

Editorial

Public Marketplaces Promoting Resilience and Sustainability

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Marketplaces and vendors weave together social integration, ecological awareness and caring, and economic inclusivity. A century ago, public markets were recognized and established by governments to ameliorate shocks in urban systems from inadequate food access, unemployment, and immigration [1]. More recently, the many benefits of markets have been characterized, and research has described the utility of markets for community development [2,3]. Pre-COVID, marketplaces had been left to their own devices. During COVID, markets have proven themselves to be wicked opportunities, adaptive to any variety of threats. We need to understand how marketplaces are resources in their practices of responding to myriad threats, from climate change to COVIDs.

Marketplaces are oriented to local and regional agriculture, crafts, and other products, recycle used goods, and provide important sources of interaction and information in communities. They are difficult to define and measure, unclear in cause and effect, and have no foreseeable ending point. They are celebrated as “eyes” in the community and on the street and castigated for not conforming to the expectations of modern retail establishments, whether the “pop-up” shop or the mall, which is in decline around the world.

Marketplaces persist and have for thousands of years. The future will prove no different. Marketplaces will survive regulation, conflict, and new forms of retail. Why? Because they are responsive to changing conditions: Because the vendors making them up are constantly integrating local responses to regional, national, and even global trends, because the spirit of trade persists across time and place, and because face-to-face interaction remains, so far, an irreplaceable aspect of human life.

Let me elaborate on this last point by showing how markets and market managers navigate and manipulate these interwoven systems to produce impactful, if unforeseen, results of their activities. For brevity, I will focus on four of the articles found in this issue.

Let us begin with the market manager. Ledesma et al. foregrounds the work of a role otherwise unnoticed until there is a problem out of market and often ignored in the literature (exceptions include [4]). The authors show how managers think strategically when empowered to do so. Furthermore, they show that applied research partnerships can be repurposed for different organizations with similar interests. Imagine the market manager’s typical day, filled with concerns about posting signage, ensuring the vendors are set up, welcoming and dealing with customer complaints and praise, the mundanity of excellence is in the details of daily activities. However, what we see on the surface belies the complexity of partnerships the market manager maintains with government officials, foundations, businesses, and other organizations. In need of decision support and data to help tell the story of the market, market managers turn to academic partners. Those academic partners became research assistance to the market managers in creating and implementing the Farm 2 Facts software toolkit. This toolkit supports managers to transform the uncertainties of partnerships, the unpredictability of ongoing experiments in practicing communities, and to reveal opportunities to exploit data in support of collaborative work.

Of course, such transformations cannot happen unless partners agree to proceed abductively incorporating the manager’s perspective, beginning with manager perceptions and needs while going about their activities, integrated with, and supported as needed by research and communities of practice. It is true that market contexts differ, it is also true that



Citation: Morales, A. Public Marketplaces Promoting Resilience and Sustainability. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 6025. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116025>

Received: 29 April 2021

Accepted: 26 May 2021

Published: 27 May 2021

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the purposes of vendors, consumers, managers, etc., limit the variety of ways that managers, in any given place, implement their market(s). This means that well executed research can, in Farm 2 Facts' case, produce a tool kit that serves markets in different contexts, rural and urban, around the United States and Canada. Spatial and temporal scales, as well as social scale, are all very important and bridged by our contemporary analytic and communicative opportunities. Therefore, tools (like F2F) should foster data collection, analyses, and reporting that can be aggregated and compared across specific metrics, geographies, and over time, by market organizations, academics, and policymakers.

A second example is the work of Warsaw et al. In this important update of early research indicating the multiple benefits of marketplaces, the authors detail the many opportunities communities can avail themselves of through markets. While markets produce economic benefits through job creation, income, farm opportunities and the like, the authors go on to suggest many new benefits markets have, responding as they do to local manifestations of larger problems and opportunities. For instance, markets were part of the turn towards local food in the late 1960s and 1970s, and since then, the opportunities provided by the growing interest in local foods as well as markets have been increasingly mutually reinforcing. This means that at one and the same time consumers see markets as opportunities for more than just consumption, market managers see markets as opportunities for more than just sales, and the two taken together act on these opportunities (often with other partners) in mutually beneficial ways.

In the spirit of Ledesma et al., which shows the importance of empowering market managers, and Edmunds and Carsjens (discussed next), which shows the importance of the invisible infrastructure of law and ordinance, Warsaw and colleagues advance our understanding of research needs in the field. For instance, they call for new research to reveal how participation in a market relates to adopting farming practices in keeping with ecosystem services. Again, at its root, such a question connects individual choice with purposes both individual and public. It is this interpretive moment that we need further and deeper exploration of, and one example in this regard is the work of Morales on public order in marketplaces [5]. Thankfully, Warsaw and colleagues remind us that investment in marketplaces, as other activities, can produce negative impacts on communities of people. They call for research that identifies " . . . equitable distribution of the benefits that markets provide to their local communities". Of course, this means that the work of markets is never-ending, even when marketplace practices might momentarily be detoured to accommodate the reflection and redistribution of the costs and risks of activities.

A third example is the work of Edmunds and Carsjens, whose empirical investigation of the place of markets in Michigan municipal law finds that, despite their importance, farmers' markets are often not codified into law. Markets should be codified in policy and municipal ordinances to ensure they can operate as part of the public sphere and in the service of public interests. Edmunds and Carsjens make a point salient to the idea of markets as wicked opportunities when they write, "By giving disproportionate attention to one type of food system activity (urban agriculture), because it causes headline-generating conflict, puts other activities (like markets) at risk of being overlooked and ignored". Indeed, the mundane market grabs few headlines and goes unacknowledged for the many positive benefits it brings to society. Generally speaking, markets, because they are a habitual part of our social spaces, can be recruited and repurposed to explicitly produce context-sensitive solutions to many social problems and can be responsive to emergent opportunities that integrate community and government.

Edmunds and Carsjens point out the interpretive moment, where purpose meets problem and transforms both into opportunities. Municipal law is about definition and implementation. How marketplaces are defined in municipal law can limit their implementation as "wicked opportunities". Hence, it is incumbent on government officials, market managers, and the public to interpret their experiences to each other and show, as they did 100 years ago, that the services markets provide can extend beyond the obvious and historical into achieving purposes yet to be determined.

Still, despite the quality of the work in this issue and that of the research reported elsewhere, we have much to learn about marketplaces. First, we have the question of framing marketplaces, hence my essay on Wicked Opportunities found in this issue. However, let us contemplate some questions of scale as well. Consider first the nation-state context, we have good research about individual markets in particular places, we have some historical studies, but we lack contemporary knowledge of market organizations and their role in regional geographies. We need longitudinal data to help us disentangle the reciprocal relationships between markets and other elements of their political-economic context (this might be the place of markets in state analyses of local foods [6]). Second, we must remember how important trade has been historically and how responsive it has been to demographic differences. Our work must comprehend demographic differences at markets and how such differences become opportunities of various kinds (such differences might be in identities of vendor/farmers, neighborhood, or incorporating age). Third, we need research on supra-market relationships to other important social goals, such as health surveillance, community resilience, and responsiveness to external shocks, whether they are economic, health, or ecological. These articulations are of fundamental interest and importance (see the work of Michele Companion). Of course, we need to locate the market in the ongoing formation of socio-political identities. Finally, we need to increase the applied research that utilizes technology, artificial intelligence, for instance, its connections to cyber infrastructure, and subsequent uses of AI that connect and leverage local and particular marketplace ecosystems to entrepreneurship, public health, and community development. We have to remember that historically markets served many functions, and they are likely underutilized today. This means, of course, that the marketplace is a wicked opportunity.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to Arden He, Brian Wiedenfeld, and Catie DeMets, for their useful comments and critiques of an earlier draft.

Conflicts of Interest: Morales was a co-founder of Farm 2 Facts as described in Ledesma et al.

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