities through intensive agriculture that technical advances enabled to be developed in their surroundings. These ideas, which may seem Utopian, responded to what was happening in those years in the field of consumption, municipal services and the progress of intensive agriculture.

It is, in this regard, interesting to compare these ideas with those defended by the Catalan Agricultural Institute of San Isidro, an association of farmers that, in those years, played a significant political role in Barcelona. In the pages of its magazine, new intensive technologies and the most modern facilities supplying the city are widely promoted. It was precisely this association, dominated by
businessmen farmers in counties near Barcelona that promoted the installation of the central market for fruit and vegetable wholesalers in the Born market hall building. With arguments of functionality, transparency of transactions, eliminating the middleman and containment of prices, the principles of a “moral economy” associated with public markets were defended, which undoubtedly coincided with their own interests. The change damaged the interests of intermediaries with considerable influence, so that the concentration of all the wholesalers in the Born market hall was only carried out under the pressure of crisis of basic subsistence products that followed the First World War.

The waste issue, another reason for thought by Kropotkin and a sensitive aspect of the relationship between the city and its agricultural surroundings, is another important aspect of the debate of those decades (Oyón, in press). The journal of the Catalan Agricultural Institute of San Isidro is opposed, in 1910, to the municipal collection of garbage from the city that actually meant it being burned. They did not accept the hygiene criterion that motivated this choice. Until then, garbage collection had been carried out by farmers coming to town, who used it for fertilizer for their lands. In 1913, in the face of the failure of the leasing company and the protests of farmers, the City did an about face and restored the old system (Revista del Instituto Agrícola Catalán de San Isidro, 1913). These examples show how, in those early decades of the twentieth century, despite the increasing use of fossil fuels, the old forms of organic economy remained efficient and refused to disappear. The complete dominance of the inorganic economy, and its serious environmental impact would be more characteristic of the second half of the century.

In the Spanish case, the long depression that followed the crisis of 1929 continued until the 1959 stabilization plan. The progress of the economy based on fossil fuels and their environmental impact would be immaterial, but the issue of livelihood would become a critical issue. As a result of the economic crisis and unemployment in the 1930s, municipal sources showed their concern at the growth of street vending (See Figure 2). Conflicts arising from vendors, ultimately led to the formation of open air “street markets” under municipal regulation. The situation of extreme scarcity, which lasted even two decades after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), led to an intense political boost of markets - especially in the two largest cities, Madrid and Barcelona -, which makes them even today a curious exception within an international context. In the fifties and sixties, when in other countries the old markets were disappearing, a new generation of markets was being built in Spain in the new suburban districts of the main cities.
For example, in Barcelona, twenty-four new market halls were built between 1944 and 1977 (See Figure 1 and 3). Whereas in Madrid, as a consequence of the market renovation of the thirties, the most outstanding ironwork markets disappeared; in Barcelona, they have been almost completely preserved. The paradox is, therefore, that a latecomer city has maintained a much more important legacy than other major cities, not only in terms of architectural heritage, also in terms of working public market halls. A fast glance around different city’s market systems, with the information available on the internet, shows us that Paris, whose system of markets served as a model to the main Spanish cities, today only has eleven covered markets, of a former total of 78. The rest are basically open-air markets, mostly only working two days a week and usually open on Saturdays or Sundays. Madrid has 46 markets and Barcelona 40, all of them covered market halls opening 47 hours a week and closing only Sundays.
Figure 3. Market halls built by decade. (Source: by authors from ACA. Industrial Register, Barcelona)

Although since the late 1920s, under the impulse of the combustion engine, the radius of supply for some products increased significantly, the result of the long depression from 1930 to 1960 meant that in three decades there were scarcely changes in Spain in the functioning of markets and the supply radius. Only with the late lift-off of the Spanish economy as of the late 1950s did a process of change begin that precipitated the first Development Plan of 1964-1967, which proposed, among other objectives, overcoming the inertia of the market structures and the persistence of outdated manners of distribution that had serious repercussions on the cost of living. It was then that the revival of the central wholesale markets was initiated. Mercabarna, the central wholesale market of Barcelona, replaced the old Born wholesale market for fruit and vegetables in 1971. At that time, Spain had completely revamped its fleet and was introducing new road infrastructures. The radius of supply increased rapidly, reaching the entire Spanish territory. This process has been accentuated in recent decades to get products around the world and redistribute them to all of southern Europe. It is a difficult trend to reverse, but makes little sense from an ecological point of view.
4 Markets as Tools of Urban Planning and Community Development

In Spain during the seventies, in spite of the modernization process, retailing was in a much more traditional stage, if we compare it with other European countries. For example, the impact of new shopping centers was delayed until the period between 1984 and 1996. The crisis of the 70s ate away at the fabric of foodstuff sales, which, in many cases, had become the last refuge of those who had lost their jobs. As a result, the market question arose during the second half of the eighties, when the entire market system had grown disproportionately and reached a point of serious inefficiency. The proliferation of dispersed units was saturating the sector, and the traditional retailing fabric was incapable of adapting.

The impact of the new shopping malls, located in the outskirts of large cities, weakened traditional trade that had given life to urban centers life, was well known. In France in 1973, the Royer law had already begun. It was a very restrictive policy towards new shopping centers, and favorable to small retailing. The law was not expressed properly in city-planning terms: it tried mainly to avoid the crushing of the small companies and the waste of commercial facilities. The attitude has been, since then, more and more restrictive. In Spain, during the eighties, the rapid expansion of the new large retailing centers coincided with the adoption of the restrictive model of French commercial urbanism by the Spanish administration, and in the Catalan community the traditional marketing defense has been very strict. The law of 1987 is, in many aspects, like the French one. The city-planning policy in Barcelona, developed by the democratic city council from the beginning of the 1980s, did not formerly consider market halls, but established a set of guidelines that in the long-term will favor them. It envisaged the “reconstruction” of the consolidated city, and preferred to think of the city as neighborhoods rather than from a general plan. It vindicated public spaces and collective signs of identity, and proposed precise programmed actions, adapted to the existing morphologies and uses.

In 1990, a Special Plan of Food Retailing Facilities (Pla Especial d’Equipament Comercial Alimentari de la Ciutat de Barcelona. 1990) was approved by the City Council that emphasized, from the city-planning point of view, the importance of fostering traditional food retailing. The municipal markets were the fundamental polarities of proximity retailing, and the main tool to update the whole system. The Special Plan concentrated its proposal on the renovation of the existing market network. In 1991 the Municipal Institute of Markets of Barcelona was created, with the mission to manage, administer and modernize municipal markets, “aiming to maintain their social, civic and cultural centrality” (See Figure 4). They have become another tool in the strategic administration that seeks to unify criteria of sustainability and social cohesion.
From that time, it has provided integrated management and promotion of the Barcelona market halls system, and has not only modernized and renovated the existing markets, but even built some new markets. In fact, markets are inseparable elements of the model of a Mediterranean city: compact, complex, efficient and with social cohesion, which is defended in the documents of the Ministry of the Environment (Libro Verde de Medio Ambiente Urbano, 2001). Barcelona has shown its effectiveness in the revitalization of commercial and social fabric of the consolidated city. Nevertheless, one important aspect of environmental potential has been forgotten, which it has been acquiring in recent decades.

Figure 4. Areas of Clientele of Local Municipal Markets according to data from 1983-84 by the PECAB. The three crowns mark the source of 25%, 50% and 75% of the clientele of each market. (Source: Pla especial d'equipament comercial alimentari de Barcelona, 1999)
In the United States, where the old systems of municipal markets could not withstand the rapid modernization of commercial formulas, some voices have defended, since the 1960s, farmers' markets as "totally functional anachronisms". Supermarkets were cheaper, but farmers' markets had been able to respond to consumers' desire of fresh products of high quality and, if they had long been considered as inefficient anachronisms, the energy crisis of the seventies, and growing environmental awareness contributed convincing arguments in their favor. At the same time the emergence of New Urbanism during the 1980s, demanding a walkable mixed use neighborhood and a smart growth (Katz 1994), has given a new impulse to the development of the phenomenon of farmers markets as demonstrated by their growth from 1,755 in 1994 to 4,385 in 2006 (See Figure 5). Open air markets are present today in every country around the world and several arguments are adduced in their defense. In the less developed areas, they are the main source of retailing; in the industrialized world, they are an alternative form of retailing and in some areas they are the only source of fresh-produce. They are also a useful help to small farmers, and work "as business incubators and survival safety nets for people on the lower economic rungs". In the same Western countries in which market halls had
progressively vanished, they have had the ever growing support of consumers, and their number has significantly increased in the last few decades. Although they carry little significant weight in quantitative terms, and we are still far from reversing the extraordinary expansion in the radius of exchanges, they are experiences that are headed in the right direction. They consolidate new habits and can help recover agricultural land near cities, which are otherwise uncompetitive.

5 Conclusion

Retailing is a multiform and changing environment, increasingly segmented because consumption depends today more on desires and cultural choices, than on massive “necessities”. Markets tend to recover their traditional character of being an event; a completely different experience from the generic and controlled environment of shopping centers. Moreover, the survival of markets must be a strategic bet to increase diversity, to revitalize city centers and enliven the public space (Moore, 1965). In the present phase, the experts predict a remarkable contraction of the great commercial centers that at the moment dominate the retailing trade. We can already see, in the United States and England, the phenomena of the “demalling” (Chiesi, 2006). In the United States of America, the time spent in malls has already fallen, and it is accepted that the new online trade, that can guarantee better prices, will cause a retailing concentration in a small number of giants (Harvard Design School, 2001). In addition, the consumption sphere will be filled more and more with ‘leisure’ and ‘experiences’: thus, traditional markets provide good assets (Kooijman, 2006). Face to face buying and selling, the different kinds of fresh, quality products, and the differences themselves between markets, can offer a wide range of experiences, richer and more authentic than other generic formats. If they are appropriately managed, they can revitalize city centers linking them with their own past andfitting, at the same time, new urban multicultural habits, two suitable features in a time of city planning ‘cultural turn’ (Freestone, Gibson, 2006). They can be a planning tool within an urbanism that can adopt different adjectives (strategic, commercial, cultural and so on) but that as a general rule is today “less concerned with the disposition of more or less permanent objects, stable configurations or definite crystallization, and more interested in accommodating processes to adopt strategic guides”.

Now, when recent European Directives (the Bolkenstein Directive, 2004 and the Treaty of Lisbon, 2007), suppose a clear menace to public markets in Europe, the resilience and resurgence of markets can be a useful tool against this type of orientation, very clearly liberalistic and deregulatory and now stridently in crisis. They can be an asset, far from negligible, for more sustainable development. After the neoliberal excesses and the failure of the market mechanism to address long-term problems, Amartya Sen proposes a return to the roots of economic thought starting with Adam Smith, because “the present economic crisis demands a new understanding of older ideas”. It also seems appropriate to return to the old ways of an organic economy and the law of proximity. In this regard,
one of the highlights of farmers' markets lies in their close connection to the farms near to the city and the possibility of returning to less predatory economic forms. It is an option that would provide more local responses, more sustainable habits and a greater "diversity".

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