



2.7 Covent Garden piazza with church and market, 1751

of the lord of the manor, the church, or merchant guild (Girouard 1990: 9–30).

The English marketplace served numerous functions, with commerce being of prime importance. This also demonstrates the reliance of community functions on essentially commercial space; with political, religious and social functions occurring on space created for commercial reasons. However, the space was not always in ‘public’ ownership, as often the owner was the church or the lord of the manor. Indeed, today, some traditional marketplaces are still owned by the church, although the majority are now owned by the state in the shape of local councils.

For its part, London was a city that had grown rich from trade, and consequently had numerous markets early on in its history. However, unlike the rest of England, London never had market squares, but rather street markets or covered markets. The public space of these markets was almost entirely commercial, while other functions of the space, such as civic life, were negligible (Clout 1991: 148–9). The exception was Cheapside, the centre of London’s retail trade, which was often the site of royal and civic pageantry and popular celebration (Figure 2.6). As such, public space in London tended to be more differentiated than in the rest of the country.

The centre of London’s government, for example, was at the Guildhall, the site not of commerce but of civic life since Roman times. Social urban public space in London was to be found developing around St Paul’s. Mitchell and Leys (1958: 142) describe old St Paul’s Church and courtyard as a ‘thoroughfare for citizens’, and note that by the late sixteenth century the central aisle of the nave of old St Paul’s – Paul’s Walk – had become the greatest promenade in London. Here the news of the day was whispered, or spoken aloud, here assignments were made and kept, and it was said that more business deals were carried out in Paul’s Walk than in the whole of the Royal Exchange.

The middle ages also witnessed London markets specialising in certain goods, such as Billingsgate for fish, and Smithfield for meat. However, many of the oldest London markets were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666, and were rebuilt as covered markets under royal charter. New

markets were also beginning to be built on what was then suburban land by aristocratic landlords, including Covent Garden.

EVOLVING PRIVATE/PUBLIC SPACE

Covent Garden provides a valuable example of how the character of public space can change over time, raising different challenges for those responsible for its management. Covent Garden was originally a residential square begun in the 1630s (see below). Designed by Inigo Jones it was London’s first planned formal open space, originally intended for use by courtiers. However, during the Civil War a local produce market sprang up on one side of the piazza, usurping its original function. In 1671 the Duke of Bedford applied to Charles II to make official this daily fruit and vegetable market (Figure 2.7). The market vastly altered the genteel activities and aesthetic of the residential square, which quickly became more insalubrious and public, despite being on private land. The square took on a shabby appearance as stalls became permanent shops and spread across the space, reflecting the general experience of English marketplaces elsewhere. Crime also increased as there were no police patrolling the area until the nineteenth century.

In 1830 a design response was made in the form of the New Market, created with avenues, colonnades, and conservatories in three parallel ranges (Ackroyd 2000: 332). While the Covent Garden area might still have been raw and dangerous, it contained a certain ‘social realism’ associated with Victorian public urban space. This was despite the contradiction of ownership still being with an aristocratic landlord (Rasmussen 1934: 153–7). Although the Covent Garden fruit and vegetable market was moved out to Nine Elms in 1974, a ‘festival marketplace’ re-opened in the conserved and renovated structure in 1980. The covered market and a portion of the surrounding open space is now owned by a private insurance company, Scottish Widows, who are solely responsible for managing what was a new type of public space.

With this, the character dramatically changed once again, whilst the company employed private security and CCTV in an effort to keep the