

Cities at Risk – From Humiliation to Dignity

September 2016

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Presentation Abstract

Marketplaces around the world are meeting grounds of people across race, class, and from places far and wide. Some have a widely varied mix of patrons; some have a global mix of vendors and products, but few purposefully blend vendors with cultural activities that represent diverse global and local cultures as daily activity.

This presentation focuses on cultural and economic empowerment and bridge-building taking place daily at the Midtown Global Market (MGM) in Minneapolis, USA. This eclectic year-round, indoor marketplace opened in 2006 and boasts 50 businesses operated by entrepreneurs who originate from 16 countries. It draws over 1.5 million visitors each year and employs almost 500 people. Ongoing exhibits of local artists, live music 3 to 5 days per week, and over 25 large-scale events each year connect the eclectic mix of cultures that are part of the market and surrounding neighborhoods.

MGM opened in 2006 and has seen steady growth in visitors and business activity. In addition, a commercial kitchen facility accommodates food preparation for 25 caterers, food trucks, and craft food producers. The market is part of a larger complex, a 1.3 million square foot structure (120,000 square meters) built in 1927 for the venerable American retailer Sears. The massive structure sat entirely empty for over 10 years from 1995 until its renovation and re-opening. MGM shares the building with 285 rental apartments, 90 condominium apartments, a 700-employee medical corporation, and other services. Building residents represent a wide mix of ethnicities. Daily traffic in the market exceeds 4,000 people and special events celebrating the many cultures of surrounding neighborhoods draw capacity crowds. Local vegetables, fruits, meat, dairy, and other handmade or craft foods and beverages are prominently featured. Imported products from dozens of countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Scandinavia stimulate trade and cultural exchange.

Minneapolis and Saint Paul have served as an important U.S refugee re-settlement area since the 1970s. Known as the Twin Cities, they are located in the north central part of the United States, and have become home to the largest populations of Hmong, Somali, and Tibetans outside those home territories along with fast-growing Latin American, East African, and South Asian communities. Between 2000 and 2012, it is estimated that the foreign born population in the area increased by 140,000 to almost 400,000 in a metropolitan area of 3.4 million. This represents almost 12% of the total population. Most immigrant communities concentrate in the two central cities which combined have a total population of 700,000. In 1950 Minneapolis' population peaked at 521,000 and was 98.4% ethnically white, mostly of Northern European ancestry. After 40 years of "white flight" to suburban areas that reduced the city to 370,000, renewed immigration returned the city to growth by the 1990s. By 2014, the city of 400,000 was 60.3% white. However, 68% of the public school population was students of color, or just 32% white.