**REDISCOVERING MARKETS**

I was introduced to the profound social significance of markets when I was living in West Africa in the 1970s. I arrived at the compound of my host family in north-east Ghana to find the whole extended family excitedly preparing for a market to be held the next day. The women were potting their “pito” (millet beer), the men were rounding up livestock, and everyone was discussing what they would wear. The was the “Day Before Market Day” and we were told how lucky it was that we had arrived on such a day.

The next day was “Market Day” and it was a splendid occasion. People came from miles around, drank far too much pito, exchanged gossip, arranged marriage betrothals, bartered for goods. Inexplicably I came with a baby goat home I don’t remember buying.

The next day was all rest and recuperation, as befitted the “Day After Market Day”. But then the next day was the “Day Before Market Day “ again – it was an exhausting three day cycle, a veritable social whirl.

More recently I became familiar with the economic significance of markets when working for the UN in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. My consultancy was charged with mapping out market activities (56 markets in all) and then promoting improvements in a selected group of markets over a two year period. It was readily apparent that some of these markets were critically important to local and national economies, turning primary produce into cash and starting an extended chain of value adding. The larger markets had literally thousands of traders as well as thousands of customers, with a cumulative annual turnover in the millions of dollars. Not without reason was the betel nut market in the PNG Highland town of Goroko called the World Trade Centre!

It was also clear that the politicians in these countries as well as international aid agencies tended to view markets as secondary to the formal economy, pushing aside their real importance. As a result there was constant pressure for the larger central markets to be moved more peripheral locations, making way for offices and the like. In Port Vila, capital of Vanuatu, the main food market and adjacent craft market are located on a central waterfront that is of considerable interest to tourism developers. I worked out that the combined site generated ten times the amount of money that could be expected from a successful tourist resort.

Of course the importance of these markets was not only measured in economic terms. They provided access to the necessities of life for a majority of the population, in a way that would not be achievable through formal shopping infrastructure. This vital role was well illustrated when a cyclone hit Fiji in the middle of our project, and the first sign of recovery was only days afterwards as the informal markets became re-established, so that people could buy their food and other household necessities.

Throughout the world we are aware that markets had a significant role to play in the history of urbanisation. Establishing places where people could trade goods and services enabled societies to move from a subsistence economy, creating specialisation of production and generating wealth. This was the foundation for building towns and cities, as well as strengthening positive relationships across territorial boundaries. Markets back then were much more than just places for trade – they were central to political and cultural development.

The multifunctional role of markets has been retained in some of the Melanesian markets I visited, where the following activities were apparent:

* buying fresh produce and other goods with known provenance
* comparison shopping for price and quality, seeking the best bargain
* recycling damaged and substandard goods
* earning a living
* new business incubation
* meeting people (old friends and new acquaintances)
* eating and drinking
* getting involved in participative activities (darts, cards)
* being entertained (music, performance)
* enjoying the space and colours, smells etc
* getting specific local information
* finding out what is happening more generally
* political lobbying
* advertising
* looking for particular people (information on their whereabouts)
* accessing services provided (advice, child care, banking, transport)
* tourism – finding out about local culture
* emergency relief
* courtship
* gambling, and…
* prostitution, pick pocketing and money laundering.

A resurgence in the popularity of markets is apparent in the western world, recognising many of the more positive social and cultural opportunities. Buyers appreciate being able to find out where their food comes from by establishing relationships with growers and producers, as well as being able to smell, touch, see and taste a wide variety of fresh produce, and seek best value from competitively priced goods. But not only this, there is a sense of excitement about the frenzied activities in a market, and a clear differentiation in the sense of place emanating from different markets. There is often entertainment to be had, people to meet, and a whole cultural experience that our increasingly homogenous supermarkets and shopping malls lack. A social mix of traders and customers is apparent across age, ethnicity and class, and being in this melting pot is part of the positive experience. The economic role of markets is also increasingly recognised, with this informal sector enabling people to gain a toehold on the economy, through business start-up, as a basis for building their enterprises. Now as at all times throughout history, markets can be business incubators which ultimately strengthen the formal economy.

This concept has been taken further in the USA, particularly relating to the market’s role as a food centre. Some locally based markets have been developed into more broadly based Food Innovation Hubs. In this model the hub acts as an adjunct to the market, and provides food growers and processers with facilities for packaging, processing, product development, market testing and promotion. Unlike a few top-down food innovation centres developed in Australia and New Zealand, which are geared to big business and export products, the US hubs are very much grounded in the local community to support farmers and small businesses. They have been funded by State or local government, as well as corporate sponsors, but they remain in local management. In Hawaii the Food Innovation Centre is based at the university, but it similarly acts as a business incubator for local farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs, and it has a further role in supporting Hawaii’s food security. In the event of a cyclone or other event which might disrupt food imports, this food hub can prepare meals for mass distribution – resonant of the role of Melanesia’s informal markets.

So markets can be much more than places to shop. Nevertheless, their prime role is to facilitate buying and selling of food as well as other goods, and in this their popularity is resurgent. So why are markets becoming increasingly popular at precisely the same time as consumers are moving away from personal contact to do more of their shopping online? Well maybe this is part of the same pattern of rediscovery. If there is no cultural and social value to the shopping experience in supermarkets and shopping malls, and no concern about provenance, then shopping online becomes more logical. However as the social and cultural dimensions of the shopping experience are missed, including the contact between producers and consumers, this gap can be well filled by occasional or regular visits to informal markets. Markets provide an intensified emotional and functional experience which can compensate for sterility in other aspects of the urban environment.

We are clearly at a crossroads in redefining how we buy and sell goods within urban centres, as well as how we enjoy urban space. The opportunities for markets to meet our needs has often been overlooked in the past, with markets being dismissed as an anachronism. Maybe we got this wrong, and overlooked the many ways in which markets can enrich our lives in urban centres. Maybe we need to go back to where it all began, and rediscover the multiple functions and pleasures of the marketplace.