

The Role of Retail Markets in Impoverished Neighborhoods

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Building services such as retail and food markets in depressed areas are inherently accompanied with certain challenges. These challenges involve issues dealing with the economic stability of the area, marketing to the existing population, and enticing a new population to inspire diversity. Baltimore, Maryland has made several attempts in urban renewal throughout its history, some projects being the most successful in the country for its time. However, it continues to be one of the most violent, underprivileged cities in America. The renewal tactics in Baltimore represent numerous lessons to be learned, as do those in many other international cities. By assessing the lifestyles and correlated purchasing habits of the poor, hopeful retail strategies emerge that explore how the insertion of new services into underprivileged areas can support the low-income minority groups who live there and aim towards creating a cleaner, safer neighborhood.

In order to increase the quality of living for those in poverty, their lifestyles must be thoroughly understood. “The most direct contact between the poor and the business community is at retail level. The greatest opportunity to assist and to revolutionize the daily lives of the poor rests in the retailing communities serving poverty areas (Sturdivant 143).” Numerous circumstances exist that are individual to a certain neighborhood, but in general, many issues exist in commonality, such as consumer practices, merchant and consumer relationships, and neighborhood isolation.

The purchasing habits of the poor are limited, for they have the narrowest shopping scope of all social classes (Richards 51). Due to insufficient knowledge of, access to, and discomfort in other segments of society, there is extreme tendency for the

poor to use nearby stores rather than those at a distance, and to buy in more personally familiar situations than impersonal ones. “The poorest housing tenants in [a] New York study used independent neighborhood stores, chain stores, and peddlers more frequently than department stores or discount houses, for buying durable goods (Richards 51).” And it was they who paid more for the goods. “In a study of urban families in Wisconsin, the preferences for independent and neighborhood stores (rather than chain stores) was related to motives concerning the store and its personnel, rather than to motives concerning price (Richards 51).”

Those confined in poverty are isolated from the larger world, and this view as a result produces several inhibiting mindsets such as powerlessness, meaninglessness, and isolation. These views are, of course, relative, as they reflect a comparison to higher society (Besner 20). Often they possess the idea that they are victims of bad luck, and living with very little thought on the future, they find attempts to change useless. An influencing stigma develops between societies as these views clash. “When people live in conditions of such obvious helplessness, when they are themselves so aware of their conditions as to feel alienated and apart from society, how can they retain, much less implement, the values of that society (Besner 24)?”

Isolation remains a primary factor in the stagnant condition of deprived neighborhoods. Lower-class citizens must be brought off the periphery and into the structure of the community (Besner 26). Until they are a functioning part of the larger population, efforts made by that community to help them will have little bearing on change. Their motivation for achievement is hindered by their low views of themselves, but this is not to suggest that they value achievement any less. The poor desire quality

products and the achievement of success as much as their affluent counterparts, but ignorance and insufficient means of attainment are inhibiting (Food Topics 189).

The conclusion that food prices tend to be higher in urban poverty neighborhoods than in better off areas is supported by the fact that few chains exist in those areas and that the residents lack the sufficient means or knowledge to seek out affordable prices. “The spacious, well-stocked, and efficiently managed stores characteristic of America’s highly advanced distribution system are rarely present in the ghetto. (Sturdivant 145)” Even though they are less organized and less clean, some small inner city businesses take advantage of the ignorance and bad credit of the poor, charging more for less.

However, the higher prices are not always caused by merchants taking advantage of the ignorant consumers in the area, but mostly they are a result of inefficiency and lack of business skills. Lacking the advantages of trained management, “mom and pop” establishments suffer through the day to day, with little in the way of broader intentions (Sturdivant 146). Conversely, large retailers are reluctant to move into slum areas to take part in revitalization efforts because they lack urban experience and are nervous about the challenges inherent in such a location (Food Topics 178). A largely organized marketplace system is a plan appreciated by many cities to manage the individual selling of goods from small independent vendors, eliminating some of the inefficient markup while retaining the personal character.

Inflated prices are prevalent among stores in deprived areas, but the cost difference between that and affluent suburban neighborhoods is difficult to identify due to qualitative differences (Sturdivant 147). Low grade meats and poorly made appliances are likely all that are found in such areas, and the poor, knowing little else, readily accept

this quality. By supplying higher income shoppers as well as the low-income residents, prices will stabilize and quality will increase as higher prices are associated with higher quality.

It is essential to remove the barriers that confine so many poverty stricken areas and enforce disassociation with surrounding urban neighborhoods. When the areas are forgotten, lifestyles and economy are left to their own demise. However, if the success of other environments symbiotically utilizes the assets of low-income areas, diversity will inspire cleaner, safer neighborhoods that will appeal to a variety of populations. “Real progress will come only if we can find some way to extend into the ghettos the highly advanced, competitive retailing system that has so successfully served other sectors of the economy (Sturdivant 153).”

Baltimore’s Westside neighborhood is geographically a dynamic intersection of lifestyles. However, it avoids any integration between the business district of downtown to the east and the university to the south. Despite the peripheral communities, it remains in a stagnant deprived state, suffocated by condemned buildings and pawn shops. Several historic cultural institutions exist, such as the Hippodrome Theater and Lexington Market. The theater has no bearing on the population of the area besides requiring police to escort people to their cars at night.

A few attempts at renewal have been made in the 1980s, but not only did the efforts fail to fulfill the vision of a diverse and economically thriving district, they introduced problems inherent in the post-modern designs incorporated. The Market has lost all charm from its original character after being reconstructed according to the shopping mall doctrine of the era, enclosing the building to protect it from the still

suspect city (Ford 165). Currently, the market is filled with more fast food and candy stores than fresh goods. The city is proud of the simple fact that Lexington Market serves its neighborhood well, but they overlook the fact that it no longer serves the larger population in any sense, especially not like it used to before the original building burned down in 1949.

In the Westside Strategic Redevelopment plan, Baltimore is considering actively using retail to integrate the underserved university and office markets as a more pronounced part of the neighborhood. While many businesses approach this issue with the question, “How can low-income people afford any of the goods we supply?” it is obvious that the first requirement of nature is the need to eat, regardless of income level. Centering a catalytic business on an already present food retail service will guarantee a market for the merchandise. Supermarkets are excellent options for low-income areas, delivering a larger quantity, better quality, and competitive prices (Food Topics 187). However, employment in a supermarket gives little to the neighborhood in the sense of pride.

Independent vendors located in a marketplace setting produce the same business environment as the supermarket, only with the addition of the pride and personnel favored by low-income residents. The redevelopment of marketplaces have been successful in reviving deprived areas of cities, for example, Pikes Place in Seattle, Swan’s Market in Oakland, and Santa Caterina in Barcelona, which though close to the city center serves a relatively poor area, formerly dingy and in disrepair (Slessor 52). In these cases, retail manifested in the form of community marketplaces is advantageous to impoverished as well as affluent citizens, which is rarely the case in often built festival

markets.

“The idea of festival markets was to build on the local history and sense of place by emphasizing physical site, old buildings, views of the city, and local historic themes and cuisines (Ford 167).” Baltimore’s festival market, Harbor Place, was built as an urban renewal project intended to bring economic stability to the city and attract a new population. While it was successful in achieving the definitions of its typology, Harbor Place also demonstrated the qualities problematic to the integral function of its urban environment. “Most, if not all, of the shopping in these marketplaces is nonessential and depends on fairly large doses of discretionary income and tourism to keep it going (Ford 167).”

Deprived sections of inner cities encompass views of uselessness that encourage no effort towards improvement. Isolation from the rest of society leaves those in poverty ignorant of more affordable means and incapable of achieving them. Issues such as these factor into the consumer practices of the poor, proving detrimental in most efforts for alleviating depressed conditions. With retail being the most direct relationship between income levels, and with the purchasing of food being an essential need regardless of income, grocery vending is a means to reach both ends of the spectrum. Among the options, urban public markets are the most successful retail strategy in dissolving the barriers that exist between social classes. By understanding the lifestyles of low-income neighborhoods, more intelligent devices can be implemented through retail establishments that uplift the impoverished into a culturally and economically diverse urban environment.

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