

Surrey Street Market

– THE HEART
OF A COMMUNITY



A RUNNYMEDE COMMUNITY STUDY
BY KJARTAN PÁLL SVEINSSON, FRANZISKA MEISSNER
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RUNNYMEDE

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In reflecting on the changing nature of ethnic diversity in Britain, it becomes increasingly clear that we have to move beyond binary notions of white and non-white to explain the ways in which racisms operate, identities are formed and people live out their lives. The societies in which we live are becoming more diverse and will continue to diversify as migration patterns change, and the impacts of globalization are reflected in labour markets as well as in transnational movement of capital.

This series of community studies aims to promote understanding of the diversity within and between different ethnic groups. Our intention is to build up a collection of studies which focus on communities; their demography, links to civil society, and key political and social issues. We hope that over time this will provide a rich resource for understanding how diversity is lived and experienced away from the necessarily crude ethnic monitoring form, in a vital and dynamic multi-ethnic society.

To find out more about the Runnymede Community Studies series, please visit: www.runnymedetrust.org

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London Markets at a Glance

Public Markets in London

- Greater London has over 180 markets; at least 89 of these are traditional street markets.
- The majority of market traders today are between 40-65 years of age. Few young people are becoming market traders.
- Street markets have been found to play an important role in providing affordable high quality food for local residents. Consequently, street markets bring together a varied clientele from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.
- A trader working a small stall for two days a week is likely to earn less than £7,000 a year. Earnings from a stall operating several days per week may be between £15,000 and £25,000 per annum.
- Market trading is becoming an increasingly competitive area, with rising costs for stalls and an increase in shops selling cut-price goods.

Street Markets and Policy

- Gentrification is often blamed for the economic decline of traditional markets.
- 2005 planning policies for town centres included the aim to rejuvenate market spaces.
- In 2008, the GLA published a study on the situation of London markets suggesting a '100 markets' initiative to focus on the regeneration of markets as public spaces.
- Markets have been found to contribute to the local economy through being a place of employment, trading revenues and bringing customers to adjacent shops.
- 'Clone town' syndrome resulting in the corporate commercialization of many public spaces is believed to have a negative effect on social cohesion, as their monotone design is not conducive to social interaction.

Croydon Demographics

- Croydon is the largest of London's 32 boroughs, with over 330,000 residents
- Surrey Street Market is located in the Croydon ward of Fairfield which has approximately 15,500 residents
- The Office for National Statistics has estimated that there is a 58% probability of two people chosen at random from the Croydon area to be from different ethnic groups.
- The two largest ethnic groups living in Croydon are Asian (11.3% of total population) and Caribbean (7.9%). However, there is a marked difference between areas as well, with the north of the borough being substantially more diverse. For example, Bensham Manor ward has over 60% BME population, while Coulsdon East is 92% White.
- According to January 2008 Labour Force Survey data, the employment rate for minority ethnic people of working age in South London is 72.6 %, compared to 76.4% for White British people of working age.

Introduction

Street markets have a special place in Britain's social and economic landscape. Resisting the development of the dominant paradigm of retail ethos – where shopping is becoming ever more monochrome, atomized and impersonal – street markets remain a quintessentially social space. Shopping for life's essentials is becoming increasingly anti-social, a purely functional activity on which most people want to spend a minimal amount of time and effort. As a result, the moguls of quick and easy retail – large chain stores designed for the needs of busy individuals – are not only changing the face of Britain's town centres, but also the meaning of social relations within them.¹ Independent and small businesses – including market stalls – are in retreat.

Not everyone is easy about these developments. Prince Charles, who made a royal visit to Surrey Street Market in 1994, wrote in his foreword to a book dedicated to Surrey Street, *A Stall Story: 100 Years of Market Trading*:

I believe quite passionately in the importance of preserving and, frankly, celebrating our unique street markets. They are a particularly colourful part of this country's cultural heritage and it is a cause of great sadness that so many are now under threat because of so-called 'progress'.²

The Prince observes that the social and cultural aspect of street markets make them valuable above and beyond a mere business venture. Markets are a site of social – as well as economic – interaction, a place where people often come to pass the time of day at the same time as shopping around for bargains. The combination of cheap prices, quality produce and a personal, enjoyable shopping experience attracts a diverse range of people from all walks of life. A market also has the ability to upset social rules and hierarchies prevalent elsewhere in society with its own set of rules and codes of conduct. Thus, a street market can be a valuable tool to

meet policy objectives relating to community cohesion. This will not happen spontaneously or inevitably, but with some investment and the right planning, markets have the potential to bring people, who would be unlikely to have contact elsewhere, together in a relatively safe and neutral social space.

In spite of the immense social and cultural value of street markets, and their potentially beneficial effects on community cohesion, they are in decline throughout Britain. Surrey Street Market is no exception. The market holds over 100 pitches, all of which would have been occupied in the not-too-distant past. Today, there are only 30 stalls, and the current stallholders are concerned that as people retire, they will not be replaced by new traders. This is obviously a sad development for those who have both economic and emotional vested interest in the market – the stallholders themselves. But its demise could also have an adverse impact on the wider community. Surrey Street is an inclusive space which serves and welcomes a wide range of people. It may not be a visionary system of multicultural perfection, but it does constitute a place where different ethnic groups interweave with relatively little tumult and agitation. Apart from the possibility of fostering mutual respect and understanding between different groups, the market also represents a public space within which socially excluded individuals often feel accepted and are able to socialise.

This report explores how Surrey Street's stallholders view the market as a community in itself, and their role in serving the wider community of Croydon. As will become clear, the traders are quite aware of the social role they play, and they believe that the market has the potential to become a valuable vehicle for promoting intercultural dialogue. For this to happen, however, policy makers need to accept that the value of a street market goes beyond economic growth and monetary worth. Street markets are not only business enterprises. They are meeting places, and when appropriately administered, a market can be at the heart of a community.

1 For a fuller discussion about the nature of 'clone town Britain', see new economics foundation (2004).

2 In Lovett (1995: 5)

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore stallholders' experiences of working in a multi-ethnic street market, their perception of diversity, how they interact with each other, their conception of Surrey Street as a community, and how they perceive their role in serving the wider community of Croydon. For this reason, the methodology used was primarily qualitative, which is particularly apt in providing insight into the complex, subtle, and often contradictory views, experiences, motivations and attitudes of individuals. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 18 individuals for whom Surrey Street is a workplace, 14 of whom were stallholders. Access to interviewees was fairly straightforward; the market inspector introduced the researchers to a number of stallholders, and in some cases interviewees would introduce the researcher to their neighbouring stallholders. Interviews were recorded where possible, though some interviewees declined the request for their interviews to be recorded. The interviews were augmented by participant observation.

The small sample size means that the results should not be read as a comprehensive account of social relations in the market. However, a purposive sampling technique – where interviewees are selected specifically a) for

their specific experiences or knowledge, and b) to capture the diversity and breadth of views within the sample group – was adopted in order to get as broad a perspective as possible. Every effort was made to achieve diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, length of trading, etc. However, as the market is relatively small, a demographic breakdown of interviewees in terms of ethnicity, age, marital status, etc. is not possible, as this would compromise their identities. For the same reason, all quotes remain anonymous.

The purpose of the study was to map out the main issues identified by the participants of the research. The qualitative approach taken provides a selection of narratives of personal experience and opinion. There is no claim to have captured every issue of importance here which should be kept in mind throughout this report. However, this report is intended to highlight the central role street markets play in local communities, how they can be highly conducive to community cohesion, and how they affect people of different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, issues that are often forgotten or ignored in discussions on urban policy. The topics identified and discussed below can be seen as a point of departure for further much needed research and debate.

Background

Street markets in Britain

Markets in Britain have been on the agenda of commentators, researchers and policy makers for some time. A number of major reports have been published on the topic. The Greater London Authority (GLA) recently published a report³ on the current state of London's markets and has found that a narrative of decline of markets does not apply to all of the 180 street retail markets found in London, but disproportionately affects council-managed markets, such as Surrey Street. The main argument espoused in the GLA report

is that markets, and specifically traditional street markets, are a place where people from a multiplicity of backgrounds can mix and mingle and that this should be safeguarded. The report warns that while farmers' and speciality markets have been on the rise in recent years and are performing substantially better than traditional markets, it is particularly this latter type that ensure that markets remain an inclusive space rather than being only accessible to people from a particular economic background. The GLA report recommended that specific economic support should be given to markets, for example in the shape of subsidised rents, making publicity more readily available, and improving transport and parking. These recommendations were

³ London Assembly (2008)

rejected by the One London Group - a Greater London Enterprise project funded by the borough councils to support small and medium sized businesses in the greater London Area – on the basis that support for public spaces in general is certainly desirable, but that the support of market traders as economic entrepreneurs falls outside the responsibility of the taxpayer.⁴ This demonstrates the difficult position of markets at the unique intersection between being a public space and being a commercial retail outlet. However, the question of whether a market is a public space or a commercial space, and what the balance between the two ought to be, remains unclear.

In social theory, public spaces are thought to be important for community cohesion and healthy social interaction. In his think piece for the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, Steve Vertovec⁵ has argued for the importance of ‘civil integration’ – routine everyday practices that allow diversity to become the norm rather than being the exception – and how this type of mutual integration allows for decreasing barriers in diverse societies. He also draws on Ash Amin⁶ who makes a similar argument, albeit in a different context. Following the 2001 disturbances in Oldham and Bradford, Amin draws our attention to ‘micropublics’ – everyday social contact and encounters – as micro social spaces, and argues that these are important in facilitating the negotiation of ethnic differences. This importance has also been recognized by some government agencies. A recent report from Communities and Local Government specifically mentions market places as public space that facilitates meaningful interactions between people,⁷ and therefore could be a key site in promoting community cohesion.

This focus on the role of public spaces has been reflected in a recent research programme undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, investigating the value of public spaces. As part of this programme, Holland et al. argued: “Public spaces allow people to meet on ostensibly neutral ground in planned and unplanned ways, to interact with others within the context of the

whole community”.⁸ In a study on street markets as social spaces, Watson and Studdert⁹ tried to identify which factors allow markets to be successful in facilitating this type of interaction. They concluded that markets function best as social spaces if they attract visitors to the site, have opportunities to linger, are easily accessed, are managed effectively and have an active community of traders interested in making the market work as a social space. While Surrey Street Market fulfils some of these criteria, it falls short on others. However, it should be noted that Surrey Street has strong foundations to function as a good social space.

Related to this, Dines and Cattell¹⁰ argue that policies aimed at rejuvenating public spaces are a timely intervention. Their research on public spaces in Newham showed that by being utilized in multiple ways, public spaces can offer a sense of well-being to a very diverse population interacting in this space. Their research was conducted in part in one of East London’s markets, Queens Market, which their interviewees considered to be the multicultural heart of Newham. In addition to the social benefits associated with street markets, new economics foundation (nef) found, in their study of Queens Market, that markets can economically contribute to their communities, for example by selling food which is affordable and healthy, by bringing customers not only to the market but also to adjacent businesses, and by being a site of employment.¹¹ This study confirms the results established in an earlier nef study of four London markets¹² which also found that markets contribute to their local economy. Furthermore, nef argued that the market had a positive environmental impact as less packaging is used, that produce in the market tended to be cheaper than chain supermarkets, and that it had the ability to serve a very diverse community.

However, the story is not always a positive one. Like most public spaces, markets are also spaces of contested power relations. Drawing on their research of markets in a deprived

4 Ibid.: Annex E

5 Vertovec (2007)

6 Amin (2002)

7 Communities and Local Government (2008)

8 Holland et al (2007: 3)

9 Watson and Studdert (2006)

10 Dines and Cattell (2006)

11 New Economics Foundation (2007)

12 New Economics Foundation (2005)

London neighbourhood, Watson and Wells¹³ demonstrate how nostalgia of better times can lead to the ‘talk’ of shop keepers turning into a politics of resentment, perpetuating and spreading negative sentiments. They argue that this politics of resentment is specifically directed against councils, perceived as giving co-operative trading outlets the ‘better deal’, but it also goes against a homogenously constructed category of asylum seekers, incorporating often wrongly perceived stereotypes and jeopardizing the aim of constructing inclusive public spaces. As Watson and Wells phrase it: “The challenge for regenerating an area like this where a nostalgic imaginary subscribes to a notion of community predicated on discourses of exclusion [...] is how to construct new more inclusive visions of, and plans for, the future”.¹⁴ This suggests that it is in councils’ interest to support and maintain good relations within a market, due to its important role in neighbourhood relations.

Finally, a street market is also an important site of practised social diversity for those who work there. In their assessment of social capital – the kind of social engagement that can have a positive effect on people’s lives – Grenier and Wright¹⁵ argue that this kind of capital can be gained from the social interactions at the workplace.¹⁶ They point to Coleman, one of the most prominent advocates of the social capital literature, and his study of diamond merchants, who developed high levels of trust to each other due to their interaction and specifically because this trust was needed for their type of trade.¹⁷ This is a pattern that was also important in Surrey Street, where traders work together and help each other despite being in competition with each other; daily interactions create a social capital as trust between market workers is a high priority to make the market profitable.

There is also the argument that diversity can be a business advantage.¹⁸ This is based primarily on the idea that more diverse teams are able to be more productive as their different

backgrounds allow them to find creative solutions to problems. Whilst this argument is usually referring to corporate organizations and companies, the same can be said of Surrey Street Market. The relatively rapid diversification of the clientele has resulted in changing business strategies of many stallholders, who for example converted from a system of pounds and ounces to ‘pound a bowl’ to bridge either language barriers or simply the fact that many of the ‘new migrants’ were used to metric measures as opposed to imperial ones. From observation of the market, it could also be argued that the diversity of stallholders has a positive effect, as customers from diverse backgrounds come to the market to pick up specific items from one stall but then move on to purchase other things at the other stalls.

Surrey Street

It is claimed that Surrey Street Market is the oldest street market in London. The earliest records of a market in the area are from 1276, when Archbishop Kilwardby obtained permission for a weekly market. In 1314 it became a corn and cattle market, and then in 1343 the range of commodities was extended. In all of these instances the markets opened for one day a week. It was not until 1922 that Surrey Street became a daily market, becoming fully functional in 1926. As with the changes in commodities and trading days, the market has had many names - the Shambles, the Flesh Market, the Butcherie, Butcher Row, and now Surrey Street.¹⁹

Despite these changes throughout the past 700 years, Croydon has always had a market with a living history. The generations of families who have operated stalls are dwindling, but are still a striking feature of the market. Locals often refer to Surrey Street as the heart of Croydon, and whatever the opinion of the market and its ware, it has an undeniable landmark status.

Since the end of the 1960s, the area around Surrey Street has been chosen for a succession of regeneration projects to bolster the area as a town hub by opening additional retail outlets. The Whitgift Centre was completed in 1970, and was the largest covered shopping development in the

13 Watson and Wells (2005a; 2005b)

14 Watson and Wells (2005a: 29)

15 Grenier and Wright (2006)

16 Social Capital is not without its critics, for further discussion see Runnymede Trust (2005)

17 Coleman (1988)

18 See Wrench (2007) for an overview; Anderson and Metcalfe (2003)

19 Lovett (1996: 6-7)

area until the winter of 2008. In 2004 Centrale Shopping Centre opened opposite to the Whitgift Centre – both of which are just a stone’s throw from Surrey Street Market. The high street chain shops found in the two shopping centres offer an alternative to going into central London and draw people from across London and the South East.

The council has planned for the future development of Croydon, including Surrey Street, in its Croydon Vision 2020. One measure that directly affects the future of Surrey Street Market is the planned development of another shopping area, Park Place. This development has been controversial. Some see the scheme as adding to the existing business in the area, and also community spirit with the promise of a public square alongside the shopping mall. The hope is that construction will begin at the end of 2009 despite current delays.²⁰ The additional retail outlets may bring more foot traffic into the area; however, the uncertainty over the construction plans and timetable have caused tensions in the business community. In the meantime, only some of the businesses on the planned site have been given compensation offers, leaving others struggling with their businesses in an increasingly derelict property which reflects poorly on the surrounding area.²¹

Surrey Street – A community in itself

Surrey Street’s long and established history has generated a specific sense of community amongst those who work there. For many traders, the market stall is a family business that has been handed down through the generations. *A Stall Story*²² details the rich history of a number of the families that made Surrey Street into an established community hub. Some interviewees explained how their family have traded in a particular spot since the 19th century. Furthermore, most of the market traders live in the vicinity themselves, a state of affairs that was

attributed to the fact that the market operates six days per week. Thus, most interviewees described Surrey Street as a community in its own right, and that the market plays a significant part in their social life and identity.²³ One trader explained the value of developing relationships with neighbouring stallholders: “They have their wife come down, their children, one of my daughters comes and helps me on a Saturday. So you get to know a whole family. It is nice. It has its social side as well. It’s important”.

Most of the traders stopped short of equating the community spirit of the market with lasting friendships that are independent of the market. Although such friendships do occur – some traders said they have known each other since they were children – many seemed to draw a distinction between their market life and their private life. Nonetheless, all described the community spirit in positive terms, as contributing to making Surrey Street an enjoyable place to work. This community spirit would manifest itself in a number of ways. Most interviewees said that stallholders would lend each other things like plastic bags or scissors, or would help a neighbour whose stall had blown over in heavy wind. These small and everyday gestures of reciprocity were said to be conducive to a sense of community. Banter and teasing is also seen as a method for fostering affinity, and some interviewees suggested that this was a good way of diffusing squabbles and confrontations that would invariably arise.

Given Surrey Street’s long history and strong community bonds, the obvious question to ask is how newcomers are received. This question becomes even more pertinent because the market has been maintained by a legacy of mainly white British families. This trend is changing; the children of retiring stallholders are not taking over their parents’ stalls to the same extent as they used to, and there have been an increasing number of minority ethnic traders in recent years. Nonetheless, stallholders are still primarily white, in stark contrast to the demographic profile of the shoppers which is decidedly more diverse. Under such circumstances, the discourses and parameters of

20 Croydon Guardian (2008)

21 Croydon Guardian (2009a; 2009b)

22 Lovett (1996)

23 Watson and Studdert (2006) make similar observations in their study of six English markets.

community can develop in different directions. At the extreme ends of the spectrum, they can become exclusive, inward looking and rejecting of change; or they can become open, inclusive and pluralistic, where diversity is seen as a valuable resource in itself.

The respondents suggested that Surrey Street would fall towards the more inclusive end of the spectrum. The relative newcomers, who had arrived in the market in the last 10 years, said that they had felt welcomed and accommodated by the long-term traders, and all stallholders – irrespective of their ethnicity – said that they try to be as welcoming and friendly as they can to new traders. Although processes of inclusion/exclusion in the past were not explored in depth, some interviewees suggested that the market had not always been inclusive, but that it had changed significantly in recent years. It is hard to establish exactly why notions of community in Surrey Street might be developing towards an inclusive model. One possible explanation is that over time, everyday contact with a great variety of people dampens prejudice and deepens friendly attitudes and behaviours.²⁴ This may play a part, but many of the more established traders connected the openness of Surrey Street to a pragmatic understanding of market forces. New traders with new and exotic commodities, they reasoned, bring in a new customer base which is good for all traders. Thus, they recognized the need to attract new stallholders to the market, and that a more diverse range of goods and services is crucial to the market's survival, especially given the ethnic diversification of Croydon itself. When asked how he feels about new traders coming into the market, one long term trader said:

OK if they can bring in new business. They can't sell fruit, veg and salad, they don't accept any more applications from them, but you get these people coming in with electrical stuff, or clothes, or bags, well that just brings people in. You've got to fill the market up, otherwise, as people finish or retire, there will just be bigger gaps than there is now.

This quotation reveals one of the most prominent concerns voiced by all the interviewees of this study. There was an overwhelming sense that the market – as so many street markets throughout Britain – is in decline. Disinterest from the younger generations mean that stallholders are not being replaced at the same rate as they are retiring, leaving the market looking increasingly empty. Numerous traders reported that business has been gradually slowing down in recent years to the point of being almost unsustainable. For this reason, the nostalgia felt by many of the more established traders appears to be giving way to a sobering realisation that as times are changing, so must the market adapt. As a result, the business people of Surrey Street are having to devise new strategies to revitalize the street and attract new customers, and to rethink how they serve their community.

Surrey Street – The heart of a community

Visitors to Surrey Street will instantly notice two characteristic features: firstly the vibrant yet friendly atmosphere; and secondly the great diversity of people, especially the shoppers. These two characteristics go hand in hand. Surrey Street was described by traders as the heart of the community, a social venue and meeting place where people of different ages, ethnicities and socio-economic statuses rubbed along, seemingly disinterested in their dissimilarities.

'Hello darling, how are you?' – Trader/customer interaction

The conduct and behaviour of traders and their interaction with their customers is crucial to the survival of the market and the livelihood of the stallholders. The range and quality of the commodities is obviously of crucial importance; few people will frequent a market with substandard and monotonous goods and produce. But the relationships between traders, described in the last chapter, as well as the relationships they develop with their customers

²⁴ Pettigrow and Tropp (2006)

are also a large part of the reason why people go to the market to spend their money. Some interviewees described their vocation as part-performance, where they create a certain atmosphere in order to attract customers. People, they argued, are drawn to the market for social as well as economic reasons. They enjoy the banter and ‘mickey-taking’ that form part of casual exchanges in the market. The personal experience offered by traders – such as showing an interest with simple greetings like ‘Hello darling, how are you? How’s your dad?’, or teaching customers how to cook the vegetables they are buying – is central to the appeal of the market and is one of its strongest selling points:

You do spark up a relationship with people, and they’ll come down and have a little grumble, or a bit of good news that they’ve had. Yeah, and you might not even know their name, you just know ‘em by their face. And you end up having a relationship with your customers.

However, this strategy does require the traders to be responsive to the changing demographics of their customer base; not all interviewees thought that the traders in Surrey Street are quick enough to adapt to changing times. This could partly be linked to a nostalgic longing for Surrey Street’s ‘golden age’. There is little doubt that the market is in decline economically, but some traders found it difficult to move with the changing times and different expectations in customer service. For some other traders, this reluctance was a problem:

There’s a very old way of shopping, a very very old way of treating the customer: ‘Don’t touch the front’, you know, ‘Don’t touch my front!’ And, you know, they would serve from behind. Now people don’t want that, they want to be able to touch, and smell. And it’s taken some of the older traders quite a long time to understand why they want to do that.

However, some traders did explain the various ways in which they were trying to respond to changing needs of the customers. When asked how the market has changed in the last few years, one trader commented:

There is a sharp increase of Eastern European customers over when the EU, it was available for them to come over, a marked increase. Our whole trade had to change how we work. Some of the old fashioned stalls are still with tissue paper, packed out beautifully, but where they did not necessarily understand the pound and ounces and a lot of them do not speak English, we converted just to having mainly bowls. So the biggest change in the market actually is the fact that we now sell the majority of the fruit by bowls, by pound a bowl. Because then people who don’t speak English can understand it.

In this way, some stallholders described how they respond to gaps in the market, or need in the community, and diversify their commodities or trading practices accordingly. The need to diversify the market was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Surrey Street has always been known as a fruit and vegetable market, but many interviewees said that societal changes – such as shifting demographics, changing shopping habits, and neighbourhood developments in Croydon town centre – made the diversification of stall types and goods sold a necessity. This need to bring in traders offering different types of commodities is being exacerbated by the effects of the recession, which all interviewees commented on. The recession is sharpening competition with other retail outlets, such as supermarkets, so the urgency to make the market more competitive is acute. Range and quality is certainly of central importance in this respect, and many traders expressed the view that the market needs to become a one-stop-shop. Commenting on why people would rather shop in a street market than a supermarket, one interviewee said:

‘Cause everything is cheaper. Everything. And it’s mostly the same quality as you’d

get anywhere else. The stalls aren't selling dodgy stuff now. I think everyone has had to up their game, to be honest.

Where quality and variety is concerned, however, market traders are in direct competition with supermarkets. Surrey Street's unique selling point is still the personal experience the traders can offer their customers, so interaction becomes the most important tool in the toolbox. The traders seemed to be aware of this:

So we've got to create an environment that's comfortable, secure and friendly. And the only way that that can happen is through the traders' interaction with people. Because we want you to come back! It's business sense.

Surrey Street and social inclusion

The importance of street markets as sites of social interaction has been commented on by various writers.²⁵ Like other street markets, Surrey Street is a place where different people meet and mix who would not necessarily do so elsewhere. The low price on quality produce attracts people from all walks of life: poor people buy necessities at cheap prices; new migrants find foodstuff from their home countries; more well-off people look for a bargain; older people seek personal interaction whilst shopping; office workers go during lunchtime for cheap but hearty street food; children and teenagers come down to the market on their way home from school; and so on. Of equal importance, a market may represent the only venue where social encounters are available and achievable for socially excluded individuals, such as older people, people on benefits, or disabled people.²⁶ The traders are aware of these social functions of the market. Commenting on what made traders' relationships with customers valuable, one interviewee said:

Just the fact that, actually, down here, people will pass the time of day, and very often they'll be the only people they've spoken to that day. And they'll

come down and they'll just enjoy being spoken to, made to feel part of the community.

These encounters may be casual and fleeting, but many traders were of the opinion that the small conversations they have are of immense value to some of their clients:

There's a lady called Gladys²⁷ who comes to the stalls, she goes to about four stalls, they all make her welcome, she gets them a cup of tea, and they'll stand and chat. Now for Gladys, her day is made up by doing that – that's part of her routine.

The market is also notable for its ethnic mix. Many traders commented how their clientele has become ever more ethnically diverse in recent years, while also reporting a decrease in white British customers, both working- and middle-class. As mentioned in the previous section, some interviewees hinted that the market may not always have been as open to diversity as it is today. Most interviewees, however, stated that diversity works remarkably well in Surrey Street, and that tensions between different ethnic groups are minimal. Similarly to reactions to greater diversity of stallholders, two reasons were given for increasing acceptance of different shoppers. Firstly, demographic changes in Croydon represent an inescapable reality. In a sense, the traders of Surrey Street are at the forefront of this constantly evolving multiculturalism and therefore have little choice but to accept it:

It's all different mixed race here, it's ok. I think it works ... Where we have so much different races here, in Croydon, I think everyone's kind of got used to it. It used to be all English, now it's different.

Thus, some interviewees suggested that sustained encounters with a wide range of people has impelled greater acceptance of difference, thereby making the market an inclusive social space to which anyone can belong: "Let's face it, everyone is in the same boat. So I wouldn't say

²⁵ Dines and Cattell (2006); Watson and Studdert (2006)

²⁶ Similar findings were reported by Watson and Studdert (2006).

²⁷ The name has been changed.

there's any racial tension down here at all. Not at all". Secondly, most traders said that the majority of their clients were minority ethnic shoppers. Quite simply, the market would not survive without them, so making them feel unwelcome would not make any sense from a business perspective:

'Cause they sell all the ethnic food down here. You got the Chinese man, you got the Jamaican stall, you get all the herbs and spices from the Asian people. So there's a bit from everyone down here, so you gonna get them. And it's a good thing, 'cause they're spending money the same as everyone else.

Indeed, one interviewee mentioned how Eastern European migrants had become a large part of their customer base, and with them leaving as a result of the recession, they were feeling the effects:

But we have noticed the decline now that they are all going. Definitely. A *lot* of the builders, and the regular customers that we were having, Polish customers, lots of families, who we used to see once or twice a week, we now don't see.

Safety was a recurring theme throughout the interviews, and was said to have a direct impact on the inclusiveness of the market. Many interviewees described a consensus amongst stallholders to maintain the safety and friendliness of the market, which was cited as evidence of the community spirit of Surrey Street. Anti-social and intimidating behaviour, they said, is not tolerated, and stallholders work together to keep the market a safe place to work and visit. This relative safety, some argued, is a crucial element to making the market an inclusive space for all. For vulnerable and socially excluded individuals, for instance, the safety aspect provides a freedom to socialize without apprehension. When asked about who shops in the market, and why, one trader said: "Quite a lot of the elderly, people who know the market, and know it as a friendly place to be in. They

feel safe". Although many interviewees expressed pride in stallholders' sense of caring and inclusion, there was also an acknowledgment that keeping it safe is in their own interest as well:

I think it's what the traders do for the customer. We want you to shop with us, so we try and make it as friendly as possible. And the marketplace has become, over the years, a lot more people friendly. A lot more people friendly. And we've built up ... a far securer place to be in.

Market in decline

Street markets throughout Britain have been in steady decline in recent years, both in terms of occupancy rates of the nation's 150,000 available stalls (from 79% in 1998-99 to 75% in 2003-04) as well as in footfall (from 5,473,955 weekly visits in 2000-01 to 5,363,437 weekly visits in 2003-04).²⁸ Surrey Street is no exception. When asked how the market has changed in the last decade or so, the first thing interviewees mentioned was the deterioration. Indeed, many traders were highly pessimistic about the future. A number of factors were said to contribute to this, but highest on the list was the nation's changing shopping habits. In the fast pace of modern society, stallholders argued, shopping has become a strictly functional activity, something to be done quickly and with minimal effort. The social aspect of shopping – characteristic of street markets – is losing its appeal for a younger generation of customers who prefer to spend their money in supermarkets.

The competition with supermarkets was brought up in all interviews as a topic of great contention. In many ways, this battle is one of David and Goliath: "The game's getting hard. The big stores want to kill the small little businesses. It's sad, really, but that's what's happening." This was partly attributed to societal changes, as mentioned above. But traders also felt powerless in fighting back. In their capacity as big corporations, supermarkets have the power to set their own agenda, while market

28 Watson and Studdert (2006: vii)

traders are dependent on the council for crucial decision-making, such as allocation of resources, environmental design, refuse collection, infrastructure and so on. Where supermarkets can create an environment designed to make shopping quick and easy for busy individuals, market traders have little to say about issues which directly affect their livelihood, such as customer parking or regeneration and town centre development. Thus, the size and power of supermarkets leaves them at an advantage relative to street markets.

Some interviewees believed that a cheaper price for quality produce was an important feature attracting customers, but the main advantage street markets have over supermarkets is the personal experience traders offer their customers. The stallholders are conscious of this, and related a myriad of stories and anecdotes to demonstrate how the market is not only about shopping, but is also an important social space. The personal relationships developed between traders and customers, some argued, makes shopping enjoyable as well as functional. Asked what drew people to the market, one trader said: "It's the atmosphere, sometimes it can be a funny atmosphere, but it's buzzy, it's nice, especially in the summer, everyone's in a good mood, everyone's out." In contrast, the supermarket experience was deemed impersonal and monotonous:

A lot of people don't like to shop in the big shopping centre. Long queues and no communication with the people. Just come, buy, and go, like a machine, like a robot. Here, you can talk and have a conversation. Like old people, you could see the lady who was just here, they're still looking for this sort of thing.

Playing into this 'buzzy' atmosphere is Surrey Street's long and unique history, which interviewees were immensely proud of. Many were of the opinion that these two unique aspects of the market – its rich past and its exciting present – were the market's main assets. They felt that these two distinctive traits should be built on to create a unique and exciting public space.

While stallholders were aware of the ways in which they can keep the market alive, collective action is difficult for market traders, which places them at a disadvantage towards their main competitors such as supermarkets. They need strategies and resources to develop their own advantage. There was general consensus that the main issue is access to the market in general, and parking in particular. Surrey Street, interviewees stated, is not particularly accessible and restrictive parking and high fines work as a disincentive to visit the market. In comparison, supermarkets have car parks with free parking and little risk of fines:

Some of my customers, they come back and say 'Oh, last time, I bought stuff for a couple of pounds from you, but I got a ticket for £100.' Cause they just wait there to give you a ticket. But in, like Lakeside, and other shopping areas, there's no charge.

Other issues relating to infrastructure were also mentioned. Most interviewees were conscious of the image of Surrey Street and its importance in attracting customers. The town centre is not particularly welcoming, they argued, and money should be spent on rejuvenating the market's appearance. In order to make the market safer and more friendly, for example, it was suggested that Surrey Street could be pedestrianized during trading hours, and the environment needs to be cleaner and more inviting, with arches on either side of the street welcoming people and marking their entry into this social and historical space.

The significance of the changes interviewees proposed is that they reveal a sense of acute disempowerment. The traders argued that they could not bring about these changes on their own; they have little influence over decision-making on issues such as parking or allocation of resources, and therefore need the council firmly on their side:

We can't help it ourselves. We don't have the funds, at all, we don't have any private funds or market funds, or anything like that, to put in the pot. So

it's got to come from outside. It's got to be a council thing to regenerate the market and the town. 'Cause the town's dying a bit as well. The town centre has got to bring back individuality. The little shops, small things. Forget about Tesco's. Forget about Sainsbury's. We've got to have individuality.

Thus, most interviewees agreed that the council is responsible for regenerating and promoting Surrey Street. However, not everyone thought that the council was particularly forthcoming with their support, and many doubted that the market, and its central role in the community, was appreciated or valued. One interviewee went as far as to say:

It used to be good down here, it used to be very busy. I feel it, the last few years it's been going down, and down, and down. I think the council isn't helping the market at all. They're not investing, they're not putting into the market like some other markets do, they put a bit of money into it, and promoting more, putting signs up. They're not doing that. I don't think they want us here no more ... But, you know, us being here for all these years, we should be the main priority. 'Cause we're the ones who keep this atmosphere going.

Conclusion

Surrey Street clearly serves an important social purpose. Many people would consider it the heart of Croydon, a place where people pass the time of day. Although street markets have different meanings for different people, they do represent a social meeting space. In Surrey Street, people of diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds rub shoulders with relatively little agitation. This is not to say that the market is free from tension. Indeed, some of the long-term stallholders expressed a nostalgic longing for Surrey Street's past glory, and implied that they did

not necessarily consider the ethnic diversity an altogether positive development. Nonetheless, all interviewees said that tensions between different ethnic groups are at a minimum, and it appears that the market is progressively becoming more intercultural and accepting of difference. The reason for this development is difficult to pinpoint. It could partly be a result of everyday contact dampening prejudice, and partly the pragmatic understanding of stallholders that their livelihoods now depend on a highly diverse customer base. Whatever the reason for the relatively successful multiculturalism of Surrey Street, the important point is that the market is a focal point of social relations in Croydon city centre.

It would, however, be both misleading and unhelpful to exaggerate Surrey Street as a multicultural utopia. There is, as Amin points out, "a limit to uses of public space for intercultural dialogue and understanding, even in the most carefully designed and inclusive spaces".²⁹ While this is true, the policy discourse on 'community cohesion' has made unrealistic demands on social relations between different groups in Britain's cities. Vertovec has argued that the core concepts guiding the community cohesion agenda – 'sustained encounters' and 'deep and meaningful interactions' – "are simply not going to occur among most people in British cities today, whether ethnic majority, minority or new immigrant".³⁰ This does not mean that 'unexceptional' multicultural public spaces are inconsequential and ineffective in fostering understanding and cohesion, even if the social exchanges within them are often superficial and perfunctory. According to Vertovec, "everyday, fleeting and incidental interactions among strangers actually do draw upon and constitute shared meanings, common values and cooperation for collective purposes".³¹ In a place like Surrey Street, the fact that shoppers and stallholders agree to abide by an unwritten, and often unspoken, set of 'ground rules' for civility is significant in its own right. Surrey

29 Amin (2002: 968)

30 Vertovec (2007: 6)

31 Ibid.: 30

Street's role in fostering community cohesion is therefore not necessarily undermined by its lack of 'sustained encounters' and 'deep and meaningful interactions'. As one interviewee put it, "you might not even know their name; you just know 'em by their face. And you end up having a relationship with your customers".

Thus, it would be equally spurious to understate Surrey Street's role in fostering community cohesion. Indeed, the market could serve a central role in the development of a successful multi-ethnic Croydon. This is a function which supermarkets simply cannot fulfil; they are not often designed with social interaction in mind, and do not always see this as part of their mandate. On the other hand, the interviewees of this study considered developing relationships with their customers an integral part of their job. In other words, Surrey Street is an essentially social space. Yet the market has suffered severe underinvestment in recent years, and seen a sharp decline as a result. Most interviewees voiced feelings of bitter resignation towards the council, and some even went as far as to say that the council is no longer interested in running the market and is simply waiting for it to wither away. They have a point. It may not be the council's explicit aim to disburden itself from running a market; the decline of Surrey Street not unique, but is part of a broader trend of street markets throughout Britain. However, it is equally clear that in the eyes of the traders, investment in Surrey Street in recent years has been inadequate. As Watson and Studdert demonstrate in their study of six markets throughout England, infrastructure and design of markets are crucial to their success.³² Croydon seem not yet to have learnt from effective practice in other parts of the country. In Croydon, simple actions like reducing parking fees for customers are not being taken, let alone more major investments in infrastructure and environmental regeneration.

There is a more general point to be made, however, about how Britain's public spaces are conceived and valued. As Mean and Tims point out, the "dominant urban narrative for the past 25 years has been a tale of the

progressive privatization of the communal spaces in our towns and cities wherein the space for shared experiences has got smaller and more fragmented".³³ This trend is evident in Croydon town centre. The decline of Surrey Street Market has coincided with the rise of two of Britain's largest covered shopping developments, the Whitgift Centre and Centrale, which are a mere stone's throw away. It would be too simplistic to assume that Whitgift grew at Surrey Street's expense, but its growth certainly signalled a new way of thinking about public space – uniform, socially safe, sterile and controlled to the extreme – which contrasts with street markets. The important point is that shopping centres such as Whitgift are not, strictly speaking, public spaces. Although the public has access to shopping malls or supermarkets during certain times of the day, these institutions remain private property over which the public has very little control over or stake in. For example, certain groups of people – such as 'hoodies'³⁴ – can be excluded by the management on the basis of their perceived undesirability.

The distinctiveness of street markets is the extent to which their value is created through a process of co-production. In Surrey Street, stallholders, shoppers and the market inspector all contribute to making the market a safe and inclusive space to visit, exactly because they feel they have a stake in it. This kind of co-production "helps to counter the decline in trust in other people's behaviour and to generate a sense of community efficacy".³⁵ It makes people feel safe, but it also encourages them to hazard impromptu conversations with strangers, even people they would normally not communicate with.³⁶ Such spaces have the capacity to disturb and reorder social rules and hierarchies prevalent elsewhere in society and develop its own set of rules and codes of conduct. In this way, 'unexceptional' and mundane public spaces play a significant role in creating successful multi-ethnic societies. They are often at the

33 Mean and Tims (2005: 70)

34 This was the case in Kent's Bluewater shopping centre (BBC News, 2005).

35 Mean and Tims (2005: 70)

36 Ibid.

32 Watson and Studdert (2006: 50-51)

vanguard of social change, and are affected by shifting demographics sooner than most other places. Yet the potential of these spaces is often neglected in policy and practice. By investing in their street markets, local authorities could also

be investing in good community relations. In a place like Surrey Street, the best way to achieve this may be to listen to and take seriously the voices and opinions of those who know the market best: Surrey Street Market's stallholders.

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