



A High Line for Harlem

A plan to turn a mile of empty space under the Metro North tracks in Harlem into a vibrant market for hundreds of local entrepreneurs could do wonders for a neighborhood lacking in affordable retail space and a city struggling to retain independent businesses

OFF THE CUF



Off the CUF commentaries are published periodically by the Center for an Urban Future. Alternatively written by outside experts and CUF staff, the commentaries aim to highlight critical opportunities and challenges facing New York and other cities, and generate fresh ideas for policymakers, business leaders and nonprofit practitioners.

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Cover photo: Meta Brunzema Architect P.C.

A HIGH LINE FOR HARLEM

AT ITS PEAK IN THE 1950s, EAST HARLEM'S LA MARQUETA was home to over 500 mostly Puerto Rican vendors occupying space in five separate buildings stretching from 111th Street to 116th Street on Park Avenue. For decades the market figured prominently in travel guides, as residents and tourists alike would flock there to buy avocados, guavas, cassava, and tamarind—things you weren't likely to find anywhere else in the city. That stands in strong contrast to the way things look today, when on a recent visit just two vendors were open for business and there was not a single shopper. Three of the original buildings no longer exist and another sits empty. If travel guides mention the market at all anymore, it is usually in the past tense, as the former "crown jewel of ethnic markets in the city."

The city's Economic Development Corporation (EDC), which controls the site, is now moving forward with what it describes as an incremental approach to revitalizing the market, building a kitchen incubator for food manufacturers and hoping that eventually helps to spur entrepreneurs to rent stalls in the largely vacant market building. That's perhaps an understandable inclination after a spate of high-profile failures to revive La Marqueta over the past few decades. But it represents a big missed opportunity.

The city should think bigger and embrace a plan recently put forward by the Harlem Community Development Corporation to create a mile long, open-air market under the Metro North tracks, spanning 22 blocks along Park Avenue from 111th Street to the Harlem River at 133rd Street.

Upon first glance, building a mile-long open-air market under an elevated train line in Harlem might seem a bit impractical or even far-fetched, especially in a time of government budget deficits and draconian service cuts. But the Harlem CDC's proposal for a new and vastly bigger La Marqueta would almost certainly prove to be a momentous investment for a large swath of Upper Manhattan.

La Marqueta Mile, as the proposal is tentatively called, would include affordable vending spaces for up to 900 local entrepreneurs and artisans, an incredible opportunity in a neighborhood with too few reasonably-priced storefronts for local entrepreneurs and in a city where small, independent businesses continue to be squeezed out by national chains. It would provide more shopping options in a community that is seriously under-retailed and has so few stores selling fresh food that it was recently labeled a "food desert" by public health experts. And just like the High Line, another innovative urban planning development that was initially given little chance of success, a mile-long market in Upper Manhattan would attract tourists and New Yorkers from other parts of the city and in so doing bring much needed new energy and excitement to the area.

Moreover, upon closer examination, the timing might not be all bad either—quite the opposite in fact. Like many other cities across North America and Europe, New York is currently experiencing a renaissance in public markets. Consumers across the city are increasingly turning to locally sourced fruit and vegetables, artisanal food products and handmade furniture, clothes and jewelry. And New York, perhaps more than any other city in the country, is teeming with would-be entrepreneurs who are willing and able to step in to fulfill the demand. Among the city's many recent successful markets are the Brooklyn Flea, the New Amsterdam Market, the Hester Street Market and a growing Greenmarket program that includes 49 farmers markets in neighborhoods from the South Bronx to East New York.¹ Other older markets that have come back to life recently are the Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side and the Moore Street Market in Williamsburg. That's an impressive collection and it doesn't even include Chelsea Market or the Union Square Holiday Market, two markets founded in the 1990s whose popularity over the years has never wavered.

"As we see a resurgence of markets in New York and all over the country, it's really exciting to see the energy that can be harnessed at the local level," says David O'Neill, a senior fellow at the New York-based Project for Public Spaces and the former general manager of Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia. O'Neill says that markets have become a powerful catalyst for local economic development and points to Pike Place in Seattle, the Eastern Market in Detroit and Borough Market in London as prime examples.² Markets promote entrepreneurialism, says O'Neill; they provide cheap affordable space and an opportunity to test out ideas and merchandise with the buying public. "With a market all you need is a good idea and a good product," he says, "and if for some reason it doesn't work out then it's no big deal." You're not thousands of dollars in debt to the bank.

The Harlem CDC's proposal for La Marqueta originally came about through a consulting partnership with Irwin Cohen, the visionary developer of Chelsea Market. Because of Cohen's successful history redeveloping formerly abandoned industrial facilities, Tom Lunke, the Harlem CDC's planning director, had hoped Cohen might submit a bid to redevelop La Marqueta's two moribund buildings. Instead, Cohen suggested something much bigger, an outdoor market under the Metro North tracks stretching from present day La Marqueta at 111th Street all the way to the Harlem River at 133rd.

"I told him it doesn't mean anything to develop three blocks, but just think about a mile of La Marqueta, 60 feet wide, with all family-run businesses," says Cohen. "[A new La Marqueta] could become a fantastic graduate school for people to learn to run businesses and to develop sustainable family wealth. You could have six people from different backgrounds making velvet cake, someone from China making Chinese birthday cakes, a guy from Senegal who specializes in Senegalese tea. On one block, you have a Mariachi band and, on another, a place where people could play bocce. Suddenly, you create something that attracts people from all over. It becomes a destination."³

Lunke and his colleagues at the Harlem CDC, a state-run agency that is an affiliate of the Empire State Development Corporation, loved the idea and ran with it, incorporating feedback from community leaders and bringing on architect Meta Brunzema to sketch out an initial plan. Although it is ambitious, their pro-

posal is wonderfully simple. It would dispense with the concept of an interior, temperature-controlled market altogether and replace the old La Marqueta buildings with free-standing commercial stalls that would use the Metro North tracks as a detached roof, much like you find in traditional European markets like La Boqueria in Barcelona or the recently refurbished Borough Market in London (also situated under an elevated train line). The space would integrate eating areas as well as places to sit and people watch (or play chess or bocce). The stalls would be visible from either side of the street and there would be multiple points of entry, making the interior of the market a much more seamless part of the city than the closed-off spaces of present-day La Marqueta.

The details of the design are likely to change following extensive community input, but Brunzema's suggestions are notable for the way they integrate a variety of different kinds of spaces. For example, her design envisions a small amphitheater dug into the street at 116th Street, pedestrian paths curving from one side of the viaduct to the other, and dense clusters of stalls opening up to broader un-programmed spaces. Like the High Line or perhaps Chelsea Market, it also combines a wide array of different materials, including—in one area—steel shipping containers

carved up and tilted at slight angles to form vendor stalls, patches of slate paving stones, and columns of crushed glass.⁴ “If the market is going to succeed,” says Brunzema, “it has to be an attraction all by itself. Ask a person in Barcelona why they’re going to La Boqueria and they’ll tell you they want to see the market or maybe meet people, not just pick up groceries.”

A Showcase for Local Entrepreneurs

While making Harlem more of a destination has significant appeal, the real beauty of the La Marqueta Mile proposal is the creation of so many small spaces for entrepreneurs and artisans. Once finished, the market could house as many as 900 vendors in small stalls ranging from 80 square feet to 160 square feet. These stalls or kiosks would no doubt appeal to a wide variety of local vendors, including bakers, butchers, artisanal jewelry makers and import/export businesses. No doubt many of these would be veteran, well-established businesses, but a lot them would be young, under-capitalized ventures that would have a hard time getting started—and surviving—in one of Harlem’s high priced retail spaces. For example, street vendors could set up shop in the market’s smaller stalls for as little as \$600 per month and save on fines and transportation costs, while receiving services like



garbage removal, public restrooms and eating areas for their customers.

Affordable spaces for small businesses are in short supply across the entire city, but our research suggests that Central and East Harlem have a particular need. For instance, as our map (see page 9) detailing the total amount of retail square footage for every zip code in Manhattan shows, except for the financial district at the southern tip of the island, available retail space shrinks the further north one travels. In fact, the 10037 zip code, where the La Marqueta Mile proposal meets the Harlem River, has one of the lowest retail square footage totals in Manhattan, if not the entire city.⁵

This trend is even more dramatic when one considers the size of the neighborhood's residential population. For example, taking the four zip codes that make up Central and East Harlem (10029, 10035, 10037, 10026) and dividing the total number of stores (including restaurants) by the local residential population, one arrives at 42 stores for every 10,000 residents. That is significantly fewer stores than nearby Washington Heights, which has 49 stores for every 10,000 residents, and dramatically fewer than the Upper East Side, which has 132 stores for every 10,000 residents.⁶

Compared to some of the largest and most successful immigrant neighborhoods in the boroughs outside of Manhattan, things look just as bad. Brooklyn's Sunset Park, for example, with large numbers of Mexican, Central American, and Asian residents, has 70 stores per 10,000 residents; and Flushing in Queens, which has a large Chinese population, is even higher at 71 stores per 10,000 residents.⁷

According to several sources, one major reason for Harlem's comparatively low number of retail is the lack of adequate retail space overall, especially in East Harlem. The Harlem CDC's Tom Lunke says that the neighborhood is full of urban renewal superblocks that took out the existing retail and disrupted the neighborhood's once vibrant merchant community; in subsequent years there has been a lot of residential investment but very little commercial investment. And a recent rezoning of the neighborhood may actually limit future commercial growth.

Supporting that assessment is a recent retail report by East Harlem's Community Board 11, which estimates that 70 percent of purchases made by East

Harlem residents are going to stores located outside the community. In order to close that gap and lure in more consumer dollars, the report estimated that the neighborhood would need 2.6 million additional square feet of storefront space, a realistic ambition, it argues, since 90 percent of East Harlem residents already shop regularly at neighborhood stores and 70 percent express a desire for additional shopping options.⁸

Meanwhile, where there *is* retail space in Harlem, the prices tend to be well beyond the reach of most small businesses. A recent report by the real estate firm CPEX shows that commercial spaces in greater Harlem's three main commercial corridors—along 125th Street, 116th Street and Third Avenue—average between \$125 and \$225 per square foot. That's higher than every single shopping district in the four boroughs outside of Manhattan; for example, commercial spaces on Fifth Avenue in Sunset Park and on Main Street in Flushing average between \$50 and \$80 per square foot.⁹

Getting La Marqueta Right

Given the lack of available retail space in Harlem, it is certainly surprising that La Marqueta has not been more of a success. Although urban historians sometimes point to the declining Nuyorican population for the market's initial demise, that trend has been more than outweighed in recent years by an influx of new Mexican, Dominican and West African immigrants, as well as by many native-born professionals moving into the area's new condo developments. And as any quick look around would immediately confirm, it's not as though Central and East Harlem are lacking in entrepreneurs.

There are dozens of tacquerias and general merchandise stores catering to Latin Americans on Third Avenue as well as a bunch of Senegalese, Ghanaian and Nigerian cafes and haberdasheries clustered around 116th Street and Nicholas Boulevard. A number of micro-businesses and concessionaries have lined up on the streets and even doubled up in traditional storefronts. On 116th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues dozens of vendors sell horchata, tomas, pupusas and fresh fruit;¹⁰ on that same block, a Mexican leather goods store leases out the front window to a woman who makes quesadilla. Near the corner of 116th Street and Fifth Avenue is a small

West African market called Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, which is full of booths selling traditional African art, leather bags, shoes and dresses; the market is itself composed of former street vendors who were forced off of 125th Street by Mayor Giuliani in 1994.¹¹

So, again, if affordable retail space is so hard to come by in Harlem that businesses are doubling up in the same storefront, why does La Marqueta and its relatively cheap vending stalls remain such a failure? “They’ve tried to remake La Marqueta eight times since the 1970s, and every time it was a failure,” says Albert Medina, the recently retired president of the East River North Renewal, a neighborhood group. “Why? It doesn’t make any sense.”

One theory is that many of the prospective operators were confused about what kind of market would flourish in that space and best serve the interests of the surrounding neighborhood. In 1983, for instance, the city asked the Maryland-based Enterprise Company, developers of the South Street Seaport in lower Manhattan, to come up with a similar “festival market” plan for La Marqueta.¹² And as recently as 2007, EDC had a contract with the East Harlem Business Capital Corporation to build a new eight-block long, six building complex that would serve as part cultural center and part market.¹³ This last attempt at revitalization eventually foundered over deep disagreements about where the financing would come from and what kinds of businesses would be allowed in (market analysts pushed for big chains, while others wanted local businesses only). “It was like everyone lost faith in the ability of the community to help out,” says Medina.

For this commentary, I interviewed over a dozen city planners, real estate developers, public market experts, community board members and other local stakeholders, and nearly all of them agreed with that assessment in one form or another: A new market could be wildly successful where La Marqueta’s remaining buildings are, they said, but it absolutely has to leverage local talent and set up small vendor stalls like the original market did.

But that’s not all. According to a number of the people I interviewed, yet another reason for La Marqueta’s continued failure is the outmoded design and dilapidated state of the two remaining buildings. For example, Meta Brunzema, the architect hired by the Harlem CDC, says that one big problem is the lack of

visibility from the street and neighboring apartment buildings. “You can’t see the stores inside,” she says. “There is only one entrance to each building and no sidewalks on the side. From an urban design point of view, the buildings function like big walls or barriers dividing the neighborhood.”

La Marqueta’s anti-urban design wasn’t necessarily a problem, says Brunzema, when it was the only place in the city you could get popular Latin American goods, but after years of lying fallow it has become a big impediment to its rejuvenation.

Obviously, there are two broad approaches one can take to these problems: reactivate the space and hope a new program attracts interest in the current set up, or re-think the whole enterprise and design something new. The city’s Economic Development Corporation (EDC), which manages the site, says it is now committed to the first of these approaches. “There have been so many grandiose visions for La Marqueta and so many failures over the years that the city now wants to take a more cautious incremental approach,” says James Harris, an assistant vice president at EDC.

To that end, the agency issued a “Request for Proposal” in the Spring of 2009 for a 4,000 square foot community kitchen—or what’s sometimes called a kitchen incubator—to be built at the back of building four, the only building still open to the public. Once built, the incubator will house industrial grade ovens, mixers and refrigerators so that promising young artisanal and ethnic food businesses can have a place to tinker with recipes and bring their products to scale. There’s no question the city could use more of these venues. As the Center for an Urban Future argued in a previous policy paper, the food industry continues to be one of New York’s most vibrant and promising sectors, but a lot of small food manufacturers wither on the vine because they are unable to afford a licensed commercial kitchen and cannot find smaller spaces that are more suitable to their needs.¹⁴ Moreover, most experts think East Harlem would be a good location, as it would be the only kitchen incubator in Manhattan and could serve a wide variety of local and citywide start-ups.

However, Kathrine Gregory, a food industry consultant and the operator of Mi Kitchen es su Kitchen, a well-known kitchen incubator in Long Island City, says the city can’t expect the incubator to stimulate

a revitalization of the market all by itself. Rather, if anything, that gets it backward: a vibrant market will help the incubator succeed. “Too often kitchen incubators fail by becoming too narrow,” says Gregory. “In order to be successful you have to have several different projects working in a symbiotic relationship.” For instance, it isn’t enough to provide start-ups with space and equipment; you need to help them refine their products for a given clientele and, if possible, find space where they can set up shop on their own. A vibrant market would help with that, Gregory says.¹⁵

Satisfy Several Policy Objectives At Once

Since 2008, both the city and state governments have created a number of programs to encourage grocery stores, farmers markets, and green carts to move into Harlem and other neighborhoods where access to fresh food is a problem. The city has requested a zoning change that would allow developers to build bigger buildings in exchange for a grocery store on the ground floor; it has created property tax abatements, mortgage tax waivers and sales tax exemptions on purchases of materials and equipment for grocery store operators. Meanwhile, the state has created a \$10 million revolving loan fund for the creation of food markets as well as a permanent farmer’s market grant program and a program that offers low-cost project insurance.

Obviously, the city and state governments have come to understand the importance of locally available fresh food in low-income urban neighborhoods. But, in Harlem’s case, they still don’t seem to appreciate what a resource La Marqueta could be in pursuit of these same goals. For decades, the market was the center of gravity of the Puerto Rican community in Harlem (and before that the focal point of a largely Jewish and Irish neighborhood). This history is something that neighborhood children still learn about from their parents, and references to it can still be found in many New York City travel guides.

The mile-long market proposed by Harlem CDC offers the most promise for a full-scale revival of this important New York institution, and it does so by not only bringing in new food purveyors to an area that currently lacks access to fresh food, but by carving out invaluable new public space for residents and ultimately creating an attraction that would benefit hundreds of local entrepreneurs and artisans.

According to Albert Medina, community support for a revitalization of the market is as strong as it ever was, though there is plenty of disagreement about what precise form it would take. Medina himself would like to see a memorial to the founders of El Barrio included in any new design and harbors a few doubts about the use of shipping containers in the Harlem CDC’s plan. Brunzema’s design actually includes a de facto memorial in the form of four beautiful 1950s era murals, old advertisements for pork and beef, which it retains from the original structures. But, overall, the specifics of her design are less important than the idea behind it: to create an attraction for the benefit of both local entrepreneurs and residents.

With enough financing and political will, convincing businesses to take part shouldn’t be too hard. Lunke says the operators of the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market have an interest in the project. And according to Peter de Vries of Esperanza del Barrio, a street vendor advocacy group that recently merged with the larger Street Vendor Project, East Harlem is home to hundreds of street vendors who would love to move into a vibrant urban market like the one being proposed. Most of the vendors sell traditional Mexican street food like tacos, tamales and ice-cream; a few sell general merchandise such as hats and clothes and a handful sell handmade puppets and paintings. “Street vending is a relatively easy way for immigrants to get started without having access to loans,” says de Vries, who is from Guatemala, “but it can still be very hard on them.” Many of the members at Esperanza del Barrio still get harassed by police officers and they can receive huge fines for being too close to the curb or for leaving their cart to go to the bathroom. A small affordable kiosk under the Metro North tracks, he says, would be a great alternative (and opportunity) for many of these people. La Marqueta, after all, was originally built to house push cart vendors just like these.¹⁶

Similarly, with its innovative design, attracting a critical mass of customers and other visitors should be achievable. Over 500,000 residents live in the immediate vicinity, and the Harlem CDC’s proposed market would be conveniently located near subway stops at 116th Street and 125th, a Metro North station at 125th, and of course dozens of bus stops along the M1, M60 and BX15 bus lines among others. In addi-

tion, the market would cut right across an impressive mix of high density apartment buildings and schools, making it a convenient destination for the many thousands of people who visit or occupy those buildings.

Harlem CDC's Tom Lunke estimates that the mile-long market would cost roughly \$215 per square foot, for a total of \$44 million. That isn't peanuts, but it's a fraction of the cost of the High Line, which came in at \$880 per square foot, for a total of \$176 million. It's also far less expensive than other publicly-funded economic development proposals such as Willets Point and Atlantic Yards.

La Marqueta Mile would be an attractive candidate for a federal grant allocation, perhaps through the new Sustainable Communities Program (which the FY 2011 Budget triples in size) or a Community Development Block Grant. But the broad outlines of their plan—including the mile long promenade and outdoor commercial kiosks—could use some support from local leaders and community groups first; design details like a memorial can always be worked out

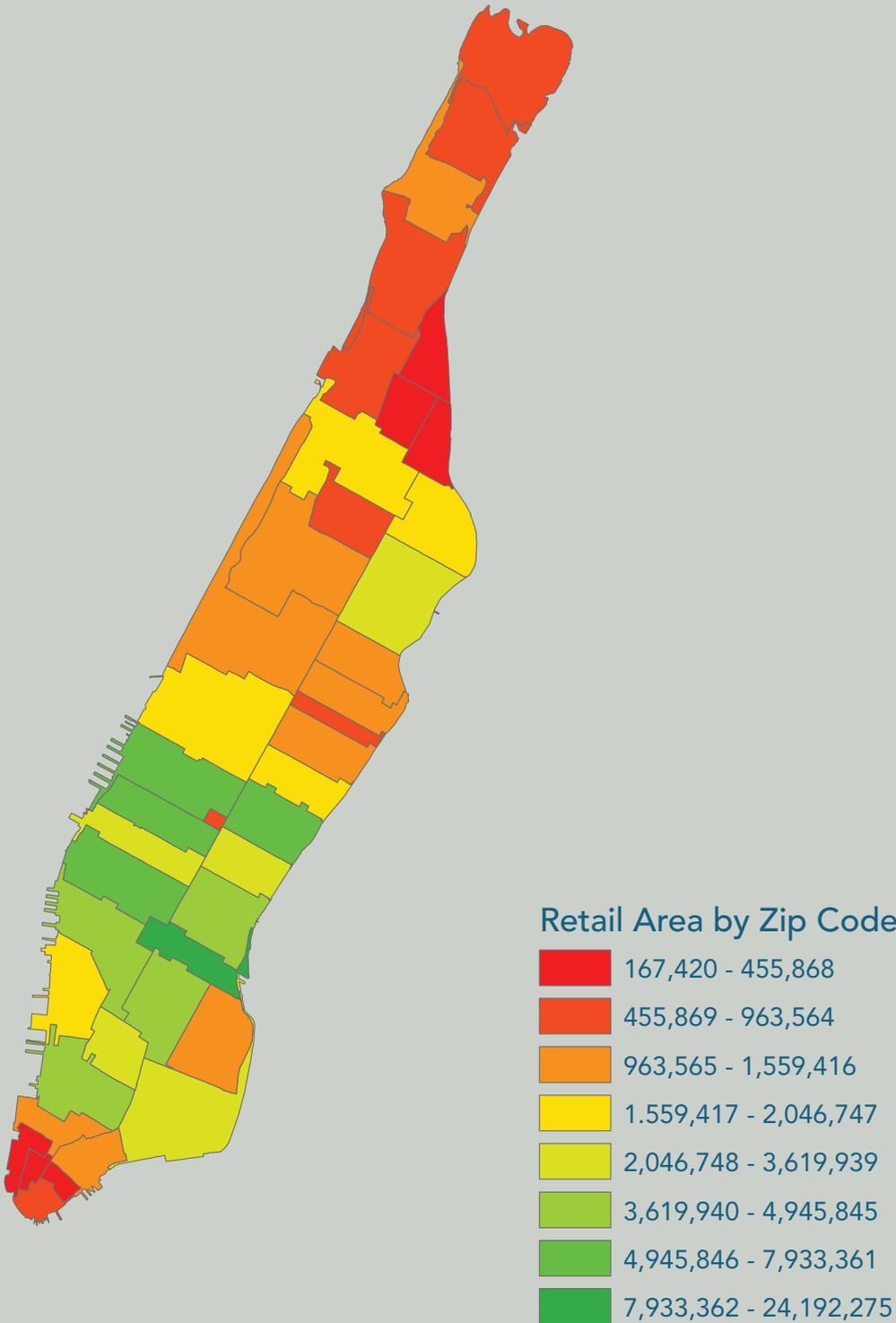
later through public planning sessions or charrettes. Robert Hammond, one of the founders of the High Line, says he and other organizers spent years nurturing a groundswell of community support before winning over powerful supporters in the Mayor's office. Of course, a revival of La Marqueta in some form or another has had simmering community support for decades, but now is the time to advance a specific plan, and a more exciting or ambitious proposal isn't likely to present itself anytime soon.

Just as it eventually came around to supporting the High Line to great success, the city should fully embrace this process and lend its support to the broad outlines of the La Marqueta Mile proposal. Or if for some reason the Bloomberg administration doesn't want to pursue this, then it could always accept a trade. The state recently relinquished its control of Governors Island; perhaps the city could return the favor and hand over La Marqueta to the state-run Harlem CDC.

ENDNOTES

1. For more up-to-date information about these and other markets in New York see "New Visions for New York Street Fairs," Center for an Urban Future (particularly the interview with Karen Seiger) and Karen Seiger, *Markets of New York City: A Guide to the best Artisan, Farmer, Food and Flea Markets*, Little Bookroom, 2010.
2. See also "Making the Case for Markets as Job Generators," Project for Public Spaces: <http://www.pps.org/making-the-case-for-public-markets-as-job-generators/>
3. From an interview with Irwin Cohen by Jonathan Bowles, April 2010.
4. Because the market is under the Metro North tracks, developers are legally prohibited from having stalls or walls go above a certain height.
5. This data was compiled by Paul Costa, the planning fellow at Community Board 11, using the New York City Department of Planning's PLUTO database.
6. Zip code population estimates come from Census 2000. Zip code store counts, including retail stores and restaurants, were compiled in 2007 and come from the Census Bureau's County Business Patterns report: <http://www.census.gov/econ/cbp/index.html>. More recent population estimates from zip-code.com suggest that all of the zip codes compared here have grown in population since 2000, but the zip codes comprising Central and East Harlem may have grown more than those comprising the Upper East Side or Washington Heights, which makes the discrepancies between neighborhoods even greater.
7. As the city's Health Department well understands, this dearth of retail establishments has translated into a significant public health challenge. In 2008, the Health Department, Department of City Planning and EDC undertook a study of the availability of fresh food in different parts of the city and found that less than a quarter of Central and East Harlem's food retailers (including corner bodegas) sold fresh fruit and vegetables. Perhaps not coincidentally, residents in both neighborhoods have been found to suffer disproportionately from diet related diseases. Between 11 and 18 percent of residents suffer from diabetes, and between 27 and 32 percent are obese, which are both among the highest rates in the city.
8. Paul Costa, "East Harlem Retail Analysis," Manhattan Community Board 11.
9. See the CPEX 2010 Retail Report New York City: at <http://cpexre.com/documents/CPEXRealEstate2010RetailReport.pdf>
10. Some of these vendors have even received critical praise from New York City food blogs and message boards like chowhound.com. For example, see: "Interesting Street Food in Upper Manhattan," *The Street Food Enthusiast*, Chowhound.com, April 29, 2008.
11. Kelley, Robin D.G., "Disappearing Acts: Harlem in Transition," *The Suburbanization of New York*, eds. Jerilou Hammett and Kingsley Hammett, 2007, pp. 63-73.
12. "La Marqueta: South Street Seaport North?" *New York Magazine*, December 19, 1983. In the 1970s, city planner James Rouse and architect Ben Thompson collaborated on the South Street Seaport, Faneuil Hall in Boston and the Inner Harbor in Baltimore, in what would become known as the "festival market" movement. These experiments experienced varying degrees of success. They have been criticized for catering to national chain stores and creating a suburban mall-like atmosphere. Illinois-based General Growth Properties, owners of the Staten Island Mall, bought all three properties in 2004.
13. Mindlin, Alex. "Hope amid the Plantains." *New York Times*. May 18, 2008.
14. Mark Foggin, "Recipe for Growth," *The Center for an Urban Future*, June 2008. http://www.nycfuture.org/images_pdfs/pdfs/RecipeForGrowth.pdf.
15. In June, EDC awarded the kitchen incubator contract to Hot Bread Kitchen, a non-profit that trains low-income women to become commercial bakers. The city will invest \$1.5 million to build the new 4,000 square foot commercial kitchen, which it hopes to open in the fall. Gregory says the EDC reached out to her as a possible operator for the kitchen incubator, but she declined to be considered.
16. See *The WPA Guide to New York City*, Random House, 1992 (originally published 1939), pp. 266-67. Also, "Model Pushcart Market Suggested," *Harlem Magazine*, November, 1930.

Appendix: Total Retail Area By NYC Zip Code



Data: NYC Department of Planning PLUTO

Map by Paul Costa