

The municipal market network

Manuel Guàrdia Bassols and José Luis Oyón, Polytechnic University of Catalonia

Unlike the UK or France, the modernisation of the traditional markets in Barcelona took place late and was laborious. The enlightened conception of markets as facilities did not become clear until the creation of the Sant Josep and Santa Caterina markets, and especially Cerdà's *Ensanche* project. Between 1850 and the 1870, the traditional guarantee of the supply of grain - the *pal·lols* or municipal granaries - became obsolete, as the markets, which had not been modernised, became the main instrument of control over food prices. Therefore it is not surprising that over the last three decades of the 19th century, with intense population growth and the impact of new technical networks, a sustained effort was made to modernise the city's food supply system.

While the metallic structures of the markets were the most visible expression of the desire to completely renew the system, other good examples are the efforts to resolve the

outstanding issue of the slaughterhouse and the attempt to create a large central wholesale market. The new forms of transport and the change in the scale of the city - endorsed by the aggregation of municipalities - meant an increase in the catchment area, particularly for meat and poultry, and the growing importance of the wholesale trade. The insistent demands for reorganisation of the markets by fruit, vegetable, fish and poultry wholesalers finally ended in 1921 with the conversion of the Born into a fruit and vegetable wholesale market, and the removal of fish wholesalers to the *Galeria de Màquines* on Wellington Street. The reorganisation of the system was completed during the first half of the 20th century, with the construction of new retail markets.

Therefore, until the end of the Civil War, following, somewhat behind, in the footsteps of other European cities, a very substantial

network of retail markets was completed. However, the critical circumstances of the post-war period led to a marked divergence from other more advanced countries. While many European cities showed a rapid modernisation of commercial distribution from the 1950s, involving the progressive erosion of traditional markets, in Spain, the containment of prices depended almost exclusively on the markets. This policy to combat the high inflation in Barcelona was written into the guidelines of the first Development Plan, led to the project for a new wholesale market in the *Zona Franca* district, opened in 1971, and resulted in a strong expansion of the network of retail markets. As a result, between 1939 and 1970, when the number of markets in Europe was declining, Barcelona went from having 18 to 40 markets.

Around 1985, the deterioration of the commercial fabric, accelerated by the crisis

and the growing threat of large retail outlets, prompted the exploitation of the inherited market network by the municipal government, who used it as a lever in its initiative to regenerate trade in the local communities. This strategic choice implied, in recent decades, a renewal of the markets and a very distinctive municipal management in the international context.



The Born Market,
c. 1900
© Photographic Archive
of Barcelona