
Centre or periphery ? The dilemma of urban planning or how to rethink commercial areas for a more attractive and sustainable city. The case of Vendenheim commercial zone in Strasbourg Eurometropole

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Abstract

The urban decrease is a challenge for many inner cities in Europe: downtowns are losing population and their urban functions, especially commercial activities. Peripheral commercial areas are denounced to cause this decline: retailing corporations have built more and more retail square meters to develop their commercial network and benefit from economies of scale. They usually settle(d) on large-scale and cheap lands with easy consumer access and good visibility from city's entrance highways. This urbanistic and economic choice deviates the flows of customers from the city centre. Since the 1960s, the commercial decline of the inner cities is often interpreted as a disloyal competition between "small merchants" and large retailing corporations, between the low investment capacity of independant commercial traders and the huge property companies investment capacity.

Nevertheless, the development of peripheral commercial areas has just followed the global ex-urbanisation trend. Since the seventies, the "automobile system" revolution (Dupuy, 1999) and the peri-urbanisation model have enhanced the segregation of functions and the location of mass-production and mass-consumption activities in peripheral areas (Mangin, 2004, 2014). At the same time, the franchised commercial chains system changed the capitalistic and commercial structure of more and more inner cities. If the attractiveness of city centres for shopping have to be rethought, we also have to assume this part of our urban history, which is still impacting nowadays the major part of the housing stock and the economic activities settlement. Inner cities cannot concentrate everything that has been transferred to the suburbs merit urban planers attention too. If saving French and European downtowns is required, it is also necessary to reinvent the relationship between centre and peripheral planning.

However, policy makers are anxious to increase the commercial attractiveness of city centres. In France, the publication in 2016 of the book: "Comment la France a tué ses villes" [1], written by the journalist Olivier Razemon, has put this question on the political agenda. In

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2017, the French government worried about the revitalisation of small and middle size cities. The government's report exhort mainly to support city centres for shopping and to reduce the peripheral retail expansion. However, retail is also threatened by the rise of e-commerce and the change in consumers behavior. As a result, commercial wastelands are appearing in peripheral areas (Garcez, Mangin, 2012). Public and private actors of retail development become more and more aware of the necessity to regenerate these zones before they become wasteland, just like the "dead malls" in the United States. If the commercial attractiveness of city centres have to be rethought, the refurbishment of commercial suburbs is also necessary.

The proposed article aims to discuss this paradox and to analyse new urban tools co-designed by public and private actors. On one hand, local authorities want to take charge of their commercial development strategy, despite the fact that they are still lacking competences and financing methods to restructure commercial real property. On the other hand, private operators (retail developers, property owners, commercial brands) have to rethink their commercial model to be more urban and sustainable in order not to lose profitability and to sustain their properties portfolio. To fight retail decline of commercial zones, some developers created huge retail parks including shopping, leisure, catering and nice landscape design. The objective is to entertain all family members and to retain customers as long as possible. Some French real property companies specialised in this kind of retail development, such as the Compagnie de Phalsbourg with the retail parks Waves (Metz Agglomeration) or Immochan with its gigantic project Europacity at the gateway of Paris. Many elected representatives would like to attract this kind of project on their territory to collect taxes and gain in notoriety. But this model remains unsustainable by consuming virgin land and being automobile dependent.

More recently, other developers specialised in transforming obsolete commercial areas in new mixed-functions part of the cities, which is more difficult to finance and needs to explore new partnerships between private and institutional actors. One of the pioneer case is the refurbishment of Vendenheim's commercial zone, the biggest in Strasbourg Eurometropole. This project experiments the transfer of the Planning Concession property and financial engineering from the Eurometropole to a private developer, the Group Frey, at the scale of the entire zone. So, this article proposes a critical analysis of that strategy and the need of a retail developer to integrate new skills to assume the role of an urban developer.

Trad.: *How France killed the cities*

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