

How can we sustain street level activities within a community?

Introduction:

A public space refers to an area or place that is open and accessible to all citizens, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level. When we talk about sidewalk, we perceive it as a public space where we are free to perform various activities. In fact, it is also a meeting place for many of us. At the same time, many street level store owners keep their merchandise at the sidewalk right in front of their premises just because they want more room. Through this “expansion” of the store premises at the sidewalk, a variety of merchandise is being displayed to the pedestrians, who, at the same time, are potential buyers, and most likely members of the community. The food shopping habit in Hong Kong is on a daily basis. Due to the proximity of the markets and the residential areas, people can get their food every day. Most of the markets are on street level and are easily accessible. The street markets can guarantee the freshness of the products as they come from the farm each day. Therefore, people enjoy shopping at the street markets and see it as a habit. The interaction among the people at the street markets creates a friendly atmosphere in the area. People have close ties to the street markets as they are part of their lives. There are also economic opportunities generated by the street markets. In addition to the increasing awareness of the environmental issue, I think there is a high possibility that the street level activities at the sidewalk help create sustainable development in a community. Let’s look at how Hong Kong is doing and see if those practices can apply in the Chinatown area in Boston.

How do we read “sidewalk” or related terminologies?

According to the Legislation in Hong Kong, "Footpath" means that part of a private street, cul-de-sac or access road used or intended for use only by pedestrian traffic; "Pedestrian way" means a private street used or intended for use only by pedestrian traffic; "Public street" means a street vested in and maintained by the Government. (Legislation, 2009)

Meanwhile, the word “street” shall mean and include all public ways, alleys, lanes, courts, and sidewalks, and those parts of public squares and places which form travelled parts of highways. (American Legal Publishing Corporation, 2009)

In the City of Boston, public property includes, but is not limited to, stairs, fountain areas, plazas, or any area under the care, custody, and control of the City but, for the purpose of this subsection, shall not include streets or sidewalks. (American Legal Publishing Corporation, 2009)

What is “sustainability”?

According to the World Commission on Environment and Development, “sustainable development” is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (“Our Common Future”, 1987) The two broad categories in sustainable development in Hong Kong are developing a healthy living environment by the improving local air quality and concerns about population and human development. (Hong Kong Sustainable Development Division, 2009) Therefore, “Sustainability” is the balance of society, environment and economy. The existence of street level activities contribute the sustainable development in a community which enable the growth in social, environmental and economic aspects. Those activities in the community helps transforming the community into a more vibrant, interesting and interactive environment.

What happen to the sidewalk?

We perceive the highly accessible sidewalk (or “pedestrian way” or “public street” in Hong Kong) as public space under the control from the city or the government. Despite of that, we generally are able perform various activities at a sidewalk.

Because of the scarcity of land resources, many store owners at street level occupy the sidewalk in front of their premises in order to expand their “territories”. There is a “shortage” in space, and the store owners are tend to pile up their products by all means, just to display the comprehensive variety and the abundance of their products. Therefore, it is easy to find that many store owners occupying the sidewalk in front of their stores during opening hours, which narrows the sidewalk and even leaves no space for pedestrians.

This sidewalk grabbing behavior happens in Hong Kong, New York City and Boston, generating a struggle in the public and private land use. In fact, both Hong Kong and Boston impose laws concerning the sidewalk obstruction. Under Massachusetts General Law, “no person shall, within any market limits, so occupy or obstruct any sidewalk as not to leave a clear and direct passage for travelers thereon; or so place or stop any vehicle abreast of, or near to, any other vehicle as not to leave a clear and direct passage for vehicles.” (American Legal Publishing Corporation, 2009) The pragmatic way seems to legalize and designate the sidewalk as street markets which may eventually sustain a sidewalk within a community.

How does street market work in Hong Kong?

The "modern" idea from the Western countries to house everything into something like a shopping mall resulting the Hong Kong Government having new market buildings or centers to put the street stalls under the same roof in order to create a "modern", "clean" environment. The Urban Renewal Authority in Hong Kong is trying to achieve this aim. (Urban Renewal Authority, 2009) However, people enjoy shopping at an open space, and there is a long history on people meeting at open areas like a plaza for social activities including trading. The street markets seem informal but they have their orders and harmony. Besides, they provide a variety for the street scene and make the street more fun to walk on and a community more livable environment. There are many opposing voices from the public, especially from S.E.E. Network (Society, Environment and Economy Network) which is funded by the Sustainable Development Division. People would like to preserve the street markets because of various reasons:

1. Some of the street markets have over 150 years history in the areas which make them inseparable from the community. It's part of the identity of the community.
2. The food centers are not designed well enough for good ventilation. The stall owners prefer open air street markets.
3. Local people like to shop at the street markets for a variety of goods, fresh products at bargainable prices.

4. Everybody likes to shop at the street. Street markets are open seven days a week for the convenience of the neighborhood, and retain the freshness of the products. People can just grab and go.
5. Tourists see the street markets as attractions. (S.E.E. network, 2009) There were 28,169,000 visitors arrived Hong Kong in 2007. (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2009)

There are about 7 million people in Hong Kong. Within the land area of 427 square miles, the population density reaches 16,542 persons per square mile. (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2009) There are 104 markets in 18 districts in Hong Kong. Imagine almost all people in Hong Kong depend on the products from the street markets in a daily basis. There is a huge economic opportunity in the street markets. In addition, the Hong Kong Tourism Board highlights some of the street markets (especially the eight theme or specialty street markets) as tourist attractions, making sure Hong Kong is still the shopping paradise for tourists. The designated areas for the street market stalls can also help solving the problem of sidewalk obstruction. The booths or kiosks can be assembled or open for extension for business and dismantled or close afterwards.

Hence, with innovative planning and design, the street markets can bring people closer, creating a livable environment, building a harmonious community and generate economic growth.

What about the situation in Boston?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are about 608,000 people in the City of Boston. With the land area of 48.4 square miles, the population density is 12,569 persons per square mile. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009) With 17 towns in the City of Boston, we may need more market space to maintain the growth within the neighborhood areas.

The sustainability in Boston involves the quality of life issues in Boston. One of the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) responsibilities is to draft master plans that address the city's needs for infrastructure, downtown and community economic development, and that include

design guidelines and development controls. Its concern is to focus on maintaining and enhancing retail activity in the City of Boston and bring business into downtown and the neighborhood centers near the City. The retail activity will improve the lives in the community by providing job opportunities, as well as enhancing the environment for stores, restaurants and entertainment. (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2009)

In 2007, there are 1,075,000 visitors arrived Boston, ranking the top 10th city in the US. Tourism in Boston is very important for the income of the City. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009) It can be a very good idea to develop the street market in Chinatown as the similar cultural background at the area where is a highlight for both local and overseas visitors. In fact, the street market can help improving the living environment of the residents in the area.

How can we keep the street markets while allowing the street level activities sustain the development in a community?

As Lewis Mumford suggested that a city is a theater. I think it is very interesting that a city is portrayed as a theater because there are always something happen in a city, For example, trading, communication, worship, etc. (Mumford, 2000) It is exactly happening at the street market and making the city more interesting. Although the sidewalk grabbing behavior can be very annoying, such informality can also create variety within a community. That is why we can see people are displaying their merchandise in a very creative manner in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, we may look for something similar in Boston, especially the Chinatown area. Besides, we can't ignore the idea of "flâneur", which a person walks the city in order to experience it. If we can draw more people to get to Chinatown and boost the economy over there. I'm sure the business associations and some pressure groups will come out and support the development of the street market in Chinatown.

References

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