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THE PLACE OF RETAILING AND SERVICES ACTIVITIES IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to bring to light the importance on retailing and services researches to understanding urban processes, especially as regards architecture and urbanism. It begins by discussing the importance of commerce to human relationships and individuals' daily lives and the myths that have formed around the retailing and services activities, which still dissuade the study and research in this area of knowledge, especially concerning its relationship with the city. Focusing on retailing and services activities, this paper then shows their complex nature aiming to indicate their interfaces with other areas of knowledge whose approaches help to broaden perspectives and deepen the understanding of the various objects of study. Lastly, thematic openings and amplitudes regarding the study of retailing and services are outlined and where their relationship with the city takes us.

Keywords: commerce and city; retailing and services; urban policies; complex knowledge; tertiary sector.

Introduction

Barter, from which commerce derives, lies in the origin of human relations and accounts for many different intentions including rapprochement among groups, exchange of favors, socializing, and demonstration of power. In this process, the act of giving, receiving, and repaying establishes a connection that, with the passing of time, became the contract, in which economic interest is obvious, and gave rise to trading as we know it today (Vargas, 2013).

For barter and, consequently, commerce to take place, individuals have to meet, even if virtually; as a result of which, ideas, words, information bits, experiences, and sensations are exchanged before goods and services. These words, information bits, experiences, and sensations are essential to sustain the appeal inherent to consumption. It is at the intersection of these flows of people and commodities—a place where human relationships are promoted and the needs of mutually dependent, particularly urban, individuals are met—that the embryo of the market place lies,¹ thus establishing the relationship between retailing and services activities and the space that promotes them. A place of public use par excellence, it will eventually lose its spontaneous character and become part of planned intentions, from Greek agoras and Arabian bazaars to lavish shopping malls.

The observation and study of commerce offer the possibility of understanding the societies that conduct it: their lifestyles; the products they produce and consume; their accounting skills; their ingenuity and creativity; preferences for colors, tastes, odors; their organizational skills and objectivity; the technologies involved, and their cultural backgrounds. By observing how commerce occurs in cities, it is also possible to

¹ The market place is established for ease of access and proximity between sellers and buyers, on neutral grounds, ensuring business, often even in times of war. Its public nature arises from the need to confirm and, in the absence of formal contracts, safeguard deals with onlookers as witnesses. The high concentration of sellers and buyers is that what makes the market the best place for commerce, in the sense that it forces prices to reflect market conditions more accurately and promotes competition (Cassady, 1974; Vargas, 2008).

understand their dynamics and vitality, since lower consumption during hard times affects commerce first and urban economies afterwards (Vargas, 1992, 2001, 2013).

The study of the tertiary sector, especially retailing and services activities, as will be shown below, implies entering countless fields of knowledge. We shall begin by addressing how ideas about the tertiary sector have been shaped throughout history.

Ideas about commerce

Despite its origin linked to urban centers and its basis on social relations, the study of the tertiary sector, i.e., retailing and services, as related to cities has lacked a systematic approach. Ideas about trading held at different times in history tend to create and reinforce prejudices against commercial activities and those involved in them: the merchants. Three ideas have been decisive in delaying their acceptance as economic activities bearing major significance to economic and social development (Vargas, 2001).

The first idea regards exchange as a process of wealth accumulation, as defined by Aristotle in Ancient Greece, which hindered then the acknowledgement of the social character of an activity that brings people together. This was later reclaimed by anthropologic studies of ancient civilizations and their system of gifts² (Mauss, 1974; Cassady, 1974). Also with respect to the social character of retailing and services activities, urban and regional provision is also often overlooked. Later, mainly from the nineteenth century onward, provision by means of indoors or outdoors markets and fairs became part of governmental programs aimed at controlling sanitary conditions and population health. At that point in time, they were incorporated by public policies, of which the most significant example is Haussmann's program of building public markets in the second

² Marcel Mauss's research (1974) included investigations on the inhabitants of Polynesia (Hawaiian Islands); Melanesia ("islands of the blacks" in Greek), a region of the western Pacific Ocean northeast of Australia (which includes the territories of the Moluccas Islands, New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji); Papuasias (which refers to the New Guinea islands and, officially, belonging to Indonesia); the North American Northwest; and New Zealand's Maoris.

half of the nineteenth century, during the government of Napoleon III (Vargas, 2001; Gosling, 1976).

This market construction program ended up influencing the establishment of similar policies in Brazilian cities, whose histories are now being reclaimed, especially because public markets that enable new uses of their space—in addition to goods supply, e.g., catering to downtown workers, visitors, and tourists—in privileged urban areas are being restored and reutilized (Fittipaldi & Gugliemo, 2005; Gorberg & Friedman, 2013; Leitão, 2010; Lopes, 2010).

The second derogative idea about trading involves a prejudice against this activity fostered by several types of doctrines, which deem it degrading, lowly, and speculative (Roll, 1950; Hirschman, 1979; Sousa, 1994; Vargas, 2001). According to Sousa (1994), the etymologic origin of the word *negócio* (*business* in Portuguese) lies in the Latin word *negotium*, a negation of *otium*, i.e., *neg-otium* (*no idleness*).³

Only in the sixteenth century, with the rise of the bourgeoisie, the increased importance of foreign trade to the wealth of nations, with the acceptance of profit by religious reform, and the emphasis on work over leisure, did commercial activities begin to be viewed as praiseworthy.

Built during that period, the architecture of *grand magasins* and commercial arcades overshadowed that of churches and basilicas, of which Galleria Vittorio Emanuele competing for prominence with the cathedral at Piazza Duomo in Milan is a case in point. Moreover, commercial arcades brought the real estate question to the context of commercial activities. They also introduced the concept of mixed-use buildings (multifunctional), whose development was to culminate in the twentieth century with the emergence of shopping malls.

However, with the advent of the industrial revolutions in the late eighteenth century, commercial activities took up a secondary role in the economy again, tagging along behind manufacturing activities (Vargas, 1992).

³ In classical antiquity, idleness was the privilege of well-to-do citizens, who could devote themselves to philosophy and government. Everything that did not belong with idleness was negated (*negotium*) and deemed less worthy and noble. Later, Christian dogma, e.g., *nullus christianus debet esse mercator* (no Christian should be a merchant), also reinforced this prejudice (Vargas, 2001).

This situation changed again in the 1970s with the exacerbation of the consumer society. As a result, many sociological analyses appeared and brought into play other seminal studies on the subject in question such as Veblen (1912), Sombart (1922), Lefebvre (1969, 1971), Braudel (1974, 1998), Debord (1992), Braudrillard (2007), Featherstone (1995), Stearns (2006), Stobar, Hann, & Morgan (2007), and Benson & Ugolini (2006).

The third idea derives from the negation of commercial activities because of their fruitlessness, i.e., they do not generate wealth. This argument was common in debates among economists and economics scholars up to the mid-twentieth century (Vargas, 2001; Kon, 1992; Singer, 1981; Roll, 1950), especially in Brazil. From the 1970s onward, with the exhaustion of the Fordist production system and its gradual and still ongoing replacement with flexible production systems together with the advancement of communications and transport, commerce regained its primacy and there occurred an expansion of the tertiary sector in major cities. New ways of conducting retailing and services activities and their sophisticated techniques were to achieve the best placement for industrialized goods. Moreover, a whole host of new needs were then and are now created to maintain active production due to the dynamics of consumption. Commerce, in turn, becomes cybernetic. Furthermore, even as commerce begins to dispense with physical spaces it gradually returns to its origins as a social activity, appropriately integrated with other human activities (e.g., leisure, culture, entertainment, and catering) to keep the turnover rates high (Vargas, 2013).

The need to understand the meaning of new products and services, on the part of businesses as well as consumers—deepened by a stronger appeal to consumption of goods and services due to the necessity to expand the consumer market and by the establishment of tourism and leisure as pillars of the economy—has ascribed more importance to research on the tertiary sector (i.e., its operation, demands, and location) and, as a result, to urban studies (i.e., its planning and intervention practices), as shown below.

The complex nature of knowledge on retailing and services activities

Given the umbilical relationship between commerce and city, verily a relation of origin, the consolidation of this field of study—while requiring the incorporation of concepts from various fields of knowledge for its construction, which confirms its complexity⁴—provides important acumens for understanding and dealing with the city, as shown in the following figure.

RETAILING AND SERVICES ACTIVITIES THE COMPLEXITY OF KNOWLEDGE

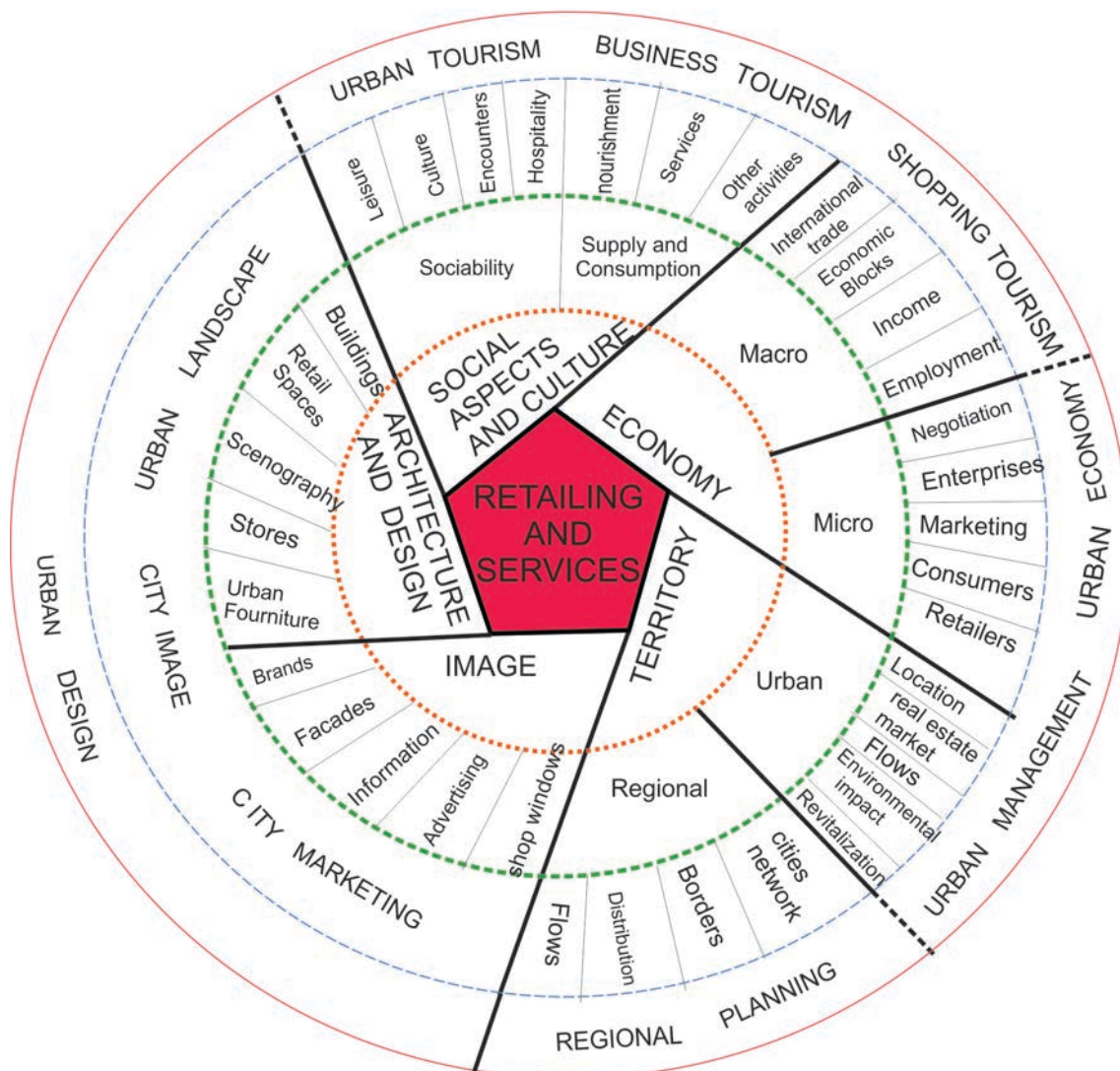


Figure 1. Source: Vargas (2002).

⁴ The discussion about the complexity of the studies on retailing and services was better conceptually explored in a previous article (Vargas, 2010) that also addressed the state of the art in this field of knowledge, albeit with less depth.

For instance, studies conducted by anthropologists and historians have helped us to understand the original relationship between commerce and city, which explains the market location, its practices, permanence, and abandonment as well as the meaning of consumption throughout time.

One of the pioneering scholars on locational theory on retail trading is Walter Christaller⁵ (1930s). He is the scholar that created the hexagonal model of central places and defined the catchment area of urban centers, by ranking them, and gave rise to a series of conversations, which in turn led to the advent and improvement of theories on the structure and production of urban space.

Amongst geographers and economists, it is possible to find other studies such as those by William Reilly and August Losch, between 1930 and 1950, followed in the 1960s and 1970s by those of François Perroux, Brian Berry (1967), Marie André Prost, Michel Rochefort, Etienne Dalmaso, among others. Some of these studies, such as Rochefort's (1976), allow an analogy between François Perroux's growth-center theory (1964), based on industry as an economic driving force, and the tertiary sector development, thus supporting the argument that metropolises work as balance-providers, with the tertiary sector as a key driver of regional and urban economics (Vargas, 1985).

In Brazil, it is possible to find studies elaborated further in that direction, such as those by Roberto Lobato Correa, Pedro Geiger, Manuel Correia de Andrade, Milton Santos, and Paulo Roberto Haddad, which reinforce the importance of trading and services to understanding and explaining urban networks and their hierarchy (Vargas, 1985).

Later, from the 1950s onward, with the growth of industrial production, research on retailing and services began to focus on understanding the market, making room for the rise of the field of management and marketing. At the international level, it is possible to cite names like Nelson (1958), Applebaum (1961), Davidson, Sweeney, & Stampfl (1988), Michel Porter (1980), and Philip Kotler (1995). These studies have paved the way for the increasingly more present behavioral science and communication

⁵ To know more about Walter Christaller and the theory of central place, see Berry (1967).

professionals, due to the pressing need to better understand consumers and effectively lead them to consumption in a then consolidated consumer society, with the shopping mall as its foremost protagonist.

The incorporation of research on retail marketing and business administration and communication theories into urban studies makes it possible, for example, to relativize the importance of strategic locational factors to the production of urban and regional space. This in turn promotes the understanding of business strategies employed to create and evaluate strategic locations, either to assess retailing and services establishments or to understand the behavior of real estate capital, which has a strong impact on the production and structuring of our cities (Gosling 1976; Vargas, 1989, 1992; Pintaudi & Frúgoli, 1992; Garrefa, 2008). As opposed to Henry Pirenne's study (1961), Fourquim's research (1979) on the Champagne Region fairs are excellent cases in point (Vargas, 1992).

Looking at the city from that perspective, i.e., that of administration and marketing, provides: an in-depth analysis and understanding of issues such as strategic planning, consumer psychology, place marketing (city marketing) (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Garcia, 1997); the possibility of seeing the city as a product, leading to the study of urban tourism and ecotourism (Vargas, 1996, 1997, 1998) and new urban environmental management techniques (Vargas & Ribeiro, 2001) with their new social communication, negotiation, education, participation and urban marketing tools; a better understanding of revitalization processes of downtown areas of cities that have so far ignored their citizens' actual demands (Vargas, 2000; Costa, 2012); and an actual, pre-existing supply in socio-economical, physical (architecture and urbanism), and cultural terms (Vargas & Castilho, 2006).

Still about the tertiary sector, research on retailing and services also leads to the need to understand the phenomena of compulsive buying and novelty seeking—thus entering the field of psychology—as well as shopping tourism, which is now studied in conjunction with urban tourism (Warnaby & Davies, 1996; Vargas, 1996). These phenomena also engender discussion on today's cities not only as places of production, but as primarily places of consumption (Cachinho, 2001). As a result, it is easier to understand the

force of ecotourism, which has the environment as its main product, as an economic activity beyond the city, as well as tourism adventures centered on consumption of emotional experiences (Vargas, 1997). Along these lines, it is important to acknowledge the strength of eco-tourism, beyond the city limits, as a driver of the economy, with the environment as its chief product, as well as of adventure tourism, which revolves around non-routine emotions and sensations (Vargas, 1997).

In addition, communication and marketing focused on commercial activity engenders debates on the use of city airspace by advertising and marketing (Mendes, 2006; Costa, 2012). This brings the cultural processes involved in urban communication to light, be taken into account and respected, by incorporating the specificities of places, aspects that the Clean City Law, edict in São Paulo and other similar policies have not considered (Vargas, 2008).

Research on trading and services can also greatly contribute to the field of architecture. At the international level, it is worth mentioning the pioneering studies in the field of commercial urbanism and architecture conducted by Victor Gruen (1960, 1964, 1973), who is considered the father of shopping malls and has only recently received due attention from architecture scholars (Wall, 2005; Hardwick, 2004; Pavesi, 2013), and others such as David Gosling (1976), aforementioned, who discusses retail spaces and Johann Geist (1993), who focuses on commercial arcades. Research on business architecture⁶ has given rise to discussion on design quality, from a deeper understanding of the customer-boss relationship, brilliantly elaborated by Johnson (1994). This conversation is of extreme importance to the practice and teaching of architectural design.

Because it is real estate-based, the shopping mall phenomenon carries within it several clients that should be taken into account by architects upon designing buildings for this purpose: entrepreneurs, concerned with their real estate business; retailers, interested in their retail business; local authorities, protecting their city's interests; and citizens defending their own well-being qua employees, users, and consumers.

⁶ The term "business architecture" was coined after an article I wrote in 1995 for a congress in the Netherlands named "Searching for a business architecture" (Vargas, 1995).

From the time of the construction of the first shopping mall in Brazil (i.e., Shopping Iguatemi in 1966) to the 1990s, a number of studies have been conducted in this field such as those by Oliveira Lima (1971), Bruna (1972), Vargas (1985, 1989, 1992); Pintaudi & Frúgoli (1992), and Masano (1993). Other, more recent, studies have turned their emphasis to the architecture of services and retail buildings in Brazil (Pini, 2000, Aleixo, 2005; Rossi, 2011; Sampaio, 2003).

Yet, with respect to architectural design for commercial building or urban spaces, the study of flows of people, vehicles, and goods is also a useful field to be explored. Bill Hillier's⁷ study pays an important contribution by mapping these flows and dealing with the social logic of space, thereby introducing the notion of flow-generating and flow-attracting hubs, which have informed discussion on urban impacts of large projects.

Researchers on revitalization of downtown areas and shopping streets as well as traditional restoration of historic neighborhoods have begun to look for analysis tools in studies on retailing and services so as to identify successful city intervention processes (Frieden & Sagalyn, 1994; Vargas & Castilho, 2006). It is important to mention the works of Urban&Com group coordinated by Corinna Morandi⁸. Tools such as the "town center management program" and "main street program", and the program for São Paulo's commercial streets (Rodrigues, 2012; Balsas 2000) in conjunction with studies on commercial urbanism (Balsas, 1999) and urban resilience (Salgueiro & Cachinho, 2011) have provided major contributions in this direction.

Other contemporary studies, in which research on retailing and services contributes to their depth, are related to globalization and increased consumption as key to maintaining levels of production and accumulation, indicating the way for understanding sensory architecture and urban interventions intended for drawing international attention to cities, their

⁷ Bill Hillier's study (1992) that assists in studying commerce and city is not related to its mathematical calculations of flows, but mainly to the understanding of the relationship between built spaces and flows. This has been of great assistance to better understand the flow of people, access, permeability, and flow-generating centers at both the city scale and the building scale.

⁸ Available at: <<http://www.urbecom.polimi.it/chisiamo/chisiamo.html>>.

administration, and their architects. Examples of these tertiary buildings are museums and administrative centers, whose architecture and urban insertion are discussed alongside the level of visibility and consumption demanded by each kind of business developed inside. The field of business architecture proper—which encompasses the design of stores, exhibition stands, showcases, and storefront windows, moving towards the field of design knowledge—interfaces with the visual arts (Demetresco, 2004). The very architecture of stores, now transformed into flagships (Serrats, 2008; Stumm & Kendal, 2002) and the work of star architects, reinstates a long-forgotten conversation, very well crafted by Victor Gruen in the twentieth century (Pavesi, 2013), incorporating the concept of localization (Rigby & Vishwanath, 2006), which advocates the integration of local attributes and idiosyncrasies into the operation of businesses as well as in the architecture and urban spaces (public or private) that give them shelter.

In the way of a conclusion

As above mentioned, focusing on the relationship between retailing and services activities and the city provides the opportunity for a better understanding of urban processes. Its space structure, production, and consumption power, its ability to guide and define the kind of architecture it builds, its intention of cityscape visibility, its capacity to drive urban development and act as an indicator of urban dynamics, and its potential resilience, capable of absorbing and coping with changes by transforming itself, combine to demonstrate its importance to city planning and intervention. On the other hand, all these possibilities call for a diversified and extensive path, as shown in Figure 1, while interfacing with other fields of knowledge.

What I have sought to portray is that the complex character of knowledge, as developed by Morin (2000), requires action against prejudices about certain topics. By preventing us from recognizing countless relationships existing between multiple fields of knowledge, these prejudices hinder the coexistence of divergent ideas about the same topic, whose relations of contradiction and controversy contribute to the advancement of knowledge.

As to the social relevance and importance of this object of study, in addition to the potential for analysis of urban issues outlined above, there may be highlighted the increasing demand on the part of governments and society for solutions to problems arising from retailing and services activities, or related to them. To cite a few: misappropriation of public spaces; intensification of exchanges and its growing deregulation; increasing informality; fierce competition for markets; bottlenecks in goods and services distribution; advancement of virtual relationships; impacts of shopping malls and mixed-use buildings; deterioration of downtown areas; disapproval of urban intervention, among many others. Distinct disciplines such as economics, management and marketing, history and geography, tourism and ecotourism, environment and public health, psychology, education, law, communications and social sciences, and anthropology must come together in this conversation about retailing and services as related to the city, thus providing and receiving reciprocal contributions.

For, today, more and more, pertinent knowledge requires that the context and the global, multidimensional, and complex character of knowledge be considered (Morin, 2000) so that sufficient relationships can be established to reach the depth needed to develop and refute theories, define actions and projects, criticize and evaluate them, intervene properly and reshape constantly, in keeping with a world where the speed of change is the only standing certainty.

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