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A THIRD LIFE FOR THE READING TERMINAL MARKET

Philadelphia—When the Reading Railroad wanted to erect a downtown terminal on the site of a farmers' market in 1893, it had to make a deal: The railroad could build the terminal if it also provided space for the market.

Reading did just that, and the marriage of farmers' market at street level and railroad terminal above has been a success. Although the terminal closed in 1984, the two-acre market still serves 70,000 customers a week.

Now the Philadelphia Convention Center Authority finds itself in the same situation as Reading was a century ago. The Authority is buying both the Market and the landmark cast-iron and brick Terminal so it can incorporate the Terminal's three-acre train yard (covered with a glass and steel vault), into the convention center it is building across the street.

Philadelphians are not so sure history can repeat itself.

The question is whether a public authority charged with building the world's most expensive convention center can understand the subtleties and opportunities of an Old World market—which the Authority is buying reluctantly, at best, because it stands in the path of the convention center.

Preserving the Market is not just a bricks-and-mortar issue. It means more than keeping the Market open during construction and afterwards.

Preserving the Market means preserving its use and its ecology. Markets require constant vigilance and protection from exploitative forces like rising

real estate values and politics. A good market is unpredictable, just as human behavior or the shape of a potato is unpredictable. Yet public bodies want predictable projects when forecasting income or loan paybacks, or when evaluating political opportunities.

Shoppers fear the convention center will pressure the Market into becoming a tourist attraction and turning away from its traditional role—providing fresh foods from surrounding farms and exotica from afar.

Convention-goers will want sandwiches and souvenirs, not fresh vegetables, and the shopkeepers and management may have a hard time resisting.

The Market has been owned and managed by the Reading Company, which has maintained it as a place where small, independent agricultural producers (including Amish vendors from Pennsylvania's famed Dutch country) can sell their goods directly to the public. No chain stores have been allowed; the Market has sought owner/operators who are directly accountable for what they sell and whose livelihood depends on the interest they take in their products, customers and

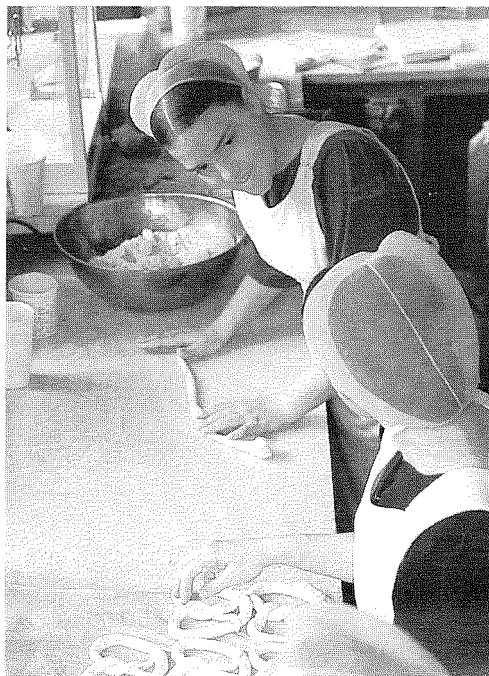
Market operations. The mix of stores has emphasized fresh food sales, not take-out or restaurant meals.

Protecting this turf will not be easy. The Authority will hire a local real estate manager to oversee the Market's operation; an architectural consultant will monitor its design during the construction above. The City Council will assume some oversight responsibility.

Although these entities are sensitive to the character of the Market, critics say the arrangement is a recipe for disaster: Too many parties will be involved in running the Market, but its future will not be the primary concern for any of them. Instead, they want a non-profit, public corporation (such as the one that operates Seattle's Pike Place Market) to run the Market.

Most important, the Market's mission must be clearly understood and explicitly defined, they say. Otherwise, no matter who runs it, the Market could become just another downtown specialty "festival" mall, a parody of the agricultural character and producer-consumer relationship that gives the Market its vitality.

—David O'Neil



Pretzel-twisters make home-style treats for Reading Terminal Market patrons.

Photo by Burk Uzzle.

Courtesy the Reading Company.