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Urban Marketplaces as Multifunctional Public Spaces: A Stakeholder-Based Assessment from Zagreb

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Abstract

Urban marketplaces are increasingly recognised in European policy debates as multifunctional public spaces that extend beyond their traditional economic role. Across the European Union, emerging trends point to a shift towards market models that integrate social interaction, cultural activities, tourism, sustainable food production and place-based urban development, thereby contributing to more inclusive and liveable cities. However, the extent to which such transformations align with local actors' perspectives and existing governance arrangements remains underexplored, particularly in Central European contexts. This paper evaluates the transformative potential of urban marketplaces as multifunctional public spaces from the perspective of key stakeholders in the City of Zagreb. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a desk analysis of European policy and practice trends with empirical research conducted at the local level. Data were collected through surveys of marketplace users (citizens) and vendors (tenants), complemented by focus groups with other relevant local actors. This approach provides insights into everyday practices, perceived barriers, governance challenges, and future expectations related to marketplace development. The findings reveal a strong alignment between stakeholder perspectives and European policy trends promoting people-centred and multifunctional marketplaces, while also identifying tensions with existing management and governance frameworks. Citizens emphasise the cultural, social, and tourism value of marketplace interactions, whereas vendors and governance actors highlight infrastructure needs and the importance of more participatory governance arrangements. The paper argues that stakeholder-based evaluation of transformative potential is essential for advancing inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban regeneration through urban marketplaces.

Keywords: urban marketplaces; resilient urban regeneration; multifunctional public spaces; stakeholder engagement; urban governance; City of Zagreb

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1. Introduction

Markets represent vital public spaces that significantly shape social interaction, the urban fabric, and economic relations within city centres [1]. As traditional hubs of direct food retail, historically located in European city cores, markets have played a key role in defining urban identity and everyday life, linking rural and urban communities. However, since the mid-twentieth century, the expansion of supermarkets, hypermarkets,

shopping centres, and later e-commerce has gradually weakened their role in supplying urban populations. Many market spaces failed to keep pace with changing consumer habits, resulting in the decline of traditional markets. Despite these trends, markets in the Mediterranean and broader European contexts have retained their status as important retail locations, particularly through fresh, locally sourced food products. Recent social challenges, especially those revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, have again highlighted markets as safe and accessible places that support local food-system resilience [2]. In contemporary spatial planning and urban regeneration, markets are no longer viewed solely as commercial facilities, but as multifunctional spaces with economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. They are increasingly becoming strategic instruments for reducing the urban footprint, promoting sustainability, and preserving local heritage. Nevertheless, the revitalisation of historic markets faces complex challenges in balancing authenticity with modernisation and restructuring governance models [3]. Existing scholarship treats markets as socially and spatially constructed institutions that contribute to economic vitality and social cohesion. Despite their recognised potential, there remains a lack of integrated research connecting local government governance practices, spatial and architectural transformations, and contemporary tourism trends within a specific regional framework.

The scientific objective of this paper is to analyse and identify the key factors of successful revitalisation of traditional food markets and to define optimal models for their transformation into sustainable and multifunctional public spaces. From the main objectives, this paper identifies three hypotheses:

H1. *An integrated revitalisation approach that combines spatial modernisation with the diversification of market functions and activities (gastronomy, culture, and education) enables the preservation of market cultural heritage while simultaneously increasing their economic competitiveness and social attractiveness. The questions that will support this hypothesis are respondents' perception of the market as an important element of neighbourhood identity and their support for the introduction of additional market functions such as fairs, cultural events, educational workshops, gastronomic content and spaces for social interaction.*

H2. *Participatory governance and active partnerships among local authorities, market tenants, and the local community are key to addressing infrastructural deficiencies and bridging the gap between the traditional role of marketplaces and contemporary market demands. The indicators that will question this hypothesis are respondents' willingness to participate in decision-making on market development and the frequency with which infrastructural and organisational deficiencies were identified, including the need for covering, improved hygiene, sanitary facilities, parking, accessibility and better spatial organisation.*

H3. *Digital transformation, interactive communication, and the adaptation of market operating hours to the needs of the working population are critical for attracting new demand, i.e., younger generations of consumers, and ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of urban market systems. The indicators used to question this hypothesis are respondents' interest in using markets outside regular working hours, particularly in the afternoon and evening, and their expressed need for improved digital and communication tools, including online consultations, clearer problem-reporting channels, better information flow, and digital payment options.*

The Zagreb case offers a distinct perspective on urban market revitalisation because its marketplaces are shaped by a predominantly public governance model, unlike many Western European cases. In Zagreb, revitalisation depends primarily on municipal ownership, public investment, institutional coordination, and market management capacity. This context shows that public ownership can help protect affordability, small producers

and everyday neighbourhood functions, but it does not automatically ensure effective or socially inclusive revitalisation. The case therefore contributes to the literature by showing how public-dominated market systems can modernise while preserving their food-supply, social, and public-space roles.

The paper is based on an integrated approach to urban market renewal that combines spatial and design modernization, active partnerships between local authorities and market vendors, and diversification of market offerings, thereby enabling the preservation of the cultural heritage of urban markets while simultaneously enhancing their economic competitiveness and social attractiveness. The paper begins with a literature review, followed by the materials and methods. It continues with the current state of Zagreb marketplaces. The analysis of citizens' and tenants' opinions and proposals, as well as findings from stakeholders' focus groups, constitutes the central part of the paper, with the final section dedicated to discussing the results of the analysis and presenting its key findings.

2. Literature Review

Traditional food markets primarily served to sell food products and positively affected the local economy of proximity, acting as key components of retail provision that mitigated the problem of geographical and economic isolation within the urban fabric [4]. Beyond their primary function as places of food exchange, markets are important sites of social interaction, local identity, and everyday urban life. Today, research literature increasingly examines markets not only as commercial infrastructure, but also as multifunctional public spaces shaped by processes of urban transformation, changing consumption patterns, tourism, governance challenges, and retail competition. Markets today are increasingly recognized as multifunctional urban spaces that integrate economic, social, cultural, and ecological functions. As Morales [5] argues, marketplaces combine social, ecological, and economic integration. Today, research further emphasizes that a marketplace is more than trade and serves as a vibrant, engaging public space for both local communities and visitors [6]. In the context of globalization and accelerated lifestyle changes, marketplaces continue to play an important role in connecting local communities with rural producers, fostering social interaction, and promoting sustainable practices. Consumers today increasingly seek quality, authenticity, and experiential consumption, encouraging markets to evolve into spaces for socialization, leisure, and identity formation [7]. Therefore, markets are gradually transforming from traditional food retail spaces into hybrid urban platforms that combine gastronomy, tourism, education, culture, and entertainment. Successful modern markets attract both residents and tourists by combining traditional heritage with modern consumer expectations and the principles of the experience economy [8,9]. In gastronomic experience, visiting food markets has been recognised as one of the primary ways through which tourists seek to temporarily "become local citizens" [10].

Markets perform an important economic function by enabling direct exchange between (local) producers and consumers, supporting access to fresh products, fostering trust-based relationships, and sustaining small-scale production [5,6]. Beyond profit, they contribute to local economic sustainability through reciprocity, solidarity, employment, and multiplier effects [11,12]. Demographic trends increasingly point toward multiculturalism and growing ethnic diversity, generating demand for products associated with different culinary traditions and contributing to the emergence of culturally specific marketplaces. Urban food markets increasingly reflect multicultural urban identities shaped by migration and globalization [6]. In this context, markets function not only as spaces of trade but also as spaces of social integration and cultural exchange [5]. Detailed empirical research into the attributes influencing visitor behaviour identifies three key factors: the physical environment, location and accessibility, and price [10]. For residents, and partic-

ularly for vulnerable consumer groups characterised by low income and limited mobility, the role of markets in meeting essential daily needs is the principal driver of loyalty and routine visitation [4]. The social purpose of markets is reflected in their role as hubs for gathering and interaction, where people meet, share information, and form social connections [13]. Markets are often the focal point of urban communities, hosting a variety of activities, from cultural events to local festivals [14]. The cultural dimension of markets encompasses their role in preserving and promoting local traditions and customs [15]. Markets often become centres of cultural events where various events, fairs, and festivals are organised [16]. These events enrich local culture and attract tourists, thereby stimulating economic development. The ecological function of markets is becoming increasingly important as awareness of sustainability and healthier eating habits grows. Existing research increasingly recognises food markets as important components of sustainable urban development and local ecological resilience [5,6,12]. As Morales [5] argues, market-places weave together ecological awareness and caring, and economic inclusivity. Markets promote the consumption of fresh, locally produced and grown food, reducing the need to transport products over long distances and positively impacting the environment.

Sustainability and short food supply chains have become central elements of modern market development. Markets increasingly position themselves as actors in sustainable urban food systems by promoting local production, seasonal products, shorter transport distances, and environmentally responsible consumption practices [5,12]. Consumers show growing preference for transparent food origins, organic products and ethical production methods, reinforcing the importance of markets in achieving sustainability goals and supporting local economies. Another emerging trend is the development of mobile markets and pop-up concepts, which increase flexibility and accessibility in urban food distribution systems. Mobile and temporary market formats enable local producers to reach neighbourhoods with limited food infrastructure while simultaneously activating public spaces and encouraging urban inclusion. Such models also allow experimentation with new business concepts and consumer formats at relatively low operational costs. Alongside physical transformation, increasing attention is being paid to governance and management models. European experiences demonstrate that there is no single dominant governance model; instead, different ownership and management structures coexist, including public management, public–private partnerships, concession systems, trust-based governance, and private ownership models.

European market development shows that successful revitalisation is rarely based only on physical renewal, but rather on the capacity of markets to combine traditional supply functions with new social, cultural and economic roles. The analysed examples differ in their governance models, programming strategies and target users, which makes them relevant for assessing possible directions for Zagreb's markets. Markets such as Mercado de San Miguel in Madrid and Time Out Market in Lisbon illustrate a commercially oriented model focused on gastronomy, tourism, and curated visitor experiences [7]. Their success is based on strong branding, professional management, and high-quality food concepts, but their transferability to Zagreb is limited if such a model were to weaken the everyday supply function of markets or reduce accessibility for local users. A different model is represented by publicly managed markets such as La Boqueria in Barcelona and Naschmarkt in Vienna, where the preservation of public interest, local supply, and market identity remains central [17]. These examples are more directly relevant to Zagreb because they show how markets can be modernised while retaining their role as everyday urban infrastructure. Similarly, Mercado de la Ribera in Bilbao [16] and Mercato di Rialto in Venice [9] demonstrate the importance of linking market activity with local gastronomy, cultural identity, and regional traditions. Their key success factor lies in using local food heritage as a basis for cultural programming, education, and visitor experience, without fully

replacing traditional market functions [16]. Hybrid and participatory governance models, such as the one at Borough Market in London, are particularly relevant to Zagreb [16]. They combine professional management with stakeholder participation, allowing markets to respond more flexibly to the needs of tenants, users, local communities and the city. This model suggests that the transformation of Zagreb's markets should not rely solely on commercialisation or tourism orientation, but on a balanced approach that strengthens local supply, improves infrastructure, introduces cultural and gastronomic content, and includes tenants and citizens in decision-making processes. The examples of Marché des Enfants Rouges in Paris, the Noordermarkt in Amsterdam, and Mercato Metropolitano in London further show that markets can support environmental sustainability, local producers, education, and community building. For Zagreb, the most transferable elements are therefore not individual formats themselves but the underlying success factors: clear governance arrangements, protection of the public function of markets, integration of local producers and tenants, diversified yet context-sensitive programming, and the use of markets as spaces for everyday social interaction. These lessons indicate that Zagreb's markets should be revitalised through an integrated model that preserves their traditional role while gradually expanding their economic, cultural and community functions.

Similar initiatives are emerging in Croatia through platforms such as "Moj Zagreb" ("My Zagreb"), "Virtualni zagrebački plac" ("Zagreb's Virtual Farmers' Market") and "Virtualni pazar Split" ("Virtual Marketplace Split"), which integrate traditional market vendors into online sales systems and expand market accessibility. Digitalization therefore does not replace physical markets but rather enhances them by creating hybrid consumption models and attracting younger, digitally literate consumers [6].

However, there are a few limitations to the contemporary urban market developments that stem from the change in behaviours and preferences of consumers and domestic inhabitants. From marketing and tourism perspectives, markets are no longer places of everyday shopping but are increasingly becoming leading cultural attractions that offer authentic local experiences [7]. Tourism-driven growth may also act as a destabilising factor since there is the problem of losing traditional local customers due to mass tourism, thereby necessitating the implementation of advanced qualitative and quantitative methodologies aimed at redefining services and restoring the local customer base [11].

The conversion of these spaces into luxury gastronomic hubs or gourmet markets results in the commodification of public space [15]. Analyses of data from platforms such as TikTok(X), Instagram, and Google Maps demonstrate how digital content differentially shapes the imagined, perceived, and lived spaces of markets, directly influencing the emotional connections and expectations of visitors [18]. Another problem for modern marketplaces is the aging of the European population, which is significantly affecting consumption patterns and the use of public spaces such as markets. It has been observed that revitalisation processes are frequently implemented solely through the lens of physical and infrastructural renewal, while the deeper issues of governance arrangements remain neglected [19].

The success of the survival and revitalisation of traditional markets is inseparably linked to the actions, strategies, and policy instruments of local authorities. Although markets generate benefits and induce multiplicative effects for the city and its agglomeration economy, aside from the above-mentioned behavioural changes, their existence is severely threatened by the expansion of modern retail formats that public administrations often directly or indirectly benefit from.

3. Zagreb Marketplaces

The Zagreb Marketplaces are part of Zagreb Holding, Ltd., which forms the largest network of 28 urban markets in the Republic of Croatia, with historical roots in the traditional trade of fresh food and local products. Zagreb Marketplaces was founded in 1930, the same year that the central Zagreb marketplace, Dolac, was built and began operating. The business of Zagreb Marketplaces includes retail and wholesale markets, as well as an infrastructure platform for small producers, distributors, consumers, craftsmen, and caterers. The Zagreb Marketplaces Branch (the Branch further in the text) operates the main city and neighbourhood markets at the following locations today: Branimirova, Britanski Trg (i.e., British Square), Botinec, Dolac, Dubec, Dubrava, Gajnice, Jarun, Kažotićev Trg (Augustin Kažotić Square), Kustošija, Kvatrić (Eugen Kvaternik Square nicknamed Kvatrić), Prečko, Sajmište Sesvete, Savica, Savski Gaj, Sesvete, Špansko, Trešnjevka, Trnje, Trnsko, Utrina, Volovčica, Vrapče, Zelena Tržnica (Green Market), and the Wholesale Market and Cold Storage. Off-market spaces include the locations Kajzerica, Trnsko, and Remetinec.

The current work of the Zagreb Marketplaces is organized through four services and one department. The services consist of market service, wholesale market service, cold storage and green market, technical service and event management, and business development service, while control of business standards is organized through the department format. The age structure of employees has the form of an “extended middle”, which shows a pronounced concentration of employees in middle and older work groups, with a smaller share of younger employees. This distribution is characterized by an expanded interval: more experienced workers aged 55–64 (39%), followed by those aged 45–54 (30%). According to 2025 data [20], secondary education dominates the educational structure of employees; in terms of the share of total employees, it is followed by unqualified employees. This age structure indicates maturity but also a low level of employees’ professional experience, and, at the same time, a reduced share of the younger generation. All the above satisfy the traditional way of working in markets, but are not suitable for implementing a strategic turnaround and digitalization, as the necessary changes to stabilize the Branch’s operations may pose a challenge to business success and long-term sustainability. In the observed period from 2023 to 2025, markets operated unprofitably and, consequently, uneconomically [20]. Given the long-term negative performance of the Branch, as well as some of the market locations and, at the same time, poor utilization of space capacity and underinvestment and, consequently, a decrease in demand for buying and selling at the markets, a strategic approach to redesigning the existing business model that would combine operational efficiency and digital transformation is needed.

In the case of Zagreb city markets, key stakeholders include: The City of Zagreb, city bodies and Zagreb Holding, sellers and tenants, buyers, suppliers and logistics actors, regulatory and supervisory authorities, local communities, city district councils, professional and academic actors, civil society, media and cultural-program initiatives. The stakeholder analysis shows that the City of Zagreb, Zagreb Holding, and Zagreb Marketplaces have the strongest formal influence, as they define the strategic, financial, regulatory, and operational conditions. Sellers and tenants are also crucial because they shape the market’s supply, identity, and attractiveness, while buyers provide legitimacy through their trust, habits, and demand. Regulatory institutions have a strong influence through inspection and compliance mechanisms, while local communities affect the feasibility of development through issues such as accessibility, traffic, noise, waste, public space, and local identity. Cultural and program-oriented actors can strengthen market visibility, innovation, and public image, but too many events may weaken their traditional supply and public-service functions. Because all stakeholder interests are interconnected, interventions such as infrastructure renovation, changes in tenancy models, digitalization, or new cultural programs cannot be viewed separately; they redistribute costs, benefits,

and influence across the system. Successful modernization of Zagreb's markets therefore depends on balancing economic sustainability, public function, stakeholder participation, local identity and everyday community needs.

4. Research Design and Methodology

A comprehensive mixed-method research design was applied, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the multifunctional role and development potential of Zagreb marketplaces, as described below.

4.1. Study Area

The study was conducted across 23 marketplaces in Zagreb in 2026, but the data analysis also covers earlier periods and trends. Zagreb marketplaces were selected as a case study due to their historical importance, extensive urban network, and continued relevance to the city's everyday supply and social life. Unlike many European marketplaces that have become predominantly tourist-oriented, Zagreb marketplaces still retain a significant public-service and neighbourhood function. At the same time, they are increasingly exposed to pressures of modernization, digitalization, sustainability transitions, and changing consumer behaviour. As a Central European urban context characterized by a predominantly public governance model, Zagreb provides a relevant framework for examining the contemporary transformation of urban markets and their evolving economic, social, and spatial roles.

4.2. Research Design and Data Collection

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis, case study analysis, surveys, and focus groups to examine the multifunctional role and development potential of Zagreb marketplaces. The research design enabled the integration of institutional, spatial, economic, and social perspectives, providing a broader understanding of market management, user perceptions, and contemporary development trends. Data collection included documents and policy analysis, analysis of good European practice examples, online and face-to-face surveys conducted among citizens and market tenants, and focus groups with key stakeholders.

Document analysis included a review of strategic documents, policy frameworks, institutional reports, and prior research on urban markets, sustainable development, and urban regeneration. In addition, a comparative analysis of selected European market case studies was conducted to identify contemporary development trends, governance models, and examples of good practice.

Two online surveys were conducted as part of the research: first with citizens who use Zagreb marketplaces, analysing their attitudes and usage patterns, and second with tenants. A total of almost 10,000 people participated in the survey, providing a broad empirical basis for identifying dominant attitudes, experiences, and development priorities among the participating stakeholder groups. In addition to the online survey, face-to-face surveys were conducted among both citizens and tenants to gain further insights into user experiences, business conditions, and perceptions of market functionality, as many market users and tenants are older citizens who cannot take part in an online survey. Survey participants were selected for relevance to the topic, with inclusion criteria focused on key stakeholders, primarily market users and tenants. Participants were eligible if they used, visited, worked at, or otherwise had direct experience with Zagreb city markets. Individuals without any connection to the markets or without sufficient knowledge of their use and functioning were excluded from the survey. The recruitment procedure combined an online survey and in-person data collection. This mixed recruitment approach enabled broader coverage of different user groups, including both regular local users and occa-

sional visitors. The analysis is based on a sample of over 9000 respondents. Of these, 4270 responses were collected through the online survey, and the rest were collected in person. The overall sample structure is relatively balanced, although women are somewhat more represented, accounting for approximately 57% of respondents, while men account for around 42%. In terms of age, middle-aged and older respondents are most represented, particularly those aged 40–69, while younger respondents under 30 and the oldest age group, 80 and above, are represented to a lesser extent. Nevertheless, the sample includes all age groups. Regarding employment status, employed people make up the largest share of the sample, followed by a significant share of retired respondents, while unemployed people and students are represented in smaller proportions. Spatially, the sample primarily reflects the views of local market users. Around 70% of respondents live in the immediate vicinity of a market, while a smaller share comes from other parts of the city or from outside Zagreb. The sample can therefore be considered appropriate and representative for capturing the attitudes of regular and local users of Zagreb city markets, while also including a smaller but relevant share of occasional and more distant users.

The survey of tenants in Zagreb was sent to all official tenants, and the analysis combined face-to-face data collection, as most tenants are older citizens. A total of 925 tenants participated in the survey, of which 36 completed the questionnaire online and 889 participated through fieldwork at market locations. The sample includes tenants with direct and practical experience of working at city markets. The respondent structure indicates a strong presence of long-term tenants, with the largest share having worked in the market for more than 30 years (24.9%). A further 14.6% have 26–30 years of experience, while notable shares are also recorded among tenants with 6–10 years (13.8%) and 21–25 years (12.1%) of experience. Both surveys were conducted between 15th February and 15th March 2026.

The survey instruments were developed specifically for this study, in line with the research objectives and the local context of Zagreb marketplaces. The questionnaires were designed to capture the views of key stakeholder groups on the current functioning, challenges, and development potential of city markets. The content of the questionnaires was informed by the review of relevant literature, strategic and planning documents, and previous knowledge. The questionnaires included a combination of closed-ended questions, allowing quantitative analysis, and open-ended questions, providing additional qualitative insights. Standard survey formats were used, including Likert-type assessment scales and multiple-choice questions, to ensure clarity, comparability, and ease of response. The content validity of the instruments was ensured by aligning them with the main research questions and by expert review by the research team and relevant professionals. Before full implementation, the questionnaire was pilot tested with a small number of respondents, and minor adjustments were made. The citizen sample was recruited through a combination of convenience-based, field-recruited, and self-selected sampling. Face-to-face respondents were recruited at marketplace locations and included individuals who were physically present and available at the time of data collection, reflecting convenience-based field recruitment. The online component was based on self-selection, as survey links were distributed across the city and participation was voluntary. In both cases, respondents were required to have direct experience with Zagreb marketplaces.

The quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of distribution for the main variables. No inferential statistical tests were applied, as the primary purpose of the surveys was to identify dominant attitudes, usage patterns, perceived problems, and development priorities among citizens and tenants. Missing or incomplete responses (which were within the margin of statistical error) were excluded from the analysis of the relevant question, while valid responses to the remaining questions were retained. The number of valid responses

was therefore considered separately for each item. Most of the questions were obligatory; only open-ended questions were voluntary. Open-ended survey responses were analysed qualitatively using thematic content analysis. Responses were reviewed for recurring topics and issues and grouped into broader thematic categories. These categories were then used to complement and interpret the descriptive survey results, particularly by explaining the reasons underlying respondents' assessments and priorities.

Qualitative data were further collected through focus groups with stakeholders, including representatives of market management, local authorities, vendors, consumers, experts, and community representatives. There were 10 organised focus groups with a total of 127 participants, and one workshop for the professional public with 29 participants. Each focus group and workshop lasted for about three hours. Focus groups were organised with key stakeholders who answered the call, including tenants, members of the Council of city districts and local committees, and management of markets. One workshop for the professional public was organized with experts in urban planning, architecture, economics, food systems, culture, and public space management; representatives of civil society organizations, the academic community, and various professional associations; and representatives of the City and competent ministries. These focus groups provided additional qualitative insights into development priorities and potential directions for transforming city markets. All relevant stakeholder groups were invited to participate in the focus group process, ensuring that the views of both direct market users and wider professional and civic actors were included. Through workshops, consultations, and a participatory process, the development vision, strategic objectives, priorities, and proposed measures for action were further defined. The focus groups explored perceptions of market governance, development challenges, modernization priorities, and opportunities to transform Zagreb marketplaces into multifunctional urban spaces. The main goal of focus groups was to gain more in-depth data on what had previously been concluded through document analysis, case studies, and surveys.

The qualitative materials from the focus groups, professional workshop, and open-ended survey responses were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The focus groups and workshop were documented through detailed written notes. The qualitative analysis was conducted by members of the research team, who jointly reviewed the materials and agreed on the main themes and thematic categories. Also, all notes were sent to the focus group participants, who approved them. Notes from participants' responses were first reviewed and organised according to the main research questions and thematic areas addressed during data collection, including governance, infrastructure, market functions, user needs, modernization priorities and development opportunities. The interpretation combined a deductive approach, based on the predefined research objectives and discussion topics, with an inductive approach that allowed additional themes to emerge from participants' statements. A consistent analytical framework was applied to all focus groups and open-ended responses, while the findings were also compared with survey results, documents, and case study findings. This triangulation made it possible to assess whether specific conclusions were supported by several independent data sources. In addition, the analysis retained distinctions among stakeholder groups and did not treat divergent views as analytical inconsistencies; instead, such differences were examined as relevant findings that reflect different experiences, interests, and positions regarding Zagreb marketplaces.

The quantitative survey results provided evidence on the frequency, distribution and relative importance of users' and tenants' attitudes. Only descriptive statistics were applied, primarily frequencies and percentages. For multiple-response questions, each selected option was analysed as a separate response category, meaning that the total percentage could exceed 100%. Missing responses were excluded only from the analysis of

the relevant item, while the respondent's valid answers to other questions were retained. The qualitative data from focus groups and open-ended survey responses were used to interpret, contextualise and explain these patterns in greater depth. Open-ended responses were analysed using thematic content analysis, whereby recurring issues were identified and grouped into broader thematic categories. In this sense, the survey data were used to identify dominant trends and priorities, whereas the qualitative material helped clarify why these issues were important. Greater analytical weight was given to findings that were consistently confirmed across several sources, for example, when survey results, open-ended responses, and focus group discussions pointed to the same issue. Where findings differed between sources, these differences were interpreted in relation to the characteristics of the respondent group and the method of data collection.

4.3. Data Availability and Limitations

Several limitations may influence the interpretation of the research findings. The study is geographically limited to the Zagreb marketplaces system and selected European case studies, which may reduce the broader generalizability of the results to other urban or institutional contexts. In addition, the analysis of good European practice examples is based primarily on publicly available documentation, secondary literature, and institutional sources.

The citizen and tenant surveys were conducted using online and face-to-face methods, which may introduce sampling limitations and response bias, particularly regarding the representation of different demographic and stakeholder groups. Furthermore, perceptions and attitudes expressed through surveys and focus groups are inherently subjective and may be influenced by individual experiences, expectations, and current market conditions. Although the research employed a mixed-methods approach to enhance reliability and triangulation of findings, the interpretation of qualitative data, stakeholder relations, and governance challenges inevitably involves a degree of analytical subjectivity. In addition, contemporary market development trends related to digitalization, sustainability, and consumer behaviour are rapidly evolving, which may influence the long-term relevance of some findings and strategic recommendations.

The research is based on publicly available documents, policy materials, and primary data collected by the authors. However, additional materials, including detailed survey results, focus group transcripts, and certain internal operational data, are not publicly available due to confidentiality and data protection requirements.

5. Research Results

To analyse the attitudes and behavioural patterns among citizens who use Zagreb marketplaces about the facilities and value-adding services, an online survey was conducted. An overview of the results is presented in Figure 1 below.

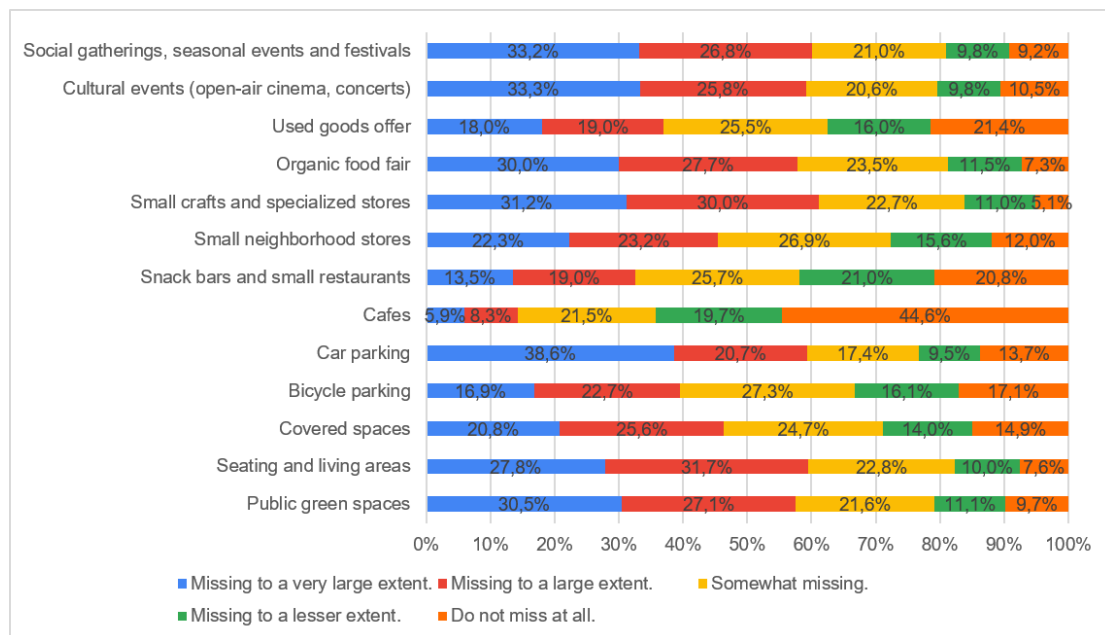


Figure 1. Respondents' assessment of missing facilities and value adding services. Source: Authors.

Figure 1 results reveal that respondents perceive Zagreb marketplaces as spaces with considerable untapped multifunctional potential. The greatest deficiencies relate to infrastructure and complementary amenities, particularly covered spaces, car parking, public green spaces, cafés, small craft and specialty stores, and cultural events, all of which were identified as missing to a large or very large extent by a substantial proportion of respondents. In contrast, neighbourhood stores and seating areas were generally perceived as less important, suggesting that users prioritize improvements that enhance the accessibility, attractiveness, and experiential quality of marketplaces. The results demonstrate a clear stakeholder preference for expanding the role of marketplaces beyond their traditional commercial function towards more vibrant, multifunctional public spaces.

To analyse the tenants' assessment of selected infrastructural conditions at Zagreb marketplaces, another online survey was conducted. An overview of the results is presented in Figure 2 below.

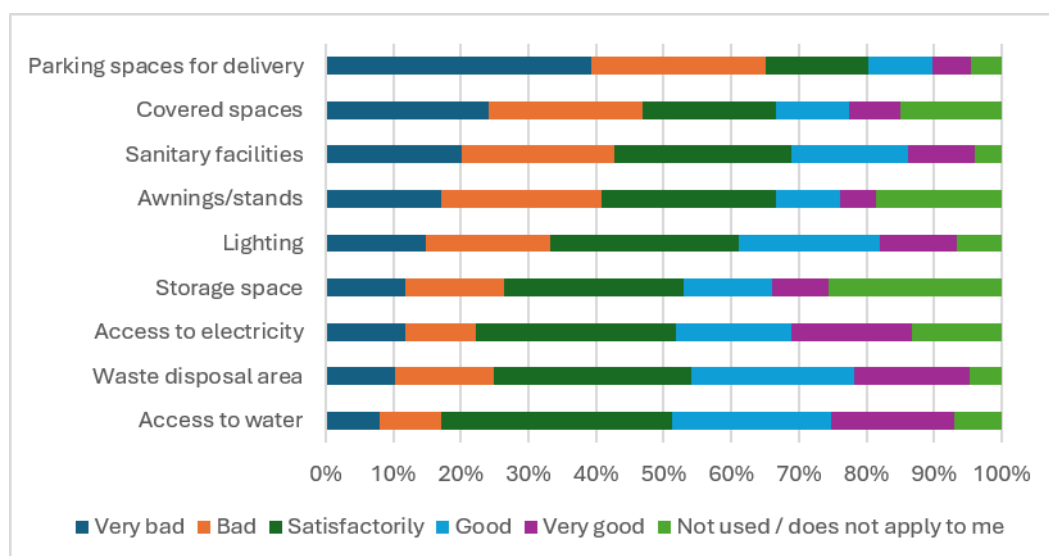


Figure 2. Tenants' assessment of selected infrastructural conditions. Source: authors.

The results shown in Figure 2 indicate that vendors generally perceive the existing marketplace infrastructure as adequate but unevenly developed across different functional components. Basic utility services, particularly access to water and electricity, received the most favourable evaluations, whereas parking spaces for delivery vehicles, covered spaces, and sanitary facilities were more frequently assessed as inadequate. These findings suggest that while the core operational infrastructure is largely functional, targeted investments in logistics, weather protection, and supporting facilities are needed to improve vendors' working conditions and strengthen the overall functionality of marketplaces. From a governance perspective, the results highlight infrastructure modernization as a prerequisite for enhancing the multifunctional role and long-term sustainability of urban marketplaces.

Taken together, the citizen and tenant surveys show a high level of convergence regarding the main problems and development needs of Zagreb's marketplaces, but they also reveal differences in emphasis that reflect the distinct positions of users and market operators. Both groups perceive markets as important urban spaces that should be preserved and revitalized, but citizens primarily assess them in terms of everyday shopping, product quality, comfort, and broader social use, while tenants evaluate them through the lens of business viability, infrastructure, working conditions, and customer retention.

A key point of convergence is the importance placed on the traditional role of markets as places for fresh, local, and trustworthy food. Citizens most frequently visit markets for freshness, locally produced food, product quality, and support for small producers, while tenants largely operate within traditional market activities, especially fruit and vegetable sales and domestic or family farm products. This indicates that both groups recognise the market as a space strongly associated with local food systems, direct producer-consumer relations and trust in product origin. Citizens' strong loyalty to familiar vendors corresponds closely with tenants' own understanding of their role, as most tenants emphasise building long-term relationships with customers. In this sense, both surveys confirm that Zagreb's marketplaces are not perceived merely as retail infrastructure, but as socially embedded spaces based on familiarity, trust and repeated interaction.

A second area of agreement concerns the need for infrastructural improvement. Citizens and tenants both identify renovation, better hygiene, improved spatial organisation, modernisation and greater weather protection as important priorities. Citizens evaluate sanitary facilities, cleanliness, accessibility, spatial organisation and parking more negatively than product quality or vendor friendliness, while tenants rate business infrastructure as moderate to poor, especially covered spaces, stalls, sanitary facilities and parking. Therefore, both groups agree that the physical condition of markets represents one of the main obstacles to their future attractiveness. However, tenants express this problem more directly in relation to everyday work: inadequate roofing, exposure to rain and sun, poor delivery logistics, and deteriorated facilities directly affect their income, working conditions, and business sustainability. Citizens, by contrast, frame infrastructure primarily in terms of comfort, accessibility, hygiene, and the quality of the shopping experience. Parking and accessibility also emerge as shared concerns, although again with different practical implications. Citizens identify parking as one of the missing components needed to support broader, more frequent market use. Tenants assess parking even more negatively, especially because it affects deliveries, customer access, and the operational functioning of market sales. For citizens, parking is mainly a convenience and accessibility issue; for tenants, it is also a business condition linked to turnover and competitiveness.

Differences are also visible in how each group understands the future role of markets. Citizens show a clear interest in markets becoming broader urban and social spaces. They identify missing content such as covered spaces, cultural events, green areas, cafés, and additional facilities, and a majority support using market spaces beyond standard work-

ing hours, especially in the evening. This suggests that citizens see potential for markets to become multifunctional spaces for shopping, staying, socializing, and cultural activity. Tenants also recognize the need for revitalization through events, promotion, better food offerings, and additional services, especially to attract younger customers. However, their support for new functions is more closely connected to economic survival, increased foot-fall, and stronger market promotion. In other words, citizens value additional content as an improvement to urban life and market experience, while tenants view it primarily as a tool for increasing customer volume and turnover.

The strongest divergence concerns the perception of economic pressures. Citizens identify problems such as resale of goods, hygiene in catering facilities, crowding, and noise, but a considerable share does not perceive major problems. Tenants, on the other hand, report a much more difficult situation, marked by declining turnover, insufficient customer numbers, weak winter business, limited digitalization, and uncertain financial sustainability. More than half report a substantial decrease in turnover, and more than 80% depend on market work as their only or main source of income. This reveals that citizens may still perceive markets as relatively stable and attractive spaces of consumption, while tenants experience them as economically vulnerable and increasingly exposed to structural decline.

Another important difference concerns digitalization and younger users. Citizens' responses indicate continued interest in markets, especially for fresh and local products, but tenants perceive younger customers as insufficiently present. From tenants' perspective, modern infrastructure, stronger social media promotion, events, online visibility and card payments are necessary to attract new generations. This suggests that the challenge is not only to preserve the existing loyal customer base, but also to adapt market services, communication, and payment systems to changing consumer habits. Citizens express demand for sustainability-oriented features such as organic products, plastic-free purchasing, recycling and composting, while tenants focus more on operational tools that could increase competitiveness and customer numbers.

Both groups also indirectly support a model of market revitalisation that combines preservation and modernization. Citizens do not reject the traditional open-air character of markets; instead, many prefer hybrid solutions that provide weather protection while preserving the market's identity and atmosphere. Tenants similarly prioritise roofing and weather protection, but their concerns are more functional and economic. This shared preference suggests that future interventions should avoid overly standardized or enclosed commercial models and instead pursue context-sensitive modernization that improves comfort and working conditions while preserving the recognizable character of Zagreb's marketplaces.

Finally, the surveys reveal that governance and participation remain important issues, especially for tenants. While citizens express preferences regarding content, infrastructure, and future use, tenants more explicitly report limited influence over market management decisions, uneven communication, administrative burdens, and dissatisfaction with fees relative to the quality of infrastructure and services. Although cooperation with market management is assessed more positively than infrastructure, tenants still call for greater transparency, faster problem resolution, and stronger involvement in planning. Their preferred form of participation is surveys, which indicate a willingness to be included but also suggest that participatory mechanisms remain relatively weak and insufficiently institutionalized.

Stakeholders' Focus Groups Insights

The implementation of focus groups and participatory workshops with identified key stakeholders (market managers, tenants, representatives of the local community, and

consumers) enabled an in-depth understanding of the actual functional, spatial, and infrastructural conditions of Zagreb's market network. Converting market spaces into gourmet markets commodifies public space [15]. In order to obtain a systematic overview of findings, the analysed markets were classified into five primary categories according to their spatial-functional role and governance-legal complexity: (1) Macro-regional and central urban hubs, (2) Markets characterised by complex (hybrid) ownership structures and governance challenges, (3) Large residential, transit, and peripheral markets, (4) Local neighbourhood spaces with developed or latent development potential, and (5) Marginalised spaces designated for radical restructuring or functional conversion.

Focus group participants assessed central urban markets as facing serious infrastructural, organisational, and logistical challenges, including poor maintenance, inadequate utilities, traffic congestion, fragmented ownership structures, and insufficient management capacities. These findings confirm both the citizen and tenant survey results, particularly the negative assessments of infrastructure, sanitary conditions, spatial organisation, parking and delivery logistics. At the same time, stakeholders emphasized their vital social, economic, and cultural roles within neighbourhoods, highlighting the need for balanced regeneration that preserves authenticity, operational continuity, and local food-supply functions. This also corresponds to the survey findings, in which citizens emphasized freshness, local products, and market atmosphere, while tenants stressed customer relationships and the social role of markets. Proposed improvements include comprehensive reconstruction, better logistical infrastructure, covered market spaces, underground storage and parking, enhanced event management, and the introduction of complementary cultural and social programs.

Markets with hybrid ownership structures face severe governance, infrastructure, and operational challenges stemming from fragmented public-private co-ownership and the absence of unified management systems. Stakeholders identified chronic technical deficiencies, a lack of communal order, underutilized spaces, and delayed investments due to complex ownership relations and institutional blockages. These findings mainly complement the tenant survey, which also pointed to the need for more transparent management, faster problem resolution, and better communication, although the focus groups provide a more detailed explanation of the institutional and ownership-related barriers behind these problems. At the same time, these markets retain strong neighbourhood importance and revitalization potential through improved governance models, infrastructural modernization, specialized market programs, cultural activities, and better regulation of communal and logistical functions.

Large residential, transit, and peripheral markets play an important role in serving densely populated districts and benefit from strong transport connectivity and parking capacity. However, stakeholders identified major infrastructural, sanitary, legal, and organizational deficiencies, including neglected facilities, inadequate utilities, low visibility, unresolved legal status of structures, and underutilized spaces outside peak market days. These findings confirm the survey results regarding poor infrastructure, hygiene, and spatial organization, while also extending them by highlighting legal status, visibility, and underuse outside regular market hours as additional structural problems. Despite these challenges, participants emphasized significant development potential through modernization, improved governance, expanded operating hours, thematic fairs, hospitality and social programs, and carefully balanced redevelopment preserving the traditional open-market identity and community function of these spaces.

Neighbourhood markets exhibit varying development trajectories shaped by their urban integration, evolving consumer habits, and connections to broader social and public functions. Stakeholders highlighted declining daily activity, reduced interest in traditional market shopping, parking pressures, and competition from supermarkets as key

challenges. These findings are consistent with the tenant survey, especially tenants' concerns about declining turnover, insufficient numbers of customers and the weak presence of younger generations. They also partly align with the citizen survey, which shows that most respondents buy similar fresh products in supermarkets and shopping centres, although citizens still attach great importance to markets as places of fresh, local, and trustworthy food supply. At the same time, these spaces were recognized as having strong revitalization potential through better integration with public spaces, cultural and social programs, small-scale events, incentive models for local producers, and holistic urban planning approaches to transform markets into multifunctional neighbourhood centres.

Marginalized and dysfunctional market spaces are characterized by the severe decline or collapse of traditional market activities, driven by infrastructural decay, legal and spatial constraints, poor visibility, and competition from alternative retail formats. Stakeholders identified the need for radical transformation, including the reduction or abolition of conventional market functions and the introduction of flexible, hybrid, and community-oriented models such as pop-up markets, cultural and creative centres, public squares, and multifunctional neighbourhood spaces. This differs in part from the citizen and tenant surveys, which generally support market revitalization while still assuming the preservation of market functions. The focus groups, therefore, add a more differentiated perspective by showing that some locations may no longer be sustainable as conventional markets and may require functional conversion. Despite their decline, these locations still retain local relevance and potential for revitalization through alternative public, social, and cultural uses better adapted to contemporary urban needs.

The macro-logistical and wholesale market infrastructure is a crucial component of the city's food supply system but is burdened by severe technical deterioration, spatial constraints, and changing market conditions. Stakeholders highlighted declining physical trade activity, insufficient institutional support for smaller producers, and growing competition from imported low-cost products as key challenges undermining the sector's stability and public trust. These findings are consistent with the survey results in which citizens emphasised the importance of local and seasonal products and authenticity and trust in product origin, while tenants pointed to declining turnover, competition and the need for stronger support and promotion. Proposed priorities include urgent infrastructure modernization, stronger support for domestic producers, and the introduction of transparent digital certification and branding systems to improve market differentiation and consumer confidence.

6. Discussion

As the previous discussion shows, the research results reveal the need for business model renewal and targeted investment in infrastructure reconstruction. Moreover, urban marketplace transformation is not primarily an infrastructure problem but a stakeholder governance problem. Taken together, the findings suggest that the Zagreb marketplace needs a strategic turnaround, a new stakeholder governance model, and a new transformation and development strategy to enable the company to cope with all the challenges identified in the research analysis. So, to start the process, the SWOT and TOWS matrices were developed through a structured synthesis of empirical findings, expert and key stakeholder interpretations, and strategic assessment. The identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats was primarily based on the results of survey research, focus groups, and stakeholder consultations. In more detail, opportunities and threats were defined by considering external development trends and contextual factors, including changing consumer habits, the potential for multifunctional use, digitalisation, competition from supermarkets and other retail formats. The SWOT matrix is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. SWOT matrix of the Zagreb marketplace system.

Strengths	Weaknesses
S1. Strong identity and tradition S2. Extensive and well-developed network S3. Direct link with local family farms and short supply chains S4. Social role as a “third place” and generator of social cohesion S5. Existing development projects S6. Vast property assets available for transformation	W1. Pronounced financial unsustainability and growing net losses W2. Outdated, heterogeneous, and neglected infrastructure W3. Uneven capacity utilisation and marginalisation of certain locations W4. Organisational rigidity and an unfavourable age structure of staff W5. Complex, unresolved ownership and co-ownership relations W6. Operational deficits (parking, roofing/coverage, hygiene) W7. Outdated website and poor corporate communication
Opportunities	Threats
O1. Digital transformation (e-marketplace, customer relationship management (CRM) systems, e-payment solutions) O2. Transformation into a “Tržnica+” (“Market+”) format (gastro zones, event economy) O3. Logistical optimisation and establishment of a central cold chain system O4. Portfolio-based profiling and repurposing of dysfunctional locations O5. Co-financing through EU funds and public–private partnerships O6. High willingness of citizens to participate and engage in evening programmes	T1. Aggressive competition from retail chains and q-commerce delivery services T2. Changing consumption habits among younger consumers and an ageing base of traditional customers T3. Financial shocks, rising energy costs, and collective bargaining agreement expenses T4. Institutional inertia and prolonged legal/property-related proceedings T5. Risk of loss of authenticity and excessive gentrification T6. Fading of business if not transformed

Source: Prepared by the authors.

To transform the SWOT analysis from a descriptive to a prescriptive tool, a TOWS matrix was developed and presented in Table 2. It cross-references internal and external factors to define four groups of convergent strategies: SO (maximizing strengths and opportunities), WO (overcoming weaknesses by leveraging opportunities), ST (using strengths to neutralize threats), and WT (minimizing weaknesses and avoiding threats). In other words, the TOWS matrix was developed based on the SWOT results by linking internal and external factors and formulating strategic options: using strengths to take advantage of opportunities, using strengths to reduce threats, addressing weaknesses through opportunities, and minimizing weaknesses in relation to external threats.

Table 2. TOWS matrix of strategic combinations.

Strategic Orientations	Opportunities	Threats
Strengths	SO Strategies (Growth and Development): Integrate the small family farm base (S3) with advanced e-marketplace and CRM solutions (O1) in order to attract younger customer segments Leverage the strong identity of historic markets (S1) and citizens' willingness to participate in events (O6) to introduce hybrid gastro and "after-work" programmes (O2) at locations such as Dolac, Britanac (nickname for Britanski Trg, i.e., British Square), and Branimirova Raising funds from the deployment of non-core property assets (S6) Enhance the website and social media engagement to enable and support multilateral interactive communication (W7)	ST Strategies (Differentiation): Position authenticity and short supply chains (S3) as a primary defence against price competition from supermarkets (T1) through branding initiatives and strict control of product origin Leverage the market network (S2) as decentralised cultural and social anchors (S4) to mitigate the risk of an ageing traditional customer base (T2) Business model renewal (T6)
Weaknesses	WO Strategies (Turnaround): • Leverage EU funds and public-private partnership (PPP) models (O5) for the urgent rehabilitation of deteriorated infrastructure (W2, W6) and to address cold chain logistics challenges (O3) • Implement portfolio profiling (O4) in order to redirect losses from marginal locations (W1, W3) toward the development of 6–8 highly profitable "core" markets	WT Strategies (Defence and Repurposing): • Urgently initiate legal and institutional remediation and property registration processes (W5) to prevent complete stagnation and degradation of sites with complex ownership structures (T4) • Implement radical repurposing or conservation of fully defunct spaces (W3) into social, craft, or creative centres (T2, T5) (e.g., Kažotićev Trg, Savski Gaj)

Source: Prepared by the authors.

As Table 2 shows, there is significant potential for the Zagreb Marketplaces to renew their businesses, as well as for the City of Zagreb to capitalize on economic, social, and cultural sustainability while preserving its traditional heritage identity. Several strategic trajectories can be identified from the analyses conducted, synthesized citizen and tenant surveys, and overall stakeholder inputs. The synthesis of findings through the TOWS matrix suggests that the future of Zagreb marketplaces should be based on a strategic rationalization of the market portfolio. Rather than maintaining dysfunctional and economically unsustainable locations, development efforts should focus on six to eight strategically important markets undergoing comprehensive modernization [20]. Marketplaces must in-

creasingly reposition themselves as key actors within sustainable urban food systems by promoting short supply chains, local production, and ecological responsibility [5,12].

Unlike many European marketplaces that have evolved primarily into tourist attractions [11], Zagreb marketplaces still retain a strong neighbourhood and community-oriented function. It is precisely this dimension of “the local” [10] that is one of the greatest strengths of the system (S1, S3), offering significant potential for positioning Zagreb as an authentic gastronomic and cultural destination [9,20].

So, three key strategic objectives have been defined as future development directions. Each objective is operationalized through the priority domains and corresponding implementation measures.

The first objective is the modernisation and functional upgrading of markets, as the physical and spatial components are prerequisites for any reactivation of the market system. Survey and workshop results clearly show that users and tenants require basic communal and hygienic safety. Four priorities emerged under this objective. The first high priority is infrastructural renewal, including systematic reconstruction of sanitary facilities, urgent rehabilitation and modernisation of public toilets across all locations, extended opening hours, and the introduction of high hygiene standards, particularly at Trešnjevka, Jarun, and Sesvete. It also includes renovation of deteriorated building elements, such as leaking roofs, damaged flooring, energy-inefficient lighting, and the installation of heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems where justified. Cleaning protocols should be standardised through stricter, more frequent cleaning and waste removal schedules, including eliminating environmental risks, such as preventing stream pollution at Jarun and controlling pigeon infestations at Savica. The second priority is spatial reorganisation, also highly prioritised, including optimizing layouts and widening circulation paths to ensure smooth customer flow, with special attention to accessibility for people with disabilities and parents with strollers. It also includes strict enforcement of municipal regulations and the removal of goods placed outside leased boundaries, especially at Jarun, as well as visual standardization and unification of kiosk and stall design. Vacant capacities should be activated through phased and controlled repurposing of empty indoor units, for example, within the Dolac basement and hall, into value-added spaces without disrupting the continuity of market operations. The third priority is accessibility and transport, with medium priority, including the reorganisation and expansion of parking capacities, which are among the most significant practical barriers for users, through underground garages in reconstruction projects at Trešnjevka and Sesvete or the optimization of existing surface parking areas at Utrina. It also includes micromobility integration through bicycle racks and e-scooter stations near markets, with clearly defined no-ride zones within market areas, particularly at Jarun, as well as improved delivery logistics through precise delivery time windows and dedicated loading zones to prevent congestion of surrounding streets, especially at Kvatrić. The fourth priority is the development of hybrid spaces, with medium priority, including modular weather protection through high-quality and aesthetically integrated canopies, awnings, or retractable roofing structures in open-air areas, especially at Kvatrić and Jarun, to ensure year-round operation, as well as flexible architectural elements such as foldable or mobile stalls, as seen at Britanac and Špansko, enabling rapid transformation of markets into public squares for events and evening programs.

The second objective is to increase competitiveness and the quality of supply by moving away from outdated business models toward digital, transparent sales systems in response to pressure from retail chains. Four priorities emerged under this objective. The first is digital transformation, with high priority, including the development of an integrated e-marketplace through a unified digital platform and mobile application that would enable small local producers to present products online, receive orders, and par-

ticipate in consolidated home delivery services, especially for younger working populations. It also includes cashless payment integration via mobile POS devices and digital wallets, supported by education programs for older vendors, as well as digital marketing to promote daily offers, communicate discounts, and increase the visibility of less-visible locations. The second priority is strengthening local supply through incentive schemes for authentic local producers, including subsidized rental tariffs and preferential stall placement for genuine fresh-food producers. It also includes digital quality and origin labeling via QR code systems that show farm location, certifications, and harvest dates, as well as stricter control and suppression of the grey economy through a digital certification system that clearly distinguishes authentic producers from resellers, especially at the Wholesale Market and Green Market. The third priority is supplying diversification, with medium priority, including dedicated zones for premium and niche segments such as artisanal products, craft goods, organic production, microgreens, and local delicacies. It also includes the symbiotic development of gastronomy through small street food units, tasting rooms, and bistros directly sourcing ingredients from surrounding stalls. The fourth priority is business model adaptation, with medium priority, including flexible leasing models such as short-term, weekly, and pop-up rental options for young entrepreneurs and seasonal producers, as well as extended opening hours toward afternoons and evenings and regular Sunday operations at Trnsko, Jarun, and Utrina, aligned with the needs of the working population.

The third and last objective is the transformation of markets into social and urban centers, redefining their role in the urban fabric from spaces of commercial exchange into generators of neighborhood social life. Four priorities emerged under this objective. The first is the development of social and cultural content, with high priority, through a continuous calendar of themed events, neighborhood festivals such as the “Plac Mljac” model at Trešnjevka, concerts, exhibitions, and antique fairs, as demonstrated at Britanac. It also includes educational programs such as cooking workshops, sustainability lectures, food waste education, and children’s programs that position markets as community learning hubs. The second priority is the creation of spaces for stay and social interaction, also with high priority, through modular seating, free Wi-Fi zones, and charging stations that make markets more comfortable social spaces. It also includes greening and microclimatic optimization through vertical gardens, planters, trees, and drinking fountains to reduce the urban heat island effect and improve spatial quality, especially in Vrapče and Botinec. The third priority is branding and visual identity, with medium priority, including a unified brand with a coherent logo, typography, and signage that combines heritage with modern urban design, as well as tourist positioning of central markets, especially Dolac and Britanac, as authentic gastronomic and craft destinations within official Zagreb tourist routes. The fourth priority is differentiation and portfolio management of the network, with medium priority, through categorization and thematic profiling of locations into macro-regional hubs with gastro-tourism functions, large neighbourhood markets for weekly family supply, and small eco/community points, alongside feasibility studies for dysfunctional locations that could be transformed into hybrid craft, creative, and social centres, such as Kažotićev Trg – The Better PLACe (PLAC in Croatian stands for colloquial term for marketplace) or Prečko market.

Taken together, these three objectives extend existing research on urban marketplace transformation by showing that regeneration should not be understood as a linear shift from traditional retail to consumption-, tourism-, or entertainment-oriented uses. Instead, the findings indicate that transformation is a multidimensional process in which physical modernization, economic adaptation, and the expansion of social and cultural functions must develop in parallel. The Zagreb case therefore suggests that the continued viability of traditional market functions is not incompatible with multifunctionality; rather, func-

tional retail infrastructure provides the material and economic basis upon which broader public-space functions can be developed. The findings also refine existing interpretations of multifunctionality. Previous research often describes multifunctionality through the co-existence of commercial, social, cultural, recreational, and environmental activities. The present study demonstrates that the mere presence of multiple functions is insufficient to ensure sustainable transformation.

An important finding of this study is the divergence in stakeholder priorities regarding the future development of Zagreb marketplaces. While citizens primarily value marketplaces as multifunctional public spaces that foster social interaction, cultural identity, and local community life, vendors place greater emphasis on operational conditions, particularly infrastructure, logistics, and functional facilities. Rather than representing conflicting interests, these findings reveal complementary stakeholder perspectives arising from the different roles that marketplaces play for each user group. Citizens predominantly experience marketplaces as places of consumption, social exchange, and urban identity, whereas vendors perceive them as workplaces whose economic viability depends on adequate infrastructure and service conditions.

From a governance perspective, these different priorities should not be treated as competing objectives but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of marketplace development. Investments in infrastructure improve vendors' operational efficiency and service quality while creating the conditions necessary to expand social, cultural, and recreational activities valued by citizens. Consequently, participatory governance that involves marketplace management, vendors, citizens, local government, and civil society organizations is essential for balancing functional requirements with broader public values. Such an integrated governance approach would enable marketplaces to evolve into genuinely multifunctional public spaces that simultaneously support local entrepreneurship, community cohesion, urban vitality, and sustainable urban development.

Consequently, the next subsections assess the three research hypotheses. Their evaluation was based on a triangulation of empirical and qualitative evidence. Specifically, the assessment combined (a) descriptive analysis of survey responses collected from citizens and marketplace vendors, (b) findings obtained through focus group discussions with relevant stakeholder groups, and (c) comparison with previous empirical studies and European marketplace practices identified through the desk research. Rather than relying on statistical hypothesis testing, the hypotheses were evaluated by examining the consistency of evidence across these complementary sources. A hypothesis was considered supported when convergent evidence from the different data sources consistently confirmed the proposed relationships.

6.1. Integrated Approach and Spatial Modernisation (Evaluation of H1)

The empirical evidence provides strong support for H1, suggesting that an integrated revitalization approach can simultaneously preserve marketplace heritage while enhancing competitiveness. This conclusion is based on the convergence of three sources of evidence. First, survey findings indicate that more than 90% of citizens attach high importance to the local origin of food products while expressing considerable dissatisfaction with hygiene standards and outdated infrastructure [20]. Second, focus group discussions highlighted the need to combine physical renewal with new social and commercial functions. Third, these findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that contemporary consumers increasingly value authenticity, quality, and experiential consumption [7].

A comparison with European examples, such as the Mercado de San Miguel in Madrid, confirms that marketplaces integrating gastronomy and social events increasingly function as generators of social cohesion [7]. The Zagreb findings indicate the need to in-

introduce a “Tržnica+” model that combines traditional retail functions with gastro zones and event-oriented spaces (TOWS matrix). However, the transformation of markets into gourmet-oriented destinations must be carefully managed to avoid the commodification of public space and the loss of authenticity [15], which the SWOT analysis identified as a significant threat (T5).

6.2. Participatory Governance and System Resilience (Evaluation of H2)

The empirical evidence also supports H2, indicating that participatory governance represents an important prerequisite for strengthening marketplace resilience. This assessment is based on the combined interpretation of survey findings, stakeholder discussions, and comparative evidence. Survey results show that 40.2% of tenants perceive no influence over management decisions, while 55% consider their business only moderately sustainable [20]. Focus group participants similarly emphasized the need for stronger stakeholder involvement in strategic decision-making. The marginalization of key stakeholders is a significant barrier to development, as revitalization processes often fail when implemented solely through physical reconstruction and neglect governance arrangements [19]. These findings are consistent with evidence from European marketplace governance models [17,19].

Examples such as London’s Borough Market demonstrate that hybrid governance models and stakeholder inclusion contribute to greater institutional resilience [17]. In the case of Zagreb, this implies moving beyond a model based exclusively on linear technical maintenance and introducing collaborative governance involving local authorities, family farms, market tenants, and civil society actors [20]. It is precisely this stakeholder synergy that enables marketplaces to function as “third places” that strengthen the urban social fabric [1,13].

6.3. Digital Transformation, Interactive Communication and the Adaptation of Operating Hours (Evaluation of H3)

The empirical evidence provides partial, stakeholder-based support for H3, indicating that digitalization and more flexible operating hours represent important factors for attracting younger generations. However, the findings do not directly demonstrate that these measures will necessarily increase younger consumers’ attendance or ensure the long-term financial sustainability of marketplaces. This conclusion is supported by several complementary findings. Survey results reveal that only 20.2% of tenants believe younger consumers frequently visit marketplaces, whereas 63% of citizens support extending operating hours [20]. Focus group discussions reinforced the importance of digital services and communication, while comparison with previous studies confirmed that hybrid digital–physical marketplace models increasingly characterize contemporary marketplace development [6]. The introduction of an integrated e-marketplace platform and cashless payment systems, combined with educational programs for older vendors, was identified as a high development priority [20]. Existing initiatives, such as the “Virtualni zagrebački plac” (“Zagreb’s Virtual Farmers’ Market”) platform, already demonstrate the potential to attract digitally literate consumers [6]. Furthermore, digital certification systems and QR-code-based product origin tracking could strengthen consumer trust and further differentiate marketplaces from large retail chains [21]. H3 can therefore be considered partially supported by stakeholder perceptions and descriptive evidence, while its effects on younger consumer participation and financial sustainability require further empirical verification.

7. Conclusions

Urban marketplaces are increasingly evolving from traditional places of trade into multifunctional public spaces that integrate economic, social, cultural, environmental, and community functions. The findings indicate that Zagreb's marketplaces are currently at a transitional stage, balancing their traditional commercial role with growing expectations for more inclusive, sustainable, and people-centred urban spaces. Citizens primarily value marketplaces as places of social interaction, cultural identity, and community life, whereas vendors place greater emphasis on functional infrastructure, accessibility, and operational conditions. These perspectives are not necessarily conflicting but represent complementary dimensions of marketplace development. This finding extends existing research by showing that marketplace multifunctionality is not understood uniformly by all stakeholder groups but is constructed through the interaction of different practical, social, and symbolic expectations.

The Zagreb case contributes to the literature by providing evidence from a Central European city characterised by a predominantly public governance model. Unlike many Western European cases in which marketplaces have increasingly become tourism-oriented destinations, Zagreb's marketplaces continue to perform important neighbourhood, social, and everyday economic functions. More specifically, the findings extend previous studies that have primarily examined market transformation through processes of commercialisation, food-led regeneration, tourism development, or place branding. The Zagreb case shows that transformation may also follow a public-service and neighbourhood-oriented pathway in which modernisation is expected to strengthen, rather than replace, the everyday economic and social roles of marketplaces.

The findings also have practical implications for urban governance and marketplace management. Successful transformation requires an integrated approach combining infrastructure improvements, participatory decision-making, digital services, and complementary social, cultural, gastronomic, and recreational activities. In this context, the proposed "Tržnica+" model provides a framework for enhancing marketplace attractiveness and resilience while preserving local identity and public value. Marketplace transformation should therefore be understood not only as a physical or commercial intervention but also as a governance process that requires reconciling diverse stakeholder interests.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design captures stakeholder perceptions at a single point in time and does not permit conclusions about changes over time or the long-term effects of proposed interventions. The findings are based primarily on self-reported survey and focus group data and may therefore be affected by subjective perceptions and self-selection bias. Moreover, the study examines a single city operating within a specific institutional and governance context, meaning that the findings should be generalized to other settings with caution.

Future research should include comparative studies of cities with different governance models and longitudinal research examining how stakeholder attitudes, marketplace use, and governance outcomes change during regeneration processes.

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