

Retail-less cities: rethinking the city through planetary urbanization, logistics, and urban planning

Retail-less cities: repensando la ciudad europea desde la urbanización
planetaria, la logística y la planificación urbana

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Abstract

This article critically examines the transformations of retail within the context of planetary urbanization and contemporary capitalist restructuring. Drawing on the concept of *retail-less cities*, it argues that traditional retail has lost its structuring role in the city, displaced by new logistical logics. The paper identifies five key dimensions that explain this process: the logistics revolution, the rising cost of urban land, changes in consumption habits, increasing inequalities, and the fragmentation of urban planning. Through an urban political economy approach, it demonstrates how these dynamics generate uneven urban landscapes and erode the local commercial fabric. The article concludes by advocating for multiscale urban planning, the recovery of retail as a form of social infrastructure, and the development of new analytical categories to better understand—and ultimately challenge—the exclusionary logics of the dominant commercial model.

Key words: retail policies; consumption; planetary urbanization.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza, críticamente, las transformaciones del comercio urbano en el contexto de la urbanización planetaria y la reestructuración capitalista contemporánea. A partir del concepto de *retail-less cities*, se argumenta que el comercio minorista ha perdido su papel estructurante en las ciudades del sur de Europa desplazado por nuevas lógicas logísticas. El trabajo identifica cinco dimensiones clave que explican este proceso: la revolución logística, el encarecimiento del suelo, los cambios en los hábitos de consumo, el aumento de las desigualdades y la fragmentación de la planificación urbana. A través de una aproximación desde la economía política urbana, se demuestra cómo estas dinámicas generan paisajes urbanos desiguales y erosionan el tejido comercial. El artículo concluye con una apuesta por una planificación urbana multiescalar, la recuperación del comercio como infraestructura social y el desarrollo de nuevas categorías analíticas que permitan comprender y revertir las lógicas excluyentes del modelo comercial dominante.

Palabras clave: políticas comerciales; comercio; consumo.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the relationship between the city, retail and consumption has been profoundly transformed. Various studies have identified a progressive disappearance of retail floor space in many cities, despite the expansion and generalised increase in urban consumption, to the point of defining this moment or period as retail-less cities (Carreras & Frago, 2022). From a business perspective, this loss of retail activity had already been conceptualised in different ways according to the forms it took: retail apocalypse, understood as the collapse of retail firms unable to withstand the pressure of online commerce (Philipose, 2019; Townsend et al., 2017; Morcuende & Lloberas, 2022); death mall or demalling, referring to the closure of shopping centres or their restructuring towards more experiential service activities, with studies conducted in Portugal (Guimarães, 2019), Italy (D'Alessandro et al., 2016) and Spain (Escudero-Gómez, 2024).

This diversity of conceptual approaches has been accompanied by growing empirical interest in the study of retail decline, more commonly known as retail desertification, in cities in England, the United States, France, Finland, the Netherlands and Portugal (Warnaby & Medway, 2022; Marjanen et al., 2023; Wrigley & Lambiri, 2015; Kickert et al., 2020). In the Spanish case, recent research stands out on retail deceleration in Barcelona (Carreras & Frago, 2022;

Morcuende & Lloberas, 2022) and, previously, in medium-sized and small cities in Catalonia (Frago, 2011, 2020, 2026), as well as in Galicia, Castile and León and Asturias (Somoza-Medina & López-González, 2017). Reports by public administrations or their actions confirm that the problem of retail desertification is generalisable to the main Spanish cities and to most urban areas, as in the cases of Madrid (Madrid City Council, 2023), Valencia (PATECO, 2022) and Vitoria-Gasteiz (Vitoria City Council, 2024). Real estate consultancies are also concerned about the issue, given that vacant premises are also increasing in central areas with high consumer footfall, places where the greatest land value capture can be extracted (Savills, 2025).

These changes, on the one hand, overflow the weak theoretical development of contemporary retail geography, still anchored in the proposals formulated in the 1930s and 1960s (Berry, 1967; Berry et al., 1976); and, on the other, they also overflow the main current explanatory lines, most of which are centred on a postmodern cultural approach (D'Alessandro, 2024) and its interest in partial dimensions such as digitalisation and competition between retail formats (Cachinho, 2014), the touristification of urban centres (Casado et al., 2025), as well as retail gentrification (Guimarães, 2022) and the consequent erosion of authenticity (Zukin, 2012).

This article argues that current changes are profoundly structural in nature and that, therefore, they must be addressed from a more totalising perspective, linked to the necessary reassertion of an urban political economy (Santos, 1994), of consumption and of retail (Silveira, 2007, 2020). In this sense, it subscribes to the hypothesis of retail-less cities (Carreras, 2022; Carreras & Frago, 2022), which emerges from a deeper structural mutation: the loss of centrality of retail as the main element articulating the city and its divisions of labour. The concept of retail-less cities is thus proposed as a new urban phase, comparable to other imaginaries such as the creative city or the smart city. It does not posit the total disappearance of retail from the urban environment; rather, it recognises that its historical functions—particularly that of mediation between production and consumption, a primordial element in the founding of cities—have ceased to be dominant. In this regard, mediation no longer necessarily has to pass through physical retail, but is increasingly assumed by digital platforms and logistical systems, with physical retail within the city potentially occupying a subordinate position within a longer and externalised chain. Therefore, retail-less cities consists of a period characterised by a relative—historically and territorially situated—displacement of urban retail in the mediation between production and consumption, rather than an absolute negation of retail as an urban practice.

The significance of the retail-less cities period becomes apparent when it is understood as part of the stage that Henri Lefebvre (1970) conceptualised as the critical zone, within the framework of

his hypothesis of planetary urbanisation. This line of analysis was subsequently developed by Neil Brenner (2013), who argues that contemporary urban forms overflow the limits of the traditional city and reconfigure the totality of social space. This hypothesis runs counter to the dominant trend in current urban studies, criticised and labelled by Brenner and Schmid (2015) as the “New Urban Era”, given its epistemological limitations.

Similarly, this approach has also been questioned from perspectives centred on the critique of contemporary urban planning (Frago & Morcuende, 2024) and, by extension, also of dominant retail policies, insofar as many urban regeneration strategies reproduce a local-centred vision of the urban phenomenon and overlook the structural processes that primarily affect consumption.

In this article, retail-less cities are conceptualised not as cities without retail, but as a historically and territorially situated urban condition in which retail loses its central role as the primary intermediary between production and consumption. Rather than signalling the disappearance of commerce, the concept refers to a relative displacement of retail within broader circuits of capital, in which logistics, real estate dynamics and digital infrastructures increasingly assume intermediary functions. Retail-less cities do not constitute a universal stage of urban development, but an analytical hypothesis that allows the interpretation of contemporary urban transformations from the perspective of urban political economy and planetary urbanisation.

2 Metodology

The research was developed on the basis of a qualitative and relational methodological strategy, structured in complementary phases. In a first phase, a critical and systematic review of the literature on urban geography, retail and consumption was conducted, with particular attention to approaches in urban political economy and planetary urbanisation, with the aim of constructing the theoretical framework and defining the retail-less cities hypothesis. In a second phase, extended fieldwork was carried out, based on direct observation, systematic walks along selected retail axes and neighbourhoods, and visual analysis of the transformation of the urban ground floor, focused primarily on the case of Barcelona and other Spanish cities. In a third phase, a qualitative analysis of institutional and professional sources —urban plans, public reports, regulations and technical debates— was incorporated, together with the author’s direct participation in spaces of institutional and academic validation, including participation in the Urban Planning Advisory Council of Barcelona City Council during the design and implementation of the Superilla project (2021–2023). The interpretative framework was further enriched through participation as an invited specialist in professional and academic validation

spaces: round tables (Urban Commerce Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2022), webinars (AGECU, 2023; Daleph, 2025), think tanks (Vitoria-Gasteiz City Council, 2024; PATECO, 2023), open debates (Escaldes-Engordany, 2024; Sant Julià de Lòria, 2025) and forums promoted by the College of Economists of Catalonia (2023a, 2023b). Finally, in a fourth phase, a transversal interpretative analysis was undertaken, aimed at identifying convergences, contradictions and relationships between the five proposed analytical variables, integrating theory and empirical evidence from a critical urban political economy perspective, and placing the long-term monitoring of commercial transformation in Barcelona and Catalonia in comparative dialogue with other urban contexts.

This set of empirical materials was analysed with the aim of identifying tensions, contradictions and convergences between the critical dimensions proposed and the prevailing theoretical and urban planning models. In this way, a robust and propositional reading of the retail-less cities hypothesis is substantiated. From a critical urban political economy approach, this research is not only grounded in qualitative techniques, but also in a conception of method that enables the identification of the structuring logics of the current historical moment. Methodologically, and following the arguments of Silveira (2020), the analysis starts from the recognition of a new urban period, characterised by the weakening of physical retail as the articulating axis of the urban fabric. This new period can be interpreted through the emergence of a set of ascending variables, understood not as direct causes, but as systemic elements that configure a new territorial rationality. In this case, the ascending variables that define the retail-less cities hypothesis are five (Figure 1):

1. The logistics revolution
2. The land market
3. Changing consumption habits
4. Rising inequalities and the decline in household purchasing power
5. The crisis of urban planning

These variables make it possible to read the transformation of urban retail not as a simple sectoral or technological reconfiguration, but as a structural mutation that redefines the link between the city, consumption and governance. Within this framework, retail—and increasingly logistics—ceases to be a phenomenon explainable solely in terms of supply and demand, and becomes a key indicator of urban metabolism in the context of planetary urbanisation. In this way, the article proposes an updating of the weak theoretical corpus of urban retail geography in light of these ascending variables driven by globalisation.

From this perspective, the framework of planetary urbanisation and urban political economy is not used as a general theoretical background, but as an analytical tool that allows the interpretation of transformations in urban retail as an expression of a broader process of territorial restructuring of capital. The five proposed variables are not analysed in a sectoral or isolated manner, but as interrelated manifestations of this structural logic, which redefines the role of retail in the metabolism of the contemporary city.

Although the analysis is primarily based on the long-term monitoring of the case of Barcelona and other Spanish cities, this is not conceived as a model that can be mechanically extrapolated to other urban contexts. On the contrary, Barcelona is interpreted as an advanced—and particularly expressive—case of broader structural transformations, whose concrete manifestation depends on the historical, institutional and socio-economic conditions of each territory

Figure 1. Analytical framework



Source: author's own elaboration

3 Results and discussion

In this section, each of the analytical dimensions involved in the conceptualisation of *retail-less cities* is analysed and discussed separately, drawing on the experience of European cities.

3.1 The logistical revolution

From the hypothesis of planetary urbanisation, logistics cannot be understood solely as an emerging economic sector, but rather as a key territorial infrastructure in the reconfiguration of the relationships between production, consumption and urban space. We understand logistics as the set of informational and technical processes located at the interface between the system, the superstructure (where production and consumption take place at the global scale) and the real territory, namely transport and storage infrastructures (Frago, 2016, p. 2). To understand this process, two analytical blocks related to the political economy of capitalism are required: the first refers to space-time compression, and the second to the circuits of capital.

First, it is necessary to highlight the improvement of the physical distribution infrastructure, constantly oriented towards seeking new space-time compressions (Hesse, 2007) that make it possible to guarantee greater fluidity in the circulation of capital—greater volume and greater speed—and to overcome the periodic crises of the system. From the nineteenth century onwards, these improvements have been crucial in avoiding the feared crises of capital overaccumulation, thanks to the so-called spatial fixes (Harvey, 1981). The improvement of road, rail and maritime transport infrastructures, together with the strengthening of their intermodal capacity, has been one of the most prominent strategic bets to stimulate the economy. This transformation is manifested in the construction of new freight terminals that are increasingly larger, faster and more efficient, such as the Barcelona Europe South Terminal (BEST), located in the Port of Barcelona and inaugurated in 2012, or the dry ports of Azuqueca de Henares in Madrid and the PLAZA logistics platform in Zaragoza, perfectly connected to the ports of Valencia and Barcelona respectively. This logistics expansion responds both to public and private promotion initiatives, as can be observed in Catalonia through specialised public operators such as CIMALSA, or centres promoted by major financial and corporate actors, such as BNP Paribas. All of them seek to capture a share of surplus value through real estate ownership linked to circulation and fluidity, as is also the case with the Institut Català del Sòl of the Generalitat de Catalunya (Frago, 2015).

Second, it is necessary to emphasise the role of the Internet, as it has completely restructured the regulation of the entire productive system. Distribution and exchange have been transformed into a more complex process —logistical processes— thus overcoming the conceptual separation between wholesale and retail trade. Virtual commerce, which incorporates both distribution and the information that guarantees synchronisation between production and the consumer, creates a geographical milieu with technical, scientific and informational characteristics (Santos, 1996) that has made it possible to suppress the exchange traditionally carried out in street-level establishments (CEC, 2023a). This has revealed the limited operational capacity of the National Classification of Economic Activities (CNAE), and consequently of the way in which the state collects taxes on economic activities. In another sense, massive and constant access to virtual information has made it possible for us to become producers as well as consumers, as we constantly and massively generate data on our consumption habits —raw material subsequently used by large logistics companies to increase consumption (Canclini, 2020).

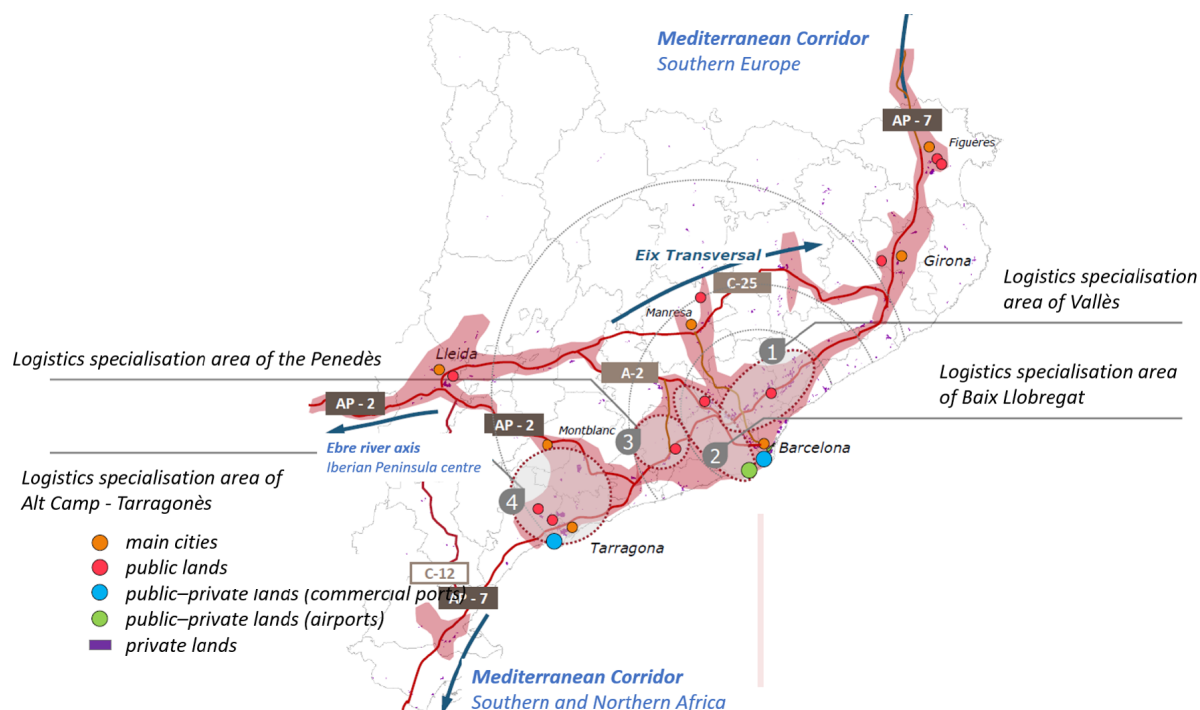
In parallel with this necessary search for solutions to systemic crises, capital also expands through real estate investments that play a key role in maximising profits, an aspect that can be linked to the next ascending variable analysed. Idle capital is diverted towards investment in new transport

and freight circulation infrastructures (Danyluk, 2018). In this context, there is an increase in rentier practices (Christophers, 2019), whereby any place on the planet becomes a recipient of capital investments aimed at boosting the circulation of international trade (Arboleda & Purcell, 2021). This has turned the construction of logistics centres into one of the means through which crises of overaccumulation are overcome.

Thus, logistics must be directly related to the hypothesis of planetary urbanisation, given that contemporary logistics ultimately aims to supply cities. This fact highlights the importance of major communication corridors located in very low-density areas, not directly related to their proximity to the city, but rather well connected to major global freight flows (Danyluk, 2018). In this way, logistics centres are what are known as operational landscapes: urban fragments located outside the city that create new geographies of differential urbanisation (Brenner, 2014), where economic centrality is no longer located exclusively in the traditional urban centre —where the most capitalised retail was located (Raimbault, 2016)— but instead large logistics hubs are situated on metropolitan fringes or close to major global communication corridors, as some studies have identified as logistics sprawl (Dabanc & Rakotonarivo, 2010) (Figure 2). In this way, as Cowen (2014) argues, the contemporary global economy (including the digital economy) cannot be understood without the structural role of logistics, which reveals the material, territorial and often violent character of seemingly dematerialised commercial circuits. Indeed, the success of so-called digital platforms associated with online commerce is based on a clearly defined urban physical infrastructure (Hardaker, 2025), above all located outside the confines of the traditional city.

Not only long- and medium-range logistics challenge the classical urban economic centrality exercised by retail, but also so-called last-mile logistics, associated with ultra-fast deliveries carried out from dark stores, such as Glovo's facility on Consell de Cent street in Barcelona, located within a superblock; dark kitchens such as those operated by Not So Dark in the Sant Gervasi neighbourhood of Barcelona; or metropolitan-scale deliveries carried out from Mercadona's "hive" in Barcelona's Zona Franca. This also includes supermarkets belonging to food distribution companies such as ALDI, Lidl or Carrefour, which are increasingly allocating more space within their stores to organising online sales. This network of small logistics centres simultaneously puts urban mobility under strain, as it requires greater flexibility and more loading and unloading areas (Regas, 2024).

Figure 2. Logistical operational landscapes in Catalonia



Source: author's own elaboration

This growing centrality of urban logistics generates a new geography of consumption. Its concentration in these nodes leads urban retail to lose its function as the main space for the circulation and exchange of goods (Cowen, 2014). This reduces the economic viability of many retail establishments, which are unable to compete with the speed and efficiency of global logistics models (Dabanc, 2016), based on an increasing space-time compression exploited by capital and by the fetish of technological instantaneity promoted through the websites and smartphone applications of companies such as Glovo, Uber Eats, Stuart and Just Eat, while concealing high levels of labour precariousness among both carriers and delivery workers (Gutiérrez, 2023) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Logistics landscapes associated with ultra-fast deliveries in Barcelona:

- (1) Glovo dark store in the Consell de Cent Superblock (2024); (2) delivery workers waiting for orders in front of the Sagrada Família (2019); (3) sign announcing a strike to demand better pay per delivery, distance travelled and working hours (2023); and (4) construction of a dark kitchen in the Les Corts neighbourhood (2019)



Source: author's own elaboration (2019, 2021, 2023, 2024)

The logistics revolution and the rise of online commerce have meant that flagship stores located in urban centres —commonly associated with luxury or fashion— must be interpreted more broadly: they are no longer merely points of sale, but rather brand-propaganda devices, conceived as shop windows in highly central locations so that consumers subsequently make their purchases online. This shift has led brands selling personal or household goods, such as MediaMarkt or Leroy Merlin, to modify their business location strategies. Instead of relying exclusively on large stores in peripheral retail parks, they have begun to open small, strategically located outlets in city centres, with the aim of increasing visibility and brand projection, after which consumers either complete their purchases online or collect their orders there (CEC, 2023a).

3.2 The land market as a deregulating form of regulation

The growing centrality of logistics should not be interpreted as an isolated or self-sufficient cause of the crisis of urban retail, but rather as a structural dimension that reorganises the set of relationships between land, consumption, labour and planning. Its explanatory weight derives precisely from its articulation with these other ascending variables, rather than from any inherent deterministic logic. In this sense, from an urban political economy perspective, land value has emerged as a determining factor in the location of urban activities since as early as the 1960s, within the context of the quantitative theoretical revolution (Alonso, 1964; Berry, 1976). The relationship between the land market and centrality —understood as accessibility— has traditionally explained the segregation or functional specialisation of urban activities on the horizontal plane. Moreover, even within a single urban function such as retail, segregation among different activities can be identified according to walking distance to the centre, as outlined in the well-known book *Location, Location, Location*, when referring to the segregation between fashion retail, financial activities, restaurants and computer shops (Jones & Simmons, 1993, p. 83). In all cases, these models are structured around proximity to the centre.

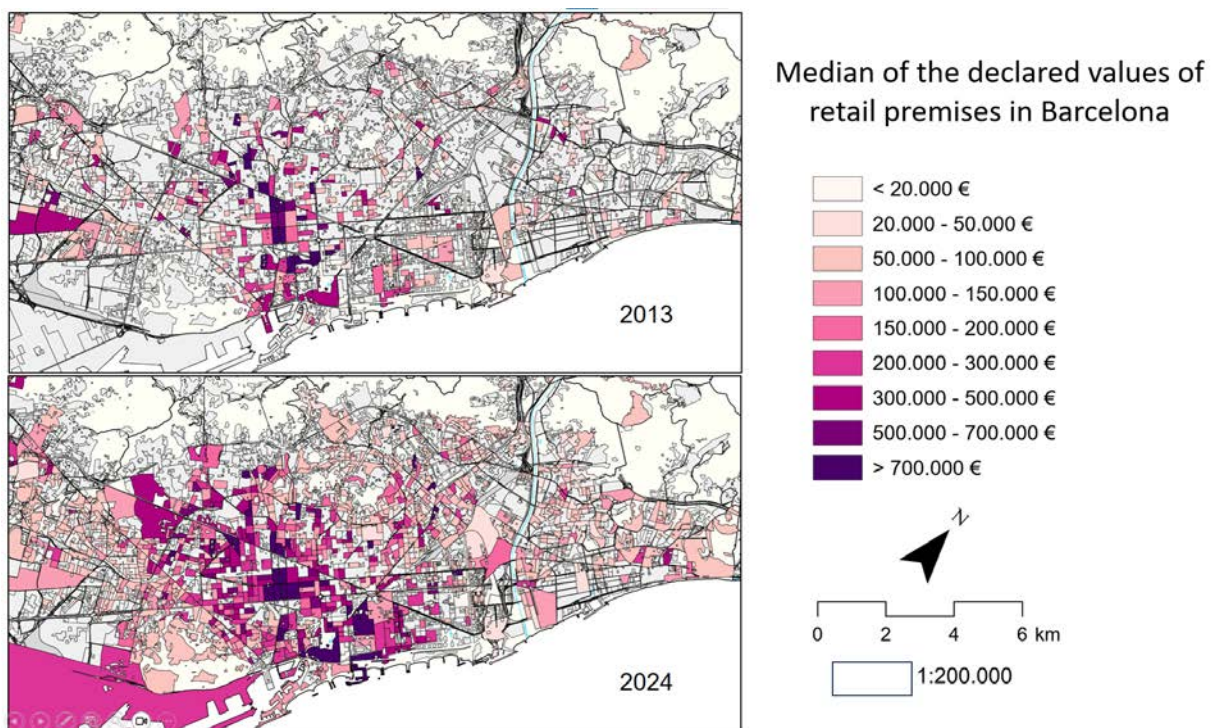
However, since then, the economic and urban reality of cities has changed profoundly, making it necessary to identify some relevant differences. First, the city has ceased to be monocentric —organised around a central business district (CBD)— and, in light of the hypothesis of planetary urbanisation, has become discontinuous and fragmented. This implies that the land value curve is no longer so strongly determined by proximity to the centre, but rather responds to multiple centres of attraction and more complex logics, such as tourism, second homes, or major international transport corridors (Frago, 2020) located outside the concentrated city. Regarding actors, it should be noted that investment funds and large holders of real estate assets —often operating through Listed Real Estate Investment Companies, equivalent to Real Estate Investment Trusts in other countries— now play a much more significant role than in previous decades (Aalbers, 2019), when local actors predominated. In parallel, phenomena such as speculation, rent-seeking and the concentration of property ownership for commercial uses have acquired a much more decisive weight in shaping urban space, in contrast to earlier periods in which property ownership did not exert such a structural influence (Silva et al., 2024).

In this way, the accelerated increase in land prices, resulting from the growing weight of the second circuit of capital accumulation described by Harvey, has become a determining factor in retail location, filtering economic activities. This rise not only affects city centres but, as highlighted in many public and professional forums, also limits the economic viability of

numerous businesses across entire territories (Figure 4). Moreover, the relentless increase in land prices has encouraged rent-seeking practices by major commercial operators, as demonstrated by the numerous property acquisitions carried out, for example, by Pontegadea Inmobiliaria, the real estate subsidiary of Amancio Ortega's family group, both in the United States and in Barcelona (Burgos, 2019).

Nevertheless, it is evident that both small and large property owners seek to maximise returns from their premises, often prioritising real estate profitability over the commercial or social use of these spaces. In some cases, owners undertake the necessary refurbishments to allow premises to be rented as housing, a use that is more profitable than retail in most locations and which is sometimes relatively easy to implement given that the certificate of occupancy allows for mixed use (residential and commercial) (CEC, 2023a, 2023b).

Figure 4. Declared values of retail premises in Barcelona (2013 and 2024)



Source: authors' own elaboration and Jofre Saltó,
based on data from the Catalan Tax Agency (2025)

Paradoxically, in other cases —especially in older neighbourhoods of cities that are less dynamic than the metropolis— despite rising prices, the existence of atomised ownership and co-ownership of retail premises, typical of inheritance situations in which vertical property ownership prevailed, favours the inactivity of retail units (Silva et al., 2024). In this way, both the fragmentation of ownership and the internal fragmentation of property rights act, particularly in

the Mediterranean context, as a form of resistance to large-scale speculative processes, making them slower and more selective than in other contexts characterised by a higher concentration of ownership, such as the Anglo-Saxon world. At the same time, however, this ownership structure also hampers the success of urban policies aimed at retail revitalisation, such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) (Silva et al., 2024).

More generally, rising land prices and land value appreciation have been understood as factors driving the displacement of less capitalised retail and as engines of retail gentrification, especially in central neighbourhoods corresponding to areas of transition. Although the process is more complex than it may initially appear—since the criteria defining residential gentrification cannot be directly applied to retail—relevant parallels can nevertheless be established. Unlike housing, where factors such as location or floor area tend to prevail, retail viability depends to a greater extent on changes in consumption habits, to which businesses must adapt in order to survive. Even so, the increase in land value and the existence of a “rent gap” —understood as the difference between current and potential rent in a speculative context (Smith, 1996)— encourage tenant replacement in the residential market, and this same mechanism can be transferred to retail premises, incentivising turnover and the dispossession of businesses that are not aligned with logics of higher profitability (Coca-Stefaniak & Carroll, 2025; González & Waley, 2013; Frago, 2020).

In the most pressured areas, this process promotes, on the one hand, a dynamic of functional specialisation towards uses capable of bearing higher rents, a trend exemplified by the proliferation of bars and restaurants in Barcelona’s Eixample district (Frago et al., 2024).¹ On the other hand, it generates vacant premises, as has been observed in the Ciutat Vella district, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, due to expectations that commercial rents will return to pre-2020 levels (Frago, 2021).

3.3 Changes in consumption habits: the reconfiguration of the home and the fragmentation of public space

Within the framework of the contemporary urban metabolism, the paradox between the expansion of consumption and the closure of retail establishments reveals that the crisis does not lie in consumption itself, but rather in the forms and places through which it is articulated. It is

¹ Economic viability is also enhanced by flexible regulations governing bar and restaurant terraces, as well as by recent practices that regulate table usage time, allowing for greater customer turnover and more efficient use of space.

therefore a structural transformation in the forms and habits of consumption and in their relationship with urban space.

A number of recent indicators point to a profound shift in spending patterns. First, according to data from the National Commission on Markets and Competition (CNMC, 2023), average monthly household expenditure in Spain on telecommunications and pay-TV platforms already exceeds €130, a figure that would have been unimaginable just a decade ago. At the same time, e-commerce continues to grow steadily, particularly in sectors such as tourism, fashion and services (CNMC, 2025), dynamics that reinforce the consolidation of a more digitalised, personalised form of consumption increasingly detached from traditional physical space. Second, the mass expansion of access to tourism has contributed to turning the consumption of places and experiences into a central dimension of contemporary culture (Urry, 1995, 2002), becoming consolidated as a symbolic foundation of what has been termed “planetary urbanisation” (Carreras, 2022). This type of consumption, linked to desires for mobility and differentiation, transcends the traditional functions of urban retail and reshapes the relationship between consumption and the city. Finally, an increase in spending on catering and hospitality can be identified: in Spain, this rose from representing 13% of total household expenditure in 1999 to 29.1% in 2022 (INE, 2023).

This evolution not only reflects a change in habits, but also anticipates a deeper structural transformation in which the home becomes increasingly multifunctional. Beyond functioning as a growing unit of consumption (leisure, provisioning, health, digital entertainment), ever more individualised and separated from the public sphere, it also becomes a centre of work (teleworking, care activities, etc.) (Cox, 2013). As a result of this trend, and of the conversion of virtually all time into consumption time (and into time for the realisation of capital), the externalisation of basic vital needs (such as food) is stimulated, leading to the proliferation of bars, cafés and restaurants. This new domestic logic weakens the role of public space and the mixing of urban uses, placing increasing emphasis on residential uses (Frago & Morcuende, 2024) and on processes such as foodification (Sommella & D’Alessandro, 2021), not necessarily linked to the growing role of tourism. This trend, moreover, intensifies processes of functional segregation and favours monofunctional or fragmented urban models (O’Connell et al., 2022).

Within this scenario, new profiles of consumers and workers emerge that contribute to the reconfiguration of commercial space. The expansion of so-called digital nomads is a clear example of this profile: individuals who predominantly work remotely from home or from co-working spaces and who contribute to the diffusion of bars and restaurants (Mancinelli, 2020;

Reichenberger, 2018). At the same time, the consumption practices of migrant communities — often ignored or stigmatised in institutional representations— require closer attention from critical and inclusive perspectives that recognise their role in the economic and cultural vitality of neighbourhoods (Zukin, 2010; González & Waley, 2013), given that collective practices are frequently more present than in communities represented as more ‘local’.

These changes in consumption habits cannot be analysed independently from the evolution of socio-economic inequalities. On the contrary, both dimensions reinforce one another: while digitalisation and the externalisation of consumption reconfigure everyday spaces and practices, the loss of purchasing power limits real options of access, deepening the social and territorial segmentation of urban consumption.

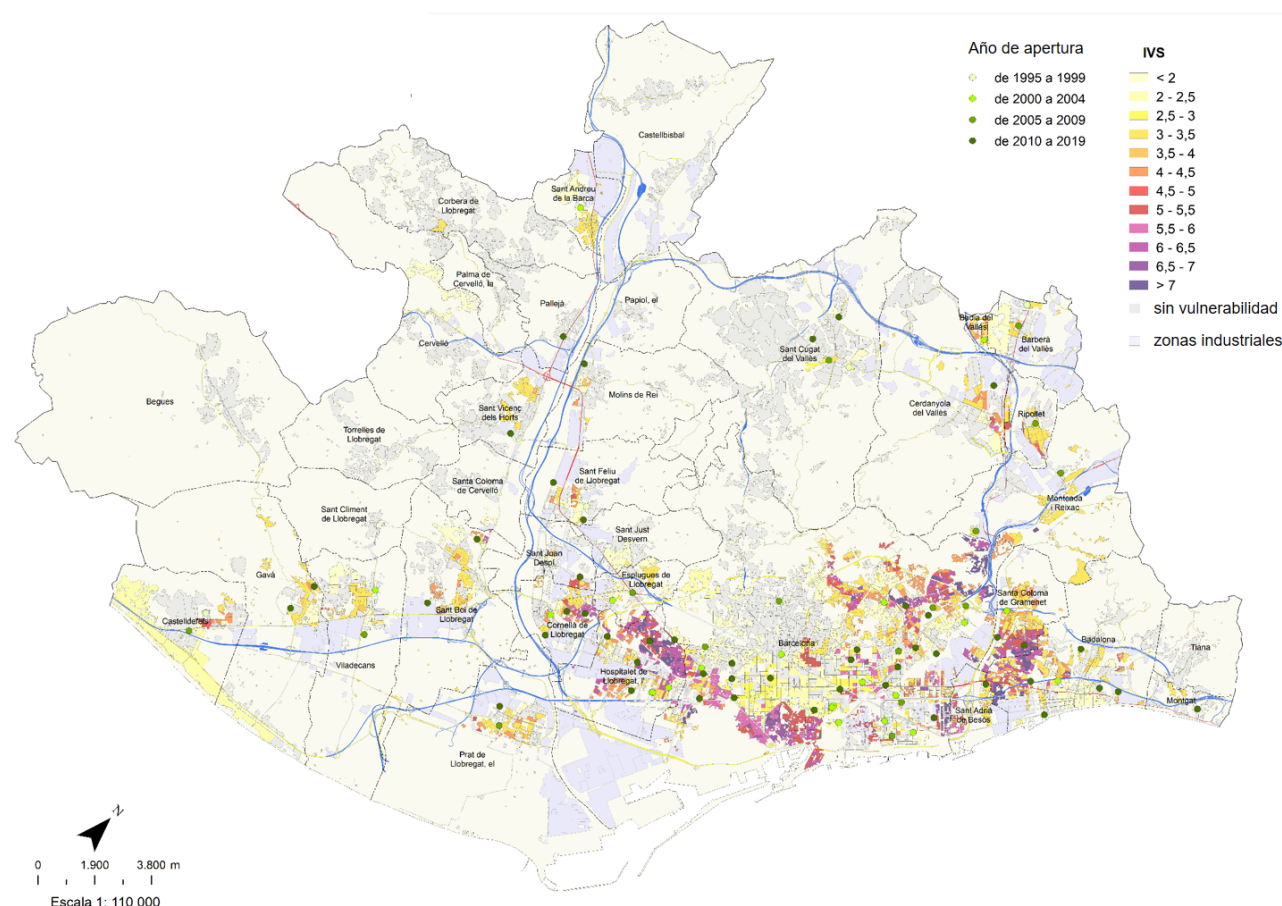
3.4 Rising inequalities and the decline in household purchasing power

From an urban political economy perspective, inequalities do not constitute a collateral effect of the process of retail restructuring, but rather a structural condition that shapes both supply and forms of access to consumption. In this sense, urban retail acts as a privileged observatory of strategies of social reproduction in contexts of increasing precarisation. For this reason, the analysis of urban retail requires moving beyond functionalist perspectives that understand it solely as a space of economic exchange. In urban contexts marked by growing inequality and social fragmentation, retail becomes a key sphere for observing the intersections between consumption, labour and strategies of social reproduction (Zukin, 2010; Castells, 1972). The relationship between consumption and disposable income is fundamental to understanding how patterns of provisioning are articulated in contemporary cities. While the state guarantees certain forms of “collective consumption” —education, health and transport— the majority of everyday consumption takes place through the market, reproducing and amplifying structural inequalities (Castells, 1972). According to the Organisation of Consumers and Users of Catalonia (OCUC, 2023), households lost 10% of their purchasing power between 2021 and 2023 as a result of rising prices and the lack of wage indexation.

This weakening of purchasing power generates a form of consumption that is extremely sensitive to price, primarily benefiting large-scale distributors of basic necessities, such as food, which are able to operate through economies of scale, logistical optimisation and centralised purchasing practices. Highly capitalised hard-discount firms such as ALDI or LIDL, for example, as well as Mercadona, have managed to position themselves through competitive pricing, efficient assortment management and an increasingly residential-oriented location strategy, less focused

on peripheral retail parks and industrial estates, as demonstrated by previous research (Cachinho et al., 2020; Herbert et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2014; Frago et al., forthcoming) (Figure 5). In doing so, they displace independent neighbourhood retail, which is unable to compete either in terms of prices or promotional visibility (Díaz Méndez & García Escribano, 2020).

Figure 5. Diffusion of Mercadona supermarkets and the Social Vulnerability Index



Source: elaboration by Clàudia Marco, Ernest Ruiz and the author,
based on the *Yearbook of Retail Distribution, Everyday Goods in Self-Service Format* (CCAM,
2021) and the Barcelona Metropolitan Area (AMB) (2025)

At the same time, urban retail represents one of the sectors with the greatest capacity for labour absorption in cities, albeit under strongly precarious conditions: low wages, high turnover, temporariness and fragmented working hours (INE, 2024). According to a study by the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce (2025), wages in the retail sector are, on average, 29.2% lower than those across all occupations. In addition, this sector displays a social structure clearly marked by feminisation (57.7% women), youth (30% of workers under the age of 30) and a significant presence of migrant populations (50.8% born outside Spain, predominantly from Latin America and Asia). In this context, it is evident that for many migrants or people in situations of exclusion, the opening of small businesses appears as a strategy of socio-economic insertion. However, this is frequently a form of subsistence entrepreneurship driven more by necessity than by innovation or accumulation. This economy of precarious self-employment —visible in barbershops, call shops, 24-hour convenience stores or small ethnic retail outlets— is based on the intensification of labour, long working hours and strong family involvement, without access to full labour rights (Gago, 2020).

A significant urban paradox thus emerges: despite the general growth of consumption, this does not translate into improved conditions for those who sustain it through their labour. On the contrary, the vulnerability of small retailers and sector workers increases in parallel with the rise of mass consumption models. The expansion of demand, far from redistributing wealth, tends to concentrate it in the hands of major market actors (Coca-Stefaniak & Carroll, 2025). In parallel, alternative forms of provisioning and economic reproduction emerge outside the formal circuits of the market and the state. Second-hand digital platforms such as Wallapop or Vinted, barter networks, informal care services or street markets configure a domestic popular economy that ensures access to basic goods in the absence of other options (Narotzky, 2013), and which in some cases seeks to act as a seedbed for a cooperative, post-capitalist economy (Wright, 2021). The informalisation of provisioning is also evident in non-permanent markets, as demonstrated by the recent case of the Canovelles market (Barcelona), which was closed in 2024 due to the high presence of unlicensed points of sale.

3.5 The crisis of planning through horizontal, vertical and sectoral fragmentation

Despite the constant and seemingly unstoppable decline of street-level retail, the general orientation of commercial policies in Europe since the 1970s has been the promotion of neighbourhood —or proximity— retail through economic incentives, subsidies for traders' associations and promotional campaigns (Dugot, 2019). The aim has been to strengthen the local business structure, predominantly characterised by small-scale ownership, so that it could

withstand the new forms of consumption that emerged alongside retail formats driven by postmodernity and globalisation, which have consolidated over recent decades. During this period, commercial policies have sought to respond to the multiple threats affecting neighbourhood retail through a variety of tools and formulas, but rarely from a holistic perspective that fully acknowledges complexity (Silva et al., 2024).

First, in Catalonia, attempts were made to curb the expansion of large spectacular formats such as shopping centres (Escudero, 2008) or French-style retail parks (Dugot, 2019), leading to specific regulations such as the *Pla Territorial Sectorial d'Equipaments Comercials* (PTSEC, 2001). Later, concerns emerged regarding the growing dominance of large fast-fashion chains in urban centres —such as INDITEX or H&M— which were believed to banalise cities by stripping them of identity. This prompted restrictive urban planning regulations concerning premises larger than 200 m² in historic centres, given that these companies could not be directly prohibited under the EU Services Directive (2006). From the 2000s onwards, certain activities —rather than companies as such— began to be regulated, including call shops, estate agencies or banks, which were considered to contribute to urban desertification and to negatively affect urban identity (Frago, 2011). Finally, the accelerated growth of e-commerce has positioned digital environments as a new structural threat, articulating logistical and financial flows that transform both the physical and virtual spaces of consumption (Bissell, 2020; Rao, 2020). This has generated attempted responses such as the so-called Amazon tax promoted by Barcelona City Council (2023), which was ultimately annulled by the High Court of Justice of Catalonia (TSJC).

More recently, efforts have been made to address rising commercial rents through municipal initiatives such as Barcelona City Council's *Bajos de Protección Oficial* programme. This policy, based on the public acquisition of premises to be subsequently rented out at below-market prices, aims to foster community, social or proximity retail activities. However, its effectiveness has been limited, as many of the properties acquired by the municipal administration are located in degraded urban areas with little real demand for commercial uses (Formentí, 2023; Carreras & Frago, 2022). Alongside this initiative, other policies have been developed to preserve traditional retail fabric through various approaches: the promotion of emblematic shops as elements of heritage and tourism value (Carreras & Frago, 2018), programmes for the renewal of municipal markets (Frago, 2017), or international experiences such as that of Semaest in Paris, likewise based on public purchase of premises for social rental.

Taken together, all these strategies reflect an institutional willingness to protect proximity retail, but they also reveal the structural limitations faced by such policies in the face of market dynamics and the unequal capacity of local administrations to intervene effectively in the urban retail model.

Urban planning has also been articulated around this same axis, at least at the level of discourse, given the many challenges it has been required to address. A fundamental starting point is that there is no commercial planning per se: rather, there is urban planning in which retail is treated as a secondary activity, one among many others. Systematically, commercial aspects remain disconnected and fragmented from other key components of planning, such as housing, mobility or ground-floor economic life. A clear illustration of this is the *Superilles* (superblocks) project in Barcelona, which, despite its strong implications for retail activity, was conceived primarily as a mobility project (Frago & Morcuende, 2024).

To sectoral fragmentation must be added horizontal, territorial fragmentation. Catalonia currently has seven partial territorial plans and more than fifty urban development master plans (GENCAT, 2025), with limited coordination among them. This structure generates functional contradictions and overlapping competences, preventing a systemic vision of the territory. For example, a territorial plan approved for the Camp de Tarragona can progress without connection to sectoral plans at the initial approval stage, such as the one regulating the Port Aventura—Barcelona World leisure area (GENCAT, 2022), which includes a significant retail component. This is compounded by the fact that the current Metropolitan General Plan (PGM) had accumulated 1,903 minor amendments by 2025 —up from 887 in 2013 (AMB, 2014) and 1,600 in 2023 (Serra Monté, 2023)— largely promoted by municipalities. This has favoured the proliferation of shopping centres across virtually all municipalities in the Llobregat plain, some of them in situations of economic non-viability (ACTU, 2023). This process reflects not only regulatory fragmentation, but also the existence of a competitive territorial logic, whereby each administration pursues its own interests without considering aggregated effects at the regional or metropolitan scale. As Brenner (2019, pp. 213-218) has noted, this dynamic is characteristic of contemporary urban restructuring processes marked by institutional rescaling, which reinforce inter-territorial competition in the absence of coherent multiscale coordination.

To this horizontal dispersion must be added an equally problematic vertical fragmentation. The different levels of public administration —municipalities, the Generalitat and supramunicipal bodies— often act in a poorly coordinated manner, with ill-defined competences and without integrated governance structures (Silva et al., 2024). This lack of inter-institutional alignment fosters both policy disarticulation and the erosion of territorial cohesion. Moreover, this

institutional fragmentation is accompanied by a striking paradox: the more local and smaller the fragment that is being planned, the more explicit the reference to the need to address global-scale challenges (Frago & Morcuende, 2024). This global-local paradox, fuelled by a logic of technical uniformity in which urban planning formulas are imported without contextual adaptation, has generated significant dysfunctions. Cases such as the implementation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Barcelona —designed in Anglo-Saxon contexts and conceived in the 1970s to revitalise commercial streets— have demonstrated limited suitability to local legal, cultural, economic and temporal structures (Silva et al., 2024; Silva & Frago, 2025).

Far from constituting a strictly local singularity, these dysfunctions allow the Catalan case to be read as a concentrated expression of structural tensions present in other European urban contexts. Although many of the examples analysed refer to Catalonia and Barcelona, the dynamics described —institutional fragmentation, multiscalar discoordination and the sectoral treatment of retail— are consistent with broader trends observed across other European urban systems. The interest of the case therefore lies in its capacity to make particularly visible the structural limits of contemporary urban planning

4 Conclusions

The results of the analysis show that the emergence of *retail-less cities* does not respond to a single factor or to a linear causal sequence, but rather to the simultaneous articulation of several structural transformations. The expansion of logistics, the revalorisation of urban land, the reconfiguration of consumption habits, rising inequalities and the fragmentation of planning do not operate independently; instead, they mutually reinforce one another, producing a relative displacement of retail as the organising axis of urban life. In this sense, the findings demonstrate that the loss of retail centrality does not imply its disappearance, but rather its subordination to broader territorial and economic logics characteristic of the current urban metabolism in the context of planetary urbanisation.

Retail-less cities do not constitute a homogeneous or universal stage of urban development, but rather a specific historical form that emerges from the uneven articulation between logistics, the land market, consumption practices, socio-spatial inequalities and urban planning. Their concrete expression varies across contexts, yet reveals a shared tendency: the profound reconfiguration of the mechanisms that sustain the everyday economic life of cities. The concept of *retail-less cities* is therefore proposed not as a closed urban typology nor as a universal phase of urban development, but as a situated analytical hypothesis that enables the interpretation —through the

lens of urban political economy— of the relative weakening of retail as an effect of broader structural transformations.

On the basis of this empirical reading, the results allow progress towards a more precise conceptual formulation of the phenomenon analysed. From a theoretical standpoint, *retail-less cities* can be interpreted as a concrete expression of the “critical zone” described by Lefebvre, in which traditional forms of urban articulation enter into crisis under the advance of new territorial logics. From the perspective of planetary urbanisation, the weakening of retail is not a sectoral phenomenon, but a manifestation of the differential urbanisation of capital, which redistributes functions, centralities and conflicts across multiple scales. Recent transformations in urban retail should not be understood merely as a technical phenomenon associated with digitalisation, nor as a simple reordering of formats. What emerges instead is a deeper structural mutation: the loss of retail centrality. This does not mean asserting the total disappearance of retail from cities, but recognising that its historical functions —especially as an intermediary between production and consumption— have ceased to be dominant. At present, the ascending variable of logistics, within a critical urban political economy, appears to have assumed this intermediary role. Logistics cannot be understood solely as a set of techniques for optimising flows, but rather as a central material and political infrastructure in the process of capital realisation in contemporary cities. In other words, logistics acts as the strategic bridge between production and consumption, ensuring not only that commodities reach their destination, but that they find a market, are sold, and thus that the value embodied in them is realised and transformed into profit.

In this way, *retail-less cities* cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as a global process that materialises differentially depending on the conditions of each place. On the basis of the analytical dimensions developed in this paper —logistics, the land market, consumption habits, inequalities and the crisis of planning— several lines of research open up that allow for deeper exploration of the structural transformations shaping *retail-less cities* in different urban contexts. First, the logistics dimension invites exploration of how its expansion is reconfiguring both the inner areas of the metropolis —through last-mile centres, pick-up and return points, dark stores or intermodal platforms— and metropolitan fringes traditionally considered “rural”. Analysing the impact of these processes on local retail, labour conditions in the logistics sector and the emerging forms of these new operational landscapes represents a crucial avenue for understanding new logics of capital territorialisation.

Second, the analysis of the land market raises questions about how real estate speculation is fostering *retail-less cities* by denying access to urban land to less-capitalised retail activities. The

study of urban policies that regulate —or fail to regulate— the use of commercial land can offer key insights into the links between the commodification of urban space, tertiarisation and socio-economic exclusion, from a perspective that goes beyond residential uses and housing, and that more directly addresses the central question: what does the city live from?

For its part, the transformation of consumption habits requires a critical perspective on changes in everyday practices associated with provisioning, access to goods and services, social interaction, and the consumption of experiences and their relationship with culture (tourism consumption, heritage and urban identity). The growing digitalisation of consumption, together with the spatial segmentation of access to these services, reinforces existing inequalities and generates new forms of distancing between consumers, urban spaces and community dynamics.

The dimension of inequalities thus becomes a transversal axis that requires in-depth attention. Transformations in retail and logistics do not impact territory uniformly; rather, they tend to reinforce existing imbalances: between central and peripheral neighbourhoods; between small and medium-sized cities and large metropolitan areas; and between populations with different levels of income, connectivity or social capital. These dynamics also manifest at the international scale, accentuating the gaps between countries in the capitalist core and periphery, where the lower circuit of the urban economy in the retail sector maintains a much more significant presence, even in a context of increasing “Latin Americanisation” of social inequalities in Europe.

Finally, the crisis of urban planning emerges as a structural challenge. The disarticulation between public policies and the dynamics of commercial and logistical capital calls into question the capacity of local governments to organise territory in terms of spatial justice. Exploring alternative forms of planning—from cooperative experiences to models of public regulation of commercial land—appears as a fertile terrain for imagining new regulatory frameworks, despite the clear risk of producing micro-scalar solutions isolated from the totality. In parallel, there is a need for a profound reflection on the type of economic regulation required at state and global scales, assessing both the uses and abuses of contemporary capitalism and their effects on cities.

In the meantime, however, it is important not to lose sight of some basic foundations of contemporary urban planning. First, it is necessary to move towards a model that reinforces mixed uses and prioritises centrality over dispersion, promoting the active presence of economic activities at ground level through public incentives, temporary uses or direct intervention mechanisms in property ownership. Likewise, it is essential to revisit the analytical categories used to classify retail, developing typologies that are more sensitive to the current hybridity between

retail, logistics, services and catering. Finally, a multiscale and flexible form of planning is required—one that articulates local dynamics with global processes and situates the scale of solutions at the same level as the scale of problems—in order to optimise decision-making and the achievement of stated objectives.

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