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# Reimagining Essex Street Market

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## Reimagining Essex Street Market

How the move of a 78-year-old market owned by the city will redefine a Manhattan neighborhood that's rich with immigrant history.

By Madeleine Crenshaw, additional reporting by Paula Moura

On the corner of Essex and Delancey Street is Essex Street Market, a 78-year-old market that is a slice of a bygone New York.

Inside, customers both young and old mill about, buying ingredients from their favorite stalls such as tropical fruits, freshly caught fish, and Indian spices. Here, vendors know their customers on a first name basis and most importantly their orders by heart. But with the market's crumbling infrastructure and slow foot traffic, the city, who owns the market, has decided that it will be absorbed into Essex Crossing, a large, shiny mixed-use development coming to the neighborhood.

For the vendors and customers, the upcoming change is causing both nostalgia and anticipation. But like the original Essex Market, the new location will also lease to vendors who can't pay the gentrifying neighborhood's rents, seeing part of its mission to also incubate local businesses.

"For me, personally it's sad, but I'm also excited for the new building," says José Marmolejo, who runs Puebla Mexican Food with his mother, Irma, at Essex Street Market.

For the Marmolejo's, Essex Street Market enables them to continue their legacy of cooking up authentic Mexican food in the Lower East Side. For almost two decades, the Marmolejo's and their extended family ran a Mexican restaurant just a few blocks away from Essex Street Market.

In 2015, they were forced to close their family restaurant after their landlord raised the rent. That summer, Irma, José's mother, decided to open a smaller version of their restaurant at Essex Street Market after learning about available stalls.

"At first my mom was just gonna quit, but a regular customer who was familiar with the market asked if she was interested because stalls were available," says Marmolejo.

The stalls operate below the market rate, allowing local vendors like the Marmolejos to sustain their business in the neighborhood—rather than shut down—as many family-owned businesses in the Lower East Side have as the neighborhood continues to gentrify.

Essex Street Market has also provided a place for their old customers to reminisce over familiar flavors and a different time in the neighborhood. But the seven day work weeks and a small kitchen make it difficult to continue the mother-son-dynamic. At the new market, the Marmolejos' stall will be larger. It will also be in the “after hours” section of the market, which will be open until 10 p.m. Marmolejo says these factors will allow them to hire more staff. Currently, Marmolejo and his mother work seven days a week at the market.

“We’re going to be able to run like a real restaurant again,” says Marmolejo.

The anticipation of Essex Street Market moving has been in the air for quite a while. For years, the site of Essex Crossing was a parking lot. Its development was put on standby after conflicting views on what should replace the tenements [Robert Moses](#), the city official who reshaped much of the five boroughs decided to knock down in 1967.

In 2013, the Bloomberg administration [announced](#) that the swath of land would become Essex Crossing, a large-scale development, complete with affordable housing and mixed-use buildings. In an effort to maintain a balance between the Lower East Side’s past, present, and future, the city decided that the development would also be the new home for Essex Street Market.

Aside from vendors who prepare ready-to-go meals, there are also aisles in the market that are stocked with imported goods. Plantains, yucca, and bacalao can be found on one end of the market while cuts of lamb, rabbit, and pork can be found on the other.

Essex Street Market is one of four of the remaining public retail markets owned by the city. The markets are classified as ingredient-based markets, rather than grocery stores. “Most people don’t get that Essex Street Market isn’t a food hall,” says Megha Chopra, the assistant vice president of public food markets at the NYCEDC. “In today’s day and age with what you see with food halls and Smorgusburg, I think it’s actually more relevant and incredible that we have this.”

Chopra says she is dedicated to making sure the market remains the same despite being inside a new building. One factor that sets Essex Street Market apart from the rest of New York's public retail markets is that it is owned by NYCEDC, which is a city-funded non-profit corporation. Chopra is specifically in charge of making sure Essex Street Market remains open and affordable. She's also responsible in facilitating the market's move.

Essex Street Market is one of four remaining public indoor retail markets left from when Fiorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York. In the 1940s, he purposely created public indoor retail markets throughout the city to curb the rise of street vendors.

In the late nineteenth century, millions of immigrants came to the Lower East Side to live and look for work. Many turned to peddling wares from pushcarts. On Orchard Street, a few blocks away from where Essex Street Market would be, over 800 peddlers sold clothing, pots, pans, fresh fruits and vegetables.

During the Great Depression, people began to run unlicensed pushcarts because they could not afford the fees. It was the final straw for LaGuardia. He closed over 40 outdoor retail markets and opened up ten indoor markets, including Essex Street Market.

Vendors who occupied these markets were able to buy their stalls for at little as \$4.25, encouraging the local entrepreneurship on the streets to happen in these markets. New York's public markets continue in this tradition today. Other public retail markets throughout the city include Arthur Avenue Market in the Bronx, the Moore Street Market in Bushwick, and La Marqueta in Harlem.

"We're incubating small businesses that could not open anywhere else," says Chopra about the remaining markets.

The process to become a vendor is much simpler than operating a restaurant in the neighborhood. This helps small businesses stick around in a rapidly changing downtown New York.

Today, the market remains an affordable staple for longtime residents. With public housing just east and south of Essex Street Market and rent-stabilized apartments, it is still home to long-term residents in the neighborhood, including its immigrant community.

Alta, 60, and Juan Castillo, 65 say that the market has ingredients for them to cook up their favorite meals from home. The two are from Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, but have been living in New York since the 1970s.

“We originally came here because we didn’t have a supermarket close to us,” says Juan Castillo. “But here, there’s everything we need.”

The two have been shopping here for almost 40 years. Essex Street Market saves them a trip from having to go all the way uptown to Washington Heights or Harlem, where large communities of Dominican New Yorkers exist.

During the political upheaval of the 1960s in the Dominican Republic, and economic hardship that followed, Dominicans started to move to New York City. Today, they make up the second largest Latino group in New York City, with Puerto Ricans reigning in at first.

The Castillo’s live in a rent-stabilized apartment on Mulberry Street, in Little Italy, a neighborhood just north of the Lower East Side that has rapidly gentrified in the past two decades.

Martha Martinez, 63, also likes to come to the market for its chorizo and nopal, or cactus, which keeps her cholesterol down. She lives in public housing on East Houston just south of the market.

“The market has all the foods from back home, in Veracruz,” says Martinez in Spanish.

Martinez likes to come twice a week to shop at Essex Street Market. At many of the stalls, she’s able to speak in Spanish to the vendors, which makes her feel comfortable because she speaks little English.

Martinez moved to the neighborhood 15 years ago from Mexico. She says she’s worried that the new market will change the friendly and familiar environment she’s come to love. But it will be closer to her house, something that many of the older shoppers find appealing.

Assad Bourkadi, who is one of the newer vendors at the market, originally was attracted to Essex Street Market because it reminded him of the markets his grandmother used to take him to as a child growing up in Morocco.

But despite living in New York for two decades, he didn't even know the market existed.

"I walked by it so many times I didn't even notice that there was a market," Bourkadi says. He attributes this to the market's current unwelcoming exterior.

In a position to venture from his day job, Bourkadi decided to open up a stall of his own. He had the perfect product: his family's olive oil.

Within a week of selling at the market, Bourkadi says shoppers and vendors came by to welcome him and extend their support. He soon partnered with Pain D'Avignon, a bakery that bakes fresh French baguettes. Bourkadi loves the community at Essex Street Market. He also likes the fact that it's only a few blocks away from his home.

But Bourkadi would like more business. Foot traffic has been a problem for the last handful of years due to talks about Essex Street Market moving.

"That's our number one challenge, ensuring people that were still open during this process," says Lauren Margolis of the Lower East Side Partnership.

The Lower East Side Partnership is the local business improvement district that works with the NYCEDC to represent the vendors and shoppers of the market.

Essex Street Market is the only city-owned market that teams up with the local business improvement district. This unique partnership allows the two organizations to foster community, not just development for the market and neighborhood.

This summer the LES Partnership and the NYCEDC released a report detailing all the concerns of vendors. The report, [Building Community at Essex Street Market](#), was comprised of customer surveys and focus groups.

But the old building of Essex Street Market isn't sustainable to last another seven decades. The move is just the next phase to ensure a space like the market can continue to thrive.

Margolis says the new market will offer community-based activities such as cooking classes by vendors, including a class on how to make Irma Marmolejo's delicious tamales.

"Us moving into the building is just a phase for the market. It's transition number two." says Margolis. " In order for the market to survive it's something that has to happen."