

Asian Wet Markets Re-Examined: Market Cities as a Force for Investment and Renewal

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Published just over a year ago, [A New Vision for Hanoi's Wet Markets](#) describes my experience working with [HealthBridge Foundation of Canada](#) and local architects to develop design ideas for modernizing three traditional fresh food markets in Hanoi. The workshop was an outgrowth of a successful campaign led by [Kieu Ha of HealthBridge](#) to save wet markets from demolition and replace them with shopping centers. Now that the markets had been saved from demolition, the question became what *should* happen with the 350 markets in the city?



One design concept for the renovation of Chau Long Market included a public park on the roof and a new mezzanine for cafes and cooking demonstrations (Credit: Phoi Canh)

Since then, most of the world has become all too familiar with the term “wet market.” As late as April, indicators were that the Huanan Market in Wuhan, China, was the likely source of COVID-19. Dangerous and largely unregulated wild animal trade took place in this market, where an early cluster of cases emerged. Now, the origin of the virus is not so clear. Other sources of the animal-to-human virus

“How can you “modernize” ... traditional markets while still retaining their authenticity and core reason for being? Leaving them in their current, often decrepit, condition is not an option.” — Steve Davies, *A New Vision of Wet Markets in Hanoi* (PPS, March 2019)

transmission are being debated and studied, and even politicized. While the jury is out on this issue, the need to improve and invest in markets in Hanoi resonates even more today. Increased media attention and the impact of COVID-19 has revealed that the future of wet markets throughout Asia is also at stake. It is time to take action.

Let’s Have a Fresh Conversation about Wet Markets

The term “wet market” has become a source of confusion, and perhaps distraction, today. Media has graphically described poor food handling, the gruesome slaughtering of animals, and has highlighted other health concerns. Not really understanding what a “wet market” was, many politicians and commentators called for them to be shut down permanently

To be clear, most wet markets do not sell wild animals; the Huanan Market in Wuhan is a [rare exception](#). Wet markets are traditional fresh food markets not dissimilar from farmers markets, distinguished from “dry” markets where items like clothing and electronics are sold. They are wet from water sprayed on fruits and vegetables to keep them fresh, as well as from fish when sold live from tanks of water. Today, the floors of modern “wet” markets with proper drainage and maintenance can actually be quite “dry.”

Still, given all the recent attention, the time seems right to be begin a new conversation about Asian wet markets – one that set the stage for the kinds of investments and changes that can bring these markets into the 21st century and leverage their full [economic and social value for cities](#) and as essential components of healthier communities.

Market Cities: A Framework for Action

While none of the proposed improvements have yet been implemented to the three pilot markets in Hanoi, the project has a launched a new examination of markets in the entire country of Vietnam. This report will be released in 2021 and provide the framework for how current and future markets will be built, financed, and operated.

This national policy interest is certainly a positive outcome in Vietnam. Similar thinking is beginning to surface in other cities and countries as well – and should happen even more to address systemic issues with markets at the city, regional, and countrywide scale. It is the core reason why [Project for Public Spaces](#) recently announced [Market Cities Initiative](#), officially launched with partners [HealthBridge](#) and [Slow Food International](#) at [World Urban Forum 10](#) in Abu Dhabi in February. The Market Cities Initiative grew out of PPS’s [10th International Public Markets Conference](#) held in London held a year ago. . "One of my goals is to lead the way in showing how city leaders can help ensure markets not only continue to thrive, but remain a vital part of local life," said Mayor Sadik Khan of London at the conference’s opening session.

The [launch of PPS’s North American Pilot program](#) in Pittsburgh, Seattle and Toronto in March was intended to develop just such stronger policy support in these cities. Then, suddenly, with the rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we discovered that the lack of policy support for public markets was affecting the ability of markets to even open this year.

Cities, regions, and countries already have the global policy foundation in place to re-think and re-invigorate their traditional markets.

[A Guide to Healthy Markets](#) by the World Health Organization (2006) details efforts cities should take to curb the spread of disease at local markets and improve the safety and nutritional level of fresh.

[Connecting Smallholders to Markets: An Analytic Guide](#) by the [Committee on World Food Security](#) (2016) is the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform deliberating on issues of food security and nutrition. This report documents that markets play a substantive role and bring great value by supporting local economies and supporting local culture and community life.

[The Hidden Wealth of Cities: Creating, Financing, and Managing Public Spaces](#) by The World Bank (2020). The report states that public spaces assets – including markets – should be leveraged by city government to be true assets for inclusive economic development. The cities that make these investments “[buck this trend and fare much better.](#)”

The COVID-19 pandemic has quickly revealed the weak underbelly of public markets as systems. Markets with strong public policy support over a city, region, or state are faring much better in terms of opening and support than those without support. Fortunately, markets are also proven to be nimble partners in this time of crisis and have reacted quickly to this urgency with changes in layout, operation and management to promote social distancing. There is much innovation, in fact, going on in markets.

An Urgent Call for Re-Investment in Asian Public Markets



A well-maintained wet market in near Huazhong University in Wuhan, China, 2017. Photo Credit: Steve Davies

Despite deep policy support from global organizations (see box above) for public markets and the community benefits they achieve, these efforts do not seem to have received the attention they deserve. Even in Wuhan, there is not a lot of public market renovation activity being reported. I found only press [article](#) that “Wuhan will spend 200 million yuan (\$28 million) to upgrade its 425 farmers’ markets, in a campaign to improve hygiene.” Spending \$28 million may indicate that you can do a lot at low cost to upgrade markets, or it may show that serious investment is lacking given the number of markets in the city.

Taking advantage of this moment in history, the Market Cities Initiative is advocating for a comprehensive exploration of traditional food markets in Asia to include research, model projects, policy development, and partnership building. Visible pilot projects throughout the region in different countries would be especially valuable to test options and evaluate impact.

Fortunately, there are proven models for wet market investment in Singapore and Hong Kong that we can look to for inspiration, as well as isolated examples of one-off public market renewal efforts in the region. These investments have enhanced community health and food safety while maintaining markets as inclusive public spaces where local vendors provide quality, fresh products at reasonable prices.

Local consumers' positive response to the new and reinvigorated markets demonstrates that these investments can make markets more competitive with supermarkets and sustainable in the long term, preserving them for future generations. The COVID-19 pandemic, having laid bare the weakness of Asian public markets, has set the stage for their renewal – if we act now.



Maxwell Food Centre, Singapore | © Eugene Tang / Alamy Stock Photo

Singapore has had a decades-long effort to introduce the cold chain for the entire meat distribution system, reinvestment in the city's 114 wet markets and construction of new "hawker centers." The Hawker Centers, aggregations of former street vendors under one roof, not only stronger food safety infrastructure as well as support systems for ethnically diverse vendors but have evolved into some of the city's most dynamic public spaces. (For further information, see [this publication](#) from The World Bank)



A Link REIT market in Hong Kong bustles with activity. Photo Credit: Steve Davies

61 Hong Kong Wet Markets Under Renewal by Major Asian Real Estate investment Trust

How we do it:
We innovatively re-design the shopping space



- Reconfigured layout**
 - Increased permeability with better zoning
- Low-rise stall design**
 - Higher visibility and more interaction
- Enhanced accessibility**
 - A more inclusive shopping environment
- Air-conditioning**
 - Improved ventilation and comfort

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Photo Credit: Link REIT

Another important example is the market of [Link REIT](#), Asia's largest real estate trust located in Hong Kong. Link REIT inherited about 100 wet markets in 2005 when they took over the operations of the shopping centers that were part of Hong Kong Housing Authority complexes, where 3.3 million low- and moderate-income people live.

Currently there are 61 Link markets, over half of which have been renovated with private investment. The [transformation of the wet markets](#) is complemented by improvements to the shopping centers themselves. When I visited the markets in late 2018, I found them bustling with customers, beautifully lit and merchandised, and very welcoming indeed – especially compared to un-renovated markets where rent was so cheap, many vendors just used their stalls for storage and sold elsewhere.

In the Link markets, vendors have personally invested in their stalls and seem to have quickly learned about how to do quality merchandising and achieve a high level of food safety. While [press reports](#) emerged about consumers complaining about high prices at the Link markets, an [independent study](#) in 2016 found quite the opposite. This study compared Link market prices to those at neighborhood shops, city-operated markets, and private supermarkets for nearly 50 fresh food items. Highest prices were in supermarkets and Link markets had lower prices than city-operated markets (where rents are generally lower).

Link, which has developed an extensive [website](#) devoted to its market revitalization process and outcomes, reports that the number of customers at its markets have doubled compared with pre-renovation. With vendors doing higher volumes of product, they can afford to charge cheaper prices than city markets, where business is often slow. Myron Ng, Assistant General Manager - Community Relations for Link, further reports that “our markets are taking business away from the supermarkets, because of the Chinese consumers’ affinity for freshness, while also attracting younger customers who tend to avoid the city-operated markets.”