

Public Markets

By Helen Tangires

(New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008)

336 pages, 11 x 8.6 inches, black and white photographs, \$75 hardcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

Stepping into the cool morning air to admire the sunrise from the balcony of Albuquerque's Hotel Blue, I was struck by an ironic juxtaposition of events. SCA members were gathering outside for a conference bus tour that would explore a unique slice of New Mexico while, simultaneously, distinctive elements of the Land of Enchantment were being assembled before our eyes—across the street in Robinson Park.

Vendors at the Downtown Grower's Market were unloading an abundance of New Mexican crops ranging from Hatch green chilies to wacky-looking, rare varieties of produce whose names and preparation methods undoubtedly befuddled many onlookers. Other stalls exuded the aroma of regional foods like Indian fry bread or featured artisans selling Southwestern handicrafts.

This vibrant scene lured SCA members who were perhaps reminded of Seattle's Pike Place Market and its carnival-like cries of "flying fish!" as fresh seafood was hurled through the air from one handler to another for customer packaging. Both city's markets offered not only unique goods but education and fun.

A recent study revealed that customers at public markets had 10 times more conversations than at supermarkets. So it should be no surprise that public markets, offering food that typically is fresher, tastier, and healthier, have experienced skyrocketing sales. It's timely that an expansive book on the topic has emerged.

Public Markets is a book lavishly illustrated with over 800 black and white photographs, posters, maps, plans, and artwork obtained from the archives of the Library of Congress. Dating roughly from the late-19th century onward, the images consist of both American markets and others from around the globe. The photos reveal a diverse world not yet overwhelmed by homogenization. Regional differences are apparent not only in the markets' architecture but with products, clothes, and nationalities.

The images also convey the vitality associated with public markets; this is street theater at its most basic starring an amazing cast of personalities. Whether bartering over

price, kibitzing, or just enjoying the fun of shopping, the excitement and frenzy of the market is brought to life in images of people such as Al Rabinowitz operating a produce pushcart in Brooklyn in 1940. There are characters of many nationalities like him throughout the book.

Public markets thrive on "freshness," a buzz word emphasized by today's crop of celebrity chefs. Some items can be a little too fresh though. A 1918 photo of a boy holding a goat has the caption, "In the public market at Athens, Greece, the animals are killed while you wait." This illustrates just how far many of us, with our sanitized tastes, have come from our agrarian roots.

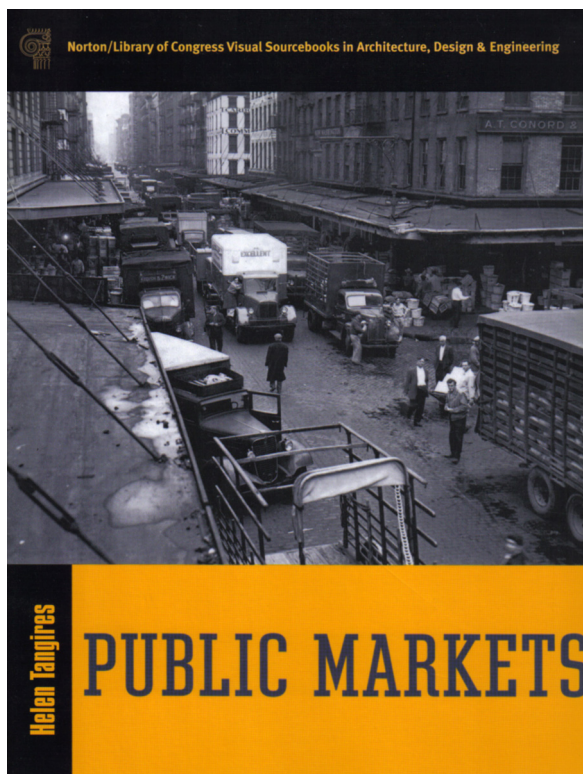
Food transactions aren't the only activity at the markets as "proselytizers, street entertainers, bootblacks, pickpockets,

and beggars profit from the crowd." Politicians also tend to show up; one of my favorite images is New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia next to a 300-pound halibut at the Fulton Street Fish Market in 1939. At first glance, the imagery in *Public Markets* seems to overwhelm the text. Except for the introductory chapter, it's a bit of a search to find the compositions that start each section. Author Helen Tangires has a tough assignment competing alongside the crème de la crème of the Library of Congress photo archive. Still, she completes the task with an engaging writing style that clearly communicates the evolution and functions of the various types of markets that allow the images to take on deeper meaning. Her contribution elevates *Public*

Markets from an impressive picture book to an impressive book, period.

Tangires divides public markets into eight categories: the open-air marketplace, street markets, street vendors, markets in public buildings, market sheds, enclosed market houses, central markets, and wholesale terminal markets. Other chapters include "Market Day," covering everything from sellers and their often unseen preparations to the sanitation workers who clean up afterwards. Another chapter features an impressive photo spread of the Fulton Street Fish Market. Readers intrigued by this topic are well advised to read Joseph Mitchell's impressions of this seafaring market in his heartfelt ode to the Big Apple, *Up In the Old Hotel*.

Centers of commercial activity since antiquity, public markets are revitalized due to a combination of economic, health, environmental, and social factors. People are once again frequenting them for goods—or sometimes merely



amusement. This dichotomy is mirrored in Tangires' book, informative about the traditions influencing the market's design and functions, yet chock full of compelling historical images for easy enjoyment.

The forced cheery greetings from workers at my local Safeway supermarket, as required by company policy, seem even lamer when compared to the book's lively marketplace images. Try as Safeway may, it's next to impossible to artificially instill passion. It's not a problem at a public market though....

For a fantasy meal, Douglas Towne would certainly include cauliflower from Tucson's Tanque Verde Swap Meet, a cheese sandwich from a Parisian street vendor, and a jar of Belinda's Homemade Pickles from the Phoenix Downtown Market.

***The Automobile in American History and Culture:
A Reference Guide***

By Michael L. Berger

(Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002)

487 pages, preface, index, \$131.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Keith A. Sculle

Historian and compiler Michael Berger already stands forth prominently from the crowd of enthusiasts and students of the automobile's impacts on American life for his one prior book, *The Devil Wagon in God's Country* (1979). In the 23-year interval since its publication, Berger worked for 17 of them on the book reviewed here. In so doing, he further opens the subject of the auto's influence to those of us already persuaded of the subject's importance and eases the entry of newcomers. What could be finer services?

Attention to the auto's many meanings shows us so many connections. For example, if you read from his catalogued writings on automobile design, you learn that it has been subjected to the same attacks as roadside architecture was until Venturi, Brown, and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). Could there be an elitist reaction or resistance to novelty at the heart of the many attacks on the automobile's aesthetic influences, both the car bodies and the roadside? This is but one idea sparked by situating commercial archeology in a setting larger than the buildings themselves that Berger's reference guide enables. It is not a tedious listing that satisfies only the appetite of those yearning for encyclopedic comprehension.

Beginners and the well-informed alike now have very readable introductory essays to many topics: the

history of automotive manufacturing, famous personalities, organizations, management and sales in the automotive industry, automotive engineering and design, interpersonal relationships, community change, leisure and recreation, government influences (such as regulations and roads), contemporary socio-economic problems, and reference works and periodicals. Among the latter is where our Society for Commercial Archeology turns up. "SCA is dedicated to interpreting architecture and landscapes and the preservation of suitable examples" (p. 392)—a succinct and accurate description. Unfortunately, Berger shows a dated appreciation of the SCA by failing to recognize the maturation at the root of the *Journal's* split from the *News* in the spring-summer issue of 1995; he still cites it as the *NewsJournal*. That's a picky point. More importantly, he definitely appreciates that the "brief stories" in SCA's publications "can be the source of original approaches to the study of any historical artifact, especially the automobile." (p. 392)

Each of the 13 chapters dedicated to the foregoing topics extends to the reader a fascinating narrative of the subject and ends the entirety with a full bibliography of the materials described throughout the respective chapter. It is, by the way, books and chapters in books that comprise the entries. Only a few scholarly journal or popular periodical items are listed. One appendix of a chronology of events in American automotive history and another appendix on research collections wrap up the text. An author index and subject index give ready access to the otherwise unwieldy 441-page narrative. No printed or on-line bibliography or bibliographical essay compares to Berger's master work.

Published six years ago, Berger's book could easily have gone unnoticed because of its dry-sounding subtitle: reference guide. Instead, it deserves not merely praise but attention.

Berger's reference guide represents an important stage in the appreciation as well as study of the automobile's profound impacts on American society, architecture, landscape, economics, and, of course, technology. SCA members will probably find the last part of chapter six ("Roadside Businesses"), all of chapter seven ("The Automobile and American Culture") and the first portion of chapter eight ("Personal Leisure and Recreation") to be the most readily engaging; the first traces gas stations and restaurants and chapter seven traces the attention to roadside structures and landscapes made familiar and intelligible by such authors as Warren Anderson, John Baeder, Jim Heimann, Philip Langdon, John Margolies, and Daniel Vieyra, each of whom and more are referenced throughout.

