

Profiles of Engagement: Public Markets as Engines for Urban Revitalization

Thai Community Development Center and UCLA School of Public Affairs partner to study public markets as a tool for immigrant entrepreneurship and social integration in East Hollywood.

By Rachel Benioff

March 2008 – "Urban renewal" once meant bringing in an office complex or convention center to revitalize a community and its economy. But these strategies often did more harm than good for local residents and businesses.

With support from UCLA's Center for Community Partnerships, the Thai Community Development Center and UCLA's Department of Urban Planning in the School of Public Affairs have embarked on a new approach to urban revitalization. The project collaborators are developing a multiethnic public market in East Hollywood - home to a unique blend of Thai, Armenian and Latino immigrant communities - to study how such markets can create start-up business opportunities for low income immigrants, preserve cultural diversity and provide spaces where different ethnic groups can interact and learn about one another.



Says Chanchanit Martorell, executive director of Thai CDC, the partnership fits perfectly with Thai CDC's need for thorough research on the economic and social impacts of a public market: "We wanted to examine all the models that existed out there in the U.S. and what role public markets played in immigrant entrepreneurship; in minority, underserved or low income communities; and also, at the macro level, what kind of economic development benefits could be gained from establishing public markets in low income neighborhoods."

Adds Neal Richman, director of the Center for Neighborhood Knowledge in UCLA's School of Public Affairs, "Urban Planning has had a longstanding focus on community-based economic development (CBED). This approach always involves attempts to keep capital cycling within a community.... CBED efforts are often most successful where there are also shared cultural understandings."

*Chanchanit Martorell, executive director of
Thai Community Development Center.*

Thai CDC: An Advocate for East Hollywood

Thai CDC, founded in 1994, is dedicated to advancing the social and economic well-being of low and moderate income Thais and other ethnic communities in the greater Los Angeles area.

For low income people, particularly immigrants, a small business commonly provides an important means to improving their lives and achieving upward mobility – and in turn benefits the rest of the community by creating jobs. Recognizing this, Thai CDC has developed a number of highly successful small business assistance programs, and envisions the Thai Town Bazaar and Food Court, its first commercial development, as a "business incubator" in a market setting, a means to promoting immigrant entrepreneurship, generating business opportunities and employment and revitalizing the East Hollywood community.

East Hollywood – defined as east of Van Ness Avenue and west of Vermont Avenue, and north of Melrose Avenue and south of Hollywood Boulevard – is one of the poorest sections of Los Angeles County. According to the U.S. Census 2000, 35 percent of its residents live below the poverty line, as compared to the state average of 14 percent, and its unemployment rate is almost double the state average of 7 percent and the national average of 6 percent. And 48 percent have less than a high school education.

Adding to the community's vulnerability, gentrification and massive redevelopment projects along Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards threaten to displace many families and local businesses. Thai CDC understands that a thriving public market which capitalizes on the asset of cultural diversity could also be strategic in striking a balance between the forces of redevelopment and the preservation of the multiethnic community and its cultures. Having been successful in its campaign to designate Hollywood Boulevard between Western and Normandie Avenues as "Thai Town" – the only Thai Town in the U.S. – Thai CDC is well aware of the economic value of "cultural tourism" as a means of attracting visitors and keeping dollars in the community.

Pioneering a New Model

The idea of the public market came to mind naturally for Thai CDC. Many of its staff are from Thailand, where public markets abound. Says Martorell, "We've seen how successful it can be and how it has served historically back in our home country as an opportunity for people who want to start a business." But, she adds, "It wasn't until we began doing this research that we began to see the benefits of a public market, and that this whole concept is very new."

Matthew Lum, a staff project assistant and graduate student in urban planning in UCLA's School of Public Affairs, conducted focus groups and surveyed permanent, indoor public markets as well as the existing literature. It quickly became apparent that little had been published on the topic and that visits to markets beyond L.A. would be necessary. Lum surveyed seven markets: in Los Angeles - Mercado La Paloma, El Mercado de Los Angeles and Grand Central Market; in Oakland - Swan's Marketplace and the Fruitvale Public Market; and in New York City - the Essex Street Market and the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market. Lum also conducted focus groups with all three immigrant groups to learn about their interest in a public market and business assistance, the kind of schedule and products they would like to see, and their thoughts on marketing and publicity.



New York City's Essex Street Market was one of the seven public markets studied.

Lum's report for Thai CDC, "Public Markets as Sites for Immigrant Entrepreneurship in East Hollywood," meets a capstone requirement towards his master's degree in urban planning and includes an examination of each market in terms of community support, funding, location, programs and administration. The research is informing the planning of the Thai Town Bazaar and Food Court, shedding light on keys to success and pitfalls to avoid. Critical elements that have emerged include an ample marketing budget and small business assistance for vendors, including financial literacy classes and aid in obtaining capital.

In the coming year, Thai CDC's research - to be conducted by a Ph.D. student in urban planning from UCLA – will focus on public markets as an economic development strategy for low income, minority communities; identifying gaps in goods and services and "leakages" of dollars from East Hollywood and how these can be eliminated through community-owned social enterprises; and the impact of commercial retail development on urban revitalization.

The Vision: Thai Town Bazaar and Food Court

In addition to UCLA's funding support for research, Thai CDC was awarded a federal grant of \$468,821 in October 2006 to create the Thai Town Bazaar and Food Court over the next five years. The grant by the Office of Community Services under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families is a Community Services Block Grant from the Community Economic Development Discretionary Grant Program.

The permanent, indoor market will provide opportunities for up to 18 start-up businesses and create 38 permanent jobs, including sales clerks, cooks, cashiers, accountants, managers, and maintenance and security personnel. The marketplace will feature ethnic foods, artisanship and traditional products, reflecting the cultural mix of the community, and, Martorell hopes, will give visitors a taste of the famous markets in Thailand, such as Chatuchak in Bangkok.

With funding in place, the biggest challenge, according to Martorell, is finding the location. Once that is secured, work on the market can begin immediately. Says Martorell, "I'll be very proud to see that we've produced yet another tourist destination for the city of L.A., another gem for the city to flock to, that will put not just the Thai community on the map, but also the

Armenian community and the Latino community. It's saying we exist, we have a presence, we want to drive our local economy and this is how we're going to do it. And we hope that not only will it benefit us, but that everyone else will also appreciate it and enjoy it."

The Partnership Impact

Both UCLA and low-income communities stand to benefit from the research in this new area and the mounting of East Hollywood's public market.

For UCLA, the survey findings and the market itself will provide a model of the public market as an engine for economic development and social integration in low and moderate income communities, which holds promise for neighborhoods in Los Angeles as well as around the country. And UCLA's urban planning focus will be expanded to include sustainable community economic development and the important role of vital public spaces.

The UCLA students who are participating in the research are gaining invaluable practical experience. Says Richman, "The Department of Urban Planning is committed to providing students with opportunities to build a strong theoretical foundation and to learn through professional practice."

For East Hollywood, the market will not only revitalize an area which has experienced a long period of decline and neglect, but it will help low income people to become economically self-sufficient and empowered through business ownership. And a popular public space has the potential to create community cohesion and unity.

Martorell commends UCLA for its support: "It's hard to find academic institutions that are willing to go to the community and work with them to create a project that the community can benefit from.... This is one way that UCLA is giving back to the community."