

From civic institution to community place: the meaning of the public market in modern America

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Abstract This paper examines the discursive transformation of the historic American public market from that of a municipally regulated institution intended to ensure fair trade and equitable food distribution to “a public place” that emphasizes community identity and sociability. Using a semiotic analysis of interviews with 31 market managers of 30 historic and contemporary American public markets, data from historic documents, and multiple site visits, we compare the social construction of the contemporary public market to farmers markets, supermarkets, and the early twentieth century public market. We analyze the meanings managers create in the contemporary public market to understand the administrative rationalities within which the public market operates. Our analysis reveals evidence of competing imaginaries active in the public market, organized around broad notions of “public benefit,” “community culture” and “institutional viability.” We propose that these tensions are embedded in the public market as an institution historically implicated in regimes of food distribution. In the contemporary context, we conclude, public markets largely substitute the spectacle of community and the image of an historic public life for a legally instated commitment to the just governance of food systems.

Keywords Public market · Farmers market · Alternative food sites · Semiotic analysis · Urban food system · Third place · Market managers · Vendors

Introduction: the public market and contemporary urban revitalization

Marketplaces of various types—public markets, farmers’ markets, and the like—are at a crossroads; in them purposes old and emergent, are rediscovered and realized. Morales (2011, p. 3)

In the proliferating studies of alternative food networks, relatively little attention has been paid to the modern revival of the public market. Scholars defer instead to farmers markets as “the most prevalent and public institution within alternative agrifood systems,” one thus providing an “important standpoint from which to examine the everyday discourses and practices that fulfill the movement’s vision” (Alkon and McCullen 2011, p. 938). What it means to be a “public institution” in this context warrants greater consideration, however.¹ Although fewer in number, public markets arguably have harnessed more formalized support on the part of foundations, non-governmental agencies, and municipal planning authorities than farmers markets. The identification of farmers markets as “public institutions” also, if indirectly, raises a question

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¹ Alkon and McCullen (2011, p. 941) reference farmers markets as “public spaces in which political activity is already present.” They note “We spell farmers markets without the apostrophe to connote that they belong to all of the managers, customers and vendors who play active roles in their creation and functioning... (R)ecasting farmers markets as consisting of farmers, rather than belonging to them, implies that farmers markets are a public resource rather than the property of the most prominent vendors” (endnote 1, p. 951).

regarding the categorical relationship between “farmers markets” and “public markets.” The USDA, for example, does not distinguish between them;² Brown’s (2001) influential discussion of market classification does, but she largely parses their *material* differences. Thus, farmers markets are “generally considered to be recurrent markets at fixed locations where farm products are sold by farmers themselves”; public markets are “the various forms of retail food markets that, while containing multiple vendors, possibly including some producers, do not enforce regulations about product origin” (Brown 2001, p. 658, 670; compare Moran 2013).

The source of this confusion, we will suggest, is inherent in the political and economic systems of thought underlying the modern reinvention of the public market, which subsume these different types of markets into the category of “marketplace.” More immediately relevant is the *legal* history of the public market as a form of urban infrastructure critical to the regulation of food and its equitable distribution to city residents. Superintended by city authority, it was a mechanism of social as well as civic order (see Baics 2012; Donofrio 2007; Goodwin 1929; Mayo 1991; Novak 1993; Rogers 1919; Steel 2013; Tangires 1997, 2003). More profoundly, their operations expressed the ideals of distributive justice and a public economy in which commerce, trade, and economics were regarded as fundamentally public in nature, “created, shaped, and regulated by the polity via public law” (Novak 1993, p. 2). The near disappearance of public markets during the mid-twentieth century, and their re-emergence in the late twentieth century—more or less coincident with the national surge in farmers markets—should alert us to larger structural transformations reshaping the role of state authority in the governance of food and urban spaces.

In other words, the public market is an institution explicitly implicated in, and thus symptomatic of, transforming regimes of food distribution and, by extension, discourses of food equity. We set its reappearance in the context of neoliberal urban policy experiments “to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, p. 368; also Zukin 1990). Signs of a “public market revival” were visible in the United States by the late 1980s, characterized as part of the efforts to revitalize urban spaces by rebuilding urban food security (Burke 1978; Deering and Ptucha 1987). In the twenty-first century, public markets have nominally joined farmers markets as, simultaneously, “alternatives to the

industrial food distribution system and as civic institutions capable of generating a wide range of public benefits” (Zade 2009, p. 127). Urban planners, non-governmental organizations, preservationists and others identify public markets as spurs for community and economic development (Lum 2007; Morales 2009, 2011; Spitzer and Baum 1995; see also Donofrio 2009) and, in the case of historic markets, anchors for a “long-held sense of identity and place within many cities and towns” (Gentry 2013).

In spite of these claims—or perhaps because of them—little research exists on contemporary public markets beyond limited case studies that assume, in various ways, their viability and relevance as community resources (Project for Public Spaces 2003a, b; Anderson 2004; Donofrio 2009; Zade 2009; Gentry 2013).³ We take one step to fill this gap by using semiotic analysis to discern how the social meanings of the public market have changed over the last century. Broadly, we ask what role does the public market play in the social imaginary—the constellation of symbols and values that shape social practice—as an alternative form of marketplace in the twenty-first century. Goodman (2010) notes that socially just food provisioning, largely identified with forms of localized production and consumption, remains prominent in the imaginary of alternative food systems (compare Allen 2010). To what extent then, do the historic meanings of purpose in the public market, emphasizing food access and social equity, translate to contemporary efforts to achieve broad social benefit?

While studies of alternative sites of food provision have tended to focus on consumption, we are specifically concerned with how public market managers interpret public markets as part of an organizational culture materially and imaginatively embedded in urban settings, to understand the interplay between images that support behaviors within so-called alternative spaces of consumption and the instrumental processes of management. Namely, as modern public markets have nominally—and increasingly—been identified with a charge that is public-policy oriented (health, food access, etc.), one more traditionally associated with government, the role of management is critical. How managers construe that role is even more important. Organizational research suggests that managers’ ideologies and values relate to organizational decision-making and behaviors (Beyer 1981; Chatov 1973; Hambrick and Mason 1984; Cannella et al. 2008). Managers are key actors within public markets who nominally embed and transmit organizational assumptions and values (see Schein 2010). They sit, therefore, in a unique position to provide

² USDA Farmers Market Directory (n.d.) and Spitzer and Baum (1995) regard farmers markets as a form of public market; Bukenya et al. (2007) conversely describe public markets as “the most popular of ... ‘new generation’ farmers markets” (p. 12).

³ See also Morales (2011) who reviews the literature on marketplaces broadly defined, with suggestions for further basic and applied research.

institutional insight into the public market as an alternative site of food provisioning, one that differs markedly from farmers markets in terms of scale, organizational complexity, and capital investment.

The paper proceeds as follows: we begin by introducing the socio-spatial narrative that has shaped the contemporary revival of the public market. This is codified in the seminal *Public Markets and Community Revitalization* produced by the Project for Public Spaces in partnership with the Urban Land Institute (Spitzer and Baum 1995). In the next section, we present our study methodology. In the fourth section, we review two semiotic techniques, followed by the data analysis and findings. There, we contrast the cultural signs embedded in the contemporary public market to those of the early twentieth century market, to farmers markets, and to supermarkets. We then explore in greater detail the meaning managers create in the contemporary public market and conclude with the implications of our findings.

The contemporary reinvention of the public market

The Project for Public Spaces has been a singular force in promoting the development of public markets, based on their traditional role in urban food provisioning. Published in 1995, *Public Markets and Community Revitalization* offers a model for developing a successful public market, making the first extended claim for their relevance in modern cities (Spitzer and Baum 1995). It proposes, in effect, to bring to life the otherwise abstract economic concept that anchors the rationalities of neoliberal thought: “the market” as it advances human well-being. Appealing to an ideal of the “universal market experience” and the vision of a renewed sense of public life “alive with vitality and commerce,” the public market embodies an authentic place of locally-based exchange, a common ground “where people feel comfortable to mix, mingle and enjoy the serendipitous pleasures of strolling, socializing... and shopping in a special environment” (Spitzer and Baum 1995, p. 1–2). To this end, the authors note the need for a wider, more inclusive concept of “public market” that moves beyond municipal ownership and operation to embrace entities of “different shapes and settings”: “many farmers’ [sic] markets, crafts markets, and even some flea markets” (Spitzer and Baum 1995, p.1). Three overarching (if tautologically assigned) determinants now define a market as “public”: (1) public goals that define the public purpose or benefit derived from the market activity (2) the market’s location in (or creation of) a public space—defined as open, easily accessible, and hospitable—and (3) tenants comprised of locally owned and operated businesses (Spitzer and Baum 1995, p. 1–2).

The reinvention of the public market as a sign of the “traditional marketplace” nonetheless masks its reality as a commercial business enterprise (Zade 2009; also DeLind 2011). It locates the historic origin of urban life and spontaneous social interaction in the “free market” of capitalist society (Goss 1996; see also Agnew 1979), serving the claim that “public markets can address social and economic problems without the need for on-going subsidy.” The public market thus achieves “public sector goals through the harnessing of private sector means” (Spitzer and Baum 1995, p. 1, 7). These goals include promoting public health through increased access to healthy, local fresh food; linking rural and urban economies for enhanced regional development; providing economic opportunity through small business and entrepreneur incubation, especially for minorities, immigrants and women; and creating active, diverse public spaces (Spitzer and Baum 1995; Project for Public Spaces, n.d.(a). In the following sections we investigate how public market managers navigate these goals.

Study methods and procedures

This project unfolded in three phases. In phase 1, we conducted site visits, background reading (e.g., “public market” feasibility studies), and literature reviews to develop a preliminary set of research and interview questions. We also drew heavily on the second author’s 20-year involvement with the local public market and the local food movement. In phase 2, we identified our market population. To minimize the inconsistencies of classification and description, we began with the markets listed in the *1918 Census for Municipal Markets in Cities Having a Population Over 30,000* (Rogers 1919). The 1918 survey itself was a comprehensive effort to inventory and more rigorously classify public markets irrespective of their physical attributes (e.g., “enclosed,” “open-air markets,” and the like). Through Internet searches, we confirmed the existence (or demise) of the 237 public markets reported in the 1918 Census, ultimately locating 33. In addition, we incorporated a list of public markets solicited from the Project for Public Spaces, excluding five located outside the U.S. (in Canada). We further relied on word-of-mouth to identify eight additional markets, self-identified as public markets. Our final study sample consisted of 52 historic and 23 contemporary public markets created between 1730 and 2013.⁴ For each market, we developed a

⁴ For the purposes of the present study, we defined “historic markets” as those originally listed in the 1918 census report and/or that were established prior to the 1950s, after which migration of food retailing to suburbs and shopping centers was dominant (Cohen 1996). The following are more specific creation date ranges and the

profile based on data publicly available, largely through the markets' websites, recording operational factors such as the mission statement, hours open, management structure, as well as their individual history.

We contacted the manager for each market, often multiple times, to request an interview. Questions were sent in advance to those managers who agreed to be interviewed. From August to October 2013, we interviewed 31 managers from 30 markets (in one case we interviewed two managers from the same market) and conducted two background interviews, following a semi-structured interview format. Interviews ran between 30 and 90 min, to result in more than 26 hours of interview data. Questions included those that were market-specific (e.g., "Describe your market for us" and "What role does it play in your town/city?"), vendor-specific (e.g., "What are your requirements for who can be a vendor?"), management-specific (e.g., "What is your business model?"), and open-ended (e.g., "Where do you see the market in 5 or 10 years?"). Respondents were assured anonymity.⁵ Following each interview, we noted our first impressions of the data. To become even more grounded in the data, we either transcribed the interviews ourselves or reviewed carefully those we had professionally transcribed.

We separately made field visits to a total of 22 public markets located within a day's driving distance of our homes or near a travel destination, though not all visits occurred within the August–October time period. We photographed the markets inside and outside, capturing our initial impressions in field notes made shortly after the site visits.

In phase 3, we coded the data using Dedoose, a web-based mixed-methods data analysis software program (see dedoose.com), in three stages. First, we coded the data for quantitative descriptor variables, such as the market manager's age, the market's establishment date, or the market space in square feet. Broadly speaking, the markets we studied had the following attributes. The managers represented 13 historic and 17 contemporary markets, with all but two being operated continuously since their incep-

tions.⁶ Nineteen of the public markets we profiled only had indoor space, and the square footage averaged 27,913 feet; outdoor square footage averaged 28,395. The number of vendors at the market ranged from less than 15 to more than 140. Six managers identified their markets as "farmers" markets, one identified his market as "private," and the remaining 24 managers identified their markets as "public." Markets were open from 1 to 7 days per week, with self-identified farmers markets open 1–3 days. Eight markets retained the legal structure that historically defined a market as "public"; that is, they were municipally owned and operated.⁷

We then coded for broad categories that loosely followed our interview questions, such as the various roles that the markets serve for customers, community, and producers. In the third phase we moved more deeply into the data with the semiotic analysis. Following Feldman (1995), Manning (1987), Barley (1983), and Weber et al. (2008), we conducted two types of analyses that look at semiotic "chains" and semiotic "clustering," which we describe below.

Semiotics and the linguistic frame

Semiotics studies the role of signs and systems of signification—the modes of the production of meaning—as part of social life. These systems include "the processes by which events, words, behaviors and objects carry meaning for the members of a given community, and... the content they convey" (Barley 1983, p. 394). Semiotic analysis has been a critical interpretative method in cultural studies inasmuch as it allows one to make explicit that which is normally implicit; we use it here to reveal the scaffolding of beliefs that legitimates and sustains particular ideas of the public market. As we suggest above, this type of analysis is particularly apt for the public market, itself a complex sign bound to changing ideas of urban vitality. Semiotic systems of meaning are active elements constructing the legitimacy of public markets as instruments of a broad polity. Describing why markets should be "tools"

Footnote 4 continued

relevant number of markets included in this study. Historic markets: 1730–1791 (3), 1802–1888 (10), and 1909–1935 (4). Contemporary markets: 1968–1997 (5) and 2001–2013 (8).

⁵ For reference in this article, we labeled the market managers with a two-letter state abbreviation and a number to distinguish multiple markets from the same state (e.g., PA1). The number accords with the original list of 75, rather than with the 30 studied markets. For example, we contacted thirteen markets in Pennsylvania, numbering them PA1 to PA13; however, only five of these markets participated in the study.

⁶ A self-identified "pop-up" "farmers market" retained the name of the historic market and located in its original site, but was not the same market.

⁷ We distinguished between market ownership (legal), management (agents of the owners), and legal ownership of the building or, in the case of open-air markets, the land that hosted the market. Given this delineation, government authorities and municipalities owned 12 markets, managed 8 of them, but owned 16 market structures and the land on which 6 open-air markets operated. Not-for-profits owned 12 markets, operated 15 of them, and owned 2 of the market structures. Private, for-profit organizations owned 5 of the markets, managed 6 of them, and owned 4 of the market structures. Lastly, vendors owned (including the market structure) and operated one market.

of planning and policy for example, Morales writes (without registering, however, the semiotic frame for his observation), “marketplaces represent the community, epitomize the community, and are symbols in the community” (2011, p. 12). Semiotic analysis assumes that these discursive meanings embody and shape the views of social actors, and thus the social impact their actions have. We use it to discern how public market managers symbolically shape their world to produce coherence and organize their actions accordingly (praxis) (Barley 1983).

Signs consist of a signifier and a signified, which produce meaning through different processes, generally conveyed as metonymy, metaphor, and opposition. *Metonymy* indicates an association between the signifier and the signified, which occupies the same domain of meaning, enabling the former to “stand” for the latter though their qualities are not necessarily transferable. Hence the public market, once a traditional feature of urban settlements, functions in microcosm as a metonym for the city as a whole (compare Barley 1983). But “the marketplace” also signifies across conceptual domains, as a *metaphor* for good government (and its by-products, justice, peace, and prosperity)—an historic urban symbology bolstered by the market’s proximity to courthouses and jails (Tangires 2003; Steel 2013)—as well as for commodity exchange (Agnew 1979).

Lastly, signs can map their meanings by *opposition*, as “a symbol of what it is not” (Feldman 1995, p. 22). Zade (2009), for example, describes public markets as alternatives to the industrial food distribution system. The market thus signifies a form of localization and artisanal production in opposition to mechanized, standardized means of conventional food distribution; as a “civic institution” it further stands in opposition to what can be taken as the interests of a corporatized food economy.

A component of semiotics is the analytic distinction between two types of signifieds, a *denotative* signified and a *connotative* signified (Chandler 2013). “Denotative meanings” refer to the different ways one has observed or heard people use the concept of interest, its literal primary meaning. “Connotative meanings” are associative (ideological, emotional, etc.) notions, occurring in addition to an object’s literal or primary meaning. The significance of their operations in constructing the modern meanings of the public market will be discussed later.

Below we use two semiotic analytic techniques—semiotic chains and semiotic clusters—to explore the meaning of the public market through the eyes of market managers. A semiotic *chain* analysis reveals “how a culture manifests a particular opposition” (Feldman 1995, p. 40). It examines the continuous process of signification through which meaning is materialized in a range of

different but linked relationships (Kress 2000). By comparison, the cultural framing of the public market becomes clear by analyzing the “clustering” of signs; it enables discovery of relevant institutional concerns and concomitant strategies.

Comparing public markets, farmers markets, supermarkets

Through three semiotic chain analyses, we examine how the discourse around public markets manifests cultural meanings and their consequence for understanding markets as both symbolic and material. Each chain examines two domains that emerged in opposition during our study: the contemporary “public market” compared to the “public market” of the early twentieth century, the contemporary “farmers market,” and the contemporary “supermarket.” We present these semiotic chains in Tables 1, 2 and 3. On either side of the tables are denotative (explicit) and connotative (implicit) meanings associated with one or the other side of the opposition. The denotative meanings themselves consist of an *expression* and *content*: the “expression” is what is observed about the market and “the content” reflects the values attached to this observation. The “connotation” is the associative level of meanings that suggests cultural constructs underlying this worldview.

Early twentieth century public market versus contemporary public market

The semiotic domain of the public market as construed in 2013 can usefully be contrasted to that of the early twentieth century public market. The latter was shaped by deteriorating urban conditions during the period before World War I: rising food prices, the need to provide “facilities for a flow of fresh and abundant food supplies” (Libbin 1913), and the challenge to municipally controlled food distribution from private market corporations, grocery and chain stores (King 1917), which pushed public authorities to “reform” existing public markets and construct new ones that would serve as civic amenities (Tangires 1997; Donofrio 2007).

As a basis for their recommendations, numerous government agencies surveyed existing urban markets. Particularly valuable is the comprehensive *Municipal Markets in Cities Having a Population of Over 30,000*, conducted in 1918 by the Bureau of the Census (Rogers 1919). In addition to a detailed classification system for the markets, it contains a systematic set of definitions and a set of principles to guide the purpose and financial administration of markets, as well as examples effectively justifying their

Table 1 Semiotic chain analysis of 1918 public market domain versus contemporary public market domain

1918 Public market			2013 Public market		
Connotations	Denotations		Denotations		Connotations
	Expression	Content	Content	Expression	
Civic responsibility and accountability	Held on public property (inside, shed, curb)	Municipal oversight of trade; regulatory enforcement; allows municipality to broker, distribute food in emergency	Market manager in charge of operations; often reports to a board of directors	Held on public or private property, usually inside, sometimes with farmers outside; easily accessed; open to public	Managerial efficiency; “business-like”
Affordability	Mandated low rents	More profitable for vendors, who pass savings (low prices) to customers; helps retain vendors	Affordable opportunities for vendors; additional outlet for established producers	Low rents sometimes; may charge sales percentage; high rents for indoor merchants; daily fees for farmers, artisans	Vendor incubation
Convenience	Variety of goods available for sale, but types of goods restricted (e.g., fresh farm products)	More efficient for shoppers, needs in one place (analogy made to department store, a relatively new model of retailing)	Right kind of product mix will better serve customers’ expectations	Seek the right kind of vendor mix (OH5, PA13) versus others who don’t plan it (NY3)	Customer-driven, proactive management
Fiscal probity	Building must be appropriate to the market’s needs; no undue overhead	Aesthetics a luxury; market architecture should reflect fiscal probity	Historic building (if relevant) enhances shopping experience	Aesthetically and/or historically significant building	Cultural preservation
Fiscal responsibility	Market must be self-sustaining; not operated for considerable profit	Attribute of a public market	The market’s survival as a cultural icon is sometimes more important than its profitability	Not always self-sustaining; often relies on municipal subsidies (e.g., cash or services)	Civic symbol
Synergy with growers	Flexible hours, days to accommodate products, vendors	Attribute of a public market	Predictable access; optimized to capture foot traffic	Set hours; longer hours at holidays, for specific merchants	Synergy with customers
Commerce is a partnership	Should be “business intensive”; customers obligated to adapt	Mutuality of interests enhance market efficiency, cost-effectiveness	“Free market” optimized for customer convenience	Customers responsible for own interests; managers focus on customer service	Commerce is sales

municipal oversight. The survey thus provides a rich archive of the language used to represent the idea of the public market.

To distinguish signs associated with the public market in modern America, we deconstructed the explicit attributes of the public market as defined in Rogers (1919). We used these attributes as a basis from which to compare the contemporary public market as discerned from our manager interviews.

Seven explicit ideal attributes of markets emerged in the census commentary (see Table 1). These are clearly conditioned by the association of the public market with municipal government and its primary goal to “assist in the economical distribution of foodstuffs” (Rogers 1919, p. 7). First and foremost, the “1918 market”⁸ occupied municipally owned property, be it enclosed, under a shed, or at the curb. Location on public property was pivotal to the source

of the market’s legitimacy, constituting a legal geography or domain of jurisdiction described as “public,” and by extension connoting both municipal authority and accountability to the civic body (see also Novak 1996). It allowed municipal authorities to carry out supervisory prerogatives, ranging from complete control “exercised by a city official with a corps of assistants,” to “casual observation by the policeman on whose beat the market is located” (Rogers 1919, p. 7). With one exception (NY2), managers of contemporary markets decoupled the idea of its “public” nature from overt notions of legal domain, regulation, and supervision. While the municipality might own the market property, it did not necessarily regulate or oversee the activities that occurred there. Those

⁸ We use this as shorthand for the early twentieth century public market.

Table 2 Semiotic domain opposites: contemporary public market versus contemporary farmers market

Public market			Farmers market		
Connotations	Denotations		Denotations	Connotations	
	Expression	Content			
Institutional; permanent, continuity; durable	Enclosed structure; stands handed down; leases easy to renew	Legacy vendors; year leases; open year-round	Informal, seasonal/ occasional	Open-air; pop-up tents, daily table rentals	Temporary (nomadic); ephemeral, unreliable
Wide product choice; “like a grocery store”; something for everyone; convenient; proactive management	Explicit categories of vendors (e.g., fishmonger, baker, etc.)	Fresh produce, prepared food, artisans, as well as grocery items	Fresh produce, locally produced products, cottage products	Agricultural products only	Narrow product choice; restrictive
Connection is with vendor, not farmer/producer	Resellers allowed	Out-of-season, non-local produce	Fresh produce; homemade products	Producer-only	Direct (producer) connections; exclusive/ restrictive
Community; cosmopolitan	Dining areas, Wi-Fi, music, special events	A gathering place for social connection	Priority given to farmers’ needs to enhance sales	Arrange stalls to maximize farmers’ selling space	Rural development

Table 3 Semiotic domain opposites: contemporary public market versus contemporary supermarket

Public market			Supermarket		
Connotations	Denotations		Denotations	Connotations	
	Expression	Content			
Intimate, “people place”	Stands handed down; leases easy to renew; direct sales; vendors know customers by name; sellers serve customers	Customers return to same vendors weekly; market exchange as personal relationship	Brands; customers have little to no contact with employees; market exchange as mediated monetary exchange	Corporations buy shelf space; mass retail; self-serve; self-checkouts	Anonymity
Community event	Event programming; dining area; WI-FI	Source of entertainment for the whole family; community lingers/ gathers	Atomizing, isolating experience; people make purchases and leave	Music pumped in; no place to linger	Utilitarian; alienating
Distinctive, “organic” or living entity	Vendor-customized signage, products; historic building	Component of and reflects local culture	Standardized; efficient	Generic signage; big-box; fluorescent lighting	Factory-like; industrial; institutional

responsibilities were outsourced to non-governmental boards of directors or property management companies, for example, connoting a transition to managerial efficiency and away from civic authority (see also Leitner et al. 2007; Zukin 2010).

Second, the census stipulated that rents should be low to make it more profitable for vendors so that they could pass savings along to customers in the form of lower food prices. In today’s public market domain, the presence of low rents varied: some charged low rents, some charged a percentage of sales, some charged low rents for daily

vendors and high rents for inside merchants. However, markets consistently charged lower rents for farmers, artisans, and craftspersons, and higher rents for prepared food vendors and retail merchants. Significantly, managers justified the lower rents as a way to incubate vendors rather than to make products more affordable.

Third, markets had a variety of goods available for sale, as did the contemporary market. But the difference lay in why. In the “1918 market,” variety provided customers convenience, “affording the patron the opportunity to purchase within a small space practically all of the articles

required for the market basket” (Rogers 1919, p. 7).⁹ In the contemporary market, variety was also equated with convenience, but so did some market managers seek to house the “right kind of vendor mix” (OH1, PA13, CA4) as an attribute of the public market. That is, a notion of product variety represented by different vendors such as bakers, fishmongers, and fresh produce sellers, was what customers expected to find there. This latter idea related to several needs: proactive business management (ensuring the availability of products for customers), the institutional concern to legitimize or define the market as a member of the public market institution, and to the idea of the market as an embodiment of a diverse community (see the cluster analysis discussion later in this paper).

Fourth, in the “1918 market” domain, aesthetically pleasing architecture was desired but not at the expense of fiscal probity. The market building might “[beautify] the city” but appropriately; it should not financially encumber the municipality or the business of the market itself (Rogers 1919, p. 7). In the contemporary market, the construction of new facilities (e.g., Milwaukee Public Market), or the maintenance and multimillion-dollar renovations of historic structures, often was prioritized (e.g., CA1, IN2, NY2, OH2, OH5, PA4, PA6, VA2; see also Casmir 2012; Hambright 2011; Zade 2009).

Fifth, the “1918 market” had to be self-sustaining but, as an attribute of its identity as a public (vs. private) market, it “should not be operated for any considerable profit” (Rogers 1919, p. 7). Rather, “any attempt on the part of the city to secure a large revenue from such an institution” (Rogers 1919, p. 7) was regarded as counter to the market’s primary objective to keep food prices as low as possible. All market operations had to be balanced against this duty. By comparison, the contemporary market’s survival as a cultural icon was often as or more important than profitability *per se*: municipally owned and operated markets often operated at a loss, though this was not identified as a function of keeping food prices or stand rents as low as possible. Only two municipally owned and operated markets in our study reported that their markets were required to be self-sustaining (OH3, NY2).

Sixth, in the “1918 market,” market days and hours should be flexible, changing “as the trade requires,” according to “the market season,” and “to conform to the needs of the people.” This flexibility gave the 1918 market, “a character quite different from that of the privately owned and operated shop” (Rogers 1919, p. 23). The contemporary market, by contrast, defined itself by consistent market hours, with two exceptions. Some managers reported extending hours during the winter holiday season

(WV2), and others allowed merchants, such as breweries (OH2) and restaurants (NY2), to stay open beyond the normal market hours, connoting a space for community gathering and conformity with conventional retail operations.

Finally, business should be “intensive” in the “1918 market,” organized around moving product in a short amount of time, thus minimizing food waste and lost hours on the parts of vendors and so enabling the public market to retain its greatest usefulness. The principle of intensive trading brought its own obligations: market patrons were encouraged to shop early to help clear the stands “as quickly as possible” releasing “the market gardener... for the production of food products for future days” (Rogers 1919, p. 24). Doing so provided the customer with the freshest produce and avoided passing on the cost of wasted products. Therefore, “the consumer should recognize the fact that certain advantages that he expects to derive from the market are obtainable only through the fulfillment of [these] obligations that rest upon him as one of the patrons” (Rogers 1919, p. 24).

By comparison, customers in the contemporary market had no explicit obligations, except perhaps to look after their own interests. The inference was that their choice to shop in the public market itself manifests an ethical position of consumption in the form of support for farmers and locally owned businesses (see Barnett et al. 2005). Notably, this is not an obligation *exerted* by the terrain of the public market, as in the “1918 market.” The latter, shaped by the particular circumstances of labor, seasonality, waste prevention and cost control, imposed conditions (abbreviated market days and hours) to which the consumer acceded. Rather, the contemporary public market facilitates consumer patronization with “convenient” operating hours, again mimicking conventional retail sites.

In other words, the “1918 market” and the contemporary public market are conceptualized around different terms of commerce and “social usefulness.” The usefulness of commerce in the “1918 market” emerges as a simultaneous expression of self-interest and mutual obligations between government, consumers, and producers that nominally facilitated the economical distribution of food (see Granovetter 1985). These constitute the terms of its “public” identity. An explicit ideal of reciprocal obligations was less visible in the contemporary market. The latter, by comparison, focused on the “business” of market and the privileging of the consumer with product diversity, convenient hours, and an enhanced shopping experience. While the contemporary public market might be a civic icon, its disassociation from city government produced a greatly transformed notion of “public”: in one case, the manager of a privately owned and operated market identified his as a “public market” (CA4).

⁹ See also Baics’ (2012) discussion of this point as an example of an “agglomeration economy.”

Contemporary public market versus contemporary farmers markets

When asked to define a public market, managers were quick to state, “I’ll tell you one thing, it’s not a farmers market” (CA4). The stark opposition, in the minds of public market managers, between farmers markets and public markets unmasks the hidden discursive tensions between them. Although managers whom we interviewed referenced operational, product, and vendor differences (see Table 2), they were inclined to construct these differences in deeper social terms. They perceived the farmers market as temporary (farmers put up and take down their stands in the same day), and at times, nomadic; in their reliance on a more direct supply chain, it offered less variety, and was focused on commerce that specifically benefited the farmer. By comparison, managers saw the public market in terms of permanence, wide product variety (akin to “the grocery store”), connection to vendors rather than producers and, importantly, “community.”

In the public market domain, architecture or physical structure is an especially powerful sign of permanence, a marker for complex affective relationships between people and places (Donofrio 2009; Gentry 2013). This was also apparent in the emphasis on renovation projects for historic market buildings and the self-consciousness of the managers that the market was “iconic” of community identity. New market structures often are designed to evoke the historicity of the building type, as with the Milwaukee Public Market or the former Portland (Maine) Public Market.

But permanence is also connoted by the vendors who have year-long leases, sell year-round, and often are part of multi-generational businesses. As one manager described some of their vendors: “80 years old… [and who were] here as toddlers with their families” (MO1). This degree of continuity is made possible because of the ease with which markets enabled vendors to renew leases (“if you have a stall and you pay the rent, you follow the rules, you don’t have any issues, that’s your stall for the next year. There are people here that their stalls have been with their family for a long time” NY3). Markets reinforced the prominence of so-called legacy vendors by enabling the businesses to be handed down through generations: “[Stands] rarely become available because someone leaves the market and they just choose to leave and walk away from their stand. They’re typically selling their business or handing their business down to a family member and the employee” (OH3).

The opposition of the domains of the public versus farmers market was also manifested in the way that market managers construed farmers markets as competitors (see

also Spitzer 2013), and the challenge of attracting farmers who often pay only a small daily rental fee or nothing at all to sell in farmers markets. Thus the relative informality of farmers markets seems to manifest notions antithetical to both “community” and the business-orientation of the public market: “All of these little neighborhood markets are popping up on a Tuesday or a Thursday and they pop their tents up; there is really no charge for farmers to come and set up, and they sell out and they go” (TN1).

In contrast, public markets offered what farmers markets have and more (“There are five categories [in our market]: prepared food, farmers, arts and crafts, antiques, ethno-specific” DC1).

A public market is going to be everything that you would find in a farmers market, so your fresh produce, your locally produced products, your cottage-produced goods. That tends to be the weekend side, the pop-up tents, farm-shed vendors, and then you combine that with full-time vendors in your other grocery items. Your butchers, and your cheese-mongers, and your fish vendors, and all of that. That kind of layers in on top of your traditional farmers market and you also have your produce resellers. And then you mix in with all of that a little bit of prepared foods in… a community gathering spot. And to me that’s… a public market and particularly what’s different about a public market versus a farmers market. (OH1)

In the minds of these managers, the public market was importantly about “community,” also expressed in the amenities it provided. The public market facilitated social connection by providing dining areas, Wi-Fi, live music, and special events to encourage people to come and linger. The farmers market on the other hand is designed to maximize the farmers’ sales, “and they sell out and they go” (TN1).

This semiotic opposition is striking, inasmuch as it seems to offer a different narrative of the socio-ecological relations typically used to describe alternative food spaces (see also Goodman 2010; Coles and Crang 2011). Public markets constitute a symbolic territory different from that of the farmers market, one that valorizes the abundance and diversity of the world with a wide variety of products (Slater 1993; see also Coles and Crang 2011). Longer supply chains are not assigned the same meaning as the commodity chains of supermarkets. Rather, they create “the spectacle of goods [that signify] cosmopolitan urbanity” (Slater 1993, p. 195; also Anderson 2004). Symbolically, this seems to give public markets an expansive purpose that seeks to provide broad positive civic benefit, understood in terms of sociability, and facilitated by diverse products and amenities. From the

perspective of public market managers, farmers markets had narrower purposes to support the local farmer (see also Hinrichs 2000; Guthman et al. 2006). Although research suggests that farmers express social as well as economic motivations for selling at farmers markets (Griffin and Frongillo 2003; Trauger et al. 2010), the managers in our study articulated farmers markets in terms of instrumental relations between farmers and consumers, seemingly construed as working against “community.”

Contemporary public market versus contemporary supermarkets

Not surprisingly, public markets are also construed as “not supermarkets.” Here they are more closely identified with the idea of “embeddedness,” as economic actions modulated in the context of concrete, ongoing social networks (Granovetter 1985). In the public market domain, shoppers know their suppliers, compared to the anonymous experiences of a typical supermarket (see e.g., Sommer et al. 1981). In the public market, customers returned weekly to the same vendors, who served them directly [“There’s people that have been coming down for 65 years to buy their ground chuck from (vendor’s name)” OH1]; market exchange was based on personal relationships (Weber et al. 2008). These close relationships were enabled because stands were handed down, and leases easy to renew, ensuring continuity and facilitating long-term relationships between vendors and their customers. By comparison, in the supermarket transactions are mediated monetary exchange (Weber et al. 2008). Supermarkets are identified with mass retail and self-serve: brand-named food created in factories far from the consumer, shelf space purchased by corporations, customers who had little to no contact with employees or other customers.

The notions of community and sociability again figure largely in this opposition. As discussed earlier, public markets fostered community by holding events, providing space for dining and Wi-Fi to encourage folks to hang out. The market was a family event: “How many times do you wake up on a Sunday and say, ‘Let’s go hang out at the local grocery store for four hours’? But people do that with us. Their kids say, ‘Hey, Mom, let’s go to the market today.’ We are the place to go” (TN2). The supermarket, by comparison, was an alienating, utilitarian experience. Few supermarkets provide space in which “to gather.” Music, if there is any, is piped in. People usually shop by themselves, make their purchases, and leave.

Managers construe the social intimacy of the public market as a positive element, although in this quote it implies a form of coercion:

[A public market] is an intimate way to purchase your food because you are forced to have a conversation with people, as compared to a [supermarket]. I had to

run in [the supermarket] to buy something for my dog today. I walked in, I went to the counter, got it off the shelf. I went to the self check-out; I didn’t have to say a word to anybody the whole time. So I could be completely anonymous. [The public market] is so much different. You are recognized when you come in the door; you have to talk to somebody; you share recipes; you share ideas. You talk politics, you talk religion. You get caught up on family affairs... it’s a really unique and special thing. (PA4)

The three semiotic chain analyses of the public market domain reveal its transformed social meaning over the course of a century, from a space embodying a nexus of social and legal obligation to a social experience or event which itself signified “community.” Whereas the early twentieth century market took its identity from the opposition of “public” to “privately-held” food retailing, the contemporary public market is a more complex sign, in part owing to its position within a constellation of referents. Compared to the “1918 market,” the contemporary public market signified a business, although its strictly functional role in urban food provisioning had largely disappeared, along with its signification as a space of government. Compared to farmers markets and supermarkets, contemporary public markets represented community and civic benefit: a place of cosmopolitan sociability, it most clearly established a space of alterity to the utilitarian supermarket. More notably, managers differentiated public markets from farmers markets in terms of their institutional standing: as a business, by virtue of its associations with permanence, the convenience it offered in products and hours, and the amenities associated with urban leisure consumption.

The production of “community”: contradictions of the public market

To what degree does the symbolic identity of the public market impede, rather than facilitate, the attainment of its public goals? In this second analysis, we examined the institutional concerns of the contemporary market and the concomitant strategies that emerged from those concerns.¹⁰ The premise of the cluster analysis is that it helps reveal how individuals assign meaning to their particular occupation or organizational setting, creating a cognitive “map” that in some measure legitimates or substantiates

¹⁰ We coded the data for the various ways that managers talked about their markets, producing 25 denotative meanings, which formed the basis of the cluster analysis. (We originally coded 47 denotative meanings, but collapsed these to 25 to reduce redundancy). We inferred from the interview context their connotative meanings and institutional concerns, as well as strategies that emanated from these concerns.

their activities. This part of the analysis usefully reveals the dynamics that create the administrative rationalities within which the public market operates. First, it exposes the contradictions inherent in the public market as a commercial food retail business intended to serve a public interest. These contradictions drive managers' institutional concerns, which moved in two directions: inward to justify the organization itself, and outward to justify the market's role in the external environment. When directed inward, managers' concerns focused on economic survival and, significantly, having the public market recognized as part of the larger institutional category known as "public markets" (Table 4). When directed outward, managers' institutional concerns centered on legitimizing the public market's role as contributing to local culture, and to the development of the community's social capital, as well as its economic and physical wellbeing (Table 5).

It should be said that we uncovered little evidence that managers established and used objective measures of the market's ability to achieve the public goals that categorically establish its identity, pointing all the more to the public market as a symbolic expression of public benefit. Indeed, as suggested in the semiotic chains, the way managers talked about their market revealed a tension between whether it was seen as an alternative to, or was assimilating, dominant patterns of food retailing. Inward-focused institutional strategies were stimulated by concerns for the economic viability of the market, with the result that they often aligned market operations more closely to those of conventional retail outlets or social spaces such as cafés. Leveraging the market's *image*—whether as a tool for revitalization, or as a "great public space"—frequently surfaced as a strategy intended to generate customers.

Second, the cluster analyses reinforce critical organizational theory, which sees managers themselves as subjects constituted within the institutional frame of their organizations, securing their "meaning and reality through identifying with a particular sense of their relationship with the firm" (Banerjee 2008, p. 58). Namely, the assumption that market managers inevitably function as "moral actors" who exercise their judgment on behalf of the "public mission" of the market is limited. In this context, it is relevant that public market managers reproduced a business-oriented mindset in their administrative roles. Fifteen of the managers we interviewed came to the market from a business background, compared to five from government, four from not-for-profits, two straight from their undergraduate (non-business) degrees, and only two from farming or agriculture.

The public market as an institution striving for economic survival

In Tables 4 and 5, column A lists the denotative meanings, column B provides the connotative meanings, column C

holds the institutional concerns indicated by these denotative and connotative meanings, and column D contains the strategies and challenges emanating from these concerns.

In Table 4, seven meanings ("unique"; "multiple, independent vendors"; "product mix"; "physical footprint"; "requires cooperation"; "hours of operation"; "something that is revitalized") evoked an institutional concern related to defining the public market as part of a larger organizational type. While each public market was unique, they nonetheless shared characteristics that produced its identity, nominally in contrast with conventional commercial spaces. When we asked managers to describe their markets, all public markets were described as having multiple, independent vendors; by extension, market managers also spoke of markets as requiring a certain vendor mix (e.g., baker, fishmonger, cheese maker, fresh produce) to be considered a "proper" public market. Twenty-eight of 30 managers referenced their public markets in terms of its "hours of operation." The following comment was typical: "We're a year-round market open Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday for retail shopping" (NY2).

The connotative meanings metaphorically aligned the public market along a spectrum of retail sites, from the traditional "Main Street" with small, independent merchants ("downtown under roof") to the shopping mall ("mall-ish"), an oxymoron that nonetheless represents a more familiar image of consumption. Depending on the market's hours of operation it was either suggested to be *not* like a supermarket or a mall (and therefore only open 1–3 days each week) or that it wanted to be like one (and therefore was open 7 days each week, year-round). These meanings were inflected by other associative meanings. Managers spoke of their markets' physical footprint, a sign of localized consumption that contrasted to the generic, endlessly replicable big-box store (Zukin 1990). Managers also spoke of the need for cooperation among the vendors, connoting institutional stability beyond the commercial constituent elements of the market. And, lastly, the market was often seen as something that was created, revitalized, marketed and promoted; that is, it represented a less familiar entity to dominant forms of retailing and thus required constant advancement.

Nine meanings evoked an institutional concern related to the market's economic survival. The public market was clearly perceived as a business that functioned within a universe of entrenched food retailing habits: to effectively compete, markets varied their hours, the product mix (e.g., to include prepared food), and hosted events. Managers also spoke of volunteers as vital to their operations, overtly indicating the embeddedness of markets in their communities such that they could attract volunteers to work on their behalf (which a supermarket could not). On the other hand, this reliance clearly suggested that the markets were understaffed.

Table 4 Semiotic cluster analysis of the public market: inward-focused institutional concerns

(A) Denotations	(B) Connotations	(C) Institutional concerns	(D) Strategies
<i>Public market as an institution</i>			
Unique	Markets stand against homogeneity	Preserve organizational autonomy	Managers, communities save/preserve markets because they are unique, regardless of economic performance
Comprised of multiple, independent vendors	'Main Street' under a roof; not a mall; alternatively, like a mall	Define organization as member of "public market" institution	Markets require independent, often locally-owned operations
Have defined product mix: e.g., baker, fishmonger, produce vendor, etc.	'Main Street' under a roof	Define organization as member of "public market" institution	Managers of markets with fewer vendors solicit missing elements, refuse applications of duplicating vendors.
A physical footprint	Spatially embedded	Legitimate organization as distinctive, place-based presence	Invest in multimillion dollar renovations, new construction
<i>Public market as an institution and economic survival</i>			
Require cooperation	Institutional stability beyond commercial constituent elements; vendor community	Preserve organizational identity and defend economic survival	Managers resolve vendor conflicts, listen to vendors through board membership, vendor associations, meetings
Defined by hours of operation	Depending on hours, markets not supermarkets nor malls, or want to be like them	Preserve organizational identity and defend economic survival	Markets open only 1–3 days a week to accommodate small producers OR open 5–7 days to accommodate changing customer purchase patterns and compete with supermarkets
Something that is created, revitalized, marketed, promoted	Markets an alternate retail identity; anachronistic	Preserve organizational identity and defend economic survival	Marketing campaigns, events, meeting customer demands (e.g., organic produce)
<i>Economic survival</i>			
Pay salaries, utilities, etc.	Markets behave like a business	Defend economic survival	In addition to rents, markets realize revenues from parking, high-rent merchants, grants, etc.
Have municipal connections	Markets have civic value.	Defend economic survival	Markets foster continued relationships with municipalities (e.g., through board membership)
Sources of food, including prepared food	Supermarket, café	Defend economic survival	Managers solicit/accept a variety of vendors to attract different types of customers (e.g., the lunch crowd that wants prepared food and the cook who buys fresh produce).
Need more than food to attract customers	Market competes with supermarkets, conventional food retail outlets	Defend economic survival	Hold events to attract shoppers
Sources of organic and/or locally grown produce	Markets part of an alternate food system	Defend economic survival	Require vendors sell organic products
Rely on volunteers	Markets socially embedded and/or understaffed; symbolize community	Defend economic survival	Recruit volunteers; have "friends of the market" organizations, etc.

The need to be competitive as a business, and the ability to service community needs, also existed in an uneasy relationship. Most commonly, the public market was described as catering to a stratified customer base in which some could afford locally grown, organic food and others could not. Managers readily described organic produce as more expensive; even when the market would accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, SNAP customers would not shop at their public markets because the cost of producer-only, organic fresh produce was price prohibitive for a tight budget (e.g.,

CA1). Only four managers indicated that their markets were located in what otherwise would be food deserts, and only 3 of the 30 managers, when asked directly if they partnered with any food policy entities, answered yes.

The public market and culture, economic development, and community needs

In Table 5, we provide the outward focus of managers' institutional concerns: how managers created meaning for their organizations' role in the external environment rather

Table 5 Semiotic cluster analysis of the public market: outward-directed institutional concerns

(A) Denotations	(B) Connotations	(C) Institutional concerns	(D) Strategies
<i>Cultural preservation</i>			
Historic artifacts	Markets represent local heritage, sense of place	Legitimate role in cultural preservation	Actions to preserve local culture, heritage
Places for local goods, to support local business, farmers	Place-based, alternative to corporate retail chains	Legitimate role in cultural preservation	Actions to preserve local economy; e.g., require that vendors be local
<i>Economic development</i>			
Tools for revitalization	Investment trickles outward into community; market anchors revitalization	Legitimate role in community and economic development	Keep vendor rents low; incubate businesses; advertise market to increase patronage to stimulate local economy
Represents demographically diverse mix of vendors	Community representation, access; draw diverse customers	Legitimate role in community and economic development	Ensure vendors low entry barriers; offer mentoring tips; have established customer base
Places for reasonable rents for micro-enterprises	Incubation	Legitimate role in community and economic development	Progressive rent structures; acquire revenue sources other than vendor rents to sustain market
<i>Community needs—social</i>			
Cater to diverse customer base	Common ground; public space; “welcome wagon”	Legitimate role in community building	Seek grants to double value of SNAP benefits; outreach to low-income neighborhoods
Places to connect with growers	Transparency and trust	Legitimate role in community building	Point of origin signage; emphasize producer-only vendors
Gathering places	Place to develop social networks; generate social capital	Legitimate role in community building	Provide amenities such as tables, music, Wi-Fi
Sources of reasonably priced fresh produce	Value for dollars spent (vs. supermarket)	Legitimate role to serve basic needs	No strategies in place
Sources of food	Food justice (depending on market location)	Legitimate role to serve basic needs	Offer SNAP and other food assistance programs
<i>Community needs—health</i>			
Community resources	Adds social value to commercial transactions	Legitimate role to improve community health	Offer nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, etc.
Grocery stores	Customer convenience; facilitates access to food	Legitimate role to improve community health	Allow diverse product lines

than for the organization itself. Managers’ outward focus was strongly oriented to ideas about place, into which were wound notions of community culture and heritage, localism, and a certain sense of obligation to community and economic development.

The first two meanings (“an historic artifact” and “a place for local goods, business”) legitimated the market’s role in cultural preservation, and identified with “community.” As one manager remarked, “Well, if you went through all the different offices in town here,... the picture of the market house is predominant in waiting rooms... You go to the bank, you see it in the bank... [The town] identifies pretty strongly with this market house” (PA2). Here again, the symbolic terrain of the public market was reified through the actions of managers and community partners who worked to formalize their market’s historic stature (e.g., listing the markethouse on the National Register of Historic

Buildings, PA4) and emphasize its connection to the local economy (e.g., requiring that vendors be local). This emphasis was consonant with inward-focused institutional concerns to save or preserve the market because it was unique, regardless of its economic performance (e.g., DC1).

The next three meanings (“tool for revitalization,” “diverse vendors,” and “reasonable rents”) represent managers’ focus to legitimize the public market’s role in economic development. While markets were often denoted as something that was revitalized, they were much less often denoted as tools of revitalization. This finding was striking, inasmuch as the foundational claim for public markets is precisely their ability to stimulate local economies (Spitzer and Baum 1995; Morales 2009). Managers did denote markets as “a place of reasonable rents for micro-enterprises.” As such, they acted to provide economic opportunity for small, untried entrepreneurs—

especially for minorities, immigrants and women—by shielding them from high overhead and reducing risk (Allen 1985). These efforts were limited, however, to a handful of markets, and applied to a select few vendors within these markets.

More notable was the tension between processes of community economic development (bringing new vendors into the market and supporting them) and maintaining the traditional “culture” of the market, suggested by the opposing codes of the “incubating” versus the “legacy” vendor. The former connoted young vendors, who were women and/or minorities, who lacked capital, were temporary (often competing for daily vending spots), and inexperienced. By comparison, “legacy” vendors were old (“X has been there since they were toddlers” MO1), were white males, had financial, social, and cultural capital, were experienced, and held a permanent place in the market. Their presence importantly defined the market’s organizational culture. As the chain analyses suggest, legacy vendors were an essential sign of stability and permanence: customers identified the market with these individuals and not with “newbies.”

Perhaps to resolve this inherent tension, managers tended either to emphasize small business enhancement (vs. development) or strategies to “lift all boats,” as through efforts to “market the market.” A minority of market managers mentioned formal activities they used to actively mentor novice vendors. They more commonly understood incubation as a form of on-the-job training, and emulation of experienced vendors (“My market manager doesn’t go around and tell them how to make a display look better or anything like that. I think it’s just kind of like... practice[ing] with the best guys, not with the worst guys.” NY3).

The next three meanings (“diverse customers,” “connect with growers,” and “gathering place”) evoked institutional concerns related to legitimizing the public market’s role in community building. Two managers, in particular, spoke of their markets as a “welcome wagon” because it provided access to American culture for immigrants; the market eased immigrants into American society because it resembled their home cultures (e.g., NY3). More often, however, managers spoke of their target customer base in narrower, more stratified, instrumental terms (“tourists,” the “lunch crowd,” and “young adults”), as market segments that contributed *to* the market’s economic stability. This was reflected in many management strategies, such as introducing café-like amenities such as indoor seating and Wi-Fi, foodstuffs prepared for takeaway or on-site consumption. Thus the notion of “gathering place” is imaginatively, and by extension, socially circumscribed, excluding, by implication, those who are not the most “profitable” customers (as in Murphy & Dittenhafer Architects et al. 2005).

The institutional concerns associated with community building are relevant to the next set of meanings (“reasonably priced food,” “food source,” “a community resource,” and “acts as a grocery store”), which acted to legitimize the organization’s role in serving basic needs. Managers always implicitly or explicitly referenced their markets as sources for food, evoking an institutional concern to legitimize the organization’s role in addressing community needs broadly construed (providing food as a human necessity). That the food was reasonably priced was much less commonly described. The market represented “value” for dollars spent, or “food justice” when it was located in an area of low food access. However, the cost of food was not something managers focused on. They often did not know how their farmers set prices, and it was the rare market manager who attempted to determine if their market offered less expensive food in comparison with local supermarkets. Ironically, the general perception was that farmers markets had taken over the function of supplying fresh foods, obviating that role for the public market.

Conclusions

If language is a map of culture, as some anthropologists claim, then we might well take it as a point of departure in surveying the changing historical and cultural terrain of the market. How do people use the word “market,” we might ask, and what relation does their choice of words bear to the actual pattern of commodity-exchange? Jean-Christophe Agnew (1979, p. 99)

Our study was subject to several limitations. By intention, we heard only from managers. A future study would extend this conversation to include vendors, customers, volunteers, and partners. We also relied on one author to code all the data: doing so helped to ensure consistency but it also limited the ability to infer from the data. Lastly, semiotic analyses require data reduction (Manning 1987), which necessarily results in data simplification.

Nonetheless, this preliminary examination of the public market, including its historico-legal framework, potentially sharpens contemporary notions of “alternative” sites of food provisioning and their position in urban policy and planning. A recurring theme in critiques of contemporary food activism is its intersection with neoliberal rationalities of consumer choice, localism, and entrepreneurialism (Guthman 2008). We suggest that a semiotic analysis of the contemporary public market shows how those rationalities are inscribed in, and mobilized by, forms of urban space integrally linked to food. The symbolic processes of that mobilization, as found in the semiotics of the public market, are those which create socio-spatial imaginaries, potentially giving (or denying) imaginative access to

notions of social inclusiveness, political agency, and civic vitality.

Of note in these chains of signification is the way in which the connotative meanings of the public market produce the illusion of denotation, collapsing the signifier and signified as if they are identical. Hence the near-ubiquitous affirmation of public markets as “people places,” a “common ground,” as “great public places” warrants close scrutiny. In our interviews, public market managers frequently talked about the market in such terms, implying a “collectivity” made visible. These terms act as tropes for the inclusivity of diverse social types that suggest a kind of social vibrancy equivalent to a thriving civil society (Nadal 2000). In effect, the public market becomes a place or institution *apart* from government, whose very workings manifest the interests and will of citizens and so the physical expression of public life itself (as in Steel 2013). Nonetheless, such images of social life that are created in the public market may rather serve to obscure the nature of the social relations found there.

The present analysis first of all suggests that the public market as an instrument of municipal authority serving the governance of food has given way to a much softer notion of the market as a sign of “community.” Dislodged from matters of polity, it seems that contemporary public markets now privilege symbolic ideals of “civic life,” with the attendant qualities of “sociability” and “urbanity.” As a cultural sign, the contemporary public market is defined in historical-reflexive relationships to other sites of food provision, in particular the supermarket (modern industrial efficiency) and farmers markets (traditional agrarianism). Thus it might be seen as a space of “enchantment,” in which its participants are invited to revisit “the imagined harmonious community of the past that industrial modernization destroyed” (compare Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).¹¹ Or, as one urban planner writes: “The ‘magic’ of the marketplace is in how people respond to their perception of the place/activity and how that response renews both person and place” (Morales 2011, p. 12). Food then, is a source of culture rather than necessity and the market itself expressed as a cultural artifact in need of preservation.

The understanding of the role of the public market in modern life has concomitantly shifted to that of “place-making”—“the planning, design, management and programming of public spaces” to “maximize shared value” (Project for Public Spaces, n.d.(b)). But who is it “sharing” this value? The vast majority of managers reported that their markets created active public spaces, and the practices

of the contemporary public market tended to legitimize the organization’s role as contributing to the development of social capital, not necessarily with their historic role to ensure access to fresh food or as distribution points for farmers. Nonetheless, like “public institution,” “public space” is a historically constituted term and thus an unstable conceptual instrument (Nadal 2000). While it once signified the state as nominal guarantor of “the people’s welfare” (regular access to fairly priced, safe food), as described above, it is more the case that the “active public space” of the contemporary public market facilitates the production of images of “community.” That is, the heterogeneity of market activity itself becomes the focal point, a spectacle that re-enacts “the presence of a thriving and dynamic civil society” (Slater 1993, p. 190).

The introduction of an historical frame to the cultural analysis of the public market should not be construed as a nostalgic turn of mind. Nor do we mean to suggest that the modern reinvention of the public market is the end result of a hegemonic politics of neoliberalism. Rather, we use our analysis to align with critical forms of organizational theory and other institutional critiques, such as Banerjee’s (2008) interrogation of corporate social responsibility. His insight is that social capital, often times generated for one group of people at the expense of other segments of society, insufficiently contributes to social welfare. As he notes, “Emerging attempts to conceptualize social responsibility as ‘social capital’ will still fall short unless there is a radical restructuring of the political economy and fundamental rethinking about the role of a corporation in society” (Banerjee 2008, p. 74). Indeed, our findings suggest that, while the public market is rhetorically framed as an agent of public benefit, it largely substitutes the spectacle of “community” and the image of an historic public life for a legally instated commitment to the just governance of food systems.

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