



This paper is designed to provoke discussion on the pros and cons of maintaining a public market in the center of a city such as Santiago, a metropolis of over 5 million inhabitants with serious air pollution and traffic problems.

The Problem

The existence of Santiago's La Vega, which is Chile's major public market, is being threatened.¹ If the real estate business had its way, La Vega would be relocated, not only because it is dirty, stinking, unsafe, and creates traffic congestion, but most important, because the value of the land on which it sits, seven blocks from Santiago's central Plaza de Armas, is too high to justify its present use. According to currently fashionable market logic, it makes no sense for this noisy, dirty, bustling public market to occupy such a central place, where the value of a square meter of land, already very high, continues to rise.

Nevertheless, one must ask whether sufficient consideration has been given to the loss to the city and to the country that moving La Vega would entail. Relocating it would create a non-place,² a facility perhaps impeccably modern, but lacking in flavor, color, atmosphere and smell (except for that

of vehicle exhaust from the cars passing by at high speed) in short, a lifeless place.

Is it possible, within a city like Santiago, as it battles with its problems and struggles to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, to preserve the life, color and texture that accompany products arriving direct from the countryside, and to continue to enjoy the aroma of real fruit and vegetables?

If we surrender to the deceptive allure of the modern, La Vega will, at best, become one more lifeless mall. That was the fate of Les Halles in Paris, once perhaps the most beautiful public market in the world, which was destroyed in the 1970s. The area was cleaned up, supposedly to create a center for culture, commerce and transportation. Today, what was Les Halles is just one more undistinguished shopping center. It could be in any city, in any neighborhood. It is clear, today, that modernizing Les Halles killed the vitality of the area in which it was located and that Paris lost a unique and irreplaceable urban feature.

There is a large group of people in particular people working in technical areas such as transportation and economics that believes that a

sensual pleasures it offers and most important by the human relations that it fosters.

The following illustrates today's view of the role of public markets:

"In the '90s, the public market came full circle..."

defend their inhabitants from the strange individuals who, to be sure, abound in the central areas. Thus, we are creating increasingly isolated urban spaces, where there is more fear and less life. The major issues facing urban planning today include: how to renew decaying downtown areas; whether replacing unprofitable

activities by ones regarded as more valuable by the real estate market really constitutes renewal; and whether other urban values should be defended and rescued, in order to increase the quality and vitality of urban life.

The Market as Public Space

One of the problems of greatest concern to urban planners and scholars today is the loss of public space. An even greater concern is the population's abandonment of public spaces. Inhabitants of wealthy areas, where there are beautiful and well maintained squares and gardens, have no need for these spaces, which become decoration, merely beautiful expressions of advances in gardening and landscape design. In poor areas, public spaces are neglected. Here, where local government lacks the funds to care for such spaces, they are soon abandoned. They become empty lots where gangs meet unsafe places that women avoid, especially at night. The abandonment of these public spaces is due to fear, fear of the unknown / other who might do one harm. This problem is not unique to one city or one country. A review of the vast bibliography on the subject of urban fear, perceptions of increased insecurity, and abandonment of public spaces (a bibliography that burgeoned in the 1990s) suggests an unstoppable and widespread process.

As a result, our cities appear less and less hospitable. Increasingly, various groups within the society shield themselves in gated areas, while private and semi-private security systems are on the rise.

A few voices, however, point to ways of escaping the trance of this vicious circle. In Leonard's view,¹⁰ public spaces have been abandoned because no one takes responsibility for them. In his opinion, the only way of recovering them and enriching urban life is for people to take to the streets and make them their own, to enjoy themselves there, in the company of other people. Here, the subject of public spaces intersects with the issue of the public market, which is one of the few types of urban space that still offers the opportunity to enjoy the chance encounter, to go on an outing, to buy from a merchant who makes jokes and treats clients like friends in a word, to enjoy the pleasures of urban life.

The Enduring Importance of the Market

The only reason that Santiago's central market is still in its original location is that the land belongs to the people who do business there. It has thus far proved impossible to convince these people that they would be better off on the periphery of the city where, theoretically, access would be less of a problem. It is our belief that the merwithwvince ssetically118 go0(e)(cc1,e(1IJT*0t anncr)20

The power of attraction exerted by cities' markets on both residents and visitors is widely recognized. (This phenomenon is particularly strong where markets are well maintained, well situated and easily accessible.) There can be no doubt that planners and politicians see recreation and entertainment as basic elements in attracting people to their cities. A strategy that focuses on developing these resources not only improves the quality of life for residents, but serves as a magnet for job creation, commerce and services in the surrounding region, and even at the national level. These functions attract income to the city and help to develop its economy.¹² The attractions of Seattle's public market have been used very successfully as an element in the city's development.

Public markets occupy an important place in the imagination of a city's inhabitants. Even people who may have visited it only once in their life retain its image as a vital, noisy place full of smells and colors. La Vega, Santiago's principal market for many years, has this effect on the city's dwellers. There is incalculable value in the fact that, since the city's colonial beginnings, the market has been located in the same district of La Chimba. La Vega has the potential to create a sense of community and pride among the city's residents, and these feelings are fundamental elements in any attempt to improve a city at this millennial juncture.

"Citizens on both sides of the Atlantic seek to recover a sense of festivity that celebrates human and physical diversity in the city. And in this process, they are discovering that such celebration paves the way for a restoration of the sense of human community and for the pride that is essential if residents are to invest their energy and savings in improving and maintaining their homes, neighborhoods and public spaces."¹³

A market of this type unquestionably has the potential to be a revitalizing factor, when accompanied by investments in improving it and by a broad strategy for solving the problems that market activities create. An examination of cities that have invested in improving and renovating their markets clearly demonstrates that markets can generate positive change in their cities. Not

only can they become magnets; they can provide an impulse for the renewal of nearby neighborhoods, which are often in an advanced state of decay.

A final element of great importance, but not

problems into resources. The best example of this is garbage, which can provide material for profitable composting, creating new job opportunities. The movement of freight can be separated from the rest of the city's traffic and brought in line with current world standards. Underground parking can become an important source of income for the market, while providing the best modern security systems for the population. Finally and of paramount importance La Vega needs, and is capable of providing, a unique architectural and esthetic image, one that reflects the market's importance to the city and to the country, one that makes it a landmark in which Santiago residents and Chileans, in general, can feel a sense of pride. It seems reasonable to attempt this undertaking.

Notes

The author is a Professor of Urban Studies at the Catholic University of Santiago, Chile.

1. The interior of the Vega Central Market houses approximately 1,000 retail businesses, while nearly 500 wholesale or semi-wholesale businesses surround it.

2. Aug , Marc, 1994. *Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, (Paris, éditions du Seuil, 1992)

3. Les Halles Centrales de Paris, designed by Victor Baltard, lifelong friend of Haussmann, had, at its peak, 12 pavilions, each specializing in a given type of product, all linked by a grid of streets covered by a glass roof. It was in operation until the end of the 1960s. Source: Kostof, Spiro, 1992, *The City Assembled, The elements of Urban Form Through History*, Bulfinch Press, p.97

4. A major museum (the Pompidou) was built in one part of the old market.

5. At the end of 2002, the municipal council for Paris's first arrondissement approved a neighborhood demand to build one or two public markets in response to the loss of quality of life that they had experienced with the disappearance of Les Halles.

6. The current steel structure was built in 1914, though the first documents attesting to the existence of the market date from the thir-

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