


## Article

# Could a Retail-Less City Be Sustainable? The Digitalization of the Urban Economy against the City

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**Abstract:** This article tries to imagine the possible future retail-less city and its sustainability, combining some theoretical approaches with the initial data obtained from an analysis of Barcelona and Catalonia. The retail-less city is based on the idea of a city in which all the brick-and-mortar stores have closed as a consequence of the growing virtualization of retail. The hypothesis is based on the contemporary theory of planetary urbanization and its implications for the popular relationship between retail and the city. First, the study analyzes the relative weakness of the current retail theories and the spread of certain terms that have not succeeded in becoming real concepts. Second, the research attempt to find a possible definition of the retail-less city based on the increase of brick-and-mortar store and bank branch closures in Barcelona and Catalonia. Then, it explores some alternatives in urban policies and planning, using examples from Barcelona. Finally, the conclusion returns to the contemporary theories on globalization and planetary urbanization.

**Keywords:** retail change; e-working; center/periphery contradiction; planetary urbanization; urban planning crisis



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## 1. Introduction

This article aims to define a possible future “retail-less city” and verify whether it would be possible and sustainable [1,2]. This study combines some theoretical approaches with the initial data obtained in an analysis of Barcelona and Catalonia [1]. Theory and theoretical hypothesis become the best and most diversified basis due to the data scarcity. The important lack of empirical evidence is due not only to the recentness and new character of socioeconomic processes but to their insertion into the serial structural crisis of the Global Economic system in the first decades of the XXI Century. First, this work analyzes the relative weakness of the current retail theories and the spread of certain terms that have not succeeded in becoming real concepts or buzz words [3]. The main focus of this analysis is the evolution of the center/periphery theories in order to explain the growth of cities [4,5].

Going from theory to reality, the article proposes a possible definition of the retail-less city of the future based on two large variables empirically analyzed in the city and region of Barcelona: first, closed shops; and second, the post-pandemic spread of e-working and its effects on the city center [6–8] and the mobility of people, especially global tourism [9–11]. Finally, the article explores some alternatives to urban policies and urban planning based on some examples from Barcelona. As this article raises more questions than answers, the conclusions are more of a work in progress hypothesis. On the one hand, it is necessary to revisit the contemporary theories on globalization [12,13]. On the other hand, the study attempts to apply the theoretical developments to planetary urbanization, from Henri Lefebvre to Neil Brenner [14–16] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Analytical framework. Source: authors (2022).

This paper is based on more than twenty years of experience in urban and retail studies within the research group of the Retail Observatory of the University of Barcelona (OCUB) [17]. During this time, we have observed and studied the urban and commercial transformation of the city of Barcelona (Preliminary data and information are mainly in the two official languages of the region; only a few articles have begun to be translated into English in some papers, even from our research group). The discussion of the data presented in this article also benefits from a deep knowledge of the city and extensive theoretical knowledge of the city and the urban fabric, which allows us to propose this concept, the retail-less city.

The work is based on an analysis of retail databases, bibliographic research and semi-structured interviews with expert informants. Some retail databases are available from the various public administrations [18–20]. The bibliographic research was essential for developing the theoretical framework and the critical analysis of urban and commercial policies promoted by the Barcelona City Council, mainly the Barcelona Superblock Programme [21] and the Officially Protected Ground Floors project for new economic activities [22]. Between 2021 and January 2022, some semi-structured interviews were carried out with stakeholders and expert informants involved in retail activities and urban policies.

## 2. Ephemeral Concepts as a Sign of the Increasing Speed of Changes

The retail-less city is obviously a new concept that could be on the way to becoming part of the chronological collection of traditional urban concepts, such as political, commercial, industrial or post-industrial cities. This new concept attempts to imagine a possible future restructuring of cities all around the world, focusing on the material consequences of changes in retail activities, which have been present in the urban fabric throughout history. It is a new concept that can coexist with many others, such as knowledge city [23], smart city [24] or whichever other denomination that tries to define the main traits of the present urban economies. Furthermore, thinking about the possibility of a retail-less city could help to clarify the real structure and functioning of the contemporary economy of cities. In recent decades, research has tried to find out the simple question: What do cities live on? (Our research team has been working on the particular question about what Barcelona lives on).

The conceptual definition implies serious theoretical research involving both Urban Theories and Retail Theories. Our theoretical revision is connected to the implementation of an Urban Studies Master's Degree at the University of Barcelona (The Urban Studies Master's Degree of the University of Barcelona was officially running in the academic years 2016 and 2017 ([www.estudios-urbanos.wixsite.com/estudiosurbanos](http://www.estudios-urbanos.wixsite.com/estudiosurbanos), 8 April 2022)). Our first step was to analyze classical thinking in modern social sciences. Classical in the sense of those ideas that exert a particular influence, both when they are imposed as unforgettable and when they lay hidden under the folds of our memory, as they belong to the collective or individual unconscious [25]. This includes the definitions developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels of urban social segregation and of the country–city contradiction to the social and land-use zoning of the Sociological Chicago School or the

functional classification of the first French Geographical tradition [26]. Henri Lefebvre developed the best synthesis of these classical theories in his fundamental philosophical work [16,27,28], which was updated by Neil Brenner in his criticism on the New Urban Age and with the proposal of the new concept of planetary urbanization [14].

Compared to these important and multidisciplinary urban theories, as well as many others, the theoretical fragility of retail studies is very discouraging. Only the connection of retail with the most general concept of consumption provides some theoretical inspiration [29–32]. Many authors from different countries have discussed the possibility of creating international non-disciplinary fragmented knowledge [4,33].

One of the most significant symptoms of this theoretical fragility in retail studies is the recurring creation of concepts or their adaptation from other disciplines. Many of these concepts become simple terms flowing with the tides of intellectual fashion. This terminological flow has accelerated with the development of the cultural logic of late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson defined Postmodernism [34].

Among the different adapted concepts, such as location, hierarchy, centrality or accessibility, the concept of gentrification needs to be highlighted. This term was elaborated from Urban Sociology at the beginning of the second half of the 20th Century [35] and reinforced with the rent gap theory by Neil Smith [36], explaining the return of certain young, affluent social groups to the city center [36,37]. However, gentrification has become synonymous with social enrichment everywhere, and certain kinds of specialist shops have been identified as gentrifying elements [38], very far from the real mean of the conceptual process.

In retail studies, there are two conceptualization methods. On the one hand, there is the structural analysis of the commercial forms, with the tedious and vague classifications and typologies of different retail artifacts. There is an extremely extensive list, including trade fairs, both primitive and contemporary, markets (with a large range of specializations and the derived supermarket or hypermarket), commercial or high-street shops (and the countless product specificities, including bookshops, pharmacies, greengrocers, and so on), stores (such as drugstores and department stores), malls, shopping centers and areas, outlets, corners and vending stalls and machines. Some countries have a legal definition of each of these terms, especially in France (The *Loi Royer*, in 1973, was paradigmatic in this sense.) and its followers, such as Spain and Italy. Many local, regional and global studies can be found focused on these concepts and their evolution.

On the other hand, some concepts related to specific commercial processes, such as competition or concentration, are much more relevant. The article concentrates on the definition of certain recent processes, from demalling to the retail apocalypse. Both appear as progressive steps in the crisis of brick-and-mortar retail in favor of the increasing importance of e-commerce. The first refers to the closing of large suburban commercial areas, malls and shopping centers, analyzed, in particular, in the United States, Italy and Portugal [39–41]. This is a similar process to that which affected factories in many old industrial regions around the world (The second describes the process in most cities of a large number of urban shops, the brick-and-mortar retailers, closing down, generating a lot of vacant premises [42–44].

The profound development of the digital economy, thanks to internet technology, has driven a reduction of brick-and-mortar shops [45]. This process has importantly emerged as a consequence of COVID-19 and has been referred to as “the great acceleration” [46]. This “great acceleration” has (i) deepened the dominant role of the internet platform oligopoly; (ii) it has accelerated the digitization process of those large companies that had not yet done so, these companies have invested in upgrading their logistics platforms, and they have closed their facilities [47]; and (iii) finally, many firms with reduced financial strength have been unable to adapt to such digitization and have disappeared from the market [46]. Despite public support to improve digitization, this has been particularly dramatic among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) [48].

Digitization has enabled more effective strategic planning for digitized companies through the use of powerful consumer databases [49,50]. Despite the fact that the cities are in the era of the so-called “smart city” and “big data” [51], companies that have not advanced in digitization are threatened by the risk of marginalization and disappearance. This last fact demonstrates the invasive and selective nature of information technologies [13].

This process, together with the parallel crisis of business offices in city centers due to the post-pandemic flexibilization of working hours [52,53], has had large consequences for the traditional urban structures. This is especially clear in the center-periphery dialectics. This implies a very rapid path from the city center degradation analyzed by the Sociological Chicago School to this present city center decay. Therefore, it has been an important interlude with the emergence of the gentrification process. In almost a century, the residential mobility of a part of the affluent urban society has undergone a triple cycle of centrifuge, centripetal and then centrifuge movements. An increasingly large area has become involved in these consecutive cycles, including from far beyond the classical suburbs, covering middle-sized cities and even the country. They are one of the complex processes of implosions and explosions presented by Henri Lefebvre and reassumed by Neil Brenner in the theorizing of planetary urbanization [14].

The restructuring processes of cities have sped up, which explains the difficulties involved in constructing an urban theory. These difficulties and the faster speed of changes are clearly expressed in the consecutive creation of new words and expressions rather than concepts.

### 3. Conceptual Discussion: An Attempt to Define the Retail-Less Cities

The first step towards achieving some kind of a definition is to analyze the possibility of imagining a retail-less city. In a more or less platonic way, first, there is the idea, and only after that is it possible to analyze the reality (Plato developed his idealist theory in his different dialogues, especially in the republic, that in Greek has the significative name of Politeia, the way of life of cities). From the point of view of the retail studies tradition, it seems very difficult to define an idea of a retail-less city. This is essential because the relationship between commercial activities in all their forms and cities constitutes the most classical and majoritarian approach. In this sense, retail has often been assimilated with actual urban social life [54].

This is similar to what Jane Jacobs discusses in her influential book on the economy of cities [55]. She proposes the theory of the precedence of cities because it was impossible for her to think about complex organizations, such as ancient agricultural civilizations, without a city economy organizing and structuring them. The Anglo-Saxon empiricist tradition led Jane Jacobs to search the archaeological research until she found some remains of cities before the Neolithic agricultural revolution.

Therefore, in spite of the long and popular relationship between retail and city it is possible to identify some precedents of retail-poor or retail-less urban projects, at least in relatively recent times. One of the most important and well-known of these precedents comes from the rationalist conception of architecture and urban planning. The canonical text could be Le Corbusier’s personal translation () of the Athens charter [56]. The consequent projects elaborated, from the never-built Ville radieuse of Paris in 1935 to the Brazilian capital in 1960, have been diffused everywhere in many cities of the post-war world. Concerning the autonomy of new buildings in relation to the street plan, their ground levels are reserved essentially for accessibility and open spaces for car parks, and they are well connected with the public green spaces and hierarchic transport infrastructures. The concept of the retail street itself was ignored, as well as many others, such as the historical center. In some cases, modern architects planned some high floors for retail activities, while big shopping centers and malls concentrated the essential part of shopping and leisure within the zoning plan. One of the biggest and most impressive examples is probably Il Corviale in a suburb of Rome, built in 1975/82, consisting of three 1 km-long buildings with

more than 4000 inhabitants [57,58] (In Italy there are other examples of these rationalist big buildings, degraded and renovated, such as Le Vele, in a suburb of Naples).

The first criticism of functionalist urban planning started at the very beginning of the sixties in North American cities. Jane Jacobs describes the dramatic combination of zoning and the concentrated effects of the urban land prices as the real death of the great American cities [54]. The main objective was to discuss city centers in their process of retail desertification by the selective location of the most profitable companies, most of them, international firms (The French geographer Michel Rochefort analyzing central Paris defined this process as the “*affinage du tertiaire*” [59]).

After the big crisis of capitalism in the seventies, his restructuring with a financial system produced the global cities, which are far more diffuse than their early sociological definition [60]. The succession of crises in the first decades of the 21st Century (financial in 2007; pandemic in 2020) produced radical changes in the urban and social paradigms. This historical period could be called a crisis itself [8] or the evolution from the Anthropocene to the Virocene [61].

In this particular way, the study can start to imagine a retail-less city, in spite of the difficulty of predicting its sustainability. Cities are becoming restructured, or even disappearing, in a general landscape of different residential buildings in all locations, in new neighborhoods, reproducing at a small scale; the 15-min utopia is far beyond smart cities [62]. This has already been analyzed in Buenos Aires in the form of a bubble city [63]. Cities now have no commercial high streets [64], no commercial centers, only some more or less regularly distributed concentrations of shopping and business areas. The only exceptions are bars and restaurants, which are dispersed everywhere throughout residential concentrations. The old city centers will increasingly become a living and open-air museum for visitors, for the periods when tourism can be reactivated, and in the meantime, for citizens of the actual city or region. There are walking cities with no cars and only with bikes and scooters and public transportation systems. This implies an increasing public sector because retail is no longer the normal partner in lighting, cleaning and even security in public spaces. Cities are becoming increasingly fragmented in a planetary urban archipelago with a very selective mobility (resources, manufactured goods) in a new immobile society. Everyone has become urban, and all territories have become urban, with differential urbanization processes, as urban rise up against the city.

#### 4. The Retail-Less City in Barcelona

After this first attempt to outline a theoretical definition, the study looks for some kind of evidence in the analysis of a case study. The growing virtualization of retail and the consequent closure of brick-and-mortar shops, especially among the most capitalized companies, are clearly the trigger for our hypothesis. The pandemic was not the beginning of this process, but it has greatly accelerated many of the already existing dynamics [46]. The urban/commercial system of Barcelona and its region, Catalonia, is a good laboratory. The commercial system of Catalonia is macrocephalic, with a high concentration in Barcelona and its Metropolitan Area (AMB), with 333,888,000 inhabitants. This is the area that concentrates the main investments. The rest of the territory is articulated by forty secondary cities over a myriad of local places, in a sort of Walter Christaller’s distribution, which allowed a later complete political and administrative organization designed in the 1930’s but not applied until the end of the 1980’s.

Thus, just before the pandemic and for a period of only two years (2017–2019), 5% of the total number of retail firms in Catalonia closed down, which implies the disappearance of 25% of the entire retail surface [16]. Despite the lack of concrete data, a process similar to what has happened in the USA (According Fortune (7 January 2021): “A record 12,000 stores closed in 2020 as e-commerce, pandemic changed retail forever”; or in reference to the main retail chains, Bloomberg (27 December 2021): “Apple closes New York City stores to online pickups only”) and other Spanish cities (As an example of closures of main capitalized retail chains, according to El País (22 March 2022) “La vida después del cierre

de las tiendas de Zara" ("Life after ZARA closures", our traduction)). The most populated (and demographically denser) areas have seen the closure of more shops and the loss of more retail space (the metropolitan area, Comarques Gironines, Camp de Tarragona and Comarques Centrals) (Figure 2, Table 1). Before e-commerce, store closures were caused by large hypermarkets and shopping malls. The process mainly affected the less densely populated areas. The closures caused by e-commerce are general, affecting the most dynamic urban centers.



**Figure 2.** Functional territorial areas of Catalonia. Source: Authors.

This process has been very irregular all around the Catalan territory, in part due to its global logic. Previously, the paper analyzed two different retail dynamics: one dynamic related to the metropolitan concentration around Barcelona, and one other dynamic related to large local dispersion. At a regional scale, the county capitals underwent a significant loss in traditional commercial centralities in favor of the metropolitan area [65]. In 1990, each of the 947 municipalities in Catalonia had at least one shop; however, in 2019, 10% no longer had any shops [19]. In this period, the traditional family retail structure was substituted by shops of large international or national franchising companies. The process described is similar to France [66,67], and can be extended to other Mediterranean countries with an eminently smallholder commercial structure.

The impact of the recent retail apocalypse among the most capitalized companies [42,44], mainly international or national franchising firms (fashion, banking and telecommunications), could be verified by analyzing the main commercial axes of 26 Catalan cities. From 2018 to 2020, the number of shops that closed down increased, as stated in the database of the reports on Retail Cloning [20,68]. In the total 26 commercial axes analyzed in 2020, 90% had more than 15% shop closures (Table 2). This implies a significant decapitalization of the main commercial axes of Catalonia; that is, the traditional local high streets. This has occurred in large county capitals, such as Granollers (62,475 pop., 2021), Mataró (129,120 pop., 2021), Manresa (78,192 pop., 2021), Tarragona (135,436 pop., 2021) and Reus (106,084 pop., 2021). This percentage of shops that have closed down can reach values of around 30%, when the analysis covers the entire municipality and is not only limited to these commercial axes.

**Table 1.** Evolution of the population, number of shops and retail surface in different Catalan territories from 2017 to 2019. Source: authors, according to a commercial census [19].

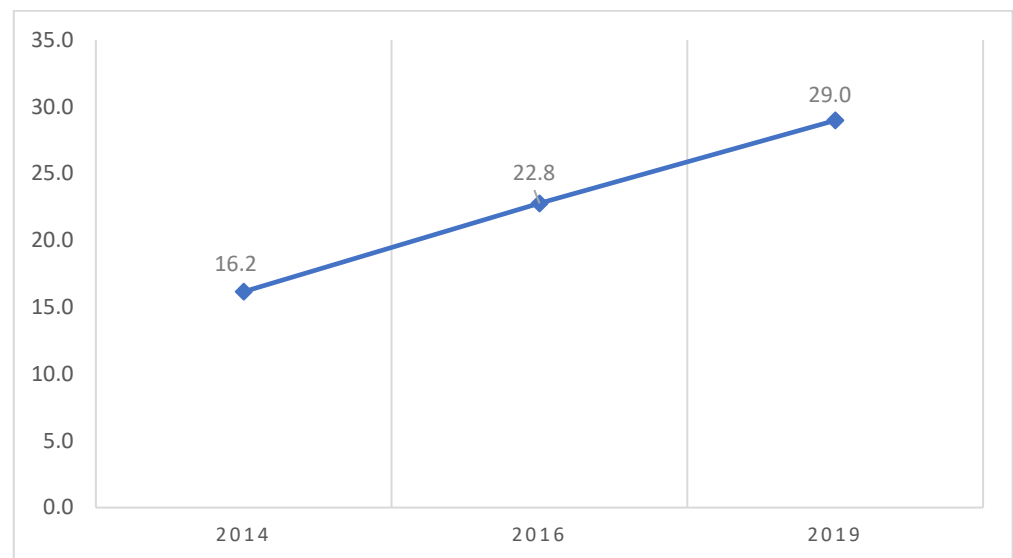
Territory	2017			2019			Evolution 2017–2019				
	Population	Shops	Area (m <sup>2</sup> )	Population	Shops	Area (m <sup>2</sup> )	Population	Shops	Area (m <sup>2</sup> )	Relative Evolution Shops (2017–2019)	Relative Evolution Shops Area (2017–2019) (m <sup>2</sup> )
Metropolitan area	4,823,361	64,428	8,815,801	4,895,876	61,082	6,670,184	72,515	−3346	−2,145,617	−5.2	−24.3
Comarques Gironines	741,452	11,411	1,854,687	755,984	11,047	1,400,621	14,532	−364	−454,066	−3.2	−24.5
Camp de Tarragona	511,335	6808	1,098,515	521,286	6445	854,156	9951	−363	−244,359	−5.3	−22.2
Penedès	468,311	5726	940,599	479,734	5467	703,459	11,423	−259	−237,140	−4.5	−25.2
Comarques Centrals	398,794	5552	850,122	407,606	5267	631,202	8812	−285	−218,920	−5.1	−25.8
Ponent	361,138	5056	812,234	363,859	4881	632,749	2721	−175	−179,485	−3.5	−22.1
Terres de l'Ebre	179,508	2875	406,261	178,387	2775	320,507	−1121	−100	−85,754	−3.5	−21.1
Alt Pirineu i Aran	71,958	1358	171,312	72,276	1345	134,785	318	−13	−36,527	−1.0	−21.3
Total	7,555,857	103,214	14,949,531	7,675,008	98,309	11,347,663	119,151	−4905	−3,601,868	−4.8	−24.1

**Table 2.** Evolution of the number of inactive shops in the main shopping streets of 26 Catalan cities (2018–2020). Source: authors, according to Clonatge Comercial a Catalunya [20,68].

	2018			2020		Relative Evolution Inactive Shops (2018–2020)
	Population (2021)	Without Activity	Active	Without Activity	Active	
Badalona	223,006	5.97	94.03	11.88	88.12	5.91
Barberà del Vallès	33,016	12.73	87.27	11.52	88.48	−1.21
Barcelona	1,636,732	nd	nd	14.06	85.94	nd
Castelldefels	67,226	nd	nd	10.53	89.47	nd
Cerdanyola del Vallès	57,217	7.34	92.66	11.24	88.76	3.89
Cornellà de Llobregat	89,300	nd	nd	14.29	85.71	nd
El Prat de Llobregat	65,532	12.73	87.27	12.21	87.79	−0.52
Girona	101,932	9.96	90.04	17.00	83.00	7.04
Granollers	62,475	6.32	93.68	14.86	85.14	8.54
L'Hospitalet de Llobregat	264,657	nd	nd	20.13	79.87	nd
Lleida	140,080	nd	nd	14.80	85.20	nd
Manresa	78,192	9.80	90.20	13.51	86.49	3.71
Mataró	129,120	12.84	87.16	13.45	86.55	0.61
Mollet del Vallès	51,151	14.69	85.31	14.69	85.31	0.00
Reus	106,084	nd	nd	15.60	84.40	nd
Rubí	78,549	9.63	90.37	20.97	79.03	11.34
Sabadell	216,204	8.43	91.57	11.05	88.95	2.62
Sant Boi de Llobregat	83,755	nd	nd	12.26	87.74	nd
Sant Cugat del Vallès	94,012	nd	nd	9.47	90.53	nd
Sant Feliu de Llobregat	45,463	nd	nd	10.09	89.91	nd
Santa Coloma de Gramenet	119,289	5.86	94.14	5.86	94.14	0.00
Tarragona	135,436	nd	nd	20.44	79.56	nd
Terrassa	223,011	13.81	86.19	19.17	80.83	5.36
Vic	47,319	11.41	88.59	13.01	86.99	1.60
Viladecans	66,707	18.11	81.89	18.75	81.25	0.64
Vilanova i la Geltrú	67,458	nd	nd	12.40	87.60	nd

In Barcelona, the City Council has carried out three commercial censuses 2014, 2016 and 2019, just before the pandemics, which show a growing trend toward a retail-less city [18,69,70]. From 2014 (with 67,434 shops) to 2019, a total of 8402 different shops closed down. In the first census, 16.2% of the total number of shops were closed, and three years later, this percentage increased to 29.0%. The data were collected by street views, and shops were considered closed when they had to rent or for sale signs or other indications of being inactive (Figure 3). The shops that have closed down most in these three years in the commercial sector are those that are part of the non-food daily trade (mainly electronics, toy stores, haberdasheries and stationery and newspaper kiosks) and daily food retail, mainly of fresh food products.

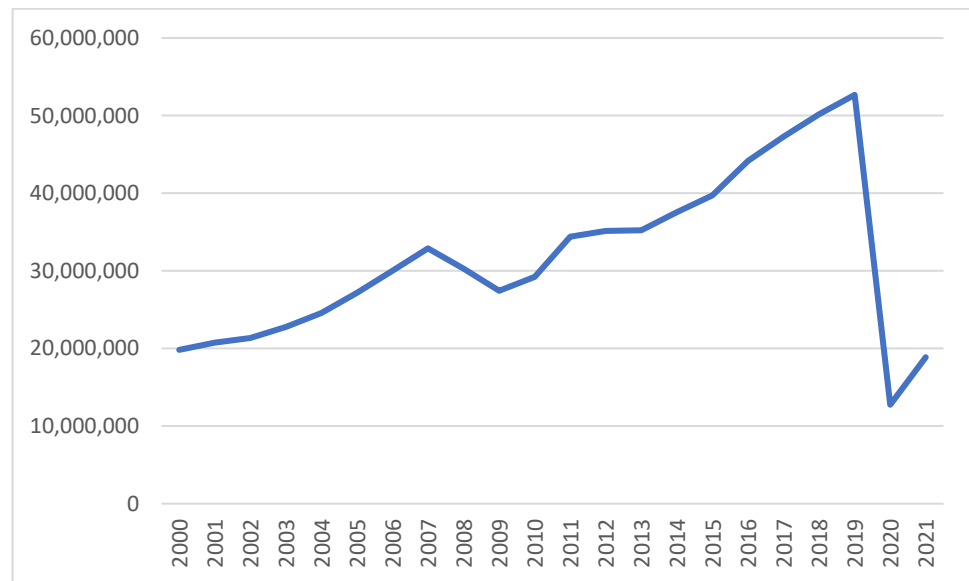




**Figure 3.** Vacancy rate in Barcelona (2016–2019). Source: authors, according to the Ajuntament de Barcelona [18,69,70].

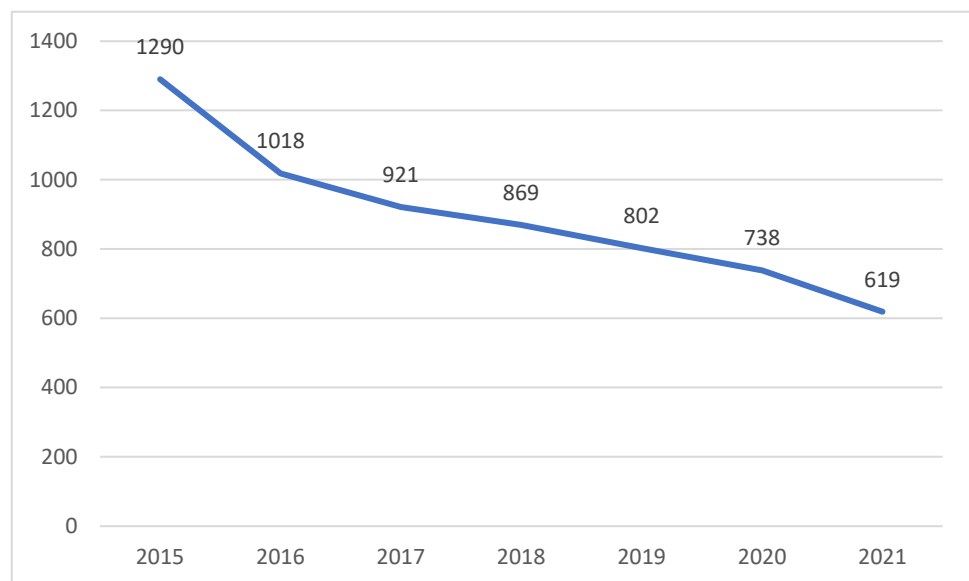
The trend towards commercial desertification has accelerated since 2020 due to the consequences of the pandemic. Although there is a total lack of official data, based on fieldwork estimates by Barcelona Comerç (the main association of the city's commercial axis), the number of definitively closed shops since March 2020 is between 3000 and 6000 retail establishments. This retail apocalypse is more evident in the non-food daily sector, the so-called non-essential sector. Besides the essential food sector, the most resilient commercial establishments are bars and restaurants.

The disappearance of the brick-and-mortar shops on the street is a trend that also affects the city center of Barcelona, the favorite location for the largest transnational companies, with their flagship tourist emporia. Small local businesses cannot afford the high real estate and rental prices in the city center. The internal restructuring driven by the development of e-commerce by companies, such as H&M and Zara, has led to the closure of several stores in central locations, such as in Portal de l'Àngel, Passeig de Gràcia and Rambla Catalunya. The closure of the shops of these brands in these central locations in Barcelona is a consequence of the collapse of international tourism [6]. The total number of passengers in the Barcelona airport was 19.8 million in 2000, 29.2 million in 2010, 52.7 million in 2019, but only 12.7 million in 2020, and 16.8 million in 2021 [61] (Figure 4). The withdrawal of some of the main transnational and luxurious fashion firms and restaurants from the city center announced a new cycle after the process of de-banking the Central Business District (CBD) during the second half of the 1990s



**Figure 4.** Evolution of airport passengers in Barcelona. Source: authors, according to the Ajuntament de Barcelona [71].

The disappearance of bank headquarters in the CBD has recently spread to all kinds of financial premises. Besides the retail apocalypse, the restructuring of the banking sector, with the concentration of firms and with the significant virtualization of all the processes, has led to the closure of a large number of inactive offices. From 30 March 2015 to 30 June 2021, 48.9% of banking offices were closed in Barcelona, from 1290 to 658 [72]. This closure was especially significant among the largest banks (601 of the total of 632 closed); Caixabank (−158 offices, representing −38.8%), Banco de Sabadell (−86 offices, representing −48%), Banco Santander (−67 offices, representing −43.5%), Bankia (−48 offices, representing −100%), Catalunya Banc (−173 offices, representing −100%) and Banco Popular Español (−55 offices, representing −100%) (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The evolution of financial institution offices in Barcelona (2015–2021). Source: authors, according to Banco de España [72].

## 5. Are There Any Alternatives?

Local authorities, as well as all the managers of the different administration levels, remain very confused about with policies can be undertaken. As an example, two strategies are selected and initiated by the Barcelona municipality with unpredictable success. Both examples are backed by a strong policy of increase of the popular and public housing.

### 5.1. Superilla Barcelona Program

The impact of pandemics has led to the massive spread of the 15-min city alternative, which could be described as a certain return to the local [73]. That is, a local lifestyle where all basic services are available within 15 min from home, by car or even by foot. In Barcelona, the City Council started a strategy to try to achieve this lifestyle based on a so-called tactical urban planning. The main basis is the Superilla (superblock) Barcelona programme [18], designed at an urban level by architects and planners but conceived mainly in the field of Urban Ecology [74].

An important aim of the Superilla programme is to improve the city's capacity to adapt to the big challenges of climate change by transforming the public spaces (squares and streets), incorporating more wooded vegetation, removing space for car traffic and parking, and increasing pedestrian streets, where the few local cars can only drive at 10 km/h. The Superilla Barcelona programme aims to address the retail-less city by promoting the so-called proximity retail, eminently SME's. The tools are those of retail urban planning from the traditional conception of commercial urbanism [75], which conceives the design of public space as a kind of promoter of commercial activities. The actions do not take into account the structural changes that the retail apocalypse signifies [76].

An example of this change is Consell de Cent street, from Girona street to Joan Miró park or the new urbanization processes in the Poblenou district within the 22@ project [77]. From the point of view of psychology, the urban program, apart from seeking to improve the quality of the environment, aims to make residents (especially families and some of the facilities directly associated with them, such as schools) the fundamental, structuring element of the city.

The neighborhood perspective of Barcelona that this program implies questions the very essence of what a city is. First, the city is understood from a clearly fragmented, merely microlocal perspective. The city is the residents of the neighborhoods and their proximity to retail. The city is the sum of neighborhoods, underestimating the essence of the city and its metropolitan and regional dimensions [78]. This concept of neighborhood becomes more and more of an Anglo-Saxon way, a part of the traditional bigger and more complex concept. Even more, it ignores the global trends of the planetary nature of the urban phenomenon. Therefore, urban hierarchies within the metropolis and with the rest of the territory become invisible, as well as the differential quotas of accessibility and the structure of the existing centralities, a historical product of capitalist urbanization.

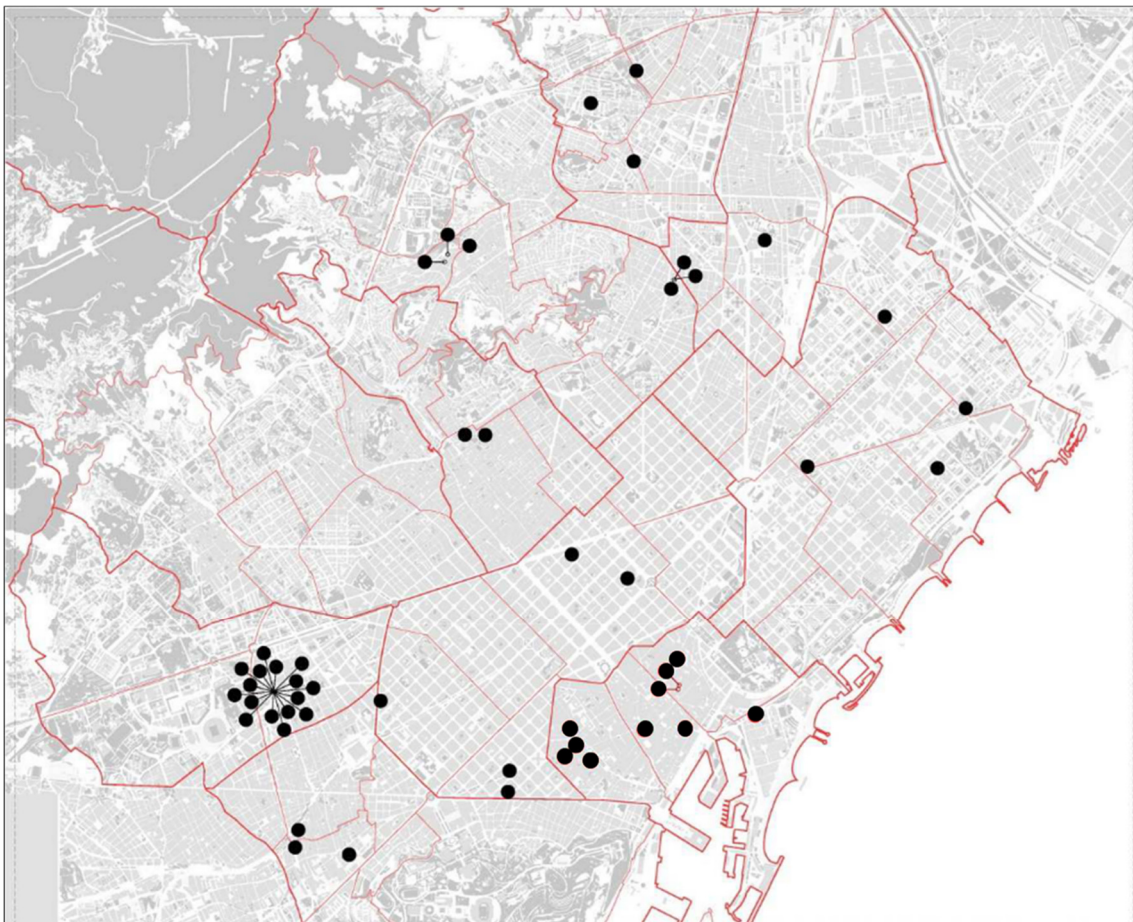
This aspect erroneously finds part of its foundations in an isotropic reading of the 19th Century city, the famous Eixample Cerdà, which extrapolates the relative but real isomorphism of the urban plan to a non-existent social, economic and cultural isomorphism, forgetting the differentiated social content of each place. The projects submitted to the Superilla Barcelona competition clearly show this idea, as there were no projects that, beyond the design of the public space, took into account the operation of the street from a multiscale, social and economic perspective. This weakness is hidden when it is considered the success of some existing superblocks, such as that of the Sant Antoni neighborhood. The increase in the number of people passing through this neighborhood is correlated with the superblock and not with the inauguration of the reforms of one of the most emblematic and central markets in Barcelona, the Sant Antoni market, after almost 10 years (2009–2018).

### 5.2. The Public Purchase of Commercial Premises

However, at the retail level, the municipality of Barcelona developed a special program with the meaningful title of "Local local" (Local in Catalan Language means a space for

economic activities on ground floor). Similarly to how they tackled the housing problem, they created a new planning formula of “officially protected ground floors”. This implies a policy of public purchase of closed shops in order to auction them among private local entrepreneurs to implement cultural or retail projects. The program states, “The Officially Protected ground floors (BPO in Spanish) formula is a new form of promotion and protection of economic and community uses of interest to the citizens of the district that must be recovered for the benefit of the life of the neighbourhood. Its objective is the economic revitalization of the premises with local commerce and sustainable and plural economic activity to fight against gentrification, which also affects businesses, and against an economic monoculture” [79]. The City Council becomes, in some way, a private promoter.

From 2017 to 2020, they bought and auctioned 16 shops, and at the end of 2021, they had bought 50 more [22]. This program mainly focuses on the devastated central historical part of the city, and it is too early to evaluate the results. It seems to be a very good, original intention, although a little bit naive. It started very modestly, but its ambition is growing. The main weakness could be the political fragmentation that localism implies. It appears as a part of the 2020 Catalan policy of Business Improvement Districts (BIDS), reinforcing the public role in private initiatives (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Location of commercial premises to be purchased by the municipality. Source: Ajuntament de Barcelona [79].

## 6. Conclusions

Our first theoretical conclusion refers to the urban planning of these new possible retail-less cities.

The functional zoning starts with the first formulations of urban planning in the theories of Ebenezer Howard and his Garden Cities proposals [80]. However, the method

for delimiting urban areas for one or mixed functions or forms became general, if not universal, with the influence of the modern architecture movement [56]. The popular rule of a place for everything and everything in its place became the general urban planning rule. The evident strength of this simple method rapidly melts away due to the passing of time and the mobility of the all-complex factors that affect the city's life. This process was clear in the rigid socialist planning of many European cities during the second half of the 20th Century [81] or even in the case of Barcelona, where the general plan of 1976 accumulated 1249 official changes [82,83] after its 45 years of official (and illegal) life.

It is necessary to find new ways and methods to solve the problem of planning integrating changes over time, even in the present general uncertainty at all levels (environmental, social, economic and political). Faced with the dominant planetary urbanization, as a world restructuring under globalization, it is necessary to consider processes as the main element of differentiation of areas that need to be policed. It is in this direction that the study interprets the differential urbanization processes defined by the Urban Theory Lab of Harvard University [14]. A new zoning is possible based on the different urbanization processes that different territories have produced all around the world. Processes will substitute land use. The landscape could be the main factor for demarcating the areas defined by their own urbanization processes. However, the complexity of new realities, the necessary flexibility to adapt methods to changes and the uncertainty of times force us to consider a variable geometry [84]. Therefore, the research must take into account constantly changing limits, with a large diversity of overlapping, contradictions and blank and interstitial areas.

Our second conclusion refers to the dynamics of planetary urbanization. It is currently assumed that in the past centuries, the contradiction between the country and the city fueled the evolution of the economic system as a whole. Today, this classical contradiction melts into global urbanization, and it is necessary to find the real driving force of the new processes. This study ventured to propose that the present global/local contradiction could be the new engine of the future.

Some large challenges remain unsolved. The most important is probably the increasing social inequality all around the world, analyzed from many different points of view [85,86]. At the level of urban analysis, a second challenge demands urgent research. How can we complete the urban revolution while maintaining the right to the city? The crisis of the representative democracy forces us to find a new coherence with the different works by Henri Lefebvre from 1968 to 1970 [16].

Our third conclusion refers to our study case, the city of Barcelona. It is important to keep in mind that the idea is that the local scale will be able to do without the global scale, that the fragment will be lost without the whole. A discourse is generated about the eminently romantic and idealized neighborhood as a space of resistance against the global, which finds in the use of landscape and image the way to reach a social pact: Who would not want to live in a tree-lined street with all services within 15 min from their home? As they are small projects, the debates on the complexity of the urban phenomenon and the functioning of the metropolis are avoided.

In the context of the hypothesis of a retail-less city, and based on the Barcelona experience, four dimensions can be identified that should be taken into account in contemporary urban policies from the urban retail point of view:

Historical, emphasizing the embeddedness of specific urban-retail concerns within specific historical junctures. The same urban policy can be a success in one place and a failure in another. The weight of pre-COVID-19 global tourism in Barcelona explains the failure of the policy of buying commercial premises. Elsewhere it could be successful.

Multiscale, overcoming the constitution of urban-retail concerns across neighborhood boundaries. Add the multiple (sometimes conflicting) geographical scales at which urban-retail concerns are articulated, incorporating the rest of the urban functions and the uneven spatial development of urban nature. Cities must be planned on a metropolitan scale that is less fragmented than the current one. In order to maintain the validity of the city and its

sustainability, retail planning policies cannot be isolated and must take into account the rest of the functions. Highlighting the residential function and also the location of territorial centrality functions of the public administration.

From a political point of view, emphasizing the conflicting interests, which characterize actually existing urban retail questions. To keep the city dynamic, it is necessary to balance the interests of residents with the rest of the city's users. The residents have different consumption capacities, and the users of the place are heterogeneous, being able to be workers, tourists, strollers, etc. Coexistence in this sense is what maintains the essence of the city, distinguishing it from monofunctional suburbs.

Finally, the representational dimension emphasizing the importance of cultural, aesthetic and ideological framings. In Barcelona, the interpretation of the changes in retail activities is made from an eminently nostalgic and emotional point of view. This fact allows for an important social consensus but at the same time makes it difficult to articulate effective retail policies to face the retail-less city.

Finally, it is difficult to develop in-depth all the social implications implied by the retail-less city hypothesis. However, we have identified two. First, the retail-less city is based on significant job destruction. The economic activities that will be less affected will be those that are more labor-intensive, especially personal services. Secondly, logistics and parcel activities will continue to be modernized. Thanks to these activities, the system can more effectively connect production with consumption. It becomes clear that the city is itself a process and not a place.

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