

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 16
The Harlow Market

c/o 201 East 28th Street
New York 10016
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Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

If you plan on visiting Harlow try to go on Market Days; Tuesday, Friday or Saturday. It's not the most charming, picturesque or bargain stocked open market in England, in fact it's utilitarian, cramped and no longer cheap, just like the new town. But on Market Days the Town Center comes alive. There are never such pile-ups of prams and strollers in front of the supermarkets



as on the days they compete with the greengrocers stalls. The old age pensioners don't crowd the Town Center benches inspecting the passing parade, except when a parade is passing, say, on the way to the Market Square. On ordinary days shop girls must spend their lunch hours in hiding. Market days they stroll and munch.

The market is probably Harlow's best example of an "instant multi purpose institution" so successfully incorporated into new town life everyone has forgotten it was planned in the first place. There was no mention of a Market Square in the original dream plans for Harlow that Sir Frederick Gibberd drew up in 1947. By 1952 when the Master Plan was published the reasons for putting an open market in the commercial zone of the Town Center were so obvious it merited only a passing descriptive phrase "a market square with shops selling cheaper articles...."

It began as a pragmatic attempt to ease two of the unavoidable problems of early days in a new town. Families moving from London to the wilderness of Essex found the cost of living substantially higher than in their old neighborhoods. They couldn't cut expenses by bargain hunting; few working class families in the early fifties had cars to get through the sea of mud to outside markets. Public transportation for medium range travel to Epping or Bishops Stortford, the nearest markets, was as inefficient then as it is now. The few shops in Old Harlow and the new neighborhoods were inadequate.

The Development Corporation was anxious to keep prices down. The market mechanism was deliberately designed to create commercial competition in the fledgling community and to provide needed goods which as yet had no roofed outlet. The social purpose was equally simple. Ex-Londoners were used to street marketing, browsing, chatting with the vendors, and friends, and choosing rather than going into a shop, buying, and slogging home. The young women, suffering in the doldrums of "new town blues" - isolated, missing their "mums" and "home," especially enjoyed the market and used it as a spirit raising expedition, and a place to meet friends and get acquainted.

That was "in the beginning." Today Harlow is a town of 72,000. Sixty percent of the families in Harlow have that most effective means of getting somewhere else to do the shopping - a family car. Most household items are available in the shops now. Prices in the market are competitive, but no longer substantially lower. The fruit in the supermarkets, for some reason, is invariably poor in quality. Some of the nicest fruit in Harlow is in market stalls, but it is expensive. The chain stores in the High do a booming business. Marks & Spenser are building next to Boots, across from Woolworths. And yet, the market is thriving.

The "HIGH" Harlow

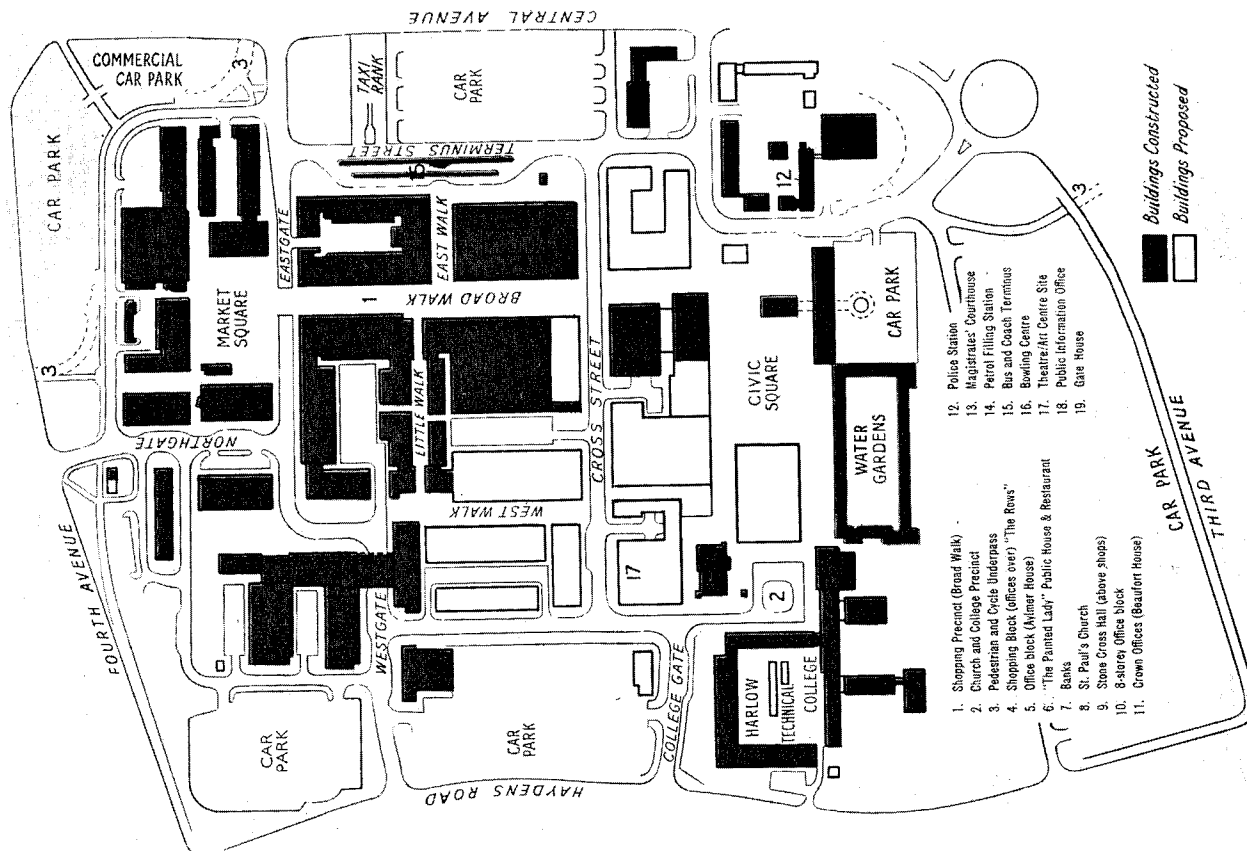
The plan of the Town Center is a cruciform of separated functions: commerce, entertainment, education and administration. The tidy stylization contributes to the teen agers' lament, "The Town Center is DEAD at night."

Leaving the cinema or bowling alley in the entertainment corner, (see map) it is unlikely that you will spot a friend coming from a class at the Technical College or a meeting in the Town Hall.

The teen hangout, the Birdcage dance hall is in one corner of the Market Square. Teens, judging activity by what they can see as they go through the commercial sector, conclude that the Town Center IS dead, although a thousand people could easily be within the perimeter of the High.

Most of Harlow's four hundred clubs and associations hold their evening meetings in the neighborhood centers, the schools or the Sports Center. The early planning has effectively de-centralized social activity.

The commercial district of the Town Center was converted to a pedestrian walkway while under construction. In the next large phase a second level of shops will be added.





EXITS AND ENTRANCES

Above: One way out of the Market Square is along Post Office Walk, a nice architectural dollop but narrow and awkwardly opening onto a main roadway at a point without a pedestrian crosswalk. Only specialty shops survive the location, notable among them: the Travel Agency, the Woman's Institute, and a cobbler.

Below: The main entrance, Broadwalk leading from the parade of supermarkets and department stores into the Market Square. Appropriately the statue, a gift of the Arts trust is called "Market Day."



The Harlow Market was eventually chartered when the Urban District Council came into being. It is administered for the Council by an inspector working under the Town Engineer. The inspector, who supervises the setting up of the stalls and the lighting fixtures, checks the scales, hovers over the market all day and makes sure the rubbish is cleared away in the evening. He also collects the rent. Payable in cash every Market Day. The price is adjusted to "market volume." Some of the specialty stalls don't bother with the slow Tuesday market and wait for the weekend crowds.

About half the stalls are greengrocers and fruiterers selling fresh produce. Several of the greengrocers did so well with their market stalls they were able to open shops elsewhere in the town. One, Mr. Ellice, now has two shops, but keeps the stall going as well. It's partially sentimental. He seldom minds it, but Mrs. Ellice personally handles the bananas. One Tuesday last winter the Ellices were the only stall to open in the snowbanked square. Another fruiterer also sells cut flowers and potted plants. Technically the free range egg stall counts as a specialty. The only other place in Harlow where you can buy eggs from chickens that exercise (i.e. range freely) is at the Woman's Institute. It's surprising how many people care much about eggs.

The specialty stalls have a higher turnover than the produce stalls but it is basically a very stable market. You can always buy clothing, from underwear to storm coats for men, women and children. Also, carpets, lumber, shoes, jewelry, fabric, sundries, sweets, toiletries, toys, jewelry, and records. The balancing formula is unwritten, its aim is to keep the market representative of what people need and want. There are never enough stalls selling cheap children's shoes.

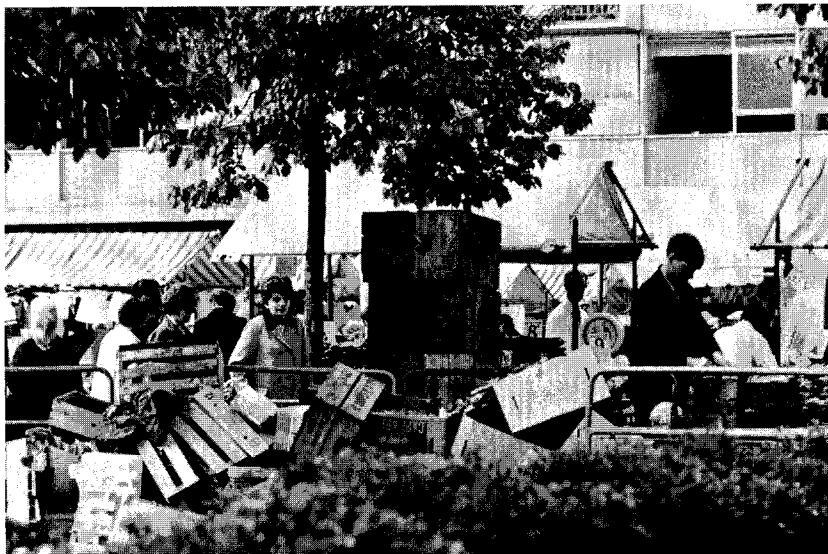
It is a peaceful market despite occasional quarrels. The Town Engineer told me about the last dispute that was carried as far as his office. During the Beatles' Indian period little Indian bells were all the rage. The lady in the jewelry stall thought they were her exclusive prerogative to sell, but the man in the toy stall was hawking them as well. She got quite hysterical about it. The Engineer sheepishly admitted that he waited long enough before holding a hearing on the matter that the fad had passed; anyway, both stalls had sold out their stock and no one cared anymore.

A majority of the stall keepers are commuting Cockneys who have been coming out to "do" the Harlow Market steadily over the years. The stalls are small family businesses and an assortment of relatives share the work; underage children help out a bit when no one is looking carefully on Saturdays. Only a few of the men are real spielers although all keep up a running stream of chatter with the customers. I was re-christened the very first time I opened my mouth to ask for a pound of sprouts. In London I'd been told I could almost speak English, but in Harlow I was gleefully identified as "A Yank!". When I went around the market with a camera the jokes were awful and ancient.



Better British Bottoms automatically queue.

No vehicular access to the Market means rubbish.





Lace, Thread and domestic sundries .

Dry goods alley late in the day.





Three generations in the marketplace.

What does the future hold for the Harlow market? If it is no longer a necessity, it is fun and in dreary times, especially on grey days, that is still important. Marketing is a very sociable custom, almost a contagious one. Open markets may be on the edge of being anachronisms but these days anachronisms are usually called precious shreds of British tradition and exploited accordingly. There are no plans to make Harlow or its market a tourist attraction, but last year's experiments having been so successful, there will probably be special bank holiday and Whitsun markets for the Harlowites forevermore.

Sincerely,

Eden Ruth Lipson

Received in New York February 18, 1969.