

Preface

Retail has undergone deep structural and spatial evolutions throughout the decades, with dramatic and radical consequences in terms of functional concentration, attractiveness, scale and location of stores. In the most recent period, these long-standing trends have been further exacerbated by the stunning development of the Internet and related e-commerce practices, together with the effects of more than 10 years of economic crisis. Consumer behaviours and retail strategies have changed dramatically, and the evidences of this process are clear: inner-city areas have become less central to people's lives, the economic impact of traditional businesses is decreasing and shopping malls and big-box stores are also falling into decay.

Although more advanced in the US, the weakening of urban retail systems—up to desertification—is a widespread phenomenon in many European cities and regions, and Italy makes no exception. The formerly dynamic, both urban and suburban, spaces once acting as magnets for a diversified range of activities and user inflows are now dotted with vacant units gradually losing commercial attractiveness. The impact of this trend exceeds a sectoral dimension and bears several social and economic costs, in terms of loss of new business opportunities, revenues and employment for both SMEs and local branches of transnational companies. Therefore, this issue represents an important factor affecting the quality of life of users and consumers, as well as the vibrancy of local economies.

Public authorities are asked to tackle this topic and to set up actions and policies meant to revitalize the sector, and, as a result, they must consider the territorial role of trading activities, as well as their relevance for local and regional development. In fact, demalling and other actions aimed to face the shrinking of urban retail systems have become a new task for urban planning in those areas where public and private actors need support in their effort to redevelop vacant malls, big-box and high-street stores. This study is partially inspired by the outcomes of a research project titled *Analisi delle criticità e delle opportunità di sviluppo del fenomeno della dismissione commerciale ai fini dell'attrattività urbana*, developed by the Urb&Com Lab (Department of Architecture and Urban Studies/DASStU, Politecnico di Milano) and supported by Éupolis Lombardia, the Lombardy Region Institute for

Research, Statistics and Training.¹ The aims of the research are as follows: (i) framing the multidimensional aspects of the problem, and (ii) showing that there are many different approaches to the issue, depending on the socio-economic and institutional context, the nature of the involved actors (private or public) and their specific goals.

The causes of the weakening of local retail systems are twofold: on the one hand, there are specific conditions for every single case, such as the relationship with the context, the saturation of markets (due to horizontal competition among operators, or to format obsolescence) and the decrease in the offer quality. On the other hand, some transversal factors must be taken into account, including the economic crisis and other current global trends, changes in the customers' behaviours (such as the emerging sharing economy and the decrease of consumption) and competition between formats and among different shopping practices (e.g. traditional purchase vs. e-commerce). In the first part of this work, all the above-mentioned factors are examined, and the overall investigation perimeter is drawn.

The book also aims to be an operative tool and a useful contribution to the current debate on how to deal with the issue of reactivating local economies. A particular focus is devoted to some international policies, programmes and actions implemented during the last years. The first chapter identifies a series of strategies after drawing them from some significant case studies located in France, Spain, UK, Germany and USA. The focus on the Italian case, in the second chapter, allows pointing out processes, instruments and methodologies within a set of cases in which the author was involved as a technical consultant to policymakers and institutional actors during the last 10 years. These direct experiences have served as a basis for collecting and implementing the tools and proposals for developing public and private strategies aimed at reactivating retail areas (third chapter), with expected positive consequences on the vitality of local economies. Indeed, the publication represents a sort of original and innovative handbook for an unexplored field, which brings together economic and spatial elements and which can be used by scholars and students, as well as by technicians and public institutions.

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¹Research Project (March 2015): Attuazione strategie europee 2014/2020: individuazione priorità e linee di azione ed evento di confronto sulle tematiche del commercio tra le Regioni dei Quattro motori. Research team: Luca Tamini (coord.), Giorgio Limonta, Mario Paris, Silvia Carena, Agathe Dessuges, Vittoria Rossi, with Luca Zanderighi (Department of Economics, Management, and Quantitative Methods, University of Milan).



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