

A (Market) Place for Everyone

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—[7 Principles for Becoming a Market City](#)

Visit a great public market, and merchandise aside, you'll find a welcoming, exciting place to spend time in. Like neighborhood parks and plazas, markets offer a stage where meetings between friends, chats with strangers, and colorful community events play out. Beyond serving as sites where people can exchange goods and services, markets are gathering places that strengthen social ties. This is especially important for diasporic communities who can enjoy markets as a "home away from home" where they can celebrate their culture and history.

The Flint Farmers' Market bustles with activity, both indoors and outdoors.



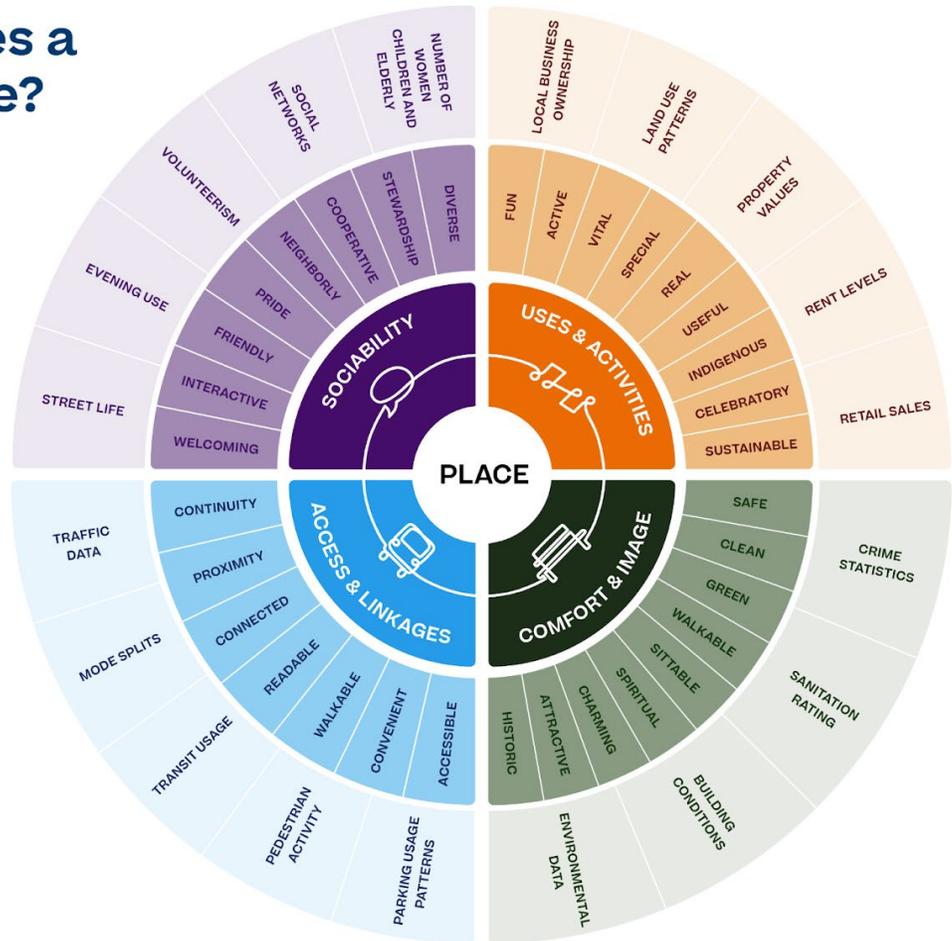
While the atmosphere of a lively market can seem magical, it's important to remember that a great place rarely happens by accident. A Market City needs to *intentionally* plan public markets so that they can meet their full potential as public spaces. In this article, the third in a series on the [seven principles for becoming a Market City](#), we'll take a deep dive into the Flint Farmers'

Market to illustrate how [placemaking](#) rooted in connecting with underserved populations can transform the physical location of a market into a place to come together.

The Flint Farmers' Market in Michigan, U.S., has been housed in a former printing press with 10,500 square feet of space since it [relocated](#), with the help of Project for Public Spaces, to Flint's downtown in 2014. When planning for the new location, Project for Public Spaces and the market's architects used the concept of placemaking to design the market, hand-in-hand with the local community, as [one of the country's great public places](#).

What Makes a Great Place?

**Project
for Public
Spaces**



More specifically, key stakeholders used the placemaking diagram to ensure that the new space was accessible, multifunctional, comfortable, and could facilitate and support community interaction. Today, the market hosts 45 permanent indoor vendors and seasonal outdoor vendors, including Michigan farmers and craft artisans, and serves half a million visitors each year. There is an assortment of local produce, fresh flowers, prepared meals, wine, candles, cheeses, and more.

Key Takeaway #1: A Great Marketplace has Plenty To Do.

To draw in a variety of people throughout the day, week, and year, a market should host a multitude of activities and uses.

The Flint Farmers' Market goes far beyond securing food access for people. The new location houses Flint Food Works, a commercial kitchen venture that helps entrepreneurs take their ideas to market—literally. [Their goal](#) is to offer a low-cost, low-risk way for locals to set-up a food-based business. In this way, they “eliminate the need for small businesses to take on debt, purchase expensive equipment, [and] sign a long-term lease.”

The market also includes a colocation that is unique in the world—it houses the Hurley Children's Clinic, which acted as the whistle-blower for the [Flint water crisis](#). The clinic provides families with medical services as well as an on-site nutritionist and, thanks to the market's proximity in the same building, produce prescriptions, which they can conveniently redeem in the very same visit.

Programs that integrate the clinic and the market are so popular that during the Flint Water Crisis, the NBA Foundation caught wind of this work and generously [offered a gift](#) of \$25 to each child in Flint's schools to be used at the market. Tom Gores, the owner of the Detroit Pistons foundation, then matched this gift resulting in approximately \$325,000 worth of food vouchers for families who were then able to support the market's small-business vendors. As the Flint Farmers' Market's manager Karianne Martus sums it up, “Everyone was happy.”

Wayfinding signage at the Flint Farmers' Market includes The Ramsdell Room—named in honor of former market manager Dick Ramsdell—a site for birthdays, weddings, and other community gatherings.

The market also partners with all types of local organizations, especially those with a mission of uplifting communities. A market that programs something for everyone keeps people coming back for more.

Key Takeaway #2: Facilitate Access & Linkages to Your Market.

Even when a market offers lots of reasons *why* people should visit, it also has to consider *how* people get to the market.

For example, the Flint Farmers' Market relocation was planned, in part, to resituate the market in a more accessible and convenient part of the city. Its location since 2014 is adjacent to a major transportation hub that 18,500 people pass through on an average day. The market has even [partnered](#) with the Metropolitan Transit Authority “to have special routes within the community to bring families to the market for fresh food and provide free satellite parking for the market at no charge.”

There is plenty of seating at the Flint Farmers' Market for both resting and catching up with neighbors.

A 2016 [study](#) by Richard Sadler at the College of Human Medicine at Michigan State University found that in just the first year after the relocation, the market saw a 300% increase in foot traffic. And, while only 4% of patrons walked, biked, or took a bus to the market in 2011, four years later almost a quarter of them did. Those numbers have likely increased in the years since.

This lesson can be applied to markets beyond the U.S., too. For example, in Arusha, Tanzania, Dr. Furaha Abwe, the Executive Director of Urban Planning for Community Change, has led efforts to better link Arusha's informal settlements to its markets via [transit](#). In this way, stakeholders in Arusha ensure its markets remain a critical and accessible part of the community.

As these examples demonstrate, considering the various modes of transportation that people rely on can help make a market more accessible, sustainable, and financially viable.



Key Takeaway #3: Welcome the People Most Likely to be Excluded from the Market.

If you want a vibrant market, focus on the needs of the most vulnerable visitors.

The Flint Farmers' Market fosters a feeling that everyone in the community has a place at the market, a process that began with community engagement at the time of the relocation. Someone staying warm from the cold feels just as comfortable taking a seat indoors as a wealthy suburbanite. And, while Karianne only has one full-time colleague to help with market management, a portion of their budget goes towards maintenance and security services to ensure the space is clean and safe.

Similarly, the [Mercado Libertad](#) in Guadalajara, Mexico serves a local audience of limited means, rather than strictly tourists or upper-middle class shoppers. Or, as *Curbed* puts it, the market is for “virtually everyone except the frequent-flier elites who stick to air-conditioned malls at the city’s edge.” The key idea is to move your market towards being more approachable than Instagrammable.

Across the world, markets play a particularly important role in creating spaces of comfort for diasporic communities. At the Flint Farmers' Market, for example, Middle Eastern immigrants travel from far beyond downtown to the market's Lebanese restaurant, which doubles as a specialty grocery store. Likewise, the largely international student populations of the neighboring Michigan State School of Public Health and University of Michigan-Flint also hang out at the market. Karianne notes that these students often gush to her that the market “feels like home.”



The Flint Farmers' Market anchors the local community while providing a "home away from home" for visitors from all over the world.

In other markets where there are large diasporic communities such as the [Southeast Asian Market in Philadelphia's FDR Park](#), an additional focus can be placed on providing hard-to-find ingredients and street foods "from back home" to create a gathering place for people to connect with their roots. The feel of a marketplace resonates with many people, no matter where they hail from, and it's always a relief to find a familiar taste, sound, smell, or sight in a new place.

In Flint, fostering an atmosphere of inclusion has led to encouraging results. In 2020, the Brookings Institution published [research](#) on the Flint Farmers' Market showing that doing so created an environment that was more inviting to all. Today, the racial composition of customers at the Flint Farmers' Market—28% Black and 68% white—reflects that of the Flint metro area. In addition, the visitors' zip codes demonstrate that the market attracts many of its customers from Flint's low-income neighborhoods. "While some of these innovations are context-dependent, they reveal the importance of designing public spaces not just for 'everyone,'" the study concludes, "but instead designing them to reach those who are most likely to be excluded."

"In doing so, the market did not lose suburban customers or become any less of a regional destination, but rather became a destination where all Flint residents—regardless of income, race, or ZIP code—felt comfortable to be."

Key Takeaway #4: The Market Is a Place for Gathering.

A Market City considers how its markets can facilitate people coming together. This sociability is often the hardest characteristic to cultivate in a public space, and it emerges as much from regular usage as any particular community-building effort.

In 2017, Dr. Victoria Morckel at the University of Michigan-Flint published a [paper](#) in the International Journal of Justice and Sustainability that explored how market patrons felt about the Flint Farmers' Market relocation. Her work showed that socializing was one of the [top four reasons](#) people visited the market. In one visit, locals can do their shopping and catch-up with old friends. All types of people—including older adults, new moms, and budding entrepreneurs—can drop in for events made with them in mind. And, Karianne notes that children absolutely love the market, so families know they can always head there for a nice outing.

Even when journalists, many of whom had been all over the world, flocked to Flint during the water crisis and during presidential primaries, they were deeply moved by how special it is. Talking to Karianne, they would say things like, "Wow, this is Flint? We would never have imagined this huge sense of community."