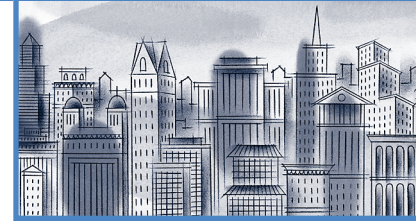


# URBAN UPDATE

COMPARATIVE URBAN STUDIES PROJECT POLICY BRIEF



## The Role of the Central Public Market in a Twenty-first Century Metropolis

Case Study: The central “La Vega” market and its surroundings in Santiago, Chile

MARÍA ELENA DUCCI

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.<sup>1</sup> 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,”<sup>2</sup> 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 public market close to the historic center of the city, where land prices are very high, is, by definition, a mistake. From the purely “technical” point of view, it is absurd to keep such a complex of activity, with the congestion that it generates, in an area that could, in real estate market terms, be much better utilized for office buildings (the dream of a number of government officials). However, the city is not a purely technical phenomenon. It is a living being that reflects our culture, tastes and passions, our mistakes and fears. Technical consid-

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erations are only tools to help urban improvement, not ends in themselves, though they are often treated as such. What is the use of having vehicles move efficiently, if the city through which they move is lifeless? Who would care to walk through even the most beautiful of parks if no other human being or animal is to be found there?

### **Evolution of the Market**

The market emerged as a center of commercial, social and cultural exchange at the beginning of the urban era. Already, for the Greeks, the market and its activities had an important place next to the central agora, and all cities in the annals of history show the marketplace as the heart of urban life. In the nineteenth century, large, beautiful iron hubs were built to house markets in the centers of all major cities. While this trend began in London, it was Paris, in the period between 1853 and 1930, that built the largest, most important and spectacular facilities in Europe, Les Halles.<sup>3</sup> Described as a “World’s Fair of Edibles,” Paris’s market set off a legion of imitators around the world.

After the Second World War, modern urban planning came to consider inner city markets

obsolete in large urban centers, and systematically eliminated them or transformed them to house other activities. Thus, London’s Covent Garden and Washington’s Central Market became stages for elegant stores and tourist restaurants, while Les Halles disappeared entirely, leaving a great hole that was later made into a “modern” commercial area, including a mall that could as easily be located anywhere else in the world.<sup>4</sup> The French are still lamenting their loss. From today’s perspective, in which markets have value as magnets for urban centers, the disappearance of Les Halles is an irretrievable loss still grieved by many Parisians.<sup>5</sup>

Some cities are wise enough to have kept their markets, however, renovating them to give them new life and making them into great urban attractions, not only for regular shoppers, but also for tourists and passers-by who take advantage of the market’s varied delights. Such is the case of the Boquería in Barcelona, in operation as early as the eighteenth century, and recently remodeled to open its space to the street and provide improved lighting.

*“It is Europe’s largest market, if not the largest in the Western world. Situated in the city’s emblematic Ramblas, it is an obligatory stop for tourists, and has become one of the symbols of today’s Barcelona.”<sup>6</sup>*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, planners and politicians, as well as the general population in many of the world’s cities, are rediscovering the importance of public markets and the great benefits that they provide for the quality of urban life. In many of the world’s wealthiest countries, markets are now being renovated to bring them into the modern world. Like Barcelona, some cities in the United States and Canada have made their central markets into major tourist and shopping attractions. One of the most renowned cases in the United States is Seattle’s Pike Place Market, which has become the city’s prime tourist attraction.<sup>7</sup> Also flourishing in the United States are weekly farmers’ markets, where farmers actually bring their products from outlying areas to sell directly to the public, which is drawn to it both by the



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... In some cities where markets survived, they not only prospered but contributed to a new appreciation of urban life and a new sense of pride for cities. The economic and social importance of the market has been renewed for the consumer, while its esthetic and historical importance have contributed to new ways of thinking about the city and the urban landscape.”<sup>8</sup>*

### **The Abandonment of Downtowns**

Observation of urban growth shows that more and more cities around the world are imitating what we have called the “American” model of growth, in which cities spread like oil spots, occupying agricultural areas on their periphery, with a tendency to abandon the central areas, which gradually decay. Current urban planning is reacting to this trend, and major plans to recover inner cities are being carried out, espe-

cially in the wealthiest countries. It is true that some successful cases of renovation have had a “gentrifying” effect, or have replaced one type of population and activity with other, more profitable ones. Indeed, many projects imbued with the New Urbanism – the most fashionable trend in urban planning today – exemplify that type of orientation.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, current thinking on urban planning, in both Europe and the United States, emphasizes conserving, insofar as possible, the activities and, above all, the original population, of downtown areas. Why? Because the gentrification of central areas has produced increased physical/spatial segregation in the city, and the new middle- and upper-class neighborhoods built in central areas look like fortresses, with walls and fencing designed to separate them from the rest of the world and

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The **COMPARATIVE URBAN STUDIES PROJECT** (CUSP) of the Woodrow Wilson Center was established in 1991 in an effort to bring together U.S. policymakers and urban researchers in a substantive discussion about how to build the viable urban governance structures and strong democratic civic culture that are essential for sustaining cities. Research priorities for CUSP include urban health, poverty alleviation, youth populations and conflict, and immigrant communities in cities.

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For more information about the Comparative Urban Studies Project, please go to the CUSP website: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/cusp>.



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

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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,<sup>10</sup> 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 merchants are motivated by reasons beyond those they have expressed, and that it is important to elucidate their thinking.

La Vega, despite its overwhelming problems, remains a vibrant center of commercial, social and cultural activity. Indeed, it is one of the most important centers of activity in Santiago, not only because of its commerce, which has importance at the national level, but because of the social activity and cultural elements that are concentrated there. If “...the essence of the goods that constitute cultural patrimony is not ownership, but rather their character of public goods...,”<sup>11</sup> then La Vega is one of the few places where Santiago maintains a strong historical and public tradition. In spite of the poor condition of its buildings and its surroundings, La Vega is one of Santiago's most vital spots.



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."<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup>

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 generally appreciated fully, is the potential for job creation. La Vega and its surroundings provide jobs directly to several thousand individuals, not counting the thousands of small vendors who set up temporary stands in the area and the vendors who work the area on foot. All are part of the market's commercial activity. An organization was recently created to represent those communities that are part of La Vega "FAC" (Federación de Acción de Comerciantes de La Chimba). It represents approximately 10,000 individuals whose sustenance depends directly or indirectly on La Vega activities, and includes the "Asociación de Feriantes de la Zona Norte" (Association of Open Markets). La Vega is undeniably a major engine in the economy of Chile's capital city, and it cannot easily be eliminated without harm to the population that depends upon it directly or indirectly.

To conclude, it is important to recognize the problems created by La Vega and its surroundings. Modern solutions must be found, taking advantage of today's technology. If this is done, the market can become a positive example, especially from the environmental perspective. Today's activity creates many problems: chaotic traffic (a mix of freight trucks and other urban vehicles); garbage, dirt, smells, and disorderliness; insecurity (a factor that has kept many traditional shoppers away); lack of parking; and the poor state of the area's buildings and streets. These are the very problems that have led to closing and eliminating central markets in many cities. However, they have been solved by cities that are committed to protecting and preserving their markets. By drawing upon current technology, all of these problems can be solved. Indeed, some of the situations that are problems today, such as solid waste, can become resources, creating new revenues and jobs.

Thus, the vision shared by the communities of La Vega is one of a last generation's public market, where brand new technologies are used not only to solve problems, but to transform



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. Augé, 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 thirteenth century. "It has a total of 6,000 square

meters, housing the more than 300 stands (selling vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, specialties, etc.) that provide the market's true charm. Its importance lies in offering a wide range of fresh products and a huge explosion of color, people and movement that make it unique in the world. There is a popular expression that says that what cannot be found in the Boquería cannot be found anywhere." Source:

[http://www.barcelona-on-line.es/cas/articulos/articu\\_shop\\_082001.htm](http://www.barcelona-on-line.es/cas/articulos/articu_shop_082001.htm)

7. "Perhaps the quintessential public market and market district, the vitality, attractiveness, and economic success of this place are a beacon in Seattle (and for market boosters across the country)." [http://www.pikeplacemarket.org/about/thenow/market\\_today.asp](http://www.pikeplacemarket.org/about/thenow/market_today.asp), June, 2003.

8. James Schmiechen and Kenneth Carls, 1999, *The British Market Hall. A Social and Architectural History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p.220.

9. New Urbanism is an urban design movement that burst onto the scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. New Urbanists support regional planning for open space, appropriate architecture and planning, and the balanced development of jobs and housing. Their neighborhoods are walkable, and contain a diverse range of housing and jobs, as a mean to reduce time spend in traffic. They aim to increase the supply of affordable housing, and to restraint urban sprawl, promoting historic restoration, safe streets, and green building. <http://www.cnu.org/about/index.cfmUrbanism>

10. Mark Leonard, "Just get out and have fun," *New Statesman*, 12/04/98, Vol. 127, Issue 4414, p.11. Mark Leonard is Director of The Foreign Policy Center and one of Britain's leading foreign policy thinkers. He writes a monthly online commentary for Observer Worldview. Subirós, Pep, 1998, *Breve Historia Del Futuro*. Barcelona : Ediciones Destino, S.A.

11. Berrocal, 2003, *Patrimonio.....* p.17

12. J. Barnett, J. Riley, J. Robin, R. Widner, 1980, *Making Cities Livable. Lessons for the United States from Europe*, Academy for Contemporary Problems, Columbus: Ohio, p.3.

13. Ibid.

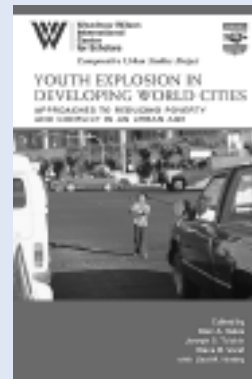


## Youth Explosion in Developing World Cities: Approaches to Reducing Poverty in an Urban Age

*Author: Edited By: Blair A. Ruble, Joseph S. Tulchin, Diana H. Varat with Lisa M. Hanley*

Cities have been transformed into magnets for those seeking a better life. Yet, rapid urbanization in the 20th century left the majority on the fringes of urban society with limited access to basic services, employment, and housing. Youth are perhaps those most affected by this urban transformation. In these conference proceedings, contributors review the importance of highlighting youth on the policy agenda, reducing the alienation that many youth feel, empowering youth through inclusive employment strategies, and taking heed of the particular needs of urban street children.

*If you would like to receive a copy of this publication, please contact Lisa Hanley at [culp@wwic.si.edu](mailto:culp@wwic.si.edu) or (202) 691-4289.*



### UPCOMING MEETINGS

#### Concepts of Immigration and Integration in Urban Areas

*April 30, 2004*

*5<sup>th</sup> Floor Conference Room*

*Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

This conference aims to examine the urban policies, spatial patterns, and attitudes that influence and shape the role migrants play in cities in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and the United States. The workshop will consider spatial patterns of immigrant settlement, economic niches of immigrant communities, psychological effects of integration on both host and immigrant communities, and effective policies for integrating immigrant communities.

#### Forum on Urban Infrastructure and Public Service Delivery for the Urban Poor

*June 25-26, 2004*

*Location: New Delhi, India*

The Forum is co-sponsored with the National Institute for Urban Affairs (NIUA) of India. This Forum will focus on how the urban poor in cities and towns can have access to safe, reliable, and affordable infrastructure and urban services. Key issues to be discussed will include how the urban poor can benefit from small scale and large infrastructure projects, with particular emphasis on the affordability of such services on the part of the urban poor. Panels and papers will include experience-based case studies as well as examples of community based and civil society based initiatives to improve access, quality, and affordability of services to the urban poor.

*For more information regarding these meetings, please contact Lisa Hanley at [culp@wwic.si.edu](mailto:culp@wwic.si.edu) or (202) 691-4289.*

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