



City center revitalization in Portugal

Lessons from two medium size cities

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Retail activity in Portugal is undergoing tremendous changes. New forms of commercial development, such as shopping centers and hypermarkets, have been built in locations far from the traditional shopping districts, and normally near a major road or highway intersection. This out-of-town commercial development has impacts on traditional forms of retail in established city centers. This article analyzes ways in which retail planning and city center commercial revitalization can be used to make Portuguese city centers more livable for city dwellers. Its main objective is to categorize, evaluate and compare the actions proposed by two commercial urbanism projects in Portugal. This study uses the cities of Coimbra and Aveiro to discuss the hypothesis that the measures proposed under the PROCOM program will help to revitalize Portuguese city centers. The key finding is that commercial revitalization is crucial for the livability of Portuguese city centers. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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Introduction

In the last decade retail activity has changed drastically across Portugal (Salgueiro, 1996). Among the causes for this change are profound and violent transformations in the economic, social and locational context in which both retailer and consumer operate. These changes involve new forms of commercial development, such as shopping centers and hypermarkets built in locations far from the traditional shopping districts, and normally near a major road or highway intersection. This out-of-town commercial development has impacts on traditional forms of retail in established city center areas, causing economic, urban, social and environmental problems (Kotval and Mullin, 1992). As a result of the shifts in shopping patterns, the introduction of new larger format retailers and a generalized lack of explicit retail planning policies by municipalities, Portuguese city cen-

ters face several dilemmas that need to be addressed as part of a city center commercial revitalization strategy.

It is in addressing this new phenomenon of retail modernization and city center livability that local governments, using retailing as an instrument of urban planning, have a role in assuring a vital and viable future for city center areas. Retail planning is considered a sub-set of land use planning, and, as Davies shows, “it has been used not only to attempt control over a changing pattern of retail development but also as away to improve city centers, whatever external pressures they may face” (Davies, 1995, p xiv). In Portugal retail planning has been limited to the licensing of new large retail stores, to the control of trade opening hours during weekends (Salgueiro, 1996), and more recently, it has been associated with commercial urbanism projects (Fernandes, 1995; Afonso and Carvalho, 1998; Carvalho, 1998). These projects are being funded, in part, by European Union subsidies that are available through the PROCOM program—a program that provides incentives for

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retail modernization of small and medium size businesses, and for the urban revitalization of traditional shopping districts.

This article analyzes ways in which retail planning and city center commercial revitalization can be used to make city center areas more livable for city dwellers. Its main objective is to categorize, evaluate and compare the actions proposed by two commercial urbanism projects in Portugal. This article uses the cities of Coimbra and Aveiro to discuss the hypothesis that the measures proposed under the PROCOM program will help to revitalize Portuguese city centers, and to argue that in order to make Portuguese city centers more livable, local governments need to implement holistic and comprehensive city center commercial revitalization strategies.

City center commercial revitalization abroad

In recent years there has been much debate across the Atlantic ocean about how livability in city center areas can be improved (Frieden and Sagalyn, 1989; DoE, 1994; Porter, 1995, 1997). After years of relative decline and neglect— fueled by the boom in personal mobility (i.e. the car) and convenience shopping—local authorities and the remaining commercial tenants are looking at ways to bring people back (Travers and Weimar, 1996, p 19). This return to city center is the fourth most recent stage of the urban development process referred to as “recentralization” or “reurbanization”. City center revitalization has risen in preeminence since the beginning of the 1990s, due to the recent awareness of all that retail planning and city center management offer for the creation and maintenance of livable cities. The First World Congress of City Centre and Downtown Management in Coventry (U.K.) in 1996 illustrates well this argument. One of the major conclusions of this congress was that despite the fact that each city is unique and must develop its own tailored approach to revitalization, there is however much common ground and lessons to be learned regarding the techniques that cities can use to implement their strategies.

In the United States, programs like The Main Street Program and the Business Improvement Districts are playing a major role in inner-city revitalization. The Main Street Program aims to develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy to stimulate economic development within the context of historic preservation (Beaumont, 1994). The Main Street Program uses a comprehensive approach to improve shopping districts and city centers. This approach is tailored to local needs and opportunities in four broad areas: Economic Restructuring, Organization, Promotion, Design. Today, the Main Street Program is working in hundreds of cities of all sizes, helping community leaders find new economic options for their important historic resources. The Business Improvement District schemes (BIDS) reflect a “bottom up” approach where independent retailers organize themselves pro-

actively in a new entity and apply a compulsory levy on themselves, in order to pay for additional public improvements and to promote their commercial precincts (Travers and Weimar, 1996a). The central idea of a BID is that the expected commercial return exceeds merchants personal contribution to the new organization. In fact, property owners recognize that the value of their asset (i.e. their property) depends to a significant extent on the surrounding environment (Travers and Weimar, 1996, p 19).

In Europe, City Center Management schemes are being used to solve some of the problems that city centers are facing. The most developed city center management schemes are the British Town Centre Management schemes (TCMs). These schemes give emphasis to public private partnerships in order to channelize, not only public but also private, funds for city center commercial revitalization. The main lessons from TCMs are that they enhance sense of place by creating cleaner, more secure and friendlier spaces; they improve sales, rents, property value; they contribute to the emergence of new activities—retail, recreation, restaurants; and they strengthen office and tourism markets. Many of these schemes use the “four A’s framework” to improve the vitality and viability of city centers. As its name suggests, this framework uses four broad areas that have been identified as critical to the health of city centers: Accessibility, Attractions, Amenities and Action (DoE, 1994).

City center commercial revitalization in Portugal

City center commercial revitalization is a relatively new area of urban intervention in Portugal (Afonso and Carvalho, 1998). The recent availability of European Union funds to subsidize commercial urbanism projects has spurred attention to city center areas (Carvalho, 1998). The Portuguese Commercial Urbanism Projects (CUPS) were introduced in 1994 and show primarily a “top down” approach, with the central government subsidizing the commercial modernization of traditional small and medium size establishments and the revitalization of city centers. In Portugal, the first long term attempt to apply commercial urbanism principles to a city center was carried out during the reconstruction of Lisbon by *Marquês de Pombal* following the earthquake of 1755 (Cachinho, 1992, p 247). The concepts of living above the store and organizing streets according to major themes were fully used in the reconstruction works. But after this, commercial urbanism remained an unknown planning term up until the late 1980s. It entered the vocabulary of Portuguese central and local policy makers, professional bodies and scholars in the early 1990’s. At this time, traditional small and medium size retailers were starting to face the impacts of new large stores in out-of-town locations. Aware of the first economic problems and influenced by strong lobbying from corporate independent retailers’ associ-

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