



Urban policies, planning and retail resilience

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ABSTRACT

Retail trade is a private-sector activity: its structure and location result mainly from the action of individuals and firms in a given time and space. However, planning and regulations, which translate the way collective interest relates to private interest, have a significant effect on the activity.

When examining the relationship between retail and urban space in the last three decades, in what may be regarded as a process of general deregulation, it is possible to identify the continued relevance of public policies, plans and projects, although with differing intensity. This finding applies considering either those rules specifically designed for retail or those with a spatial focus on places where retail plays a significant role, as is the particular case of the “city centre”.

Policy and planning are seen in this article in their relationship with retail and urban resilience, as the text deals with the way in which they influence the situation in the countries which were the object of study in the Replacis Euro-net research project: France, Portugal, Sweden and Turkey. The article intends to examine the role of the countries’ cultural framework in policy design and to demonstrate how regulations, planning systems and practices contribute significantly to understanding the differences in urban retail structure between these countries (and, in particular, in some of their cities).

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Introduction

Retail is a private-sector activity, the structure and location of which result mainly from the actions of individuals and firms in a given time and space: however, in order to be able to understand spatial retail dynamics, the articulation of retail with public authorities is a very important factor which must also be taken into account. This seems to have been particularly true in the last few decades, since the way in which retail and private interests have been related with planning, regulations and policies (and all that is understood as collective interest) has had a very important effect on this activity.

The comparative research undertaken in selected countries from Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe demonstrates that Europe has a very diverse pattern of national retail structures, which presents different characteristics with regard to the type of facilities, the shopping environments, the profile of retailers and the spatial distribution of retail units in urban space.

France is considered one of the first countries in Europe to know the economic concentration and spatial suburbanization of retail and also one of the first to have strong political measures for the activity; Sweden, acclaimed as the social democratic lighthouse of Europe, is also included in this study. In addition to these more

developed countries, Portugal and Turkey have been included as spaces on the periphery of the continent (with Turkey also a non-EU country) where the “retail-urban revolution” has taken place more recently. In both countries the effects have been different, but also dramatic: in the case of Turkey, it may be related to the different cultural background and the geographical context, with closer relations with other Muslim countries; in the case of Portugal there is a certain proximity with North American attitudes, with more liberal public policies than in most other European countries and with easy-going consumers who are seen to be more susceptible than most in Europe to publicity, technological gadgets and fashion.

Within this diversity and heterogeneity of retail structures, and based on the research carried out in the countries that were studied in the Urban-net project Replacis, we argue that the influence of the neoliberal political context is still important, but it is increasingly limited by the socio-economic and cultural contingencies of each territory. In fact, the cultural and socioeconomic specificities of each country influence governance and planning structures and, therefore, the plans and policies produced are very important in explaining different retail structures and patterns from country to country. In this context, globalization and neoliberal principles continue to play an important role (visible, for example, in the strong links that exist between urban regeneration, retail planning and retail resilience where the private sector and its capital strongly influence the policies and plans which are designed) but are being increasingly challenged by a new “urban

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management” attitude (marked by the growing incorporation of governance principles on territorial planning and management and by the empowerment of local stakeholders and the involvement of civil society on public policies decision-making): this leads to a heterogeneity of the relation between retail and urban spaces.

Although differences between countries exist and are important, we should also notice that there are significant common aspects, related to the so-called globalization process and to similarities that can be identified in policy principles (or to the globalization of policies?). It is an indisputable fact that over the last decades, sustainability and sustainable development (first) and resilience (later) – as well as governance and regeneration (which have already been mentioned) – have emerged and been consolidated as key principles within territorial planning and governance (Chamusca, 2011; Fernandes, 2011). In the context of urban areas, policies became more and more concerned about producing sustainable cities, where social and economic dimensions are balanced with a more natural and healthy environment. This also takes into account the role of retail activities and its importance for the city’s economic health (in terms of employment and in supplying people’s needs) and for social inclusivity (diversity, product-service quality and similar prices available for all), as well as its effects on the environment (especially those related to transport).

This article deals with policies and spatial planning in their relationship with retail: and it is connected to the research project referred to above which considers resilience to be a central concept. Resilience has many different meanings. It stems from the areas of physics (where it means the ability of an object to return to its original position after being displaced) and of psychology (signifying the ability to recover from a shock), which associate resilience with the idea of equilibrium. These perspectives have evolved and accept that after a shock or crisis the ecological systems may not return exactly to their former condition, but rather achieve a new state of balance. In this context, the system’s resilience is measured either by the speed of its return to a state of equilibrium (the old or a new one) or by the intensity by which they are able to absorb change (Hudson, 2010).

Given this conceptualization of resilience, technical literature provides no consensus regarding its application with regard to cities or urban areas, as these are understood as dynamic products of human processes where places evolve with different rhythms and patterns but do not return to their previous state. Therefore, social sciences have rejected the perspectives of equilibrium and have provided new approaches to resilience, understanding it as an on-going process of adaptation to constantly changing situations which can be considered in different systems, such as urban spaces or retail structures.

Simmie and Martin (2010), for example, defend an evolutionary approach, where space (as a product of human action, social and power relations) is constantly changing and adapting, more or less successfully, to all the threats and pressures that arise from market forces, technological trends or environmental challenges. Therefore, within social sciences, particularly in Geography and in Economics, planning and policies (as well as all the political and economic processes) are seen as central elements of resilience. Thus, Foster (2006, p. 14) argues that resilience lies in “the ability of a region to anticipate, and prepare for a disturbance” and Godard (2005, pp. 2–4) defends the idea that “resilience lies in the capacity to overcome disturbances, catastrophes and crises by drumming up resources and undertaking an internal reorganization”. Resilience is associated to reorganization and to new modes of working, either at institutional level (in new ways of planning and governing in the political, economic and urban areas) and at social level (with regard to the roles citizens and local actors should play in shaping initiatives, spatial strategies and decision-making processes).

This global and holistic perspective of resilience requires an understanding of the various sub-systems that make up communities, cities or regions, considering the various elements they comprise and the numerous interrelations established between them (Callaghan & Colton, 2008). However, this position highlights the independence of each of the sub-systems or components (infrastructures, retail systems, school systems, etc.), noting that there is no synchronization in their cycles (Barata-Salgueiro, 2009; Perings, 2006). Therefore, in the same system expanding and contracting components, or resilient and non-resilient elements, may co-exist. In this formulation, a system is more resilient when it is in a state of reorganization, growth and innovation, since it is more vulnerable to stress when it is rigid, static and conservative.

From this perspective, which is accepted by several social scientists, the resilience of urban retail is considered as being very important in order to understand the dynamics and sustainability of urban systems, as well as the way in which certain urban areas or individual shops may adapt to change. In addition (as defined in the Replacis project final report), urban retail resilience may be understood as “the ability of different types of retailing at different scales to adapt to changes, crises or shocks that challenge the system’s equilibrium, without failing to perform its functions in a sustainable way” (Barata-Salgueiro, 2009).

As an example we may consider that following a shock, such as the intense suburbanization of retail, the city centre may either simply resist, without any significant change, modernize with changes that significantly alter its character, in some cases with the centre becoming similar to the shopping centre, or be resilient, keeping its main attributes and identity but adapting to the changing conditions and to the new economic, social and cultural contexts. The role of urban planning (which enhances resilience), the importance of the evolutionary perspectives and social learning processes may reduce vulnerability and the risk of collapse of the system (i.e. of a given urban area or that of an individual shop).

As such, resilience is much more than just a new buzzword, as the management of the existing stock is seen as essential, and policies tend to favour the introduction of novelty as a simple addition and not as part of a (new) dramatic urban revolution. Thus, in urbanism in general and in its relation with retail structure or retail spatial organization in particular, proposals for a “new city” and for important renovation give way to a more respectful attitude towards the urban fabric and existing activities, with particular regard for the capacity of shops, and specific city areas (taken as an integral part of the urban system), to react, adapt, cooperate and promote continuity and change.

Retail, planning and urban space: a recent history of increasingly complex relations

It is well known that retail has suffered significant changes in recent decades, as the small traditional retail shops – located on main streets, run by families and dealing normally with neighbourhood customers – that have dominated in Europe until the 1960s have progressively lost importance and have sought to add new value to their merchandise, in an attempt to attract the more demanding consumer. Specializations, locations, forms and formats have been multiplied and diversified, and the modes of operation, the financial dimension of firms and the interactions among producers and consumers have also changed considerably.

Public authorities have long devised instruments and political measures, on diverse levels and of different types, to guide and exert some measure of control over the development process of retail and on its spatial distribution. In recent years, however, societies and territories have become increasingly more complex and fragmented: this has motivated important changes in their relations

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