A Wide view of a public market

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A WIDE VIEW OF A PUBLIC MARKET

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PROCEDURE

I began photographing for my thesis during the summer of 1987 at the marketplaces in Puerto Rico. After returning to Rochester this fall I began printing and I am now in the process of editing the negatives that I have collected so far. This coming year I will be returning to Puerto Rico in order to continue photographing the Public Markets. I am now involved in researching the structure and importance of the markets, its marketing, and the effects it has on the culture that surrounds it, as well as the sociological aspects of human interaction. At this time I have plans to present my work in the Spring of 1988.

As John Berger has said in his book About Looking:\(^1\)

"If we want to put a photograph back into the context of experience, social experience, social memory, we have to respect the laws of memory. We have to situate the printed photograph so that it acquires something of the surprising conclusiveness of that which was and is."

Berger follows this statement with a quote from Brecht suggesting a substitution of the word photography for *instant* and contrast for *acting* :\(^2\)

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\(^2\) ibid.
"So you should simply make the instant (photography)
Stand out, without in the process hiding
What you are making it stand out from.
Give your acting (contrast)
That progression of one- thing- after- another,
that attitude of
Working up what you have taken on. In this way
You will show the flow of events and also the course
Of your work, permitting the spectator
To experience this Now on many levels, coming from
Previously and
Merging into Afterwards, also having much else Now
Alongside it. He is sitting not only
In your theatre but also
In the world."
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents Pedro and Nelky for always being there when I needed them.
PERMISSION STATEMENT

I, Nelky González, prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction of my thesis A WIDE VIEW OF A PUBLIC MARKET is made.

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INTRODUCTION

Being from Puerto Rico emphasizes how important it is to me to work with a subject that presents a cultural tradition which has been changing throughout the years, the Public Markets. I grew up culturally dependant on the land because my grandfather used to farm for a living. My family grew close to those roots and learned to appreciate every little thing provided by the land according to the way it was given. We understood the importance of keeping the bond between the land and the treasures created underneath it. My parents were raised on the west side of the Island but once they married they moved to the northeast coast.

During my childhood I used to visit the marketplaces with my grandparents at the west side of the Island. I never understood what Plaza del Mercado could mean until they taught me the importance of eating the fresh produce grown from the soil. My grandmother used to visit the Plazas de Mercado at least one day a week to buy the foods needed for the family. With all the years spent in touch with and attached to the land she could make decisions about what would be the best fruit or meat to bring home. She would not only have the eye to look toward the aesthetic but she would search for the qualities of the produce.

In Spanish, “Plazas del Mercado” means “Public Markets”. They were introduced by the Spaniards in the 15th Century. The “Plazas” are wide open spaces in town used to celebrate any kind of activity or to gather with friends and family. The towns were founded around the “Plazas”, dominated by the Catholic Church and the office of the Chairman of Jurisprudence. People from different social levels went to the “Plaza” to talk and share with neighbors, friends and families. Later on, the commercial interaction became so complex that a new place was created specifically for that purpose: “Las
Plazas del Mercado” (Public Markets). The Public Market was the spot for the selling of vegetables and all kind of fruits, meat, dried merchandise, and medicine plants.

The Public Markets have contributed to satisfying an economic and social role for the people from different towns and places. They have also helped to promote and reinforce the value of sharing the goods provided by the land.

In Puerto Rico almost every town has a Public Market and almost each town is known for a specific fruit which is best produced in that area. As an example, the southwest area of the town of Ponce is very famous for the production of the biggest and sweetest “Quenepas”: a small round, juicy, and very sweet fruit. In contrast, at the northeast side of the Island the finest fruit is the pineapple, while in the west is the Mango. This explains why, in a way, every town and every place keeps its own history, and how the roots of the Public Markets share the tradition of the Puerto Rican culture.

Most of the fruits and vegetables found in Puerto Rico were brought by the Spaniards during the 15th Century. Coffee, for example, was brought and cultivated at first for two main reasons: as a medicinal plant to cure infections and for ornamentation. It was not until years later that coffee was cultivated as one of the main agricultural products of Puerto Rico, becoming a leader in the international market toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The “Plazas del Mercado” have suffered the social, economic and political transformation of the Island. Their appearance and facade are testimony of this changes.

The plazas are there to be discovered. I present the world of the plazas to show their colorful presence. But my interest in photographing the Plazas was more than merely pictorial. Photographing the Plazas was necessary for
me in order to explore and understand the cultural process in my country. The pictures I took keep a physical record of a place that will keep on changing throughout the years. Time changes and people tend to see the world a little differently. There is no doubt that photography makes possible the visual record of the world and its qualities as they change with the path of time. What particularly influenced me about this work was the uniqueness portrayed by each plaza and the significance they hold in my life. It is not a patriotic meaning but an emotional experience that has grown inside of me since my childhood.

At the beginning, Public Markets offered no security at all, the booths were built by each vendor individually and were made of wood, not safe enough against natural disasters common in the tropics such as hurricanes, floods, heavy rains, and others. For this reason many vendors decided to sell their products in the streets and from house to house, instead of just in the markets.

Now, most of the Public Markets are open Mondays through Saturdays from 5:00 A. M. until 5:00 P. M., and Sundays from 8:00 A. M. until 12:00 P. M. Most Plazas are located in the mid-town areas to make them accessible to the customers. Also, the Plazas are constructed of cement to protect the shoppers from bad weather.

Everyday, early in the morning, wholesalers gather to sell fresh food to the "placeros" (the person in charge of selling products to a customer) who then start to set up their "kioskos" (the working space) and organize the display of the fruits, vegetables, meats, etc. It is important for the placeros to keep their places very neat and to offer the best services to their clients. This way they maintain the good relations and the good will that makes the market a pleasant, sociable place to shop. Each Plaza is divided into three
main segments: The “fruteros” are in charge of selling the fruits, vegetables, and grains. They buy fresh goods daily. The second one is the meat markets which provide any kind of meat needed to satisfy the consumers.

The third is the “espiritistas”. Those who believe in spiritism come to these shops to buy colorful liquids, amulets and imagery for physical and emotional maladies.

The “fruteros” are the biggest segment found in the Plazas and are the main reason for the Plaza del Mercado. In each Plaza you will find a “Placero” (the person in charge of selling the goods) in a little booth designated by the administrator of the Plaza. The fruits are the principal selling point and the “Placeros” usually place it at the front row of the “kiosko” (the booth) to visually attract customers. As in the picture (Photograph #1), the abundance of fruits presents a resume of the sort of food that can be found in such a small island. The creative mind of the vendor arranges the produce, so there is no doubt that the placement welcomes the customers and the products become more appealing to buy and later on, to be eaten. The pleasing, colorful arrangement of the produce is an important task in the sale of the product, and it is unquestionable that the “placero” has a marketing objective in mind. The organization of the products as well as the appearance of the booth say a lot about the vendors or owners of the place. It suggests to the customer that he cares about the produce and its freshness. It also suggests that the products he has chosen to sell are the very best because the “Placero” is always very proud of the produce he displays. He is the one in charge of selecting the best to sell. In the markets the competitive advantage lies in the ability to furnish the wonderful variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, etc., in the kioskos and to change the display frequently.
PHOTOGRAPHING THE MARKETS

The time I spent in the “Plazas” was stimulating, and the vendors encouraged my enthusiasm by leading me to many others, or by just following my path to watch what attracted my attention. I remember an anecdote that happened while I was photographing a kiosko full of fruits. A man came close to me, he was intrigued by what I was photographing and asked my purpose. I explained my interest and from then on he became part of my experience. He took my hand and said “You want to see something really beautiful? I’ll show you”. So I followed him to a very dark place where he opened up a huge refrigerator full of bananas. Who would not be amazed to see such a thing? It was different and exciting, it was and it is indeed a spectacle ( Photograph #15). The old man explained that the bananas are brought from the northeast side of the Island and then hung up in a dark and cold refrigerator for at least two weeks to ripen before they are later sold to the vendors, and then to the customers. The “kioskos”, the little booths, are constructed of wood and are generally painted in bright colors to attract the attention of the customers. The kioskos serve as a decoration, they are a complement to the Plazas de Mercado, making the latter more unique and appealing. The kioskos are numbered in sequence to facilitate the Administration’s supervision and to serve as a guide to the many customers who visit the Plazas. Some “placeros” add names to their kioskos as symbols of good luck or because the name makes it more unique and personal: “Happy Land Meat Market”, “Carnicería Mondongo Jim”, etc.

The town of Caguas in the northeast side of the Island, has kiosko #11 ( Photograph #2) which is typical of what can be found once you are inside the Plaza de Mercado. The kiosko is painted in brilliant yellows, reds, blues, and greens and the placero as well as the customers are usually dressed in similar
brilliant tropical colors. Some people dress according to their moods, and others dress to attract attention. The “placeros” are always known to wear clothes intended to complement their decorative displays and add enthusiastic, vocal encouragements to have the customers buy.

The pictures enable one to encompass the world of the “Plazas de Mercado” in which we live, and make the viewer aware of those significant details shown in the photographs. Because we dwell on memories that are part of the past, placeros tend to use symbolic images to decorate the “kioskos”.

Perhaps that’s why the “placeros” who spend from 8 to 10 hours of daily work decorate the kioskos with little calendars like the ones from “La Carnicería la Marketa” (La Marketa meat market), (Photograph #5). The almanacs record a past of times spent in the public markets selling the fruits, and other goods, and especially making the living for a tomorrow. Some vendors also tend to use symbolic statues as a means of protection or statement of faith because they believe that the statues can keep the place free from vandalism, or because these symbols would assure their success or will keep them healthy.

An example of this is the old man portrayed in front of his “kiosko” (Photograph #5) looking up with pride, showing the goods harvested from the land, and surrounded by the Christian symbols that let us know about his profound heritage and personal beliefs.

The meat section is a contrast with the fresh food area, and is usually found at the last section of the marketplace. When markets first evolved, no division existed. Now, particularly if the market is in a two-story building, the meat section will be found in the second one. Any kind of meat can be found in the Plaza: lamb, goat, pork, beef, rabbit, and also fish. Since pork is one of
the main dishes in Puerto Rico, the vendors hang the pig heads from the top of the ceiling to attract the attention of the customers and let them know that fresh pork is available. It is sold the most during Christmas time.

One of the pictures (Photograph #7) of the meat area shows a little boy in a left-hand corner playing with a tail of one of the hanging pigs from the Río Piedras meat market.

Río Piedras is one of the largest public markets in the city of San Juan and it is located behind the University of Puerto Rico. The picture discussed before also presents a pig smiling with a cigarette placed in his mouth, part of the satiric aspect of the selling of this product.

The picture also talks about a specific season, Christmas time, when people are buying foods and presents at the same time. During this period the market tends to become more crowded, and it is interesting to observe the interaction of the people who had first shopped for presents and then stopped at the markets to buy food.

The carniceros dress in white, or at least wear white aprons that later will get spotted with animal blood. The meat is usually kept in open refrigerators under fluorescent lights to show its quality and to keep mosquitos away. At this "job" there is more than one person, because while one is cutting meat someone else takes care of the customers. Generally speaking, only men work in the meat area because it is a crude job for a woman to accomplish. That is shown in the picture where the man is cutting the meat of a bull that weighs tons and has to be chopped in small pieces in order to be sold.

In the meat area the smell is also very different from the other areas, but once you get used to it you don’t even notice it.
Because markets gained such popularity people in need of starting up a business decided to open department stores (Photograph #11). Outside the "Plazas del Mercado" there are people selling all kinds of merchandise, especially during Christmas time. They bring many different products and sell in a corner of a street. The products will vary from more fruits and vegetables to articles used in the house or as personal items. The scene is very picturesque and is closely related to the selling done in the public markets, for it provides the opportunity to shoppers to have the choice of deciding where they will like to buy their household and other personal goods. The vendors selling outside the markets have the advantage of not having to pay the rent of a booth. The little establishment or booth can be moved to different places every day because the selling of the product is done by transporting wooden carts everywhere. The advantage with this kind of selling for a photographer is that you meet a wider range of personalities.

There are also some bargain shops around the public markets. The products they sell are mostly clothes and gifts. They are like many different department stores but are much cheaper than the stores found in a mall. The advantage of these department stores is that they offer a wide variety of products without the expense of too much overhead.

It is common to see a whole family with their children, especially on Saturdays when families gather to share or rest in the plazas to eat, relax with friends and talk.

It is interesting to mention that the people whom I met who work in or around the plazas are people who never finished high school, and some others never went to school, not realizing the importance of studying or getting a degree. There is a wide range of ages shown in the picture of the youngsters selling wrapping paper in a corner of a street.
There is more than one activity in the picture because while they sell wrapping paper a man is trying to sell a wall clock and on the other corner a family is walking around (Photograph #11).

DIFFERENT MARKETS, DIFFERENT TRADITIONS

Every public market has a history of its own. There are customs and different traditions everywhere but all of them also offer a great variety of household goods for residents or tourists who visit “Las Plazas de Mercado”. As the politician Enrique Lugo-Silva comments “The Puerto Rican Public Markets represent a patrimonic history that starts at the beginning of our lives as Islanders: It is one of the most important distributive channels of the consuming products in Puerto Rico”.1

The public market is essential for the economic growth both for the public and for the merchant.

The market combine the areas of production, distribution, and consumption. In the pictures I present a balance, a harmony of the products and the significance of what is presented. The public market is part of a history and presents a decorative composition of a culture while the photographs suggest the freshness of a spontaneous creation form of mother-earth. The camera provides the viewer the advantage of perceiving all of this from certain angles. The eye tends to focus on specific details instead of travelling and gathering a large amount of diverse information. The panoramic photographs give us the feeling of spaciousness and provide a different perspective. I took into consideration the fact of photographing before the image formed in front of the camera disappeared. The panoramic

camera gives us this sense of continuity, and it records honestly the fact that it is a photograph from a specific place and time. In the pictures the viewer is enriched by the surrounding scene so the observer would not be entirely separate from what is observed. The picture encompasses the world in which we live; that which will change throughout the years.

The composition used was never really posed, I did ask the people in the photograph if I could take their picture. The people were aware of my presence and of the camera but they were not disturbed by either. I prefer to have the vendors and customers react to the camera rather than giving them directions and make them pose for the situation.

My interest is to gather a spontaneous situation and invite the observer to see with me, to use the eyes to focus on the daily activity rather than just the presence of the people who visit the Plaza. The subject comes to be the world. That’s why the photographs are wide, horizontally framed and have varied, contrasting light situations.

**HISTORICAL REFERENCE**

The Panoramic views were introduced by painters who used to draw large scales to present the scenes in a dramatic way to add “reality”. In photography Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre and Bouton fitted this format to the Dioramas to give the spectator the entire field of vision.

Later on, Frederic Martens, a German born in 1809, was one of the first engravers who exhibited panoramic views of European cities in 1844. The pictures were daguerrotypes which measured 10.0 x 37.0 centimeters. He also developed cameras known as the Megastop that could encompass 150 degrees
by a lens who swung or turned on an axis. Martens' photographs focused in scenic landscapes of Switzerland and the French and the Swiss Alps.\(^2\)

Then by 1848 an American known as William Southgate Porter, born in 1822, made a panoramic view daguerrotype of the Philadelphia Fairmount Park and the Waterworks. The daguerrotype is made of eight plates by piecing the images together. Porter in partnership with Charles Fontayne photographed the Waterfront that same year. The same subject Fairmount Park was taken by T. P. and D. C. Collings at the same time. But, this one was not as spectacular, since it failed to include an eight plate at the center of the Panorama.\(^3\)

By the 1900 century Kodak made a panoramic camera using 120 film and making 2 1/4 x 6 1/2 inch pictures. The camera covered a wide field of view by having the film covered in an arc and a lens which swing in a pivot, exposing the film area through a narrow slit.\(^4\)

Another camera that was very popular for panoramic pictures and photographs of large groups was the Circut Camera (no longer manufactured). During the exposure the Circut rotated on a panoramic tripod head by using a spring motor. The spring is wound from one spool to the other across a narrow slit in the camera back. On the top of the tripod it has a gear to produce a correct rate of rotation for lenses of different focal lengths. The camera used film of 8 inches wide by 5 feet long or 10 inches wide by 6 feet long. But, it could produce pictures of 360 degrees in a single shot or less

\(^3\) Ibid 2. p.42.
because the camera could be stopped at any point depending upon how wide the picture was desired.

A more modern camera made in 1963 is the Widelux. This one also uses a swing lens and makes 24 x 59 mm pictures on a 35 mm. The angle covered is of 140 degrees. The camera has three different shutter speeds: 1/15, 1/125, and 1/250. The f/stops range from f/2.8 to f/11, and the distance of focus from 5 feet to infinity.

**MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

During my last core class which I took with Charles Werberig I began to explore panoramic camera technology. Unable to have access to a Widelux, I asked Andrew Davidhazy for one from his unique collections. He loaned me a panoramic camera made by Kodak in the 1900 called the Panoram. Since the camera gave unexpected results, it was hard to know what was going to come out of it. The camera has a slit that travels along an axis but no exposure recommendation was provided. I made "tons" of proofs but I was dissatisfied with most of them. I decided to contact a former professor of mine in Puerto Rico, Osvaldo García, who is a great camera collector. Once I mentioned the problem he decided to send me a Russian Kalimar Panoramic Camera. The camera has the same features as the Widelux F7, except that the shutter speeds are 1/30, 1/125 and 1/250. The disadvantage of this camera in comparison with the Kodak Panoram lies in the quality of the lens, which is not the best.

While trying this camera during my graduate courses I decided to buy a Widelux. At this point I knew I was interested in exploiting this camera and searching for a relevant subject matter. Once I got the Widelux F7 I tried to explore the technical potential of the camera by taking pictures from different
angles and views. That was how I became aware of how it optically distorted my subjects. But once I became aware of this technical limitation it was easily overcome. For my personal point of view, I was concerned with making use of the whole scene in the picture frame to surround a moment in time. The physical breath the Widelux encompasses served that objective superbly.

I started taking pictures for my thesis project during the summer of 1987 and finished by the month of January. I took more than 70 rolls of color film of 36 exposures each, using Fujicolor 200 and 400 and visiting at least 20 public markets of different towns on the Island of Puerto Rico.

Color film was used intentionally to reflect part of the colorful folklore of the Island through the playfulness of its markets.

I made 70 contact sheets to later facilitate the editing process. And before I went to a final print, I had work printed about 40 pictures on 11 x 14 color paper. This really helped me visualize each print and to know which should be printed in a larger scale. The editing process was not a difficult one. My thesis board as well as the critiques in class helped me to understand the images that were more powerful and relevant to what I wanted to transmit so that it could be understood.

The Widelux enabled me to absorb from the scene more than what is perceived by the human eye. The lens moves along with more freedom and it allows me to obtain a more peripheral scene. I also learned to make use of the viewfinder without losing the perspective seen by the eye.

Once I determined which images were to be printed in a larger scale I made arrangements to print in the G-6 color series area and used an Omega dichroic 4 x 5 enlarger. While printing, I was careful to get a good color balance.
The paper used was Kodak Ektacolor Professional, Surface E, 100 feet long by 20 inches wide. I learned that in order to facilitate the viewer's appreciation, the image size had to be 17 inches wide by 44 inches long.

The most exciting part was putting the exhibition and all the work together. Once it was on the wall the work seemed to follow a path and a sequence, and everything fitted the way it was planned.

I found similarities in my work and that of Walker Evans: Evans photographed places and settings where people usually gathered. He photographed markets found along the road. They evoke a meaning of time and place.

"For Evans' work it was written that photographs are packed with things that make one part of the everyday American experience. They are photographs about getting and spending, about travelling and soliciting, about the character of places and people as defined by commercial public transitions. The effect of looking squarely at such things was shocking for his time. Most critics characterized his works with words such as disintegration, chaos, waste, and decay. But, Evans was trying to provide a new vision of reality by choosing a new vocabulary of facts. To intensify his vision, he chose objects that had not yet attained through repeated usage the status of icons, symbols, or metaphors through repeated usage."5

A similar concept is presented in my photographs taken during 1987-1988, in a different country. But the idea conveys a similar experience and tradition where you do not have to speak the native language in order to understand what the experience is all about.

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