

THE IDEALIZATION OF A "BARCELONA MODEL" FOR MARKETS RENOVATION

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Abstract: The detailed study of markets provides valuable information about the changes and relations between urban trends and food practices in cities. In the case of Barcelona, the operations of preserving and renovating market halls during the last 30 years are a true record of the urban changes and they conceal a socioeconomic project often overshadowed by iconic architectures.

In this paper we analyze the early stages of the markets' renovation policies in Barcelona, which has been strongly characterized by the Special Plan for Food Retailing Facilities (known by the Catalan acronym PECAB), written in 1986. To this aim we will contextualize the origins and motivations of these renovations in the European urban framework of the 70s and the 80s. Instead of thinking of the Barcelona case as a unique and exceptional experience, we will rather understand the resulting policies as local answers to the urban theories of that time. We will then present the unusual conditions and constraints in Barcelona to finally pursue a better understanding of the social structures and the food supply chains fostered by these market renovations.

1. The context for a markets renovation policy

During the last recent years, we have seen how interest for markets has grown exponentially. Its role as urban assets has been explored and largely experimented by the municipalities resulting in a wide and varied panorama of experiences. However, we cannot understand these experiences as isolated phenomena, but as operations in which cross transferences between different cases play a fundamental role. For this reason, it is important to focus on the global context in which they emerge and are developed as well as on the characteristics that distinguish each case.

1.1 *The raise of public awareness on the preservation of iron architecture and market hall structures: Les Halles in Paris*

After II World War two related debates emerged: on the one hand, the modern reconstruction of cities and, on the other hand, the preservation of the architectural and monumental heritage of cities. At this doorstep, many market halls built during the 19th century were destroyed to leave space for new commercial forms. During the war, markets received small investment so they soon became obsolete and were seen as anachronistic food distribution systems in front of the progress of the cities (Schmiechen & Carls, 1999). In contrast, supermarkets and commercial malls proved their efficiency, competitiveness and adaptation to the urban patterns advocated by the Modern Movement: zoning, use of private transport and energy consumption (Koolhaas, Chung, Cha, & Inaba, 2001). Furthermore, agriculture was getting into what Harriet Friedmann would call the "second food regime" in which industrialization, internationalization, mechanization and dependency on oil and chemistry characterized agricultural production (Friedmann, 1987).

However, given these sudden changes it became clear that gradual awareness for lost heritage was arising. Alarms were triggered by the destruction of Les Halles in Paris, in 1971. This building,

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admired and copied by almost all countries in Europe during the 19th century, was being demolished and relocated to the outskirts to avoid operative problems in the city center and improve its distribution efficiency. This strategic decision enabled the arrival of goods from sources farther away. Consequently, this contributed to the homogenization of the food retail sector across regions, without regard to local diets and products.

In this same year, Hermione Hobhouse published *Lost London*, a compilation of the most singular architectures that London had lost during the previous decades. She also warned of the social need to protect historic buildings in order to prevent London from becoming a Manhattan-like city, "unattainable and unattractive to the middle classes" (Hobhouse, 1971). Also in Spain, the journal CAU published in 1975 a special issue that listed many buildings in danger. The fact that a large part of the selected building was related to food distribution is symptomatic of the changes that were taking place.

This approach was drawn in the actions carried out to preserve the Covent Garden Market and El Born Market in Barcelona —two wholesale markets that were relocated following the guidelines of Les Halles. In both cases, the primary concern was tightly related to the architectural and historical legacy of the buildings. So the neighborhood and conservationist associations gathered to protect them from disappearing and to protect their communities from losing an inherent representation of their history. The governments ended up recognizing them as listed buildings, although initially they had planned to demolish them.

These movements saw market halls as identity signs of their neighborhoods and contributed to preserve the buildings as constituent parts of their historical memory. However, the activity was no longer supported. That was —and still is— the most common attitude towards the surviving market halls. Nowadays, they are being transformed to accommodate new activities like exhibition spaces, cultural centers, theaters or, in many cases, food hubs, largely dedicated to restaurants.

But there is another side of the coin. Market activity is now being vindicated as a strong urban asset and it is adopting new forms out of the market halls more appropriate to the contemporary reality. They have proved their impact in different communities; they can contribute to undergo economic initiatives —both, bottom up and top down—, as well as address urban changes.

1.2 Towards a comprehensive preservation: the Plan for the historical center of Bologna

However, in Barcelona, the El Born case is an extremely unique example. This is because market halls in the city of Barcelona were preserved regardless of their monumental and historic values. Less than half of them were examples of valuable iron architecture from the end of the 19th century while the others were built in concrete during Franco's dictatorship to supply the outlying neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the PECAB —Special Plan for Food Retailing Facilities (1986)— did not conceive them as isolated elements in the city but as an urban system with the potential at both the local and the municipal scale. Therefore, it was the potential of the whole rather than the individual value of each market hall what gave a comprehensive sense of preservation. This meant not only preserving the building but also the activity in it and its socioeconomic environment, as it was stated in the theoretical foundations of the reconstruction plan for the historic center of Bologna during the 60s and the 70s.

Although it is difficult to evaluate the feasibility of this plan —which soon started receiving critics—, it had a significant impact on the European urban debate (Angotti & Dale, 1976; Marston Fitch, 1990). The Bologna Plan understood the area to preserve as a settlement with buildings as much as people and organizations with the aim to keep a certain "urban atmosphere" (Cervellati, De Angelis, & Scannavini, 1977; Cervellati & Scannavini, 1973). This conservationist approach had strong political

and ideological implications. The plan not only expected an exhaustive restoration of the buildings according to the existing documentation, but also the preservation of the uses and activities to ensure the continuity of the social and economic values of the area, accepting the arising consequences.

Also in this regard, the Bologna Plan matches the origins of the PECAB in Barcelona, closer to a socioeconomic project than a monumental one. On the one hand, although markets were decaying in front of the supermarkets, the City Council of Barcelona decided to keep them as an urban public service. On the other hand, each market preserved the activity with the aim to establish a commercial polarity in each neighborhood that could help to overcome the deep crisis of the retail sector at that time (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1986; Maymó, 1984). The protection of this small commercial activity in front of the spread of the supermarkets had an implicit desire: preventing the local and traditional trade from disappearing as an operation of protecting a constituent "urban atmosphere" of the compact Mediterranean city. At that point, the City Council began a policy of refurbishing the market halls to make them more competitive in a more liberalized environment, upgrading their logistical core.

1.3 To preserve or to renovate? The IBA in Berlin

In the 70s, criticism to the Modern Movement consolidated throughout Europe, and consideration for the existing city was substituting the abstract practice of developing supposedly universal models. This turn to focus on the existing became evident with the writings from Colin Rowe to Leon Krier, with a general interest in the urban assessments of the 19th century, like Camillo Sitte.

Many of these theories converged in the project for Barcelona elaborated by Oriol Bohigas —head of the City's Planning Office, 1984-1991—, which led to a prolific activity during the 80s. These projects focused on solving specific problems in the existing city with significant attention to architecture and urban morphology (Ajuntament de Barcelona & Àrea d'Urbanisme, 1983). Bohigas advocated for the "reconstruction" of the city to overcome the urban "development" needs. For him, interventions in the existing should accommodate the future developments of the city, and the projects had to be "contemporary, that is to say, respectful but creative" (Bohigas, 1985). These ideas on reconstruction were largely tested during the 70s and the 80s within the framework of the IBA in Berlin.

The underlying intent of the Berlin International Building Exhibition —Internationale Bauausstellung—, under the leadership of Josef Paul Kleihues and Hardt Waltherr Hämer, highlights the analysis of the city's history and the search for a contemporary equivalent. Under the name of "critical reconstruction" or "careful urban renewal", the IBA suggested the adaptation of the former structures to the current needs. In this regard, the PECAB is an example of preservation, but above all it is also a regeneration project that has taken the markets legacy as a starting point. It interprets the historical role of markets in the structuring of the traditional city and updates their attributes to inscribe them in a totally different city governed by new economic laws, new producing standards and new consuming trends.

In Barcelona, this approach led to the renovation, refurbishment and modernization of the market halls and the market activity. And over time, this practice has progressively defined some recognizable characteristics of the renewed Barcelona markets: first of all, the introduction of an entrepreneurial thinking (Cabruja, 1990). Sellers are no longer licensees of a service to become tenants of a physical space. This fosters the capitalization of the stalls that grow in dimension and decrease in number. At the same time, the seller becomes also an investor and adopts a proactive attitude towards the revitalization and the success of the market. Secondly, the use of supermarkets inside the market hall to generate a symbiotic relationship with the stalls. This needs to be carefully

designed so that the supermarket gets a place inside the market hall but in turns the market ensures a reliable flow of people and controls the competition in the area outside the building. The interpretation of the new consumption habits and social changes —female participation in the labor force and changes in family structures and time schedules— is a key element for this modernization. All these factors combined can offer a wide commercial mix, a one-stop-shopping experience. And finally, the opening of the market halls façade to the public space for the advent of new relations and activities as a way of revealing and emphasizing the permeable nature of the market.

In parallel, architecture has also played an important role in the popularization of market halls, though not a central one in their success or failure. However, the undeniable efforts and construction costs of some of the interventions, mainly those in the central areas of the city —like Santa Caterina (2005), la Barceloneta (2007) or recently El Ninot (2015) or Sant Antoni (2016)—, highlights the interest to include markets into the set of institutions which serve as urban references in the city. Food culture —like the Mediterranean Diet or the Slow Food— is adopting a representative role supported by renovated market halls architecture since they are a new asset in their promotion (Garriga Bosch, 2015).

Nevertheless, in spite of this traditional imagery promoted by the markets themselves, data reveals another reality. The 72% of the produce sold in the market halls comes from Mercabarna (41,7%) — the biggest wholesale cluster in the metropolitan area—, distributors (22,0%) and other wholesalers (14,8%), while the amount of produce directly bought to producers or of own production represents the 15,4% (Ajuntament de Barcelona & Institut Municipal de Mercats de Barcelona, 2009). Also, while in 1996 the mean distance of fruits and vegetables reaching Mercabarna was 400km, in 2013 the figure was about 1750km (Garcia Fuentes, Guardia Bassols, & Oyón Bañales, 2014; Mercabarna, 2013).

Therefore, it is obvious that although in some countries markets represent an alternative to the standard supply chains, in Barcelona, the renovations of the markets have not restored the logic of the past, but have adapted the markets to the prevailing dynamics of the European contemporary commerce. The idealized version of the Barcelona model emerges between the traditional imagery of markets and the globalized economic context.

2. Markets' mission change: from need to choice

During Franco's dictatorship, markets in Barcelona proved to be the most effective way to supply the city and keep prices in check. But with the substantial liberalization of trade, new commercial forms became more efficient and gradually competed for the relative monopoly on food sales that markets had had until the end of the 80s (Guardia Bassols & Fava, 2015). Consumption patterns changed and availability of the commercial forms was multiplied. Consequently, markets lost their main function as a food supply service to become one among the many consumers' choices. This change of purpose motivated a reorientation of the products supplied. On the one hand, it required adaptation and produce specialization —ready or semi-ready cooked food, gourmetization—. On the other hand, it generated a shift towards the ecologic and local sector and, in general, domains where large supply chains are less likely to access.

While adaptation has been the answer in Barcelona to preserve markets, the ecological and local sector also reflects a small but generalized movement in many other places. In these cases, markets are vindicated once more as an efficient way to supply the consumers' demands concerned about a healthier, local and less homogenized diet. Although they represent a very small share, the exponential growth of farmer's markets in United States or their resilience in France or Germany are indicative of this trend.

And this is not happening only because of a consumers demand. Producers are seeing their economic margins structurally decrease as productions costs increase due to the need for continuous technological investment, new sanitary regulations and competitive low prices (Renting, 2003; van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Attempts by producers to recapture value in the supply chain, even though they are weak, have references to the Agricultural Park of South Milan, created in 1990. This project, although it established its theoretical bases in the 30s, it consolidated as an answer to the uncontrolled impact of the metropolitan growth of Milan (Calori, 2009; Matarán Ruiz, 2013; Sabaté Bel, 2013). In Barcelona, however, the concern about peri-urban agriculture led to the creation of the Agricultural Park of the Baix Llobregat in 1998 (Montasell i Dorda, 2006). And today, some producers from the metropolitan area of Barcelona claim for a place to sell their produce avoiding the wholesalers and distributors structures. These claims are resulting into a new generation of open-air, weekly markets that live together with municipal permanent markets. The former recover the eventual nature of the market. The latter accommodate and shape an urban and a commercial fabric on its surroundings.

3. Conclusions: defining a model?

The contextualization of the European framework in which the PECAB was developed is needed to avoid localisms and helps us to better understand the nature of the plan for Barcelona market halls. However, it is also essential to highlight the constraints and conditions that make the Barcelona case a singular and therefore a rather unusual experience, very unlikely to be replicated anywhere else.

On the one side, it is important to consider the strong presence of the market halls in Barcelona during the second half of the 20th century. While in many other cities markets were becoming huge obsolete urban facilities and falling into disuse, in Barcelona they were consolidated and even increased their presence in the urban structure. That left the city with an exceptional legacy of 40 operative food markets distributed homogeneously across the neighborhoods (Guardia, Oyón, & Fava, 2010). Moreover, in 1985, these markets accounted for 45% of total food sales and 75% of fresh produce (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1986). Therefore, policies focused on preserving and boosting the prominence of these markets as a mechanism to reorganize and consolidate the retail sector throughout the city. Today, this prominence is stabilizing around the 40% in fresh produce. But the urban —and even social— benefits and contributions of these renovations are much more comprehensive than the economic and statistical results and still justify the promotion of markets in front of other commercial forms (Institut Municipal de Mercats de Barcelona, 2014).

On the other side, it should be noted that markets in Barcelona are still managed by public authorities. With the advent of private suppliers, many cities gave up on public ownership of markets. Instead of this, Barcelona updated them as a tool to mobilize strategic private investments: a selective public intervention intended to improve the economic and functional efficiency of the city and address the crisis of the retail sector in the 80s. Nowadays, thanks to this strategy, these investments in market halls are enabling spaces to accommodate urban and social processes of regeneration.

To take up the challenge of an entrepreneurial management of these markets, in 1991, the Markets' Institute of Barcelona (IMMB) was established. The IMMB is an autonomous body with budgetary and administrative capacity, under the auspices of the City Council, to manage and direct markets. Since then, the Institute has sustained a continuous investment policy of markets evaluation, renovation and promotion; it has established a formal relation with the associations of sellers; as well as it has gathered enough experience to systematize, particularize and undergo the renovation

of the whole system of market halls in the city. This panorama is in stark contrast to the simplistic assessment in which management and socioeconomic projects are placed in a second level.

So, if there is to be a Barcelona model for markets susceptible to be applied in other contexts, it has nothing to do with iconic architecture. In countries like United States or France, markets have a clear function to bring producers and consumers closer together, while in Barcelona, as we have seen, the trend has been quite the opposite. Also, in other contexts, like in the United Kingdom, many markets still play an important part in the less well-off inhabitants economies, something that is certainly not happening in Barcelona either. In these cases, markets followed different guidelines and are of an entirely different format, focus and organization. Consequently, adopting a model such as Barcelona's one, or a misconception of it, would probably turn into a disorder to the established social structures.

In any case, it is evident that markets are the result of a complex socioeconomic structure, both in the city and the agricultural environment. And renovations always reshape them according to the existing contemporary social and economic changes. So, markets become and observatory of the societies that conceive them, and therefore the study of markets transformations highlight their dynamic nature. Markets and the social structure of the city are deeply intertwined. Because, indeed, the act of buying potatoes helps us to understand the social fabric and the territorial structure that cultivate, transport, store, sell, cook and eat them. However, the question that still remains unanswered is: could this happen the other way round? Could a change in our markets foster changes in the economic, commercial and urban policies on different scales?

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