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EXCHANGE IN THE STREET

Rethinking open-air markets in post-socialist Budapest

“Food is a social justice issue and a public health issue; it’s also an economic development issue, it’s a transportation issue, it’s a regional planning issue, it’s an ecological issue.”¹

“Open-air markets are symbols of poverty,” declared the former deputy mayor of Budapest in a recent interview. This statement reveals the Budapest City Hall’s formerly dominant policy on urban public spaces: open-air markets have been closed down and market halls have been turned into supermarkets because of their uncontrollable nature; they serve as magnets for loiterers, the jobless and the homeless. As disorderly reminders of how the “other half” lives, they are intolerable from the viewpoint of a certa-

¹ Nevin Cohen at Foodprint NYC, February 27, 2010, Studio-X, New York City.

in kind of economic development: no hotels, restaurants, or other businesses in need of a sterile, optimistic environment will move into the vicinity of open-air markets, goes the argument.

However, among actors in the civil society, there is an increasing acknowledgement of markets as vehicles of specific values. Open-air markets are genuine public spaces of a particular kind: while functioning as meeting places for local communities, they also offer contexts for intergenerational encounters and for the exchange of non-primary information, such as jobs, sales and possibilities. Open-air markets may be analyzed from a multiplicity of viewpoints: they offer affordable fresh food, they are central to public health, biodiversity and fair trade; and they open up access to commercial

activities with a very low profit margin for people often at the peripheries of society.

MARKETS BETWEEN FUNCTION AND IMAGE
In April 2010 Imre Ikvay-Szabó, then deputy mayor of Budapest, told journalists at a press conference: “The urban landscape is negatively affected by fruit and vegetable stalls.”² He went on to propose to withhold permits to sell food in public spaces in central parts of the city. The use of the word “landscape” by Ikvay-Szabó is telling: in its reference to seeing, “landscape” suggests a relationship to public space that is based on spectatorship

² Kata Janecskó, “A külvárosba úzné a pultozó zöldségárusokat a főpolgármester-helyettes” (The deputy mayor would push vegetable stalls into the suburbs), Origo, April 23, 2010, <http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20100423-a-fopolgarmesterhelyettes-megtiltana-a-zoldes-gyumlcs-arulast-budapest-belso.html>.

more than on agency. Landscape is what is given only to the eye: instead of being a terrain of activities, the urban landscape is a set of images.

To look at public spaces as images instead of terrains of activities is hardly an invention of Budapest City Hall. In recent years an increasing number of theorists have described the process by which the urban landscape has gradually lost its materiality and has turned into the city's foremost visual representation. As the American sociologist Sharon Zukin wrote in 1995: "The development of visual media in the 20th century made photography and movies the most important cultural means of framing urban space, at least until the 1970s. Since then, as the surrealism of King Kong shifted to that of Blade Runner and redevelopment came to focus on consumption activities, the material landscape itself – the buildings, parks and streets – has become the city's most important visual representation."³

If, in the sense of architectural postmodernism, buildings are reduced to their façades, in conjunction with this, securitizing and sterilizing policies aim to reduce urban streets to postcards, embodying diverse ideals of the civic order customized from a variety of 19th-, 20th- and 21st-century elements. Urban regeneration based on beautified public spaces looks at markets as mere aesthetic phenomena, ignoring their social, economic and ecological dimensions. When neo-liberal urban planning envisions

³ Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 16.

the creation of public goods markets, these are circumscribed, well-targeted markets for an affluent clientele, exclusive to both vendors and customers.

REGULATING MARKETS

If today's markets bother City Halls officials in their very appearance, this is by no means a newly emerging conflict: markets have been seen as disturbing elements by generations of legislators; regulating markets has been on the agenda for the past 150 years. In parallel with the eastward spread of Haussmann's hygienist ideas of urban systematization, and inspired by Napoleon's taxable market halls, concepts of reorganizing food distribution also traveled significant geographical distances. The complex and chaotic food infrastructure developed by the first half of the 19th century was judged to not match the requirements of the modern metropolis: in the 1870s, city leaders agreed upon the need for restricted regulations for food markets. They estimated that there were too many markets in Budapest (44 open-air markets and over 10,000 mobile vendors in the mid-1890s)⁴, without the necessary control, and with medieval standards of hygiene. In response to this "public food supply crisis", a special commission was established in 1879 to oversee the creation of a market hall system, based on Western models.⁵

⁴ András Gerő, "Piac a csarnokban (Market in the Hall)," in Lehel: Tér-piac-vásár-csarnok, ed. Judit Rajk (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2003), 39.

⁵ Ferenc Vadas, "A Surviving Building Type in Budapest," in Market Hall. Expiration Date: To Be Determined, ed. Allan Siegel (Budapest: Ernst Múzeum, 2005), 133-139.

Market halls were not simply covert versions of the previously functioning open-air food markets: they were institutions in themselves, sophisticated tools in the municipality's hand to respond to the challenges of modern urbanization. Through price control, quality assurance and hygiene standards, market halls helped municipal institutions become mediators of urban food consumption, constituting an unsurpassable link in the food chain between farmers and consumers. Municipal control over the food infrastructure aimed at totality: legislation following the construction of market halls proposed that in the districts where new market halls were built the existing markets be prohibited.

Modern market halls consist of clearly distinguishable (and taxable) vending units, and they serve as architectural frames for the rational organization of the traffic of goods and bodies. The spatial arrangement of market halls corresponds to the disciplinary practices of the modern state, described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*: "Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed."⁶ Through their architectural design and the management of goods, market halls exemplify the changing nature of the relationship between the state and the individual that Foucault describes as bio-politics: where food distribution becomes an instrument by which to manage and shape individual bodies and behavior.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books 1995), 142.



Market hall at Szena square in Budapest - between the interior and exterior

SUPERMARKETS, MARKET HALLS AND INFORMAL STREET COMMERCE

The decades under communist leadership in Hungary had their definitive impact not only on politics and the economy, but also on commerce, people's routines, and their use of the city. Following that in the late 19th century, another wave of "modernization" reached markets in the 1980s: in efforts to further centralize commerce, many of Budapest's market halls were converted into supermarkets, further rationalizing food distribution by imposing standards upon agricultural associations and consumers, thus eliminating the link between the latter and food producers.

Similar evolutions took place in the urban public space, another arena of efforts to modernize and control everyday life from the 1950s on. The restructuring of the urban fabric by new housing estates went hand in hand with the transformation of its principal public spa-

ces: residents, discouraged from assembling in squares by perpetual police control, gradually withdrew into private apartments turned into semi-public meeting places. However, formalization and control was not the only direction of change: like places of public assembly, markets also found alternative locations. In parallel with the increasingly controlled and monopolized interior spaces of food commerce, the emerging market economy of the 1980s, together with a blossoming second economy, transformed public spaces into temporary, informal markets where everybody seemed to have something to sell.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, several new market concepts emerged in Hungarian cities. In the early 1990s, "Polish markets", popping up for half or entire days at regular locations in towns of various sizes, offered cheap clothes, household utensils, and technical equipment, sold from mobile stalls or from

the ground by (not only Polish) vendors with hardly any form of certification. In parallel, "MDF markets", initiated by the leading political party of the first democratically elected government and proliferating on sidewalks and in parking lots, provided affordable vegetables and fruits to those impoverished by the recession of the transition years. In an atmosphere where informal markets were tolerated as complementary to formal chains of food and goods distribution, improvised stalls on sidewalks and in parking lots all supported an ambience of libertinism in the market, relatively uncontrolled, where one could barter and bargain.⁷

The importance of semi-informal market arrangements persists today, as food distribution increasingly takes place in supermarkets, and market halls have virtually become the only official alternative. While some of today's market halls in Budapest are internationally renowned as examples of well-functioning markets, they hardly constitute the same network they did over a hundred years ago. Besides the numerous market halls whose renovation was only affordable with the monopolization of the commerce space (by introducing supermarkets dominating the halls' space), there are only a handful of market halls which are still structured around individual vendors' kiosks and stalls. But even "market-like" market halls present significant obstacles to those unable to pay the rental fee for stalls or kiosks inside the hall.

⁷ András Szalai, "The Changing World of the Market and Market Hall," in *Market Hall. Expiration Date: To Be Determined*, ed. Allan Siegel (Budapest: Ernst Múzeum, 2005), 150.

BETWEEN REGULATIONS AND PRACTICES

At a recent conference about street markets, participants agreed that the key to well-functioning markets is good regulation.⁸ Openness to public food markets and street vending is best manifested in tolerant regulations. Changing the regulatory framework to allow street markets to take place implies diversification of the rules and addition of progressive measures and incentives to them. Rules need to be “adaptable to the needs of distinct types of vendors and take into account different reasons for vending.”⁹

Serving as economic incubators, markets can be laboratories of self-employment and enterprise creation, as the Brussels-based activist group City Mine(d) demonstrated in its *Micro-nomics* project: as a result of negotiations with City Hall, City Mine(d) arranged artist status for members of an immigrant community so that they could sell their goods tax- and permit-free at specific markets, learning vending skills, experiencing demand and supply, and moving on to create their own enterprises.¹⁰

However, regulations are not necessarily tools of repression and control; they are also in place to protect consumers as well as residents of a city or neighborhood. Eased regulations can only be reassuring if they function in tandem with reinforced self-control of vendors. As architect László Rajk underlined at the above-mentioned conference in Budapest, vendors must be organized and led by representatives

⁸ A market for every district: food, consumption, urbanism. A conference organized by the Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre, on March 19, 2011, in Budapest. For details, see <http://kek.org.hu/piac/en>.

⁹ Morales, *ibid.*, 428.

¹⁰ For details, see <http://www.citymined.org/>.



PHOTO: HTTP://LAWV.HU/NODE/6065

who can guarantee the quality of food and thus exclude any undesired consequences of food consumption.”

A MARKET AT HUNYADI SQUARE

Economic viability, community cohesion, and access to healthy food and to self-employment in the only remaining open-air food market in Budapest’s inner districts; these were the main arguments activists of the civil organization KAP-HT (Our Treasure, the Market – Hunyadi Square) emphasized when its members entered the fight to protect the market from demolition. KAP-HT was founded by Gabó Bartha in May 2007, when she heard the news that the district’s municipal commission had voted to eliminate the open-air market at

¹¹ László Rajk at the “A market for every district: food, consumption, urbanism” conference, March 19, 2011, Budapest.

Hunyadi Square in order to create an underground parking garage serving the “House of Europe”, a vaguely defined cultural centre to be built in the subsequent years to replace the adjoining market hall. Linking the luxurious Andrassy Avenue to the rapidly gentrifying Király Street area, the Hunyadi Square market has become an indicator of the changing demographics, value systems and consumption patterns of the city as well as of political attitudes towards food markets.

After long negotiations and interventions by the KAP-HT group, the local government took into account the importance of involving local residents in the decision-making process. Meanwhile, they also decided to apply for EU funds together for the renovation of the site. Various participatory exercises were introduced to collect views and opinions on the

planned development, while the impact of the community on the final plans still remained strongly compromised. The proposed plan for the market square envisioned a 500-car parking garage under the square, which went against the agreement of the participating residents. Following an unsuccessful bid to raise EU funding for the planned car park, the local government shifted its focus to smaller interventions like renovating the park, creating a new playground, redesigning the market stalls and turning parts of the square into a moderated traffic zone, thus allowing for more space for the Friday and Saturday markets.

Nevertheless, the conflict was renewed by the local government's plans to clear from the square a significant number of trees, considered unsafe and a danger to public use of the square. KAP-HT's call for independent expertise contributed to a deepening of the disagreement between supporters of the competing plans. Trees thus became crucial in the district's heritage preservation strategy: once the trees are removed, plans for the garage may gain momentum and the existence of the farmers' market may be cast into question. Close cooperation with the district's chief architect did not prevent the market remaining on precarious ground: municipal attempts to reduce its hours of business and to increase the stall rental fee may result in a more exclusive market structure.¹²

The KAP-HT project, in the beginning, consisted of researching the municipality's files

¹² Gabó Bartha, "Rethinking the Marketplace: A Story of Resistance and Proactivity," in *Anatomy of a Street*, ed. Eszter Steierhoffer and Levente Polyák (London: Art Network Agency, 2010), 33.

and launching campaigns to raise awareness of the plans related to the market and the hall. Later, however, the focus of the organization shifted towards less political, more community- and local economy-oriented activities: group activists got involved in the life of the market, elaborating strategies for improving services and product variety (by introducing new herbs and vegetables, extending the selection of goods and foods) as well as opening up alternative channels of communication between the market traders, the wider public, visitors to and customers of the market, and the local authorities.

IN PRAISE OF MARKETS

The polemic around the Hunyadi Square market highlights conceptual differences when it comes to food markets and the use of public space. While the KAP-HT's activities exemplify how an activist group may move from a resistant position to become a project incubator promoting more livable and sustainable neighborhoods and cities, the position of the district's municipal commission fell in line with the city government's repressive public space policy of recent years. If the deputy mayors were unwelcoming toward the phenomenon of street commerce, community activists like Gabó Bartha, in contrast, applauded it: "I find it senseless that municipalities want to erase a market in the name of modernization. Let's modernize the market by renovating the stalls, to make the market cleaner, but its obliteration cannot be justified. It is enough to look at the contemporary European scene of outdoor markets to realize the importance of markets in communities, commerce and food security."¹³

¹³ Interview with Gabó Bartha, September 22, 2007.

Researchers of food markets and urban scholars tend to agree with these remarks. Plans to ban open-air vending are all the more bemusing that open-air markets are enjoying increasing popularity worldwide. The proliferation of public market guides for tourists and special issues of gastronomic magazines are evidence of the emergence of a new idea of markets: in the tourism industry's quest for authenticity, open-air markets are often appreciated as public spaces par excellence that by being local and global at the same time transmit a sense of familiarity, and where rare encounters with local people and local products are made possible.¹⁴ Food enthusiasts emphasize that the experience of food consumption is intensified at markets: the sensory dimensions of buying food at markets transforms the practice of shopping.¹⁵ In addition to this, markets may play a number of crucial roles in urban neighborhoods.

In the scholarly and popular literature, markets are often described as genuine public spaces of a particular kind: while functioning as meeting places for local communities, they also offer contexts for intergenerational encounters and for the exchange of non-primary information, such as jobs, sales and possibilities.¹⁶ Furthermore, they can be considered pillars of public health, by providing affordable fresh food, supporting biodiver-

¹⁴ Shira Brand, "Markets and the City, Traditional Spaces of Commerce for a Global Society," in *Market Hall...* op. cit., 156.

¹⁵ Allan Siegel, "Introduction," in *Market Hall...* op. cit., 105-107.

¹⁶ Allan Siegel at the "A market for every district: food, consumption, urbanism" conference, March 19, 2011, Budapest.

sity, promoting fair trade, and enhancing the access to commercial activities of people with a very low profit margin, often at the peripheries of society.¹⁷ In another perspective, by serving multiple constituencies, from low-income city residents to gourmets, markets may enhance social and ethnic integration.¹⁸ These dimensions all highlight the public interest in maintaining markets: by turning markets into schools and health centers, the Barcelona municipality projects seem to exemplify the concept of the market as a public institution.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Various historical periods added their own regulatory systems to markets and halls, thus further complicating the selling and buying processes at open-air food markets. In this history, regulations are of crucial importance: regulations can be used as pretexts to eliminate street markets, but they can also engender market activities, thus creating thriving markets, and better public health and employment possibilities.

There is a striking difference between conflicting understandings of “order” in public spaces. If in the Middle Ages and in the early modern age, official documents, chronicles and descriptions used the terms “mixed-use” and “prosperity” as synonyms, this was an expression of the concern that “establishing useful (physical and legal) boundaries might also provoke a diminution of ‘disorder’ which

¹⁷ Steven Balkin, *Self-employment for low-income people*, (New York: Praeger, 1989)

¹⁸ Brand, *ibid.*, 154.

¹⁹ Jordi Tolra at the “A market for every district: food, consumption, urbanism” conference, March 19, 2011, Budapest.

might be interpreted as a sign of economic decline.”²⁰

In contrast, “disorder” and “prosperity” are seen today by many in municipal governments as mutually exclusive. If urban policymakers in many cities (including Budapest) have not acknowledged the opportunities markets offer, activists and civil organizations have recognized many of the findings of researchers studying markets. The success of KAP-HT exemplifies the ways in which conflicts related to markets are intertwined with dilemmas of public space design and regulations, of local economy and employment, of public health and affordable fresh food, of community cohesion and sociability, and of corruption, among others. Faithful to their tradition, markets may prove to be important tools for urban

²⁰ Donatella Calabi, *The Market and the City: Square, Street and Architecture in Early Modern Europe* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 95.

planning, and highly instrumental in creating sustainable cities: to really understand their influence on urban processes, we have no choice but to conceive them at the intersection of all the domains they belong to.



An informal market next to the market hall at the Hunyadi square