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Towards a Retailess City? A Comparative Analysis of the Retail Desertification between a Global and a Local Commercial Strips in Barcelona

Lluis Frago [1], Alejandro Morcuende [1,*] and David Lloberas [2]

[1] Facultat de Geografia i Història, Universitat de Barcelona, C. Montalegre, 6, 08001 Barcelona, Spain; llfrago@ub.edu
[2] Instituto de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território (IGOT), Universidade de Lisboa, R. Branca Edmée de Marques, 1600-276 Lisbon, Portugal; d.lafuente@edu.ulisboa.pt
* Correspondence: amorcuende@ub.edu

Abstract: The relationships between the circuits of the urban economy and retail desertification are analysed based on two retail strips in Barcelona: Passeig de Gràcia, a central hub with global reach, and the Sants-Creu Coberta strip, which responds to the demand for consumption on a local, everyday scale. The hypothesis is that the relationships between these circuits and retail desertification behave differently depending on their relative position in the city with respect to consumption flows. This is tested with a one-to-one analysis of the uses of ground floor premises in both strips for 2016 and 2021, using data from the Commercial Censuses of the Barcelona City Council and Barcelona Provincial Council, respectively. Each ground floor premises is classified as superior, lower or vacant, which allows the process to be mapped from 2016 to 2021 for each of the premises. The article provides, first and foremost, an original systematisation of the behaviour, relationships, and observed forms between the circuits and desertification, and secondly, it demonstrates the differential behaviour of these relationships and forms through case studies, indicating that retail desertification is the main cause of economic and landscape change.

Keywords: urban economy circuits; retail desertification; Barcelona

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1. Introduction

On 17 January 2023, the European Parliament approved a motion to create the European Capital of Local Trade. This initiative proposes that each year, a city or municipality in the EU should host a number of conferences focused on commercial space management and innovation in urban policies (2023) [1]. The proposal is articulated by the European Federation of Traders' Associations *Vitrines d'Europe*, which brings together associations from Italy, Spain, France, Portugal and Belgium. Barcelona will be the first to host this initiative, given the strong weight of commerce in the city (1.6 million inhabitants and 59,000 commercial activities at street level in 2022).

The initiative takes place in a context of important changes in the commercial structure of Barcelona [2–5] and other cities in southern European countries, such as Portugal [6–10], Italy [11–14] or France [15–19]. These changes are dominated by the progressive closure of "local" establishments and a deepening concentration of consumption around fewer companies in the sector, whether in physical shops or, above all, online retailers. This process of retail decline has often been referred to as the *retail apocalypse* [20,21], while urban geographers are proposing to call it *retail-less cities* [22–24].

In recent years, and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies and analyses have been carried out on the impact of the retail apocalypse in different contexts and using different research techniques. We highlight the work of Chun et al. [25] in which they address the impact of e-commerce on retail employment, based on the analysis of more than 30,000 million transactions made with credit cards in Korea. In their article, they point out the reduction of retail employment and its shift to other sectors such as restaurants and personal services. Talen and Park [26], for their part, point to the transformation of the retail industry, demographic changes and the increase in retail costs as causes of the difficulties it is facing. This was analysed through in-depth interviews with business organisations in Chicago. And finally, in the European case, we can highlight the analysis of the impact of retail on social interaction and urban planning based on the case of Malmö, pointing out the challenges facing retail in terms of employment, formats and demand in the real estate sector [27].

In order to understand the processes and manifestations of commercial systems, such as the closure of shops, this research uses the theory of urban economy circuits [28–30] as a theoretical and analytical framework for approaching the changes from a broader perspective. The theory is based on the dialectical existence of two circuits: the superior, highly capitalised and sophisticated, and the lower, under-capitalised and with a simpler structure. The theory was designed to characterise the urban economy of least-developed countries; however, it has been applied to Europe on several occasions [31]. Nevertheless, this work vindicates its temporal and spatial validity and appropriateness by analysing two commercial hubs in Barcelona.

This article makes four main contributions: (i) it applies this theory in a new context, the commercial system of Barcelona; (ii) it operationalises this theory at the scale of the commercial establishment using process mapping (2016–2021); (iii) it identifies new analytical variables that improve the understanding of the relationships between the circuits and how their forms crystallise in the city; and (iv) it demonstrates the differential behaviour of these relationships and forms through case studies, indicating that commercial desertification is the main cause of economic and landscape change Four contributions that respond to the two main objective: (1) analysing the relationships between urban economy circuits and retail desertification, based on two case studies, contrasting one that represents a globally central hub and another that represents everyday life scale, and (2) analysing pre-pandemic trends regarding retail desertification, that allows for a more accurate subsequent assessment of the pandemic's impact on trends that have either intensified or slowed down.

This article analyses two strips in Barcelona to explore the relationship between the superior and lower circuits and the closing of commercial establishments. The first strip, Passeig de Gràcia, is a global and metropolitan hub that captures the consumption flows of international tourists. The second strip, Sants-Creu Coberta, which crosses the neighbourhoods of Sants, Hostafrancs and La Bordeta, specialises in local consumers. The hypothesis is that the connections between the two circuits of the urban economy and the closed commercial premises vary depending on the relative position of the city's locations concerning the flows of consumption. This hypothesis is verified through a one-to-one analysis of the uses of commercial premises in both areas for 2016 and 2021, employing data from the Commercial Censuses of the Barcelona City Council and the Barcelona Provincial Council, respectively.

2. Theoretical Framework: Urban Economy Circuits and Retail-Less Cities

2.1. Circuits of the Urban Economy

This research develops the theory of the urban economic circuits, elaborated by Santos in 1975 in *L'espace partagé, les deux circuits de l'economie urbaine* [28], a work in which the Brazilian geographer links globalisation and the social life and urbanisation of territories. Globalisation is understood here as a process of modernisation based on three ascending variables: (a) the unicity of a technical system, which is based on communication and information techniques [32–34]; (b) the convergence of moments, making it possible to know what is happening in any part of the world and, at the same time, send command orders from any point on the planet to another [35,36]; and (c) the existence of a single driving force, which is the globally produced surplus value, i.e., the global integration of markets, based on money, finance, consumption, debt and credit [37–39].

The modernisation process impacts specific spaces and territories with a particular history of relations between the objects and actions they contain [40]. In other words, globalisation impacts different *used territories*. Thus, the modernisation process integrates the different ways in which societies use their territories. The territorial divisions of labour are the result of the fact that:

> "actors occupy certain parts of the built environment. However, locations are not permanent and their duration depends on the equation between the cost of place in the urban fabric and the capacity to add value to products and services. Hence the migration of fewer capitalised firms and the incessant reorganisation of urban centralities in this extensive built environment" [41]

Therefore, the differential impact and insertion of modernisation in the territory results in urban economic circuits, i.e., a set of economic activities developed at different levels of capital, technology and organisation [28,30,41]. So, circuits must be understood as the city's mode of existence. In this way,

> "the city is seen as a single system whose movement is given by communicating vessels that are the circuits; in such a way that it is only possible to recognise and understand one of the circuits concomitantly with the identification and understanding of the other. Far from being simply a duality, the superior circuit and lower circuit reveal its unitary existence and its dialectic opposition" [42]

Then, the circuits of the urban economy are a tool for the interpretation of space and urbanisation. This theory identifies the connections and distribution of the different types of economic activities in the metropolis. The superior circuit consists of economic activities closely linked to the modern, globalised economy, which are more highly capitalised, technologically advanced and intensely organised. This circuit is home to large companies, multinational corporations, supermarket chains, franchises, outlets, shopping centres and other large-scale production and distribution activities. The activities of the superior circuit make intensive use of technology and advertising to attract consumers and have better access to credit and other financial resources [28,43,44] (Table 1).

Table 1. Circuits of urban economy scheme [28].

Variables	Upper Circuit	Lower Circuit
Capital-Work	Capital intensive	Work intensive
Organisation	Complex and hierarchical	Simplified
Technology	Innovative	Rudimentary
Advertisements	Scientifically planned	Informal
Discounts	Periodic sales	Result of negotiation
Credit	Institutionalised	Informal
Territorial logic	Vertical	Horizontal
Property	SA or transnational	Unipersonal or family-owned

In contrast, the lower circuit includes locally based economic activities, which tend to be less capitalised, technologically simpler and less bureaucratically organised. These activities include small shops, local markets, street vending, and activities that generally produce and distribute on a small scale. The lower circuit is oriented to respond to the daily needs of the population, so it has a more direct relationship with the local consumer. Investment and access to credit for activities in this circuit tend to be more restricted. Lastly, another specific variable of the lower circuit is low-skilled and low-income migrant workers [28]. The less capitalised economic activities of the lower circuit emerge to satisfy the consumption and labour needs of the working class [42]. There has been an exponential growth of the population living below the poverty line in the urban peripheries, which has generated a greater demand for more affordable goods and services of the lower circuit.

As previously mentioned, these two circuits are not independent, and their relationship goes beyond duality. Each circuit exists as opposed to the other, forming a dialectical unit [30,41]. In other words, because of their common origin and dependent existence, the circuits do not have autonomy of meaning on their own and, therefore, require the opposite to exist as a category.

The first connection between the circuits is the internal or intra-circuit relationship, which horizontally articulates them, resulting in the concentration and contiguity of both activities [45]. Secondly, there is a vertical inter-circuit relationship, which shows their relational existence. This vertical articulation can be complementary: "when the superior circuit sells a good to the lower circuit or when the former uses some external economy, outsourcing tasks in favour of an under-capitalised agent" [45]. But it can also be a hierarchical complementary relationship when "small businesses or street vendors drain the surplus goods of the superior economy, or when global and national networks reach the peripheral areas and end up diminishing the size of the markets of the lower circuit" [45]. These relationships, and how the retail apocalypse influences them, are the subject of analysis of this research.

2.2. Retail-Less Cities

The concept of retail apocalypse was used for the first time in 2017 in the USA [21] to refer to the massive closure of shopping centres caused by the Great Recession (2007–2012) [20]. A process that is also known as *death malling* or *demalling* [10,12,46]. It has spread throughout the world, affecting above all shopping centres in the urban peripheries. This restructuring of the commercial distribution sector led to the massive closure of peripheral shopping centres, the emergence of online shopping as the main channel for capturing consumer income and the opening of smaller establishments closer to the densest residential areas, especially in the food sector [47].

This process in Mediterranean Europe has also meant the destruction of hundreds of thousands of commercial establishments, given the heavy weight of the small-scale business sector, which is unable to cope with this inter-company competition [3,48–50]. Particularly evident since COVID-19, studies dealing with the retail apocalypse have incorporated in their definition the closure of all physical retail formats, regardless of their location, size or capitalisation pattern [22,24,51]. In this sense, the concept refers to the definitive closure of commercial establishments at the street level [52].

To respond to the crisis, large transnational companies restructure circulation and distribution, leveraging the fixed and flowing opportunities [40] offered by the geographical space [53]. Their strategy consists of reducing fixed establishments, which means closing their street-level shops, while increasing the flows from improved online sales, something feasible thanks to the logistics revolution [54–56]. This process is evident in the banking and fashion sectors [23]. First, the establishments in commercial hubs of the urban peripheries, whether in metropolitan neighbourhoods or medium-sized cities, are being closed down [57]. This is a particularly dramatic situation in the fast fashion area of shopping centres, as these types of establishments have acted as a magnet for the rest of the retail sector. Subsequently, as a result of COVID-19, the process is identified in all commercial areas, including the most central ones [51,58].

The consolidation of large business oligopolies in e-commerce, such as Amazon and Alibaba [59], deepens the modernisation differential compared to small and medium-sized companies in the retail sector, which have traditionally dominated in Mediterranean cities [19,57]. The inability to invest in business competitiveness forces many of these companies to close, leading to commercial desertification. These small and medium-sized businesses find it difficult to adapt to changes in consumer habits (home delivery, opening hours, quantity and diversity of stock and prices, etc.) [60,61].

In addition to the disruptive effect exerted by e-commerce on street-level trading, there is also the increase in the price of land, which reduces the profit rate of the business, especially for those on a lease. This makes the process of locating commercial activities more selective. As a result, there is a tanking of commercial establishments and *commercial gentrification*, a process that has already been analysed in the high streets of the UK [62].

3. Area of Study, Methodology and Sources of Information

3.1. Area of Study

The case studies are part of Barcelona's commercial system, which is structured based on different centres and hubs (Figure 1). Shopping centres, distributed throughout the urban peripheries and the Eixample district, represent the highest level. Then come the department stores. At a lower level is the network of municipal markets, which supply goods to a significant part of Barcelona's neighbourhoods. Below this, there are various commercial areas with different levels of dynamism depending on the neighbourhood. At the neighbourhood level, a total of 22 associations of strips or commercial areas are identified, organised by the public-private foundation "Eixos" but with clear differences in terms of vitality hierarchy [2], being much more dynamic than those commercial areas that in 1990 were identified as areas of commercial concentration [63] and that correspond eminently to commercial areas of the left Eixample.

On this hierarchy of the commercial system, Barcelona's Shopping Line can structure consumption on a metropolitan scale while receiving the influx of international tourism. The Shopping Line, which starts from Avinguda Diagonal toPasseig de Gràcia and the large department stores such as El Corte Inglés and El Triangle in Plaça Catalunya, organises the maximum commercial hierarchy of the city of Barcelona, which is diffused through the Eixample and the historic city centre. Thus, a dual commercial structure is observed, based on the tourist axis and others at the neighbourhood level.

The Passeig de Gràcia, which forms part of this five-kilometer Shopping Line running from Plaça Francesc Macià to Plaça Catalunya, is the first part of this commercial system. It combines the attraction of metropolitan consumption and international and national tourism, justifying its high placement in the hierarchy, while at the same time orienting the real estate market in Barcelona [64,65]. As you can see in Figure 2, it is a boulevard with wide sidewalks, trees, monumental benches and the well-known lampposts designed by Gaudí. Other nodes and spaces appear that are specialised mainly in tourist consumption, such as the Las Arenas shopping centre, the Barceloneta neighbourhood, or the commercial axis of Avenida Gaudí, near the Sagrada Familia, many of them organised in the private association Barcelona Oberta, the Union of Tourist Commercial Strips of Barcelona.

Prestigious residential and commercial activities appeared in the Passeig de Gràcia after the construction of the urban gardens between the old village of Gràcia and Barcelona in the 19th century [66]. The bourgeoisie started living here after moving away from the historic city centre or returning from the American colonies. Now, it is an important tourist destination because of the numerous modernist buildings of great heritage interest by renowned architects such as Antoni Gaudí and Domènech i Montaner, for instance, La Pedrera, Casa Ametller, Casa Batlló, and Casa Lleó Morera.

Barcelona started building an area similar to a central business district in the mid-20th century, with the bankarisation of the lower floors of buildings. From the end of the nineteen-eighties, the banks started leaving Passeig de Gràcia and the premises were progressively occupied by transnational retail companies such as INDITEX [67]. Despite the recent financial restructuring, the banks moved to Avinguda Diagonal, an extension of the shopping line closer to the residential areas with the highest purchasing power in Barcelona (the Sarrià—Sant Gervasi district) [68]. Currently, fast fashion is the dominant sector in these premises corresponding to Upper Circuit, such as Guess, Chanel or H&M, located in the old Banc Vitalici d'Espanya building, and Zara, in the old Banc Rural i Mediterrani building [64]; the lower circuit would be represented by simple restaurants and some family-owned businesses, such as La Vaca Paca; and finally, the vacant premises are characterised by being of large dimensions (Figure 3).

Then, there is the four-kilometre-long Carrer de Sants-Creu Coberta, which links the neighbourhoods of Sants, Hostafrancs, Badal and La Bordeta and is the longest commercial strip in Europe with a history spanning 200 years. It connects the Collblanc road, in the neighbouring municipality of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, with Plaça d'Espanya, the historic gateway to the city of Barcelona.

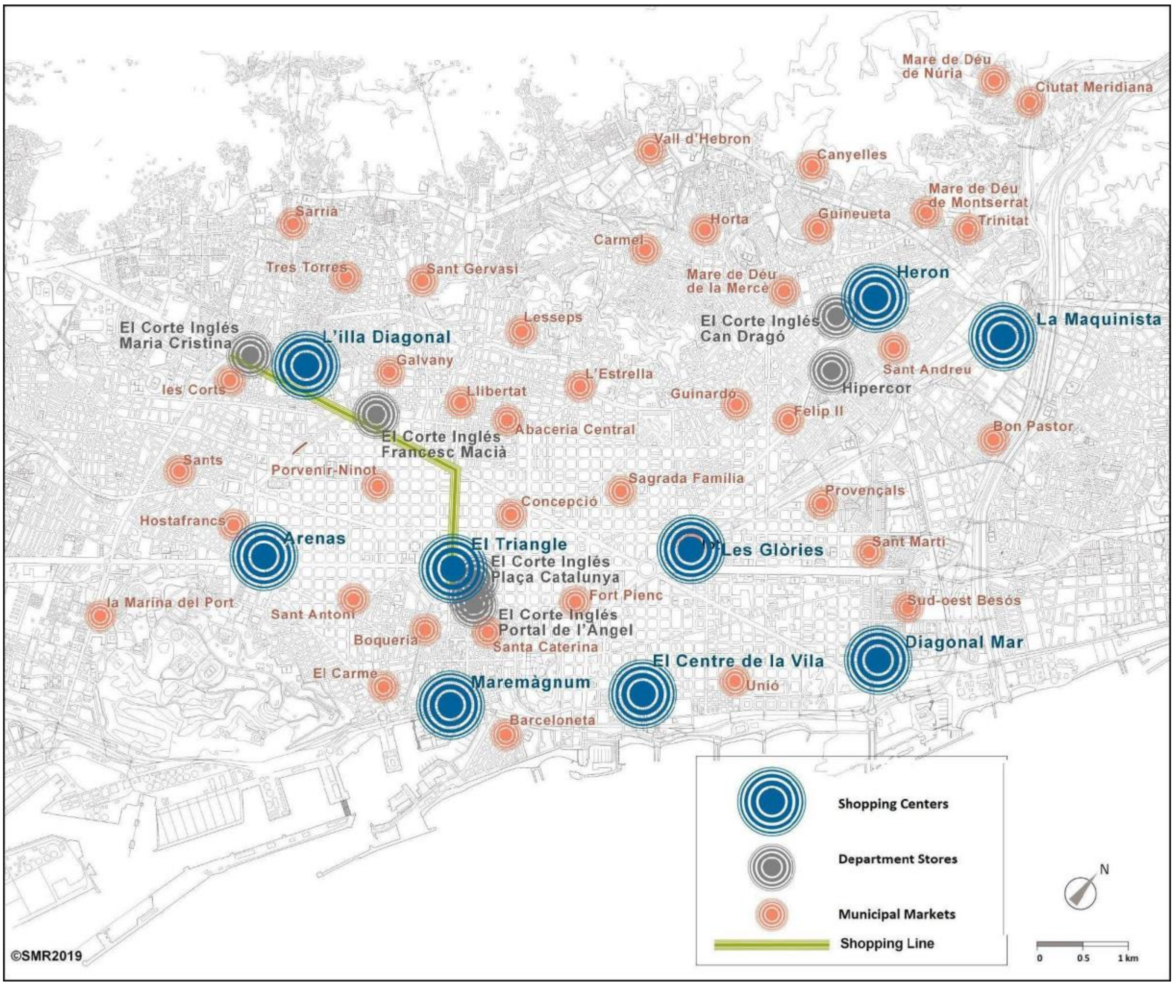

Figure 1. Shopping Line, shopping centres, municipal markets and large stores in Barcelona. Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 2. Passeig de Gràcia. Source: Photograph by the authors.

With origins well before Passeig de Gràcia, the urban development of Carrer de Sants dates back to Roman times, acting as a connection between the Roman city of Barcino and the Via Augusta. However, Carrer de Sants only became heavily urbanised and consolidated as a commercial street after the 19th-century industrialisation due to the building of numerous industries in Sants and the consequent demographic explosion [68,69].

Figure 3. The current retail landscape on the Passeig de Gràcia strip. Each image illustrates a commercial premise of Upper Circuit, Lower Circuit, and Vacant. Source: Photograph by the authors.

Currently, the Sants-Creu Coberta shopping area has more than 800 shops, most of which are organised in two traders' associations [70]. Associationism is one of the distinctive traits of the neighbourhoods of Sants and Hostafrancs. It can be traced to the first industrial revolution, which gave rise to a workers' movement and a political and community tradition that is still present today in cooperatives and the social relations of the neighbourhoods [71]. In addition to these commercial premises, the area is surrounded by other facilities such as the Hostafrancs and Sants markets, libraries, the Cotxeres community centre, and numerous public spaces.

These commercial associations are largely responsible for resisting the modernisation of these commercial strips. Recently, with the City Council on the left, and as a result of the municipal policy "Obrim carrers" (Let's open up the streets), the Sants-Creu Coberta strip is one of two streets closed to traffic on weekends, opening up a space for different activities. A policy of commercial dynamisation with ambivalent results, according to the neighbours and shopkeepers of the commercial area [72] (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The Sants-Creu Coberta strips axis on a traffic-less Saturday. Source: Photograph by the authors.

Therefore, Sants-Creu Coberta represents the typical and traditional shopping street of a neighbourhood of Barcelona. It resists the onslaught of tourism and gentrification found in Passeig de Gràcia because it presents its own dynamics and logic with shops that cater to the everyday needs of residents (Figure 5). The upper circuit of the economy is characterised by food distribution companies, such as Caprabo or the frozen food company, La Sirena. The lower circuit is dominated by small grocery stores and kebab restaurants, for example. As for the vacant premises, many of them correspond to old family businesses (Figure 5).

As observed from the description of both cases, urban economic circuits are implemented through various commercial forms according to the strips and areas (Figure 6).

Figure 5. The current retail landscape on Sants-Creu Coberta strip. Examples corresponding to a commercial premise of Upper Circuit, Lower Circuit, and Vacant.

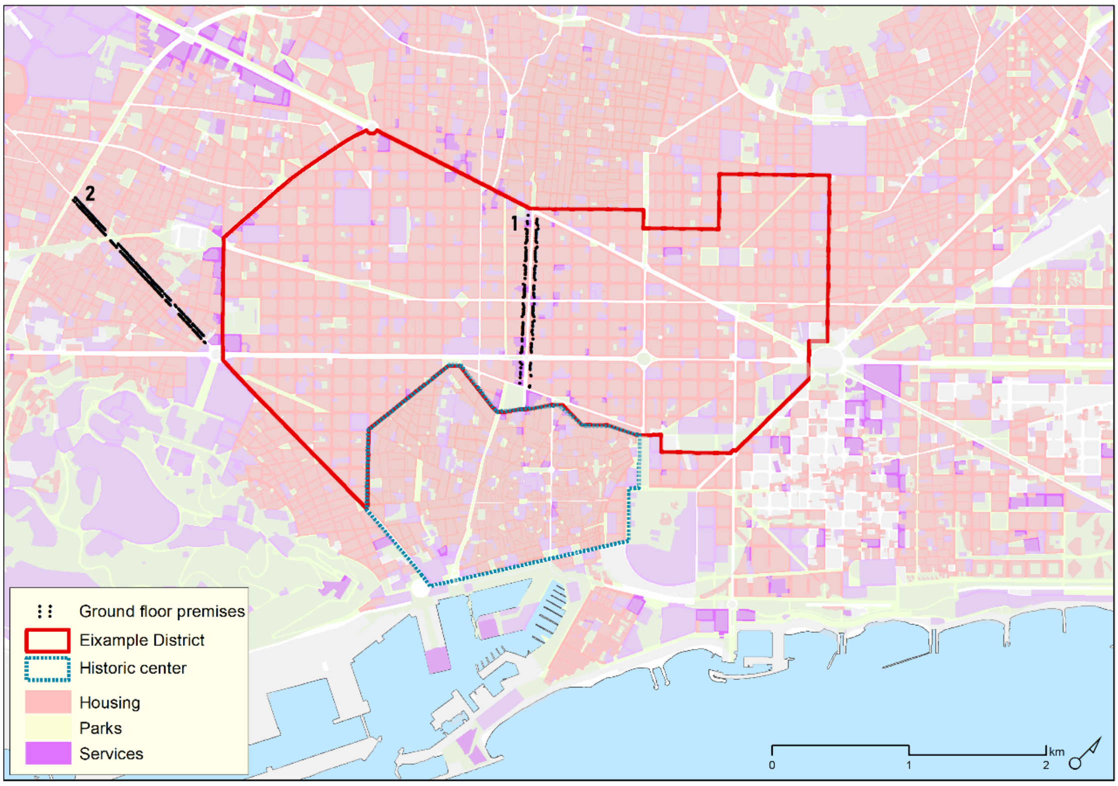

Figure 6. Commercial premises in the two areas analysed, (1) Passeig de Gràcia and (2) Sants-Creu Coberta. Source: Barcelona City Council/Barcelona Provincial Council. Source: Prepared by the authors.

3.2. Methodology

The experimental part of this comparative article explores the changes that two contrasting commercial areas in Barcelona have undergone over five years. Thus, the study gathers data from two commercial censuses relating to 2016 and 2021, drawn up by different institutions, in order to cover the longest possible period.

On the one hand, there is the *Cens d'Activitats Econòmiques de l'Ajuntament de Barcelona* [73,74], a census of all ground floor premises in the municipality which has been used extensively in previous studies [24,75–78]; the 2016 and 2019 editions had the same structure. It has been previously discussed in Morcuende & Lloberas [24]. On the other hand, there is the *Cens d'Eixos Comercials*, which consists of the 2020 and 2021 editions, carried out by the Barcelona Provincial Council [79], which consists of a characterisation of the shops in the streets of different cities, considered to be the most important in the Barcelona area.

The process of validation and operationalisation of the two databases to generate compatible and comparable one-to-one records. A one-to-one relationship links two fields from different data sets (censuses, in this case) in a single table. This made the 2016 and 2021 (one by one) characterisation possible, enabling an individual analysis of their evolution consisted of the automatic and manual cross-referencing of data. A manual review of the data was necessary when comparing the two censuses drawn up by different bodies because the databases did not have a common key field linking them, nor did their geolocation coincide completely, even though there was a certain proximity between the points. Thus, the data revealed 153 common records in Passeig de Gràcia and 343 in Carrer de Sants, a total of 496 establishments present in both censuses (Figure 6).

The empirical proposal is developed from the typological classification of the premises in two moments (2016 and 2021), using three categories: vacant, superior circuit (active), and lower circuit (active). For this purpose, it has been necessary to identify whether the establishment is active or not, and if so, to determine which sector of the economy it belongs to. In the first case, it is a simple classification. However, to identify whether an establishment belongs to the higher circuit or not, it is necessary to apply the criteria described below.

The criteria used to define the establishments within the superior circuit are based on the characterisation outlined in the study Ciutat Profile [80]. To belong to the superior circuit, a company has to (i) have a brand with retail locations in more than half of the shopping centres in Catalonia or (ii) have stores in more than a quarter of the cities in Catalonia with more than 50,000 inhabitants.

(i) $R > S/2$

S = total number of shopping centres in Catalonia
R = number of retail locations of the brand in catalan shopping centres

(ii) $T > C/4$

C = total number of cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants in Catalonia
T = number of catalan cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants where a brand has an establishment

However, as some cases do not fit this classification, two more criteria are suggested. The first consists of determining whether the brand has more than five points of sale, a requirement imposed by COMERTIA—COMERTIA is the Catalan association of family-run retail companies that brings together around fifty companies with at least one online point of sale and/or three physical points of sale, a minimum of 25 employees and a minimum annual turnover of 3 million euros—on companies who wish to become members of the association [81,82]. The second criterion applies to luxury brands not located in Catalan shopping centres with no more than five establishments in the same region, a value that can be surpassed globally. This last criterion demonstrates a high level of organisation and management.

Once the establishments have been characterised in both years, it is possible to analyse the changes in category (superior, lower and vacant) from one year to the other. There are nine possible change or permanence combinations between 2016 and 2021: from lower to vacant, from superior to lower, from vacant to vacant, etc. The evolution of these three categories is represented in percentage and chromatically—the chromatic selection of the change matrices is expressed by the value to differentiate the three categories in the vertical strips (2016), while for the horizontal strips (2021), the hue has been used—in the change matrices and the mapping of the axis (Figures 7–9).

These possible combinations are represented graphically in the nine intersections between the categories of the three vectors of the vertical strips (A_{16}, B_{16}, C_{16}), corresponding to 2016, and the three vectors of the horizontal strips (A_{21}, B_{21}, C_{21}), corresponding to 2021. The intersections in the change matrices show the percentage of premises within each combination, i.e., a dynamic situation. Meanwhile, the sums show the percentage of premises that in 2016 (ΣA_{16}, ΣB_{16}, ΣC_{16}) or 2021 (ΣA_{21}, ΣB_{21}, ΣC_{21}) were part of each of the three categories, i.e., the static situation at each moment.

Thus, this matrix is useful to observe the status of the axis at two specific points in time and makes it possible to appreciate the changes that have taken place during the analysed period through the intersections of axis. To understand the process, it is essential to ask the following question: What category did the premises belong to in 2016 that now correspond to category A/B/C in 2021? (Figure 7).

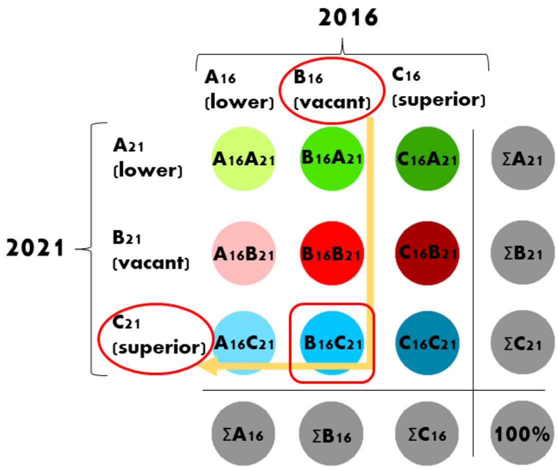

Figure 7. Diagram with matrix changes and an example of how to read them. Source: Prepared by the authors.

The sum of the second column represents the percentage of establishments that belonged to category B (B_{16}) in 2016. The different intersections of column B_{16} with the files A_{21}, B_{21}, and C_{21} show the possible combinations between categories: $B_{16}A_{21}$, $B_{16}B_{21}$, and $B_{16}C_{21}$. At the empirical level, it shows the percentage of premises that have changed from category B in 2016 to each of the three categories in 2021. Specifically, the combination highlighted in Figure 7 would be B_{16} C_{21}, i.e., the percentage of premises that in 2016 were vacant (B_{16}) and that have been absorbed by the superior circuit in 2021 (C_{21}); or, in other words, the percentage of premises in the superior circuit in 2021 (C_{21}) that in 2016 belonged to the vacant circuit (B_{16}).

4. Results: The Urban Economy Circuits in Passeig de Gràcia and in the Sants-Creu Coberta Street Strips

This section shows the results of the analysis methodology for each case study. It presents the quantification of the changes between circuits and the building of ground floor premises, as well as a brief qualitative description of some representative examples of the process.

4.1. Passeig de Gràcia

Passeig de Gràcia, as a traditional boulevard of Barcelona's bourgeoisie, is currently home to a large part of the city's luxury fashion shops. It is an area specialising in fashion (fast fashion and luxury) (Bershka, Stradivarius, H&M, Zara, Mango, Benetton, Massimo Dutti; Hilfiger, Levi's, Diesel, Burberry, Armani, Boss, Dior, Gucci, Max Mara, Adolfo Domínguez) and personal accessories (jewelry, clothing, leather goods and design) (Cartier, Rolex, Montblanc, Bulgari, Swarovski, Piquadro, Prada, Louis Vuitton), where the superior circuit is in a dominant position, representing 69% of the 153 commercial establishments on ground floors in 2021. In addition to the luxury shops, there are other complementary businesses, such as cafés and restaurants [83].

It should also be noted that this area has experienced a significant rise in vacant premises, from only 1% to 9%. The superior circuit has the most closures, representing 8/74 points (11%), proportionally higher than closures in the lower 1/26 points (3%). During this period, the superior circuit is the most affected due to the high number of closures, which are only partially compensated by the absorption of some premises from the lower circuit. Thus, there seems to be a dynamic in which desertification is absorbed by the superior circuit while trying to compensate by absorbing premises from the lower circuit (Figure 8).

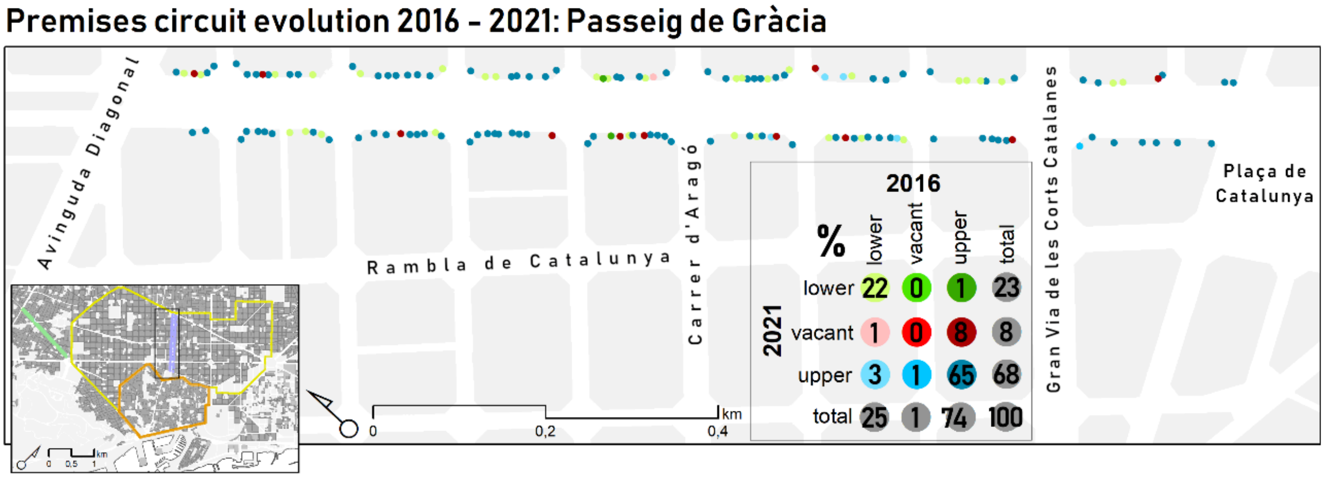

Figure 8. Premises circuit evolution in Passeig de Gràcia (2019–2021). Source: Prepared by the authors.

Regarding the shops in particular, many of the closures of the superior circuit are actually relocations within the avenue itself, as in the case of Nike and Camper, or towards the neighbouring Rambla Catalunya, such as Nespresso and Lottusse. Examples of the absorption of the lower circuit by the superior one includes the cases of the bars La Vaca Paca and La Baguetina Catalana, the restaurant Tenorio or the Llorenç jewelers. In this sense, the lower circuit on Passeig de Gràcia in 2021 was characterised by medium-capitalised establishments such as Euskal Herria Txapela, Tascón shoe shop, Torres wine cellar, Bagues-Masriera and Gràcia jeweler's, Villa del Arte art gallery, and Citrus restaurant, among others.

4.2. Carrer de Sants-Creu Coberta Strips

The undeniable characteristic feature of the economic activities carried out in the Carrer de Sants-Creu Coberta strip is the multi-sectoriality—a common feature of the lower circuit—of the 343 ground-floor commercial premises (73%) in 2021, despite the efforts of the superior circuit to adapt to the diversity of the area. This strip is home to food shops—supermarkets, corner shops, butchers, etc.—(La Sirena, Caprabo, Consum, Mercadona, Ametller Origen), as well as clothing and home accessories—fashion clothing, shoes and leather, jewelers, perfumeries, homeware, technology, toys, gifts...—(Pull&Bear, Calzedonia, Inside; Bosanova, Misako, Querol; Equivalenza, San Remo; Cex; Drim, Muy Mucho, Flying Tiger), catering services—cafés and bars—(Granier, 365, Panet, KFC), beauty services—manicure and hairdressing—, telecommunications (Orange, Movistar, Yoigo), financial services—banks and pawnshops—and health services—opticians, hearing aids and dentists—(Multiópticas, Óptica Universitaria; GAES, Vitaldent, Dentix).

Concerning the evolution of the commercial typology, it is worth highlighting the permeability between circuits of ground floor premises. Thus, differences are not massive but indeed significant: some shops change category from the lower circuit to the superior, and vice versa, implying a high turnover between circuits within the strips. However, there is a compensatory effect: the lower circuit gains three points from the superior circuit, while the superior circuit gains four points. Evaluating the strength of each circuit requires knowing its permanence rate, which is lower in the superior circuit, 13/19 points (68%), than in the lower circuit, 65/74 points (88%) (Figure 9).

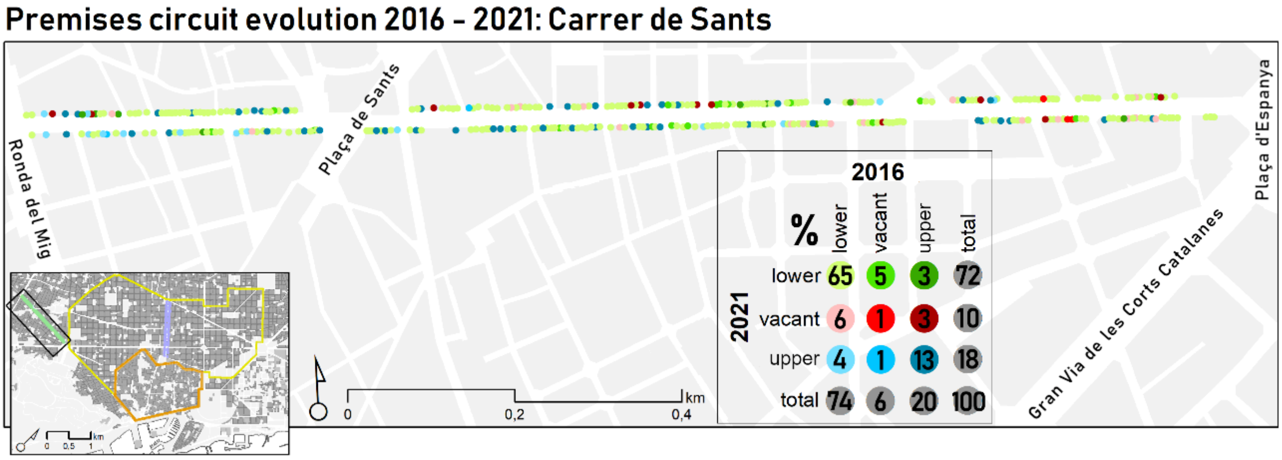

Figure 9. Premises circuit evolution in Carrer de Sants-Creu Coberta (2019–2021). Source: Prepared by the authors.

Another noteworthy feature is the low number of establishments that have remained closed during the period analysed, with a stay rate of only 1%. This reflects the remarkable dynamism of this commercial hub, in contrast to the alarming stay rates for the Sants-Montjuïc district [24].

The number of closed shops within this period is proportionally higher in the superior circuit, 3/19 points (16%), than the 5/74 points from the lower circuit. Bank branches are at the forefront of this loss of premises by the superior circuit: three from Banc Sabadell, one from Banc Popular and one from Caixa Bank. The same trend continues when looking at the new shops that were vacant in 2016, in which only 1/7 points are now businesses in the superior circuit, while 5/7 points (71%) are in the lower circuit. The superior circuit only reactivates two stores: Bio Carrefour and Ametller Origen; while the lower circuit reactivates fifteen: G&T Nails, Wines & Drinks, Solo Frikis, barber shops, and grocery stores, among others.

In conclusion, in 2021, the superior circuit maintained a percentage of establishments similar to the one it had in 2016, from 19% to 18%. The reduction of superior circuit premises during this period is compensated by new openings (losing 3/19 and 3/19 points to vacant and lower respectively but gaining 1/18 and 4/18 from these categories). Similarly, in 2021, the lower circuit maintains a similar proportion of establishments to that of 2016, going from 74% to 73%, at the expense of the capacity of retaining establishments, 65/74 points, 88%. Another strong aspect is the versatility of occupying premises that were vacant in 2016 (5/7 points).

5. Discussion

Although there are significant quantitative differences between the two analysed areas (153 commercial premises in Passeig de Gràcia to 496 in the Sants-Creu Coberta strips), what is most relevant is that both areas are representative of different manifestations of urban economic circuits. In general terms, these differences are the result of the distinct characteristics of their urban built environment and macro-economic policies [84] that affect each urban space and the intra-circuit relationship.

The general trend of the dialectical coexistence between the two circuits suggests that the superior circuit is expanding at the expense of the lower circuit in response to the growing process of business concentration [41]. In light of the retail apocalypse caused by e-commerce and the logistics revolution—including last-mile delivery [85] and the pressure of the housing market [58], the mentioned concentration of capital is still occurring. However, this process does not have a landscape crystallisation of the superior circuit in the city's streets or shopping malls. In this context, the trend indicates a shift towards a more selective and targeted approach in locating the activities of the superior circuit. This means focusing only on the most strategic locations, particularly those closely linked to higher human traffic, typically observed in the main streets [86], shopping malls [87] and areas with high purchasing power.

In this sense, the expansion of consumption and the dynamism of trade that tourism exerts is clear [88]. This is especially true if, apart from the innate importance of the experience in tourist shopping, there are also economic incentives such as duty-free shops (−21% of the price). Another decisive factor has been the contraction of the purchasing power of Barcelona residents, resulting from the repeated crises of the last 15 years (Great Recession, COVID-19 and generalised inflation). Against this backdrop, the adaptation of supply to tourist demand is evident, leading to what some authors call *commercial gentrification* [9,61]. Previous publications [51] have already underscored the significance of global tourism in the commercial viability of Barcelona's city centre. This reliance was proven after the COVID-19 lockdowns when tourism had not yet recovered, the number of businesses shuttered in the city centre was much higher than in neighbourhoods.

In the case of the luxury sector, shop location is even more crucial because points of sale have to be in streets of high symbolic and cultural value [89]. In Europe, these streets are usually the most prestigious and expensive ones. In order to achieve this, the luxury sector has a strong alliance with financial and real estate capital [37,90]. These streets become specialised in luxury brands as they set rental prices for commercial premises, thus filtering the activities that can be located there and orienting the real estate market of the entire metropolitan area [91].

There may be exceptions, especially when the business owns the commercial premises, as is the case with the Santa Eulàlia shop, owned by the same family since 1843 (Associació de Comerciants del Passeig de Gràcia, 2019). This highlights the significant role of the real estate market in shaping horizontal relations within the superior circuit, leading to discernible differences in modernisation processes among various commercial spaces within the city. In some, the physical location of the superior circuit is essential for their business success, as happens with the luxury sector that seeks emblematic and pedestrianised streets [92,93]. Elsewhere, the rising price of land makes it difficult to open new establishments and encourages the closure of existing ones [94].

The high specialisation of Passeig de Gràcia, seen in the strong continuity and horizontal concentration of shops, is mirrored in the stability of the brands along this street throughout the analysed period, i.e., little commercial rotation. This reflects the hegemony of an oligopoly comprised of global corporations within the luxury and ready-to-wear fashion sectors for clothing and accessories [95]. A harmony in the luxury sector that holds true after the effects of COVID-19 when, despite the total freeze on international tourism, the luxury brands in Passeig de Gràcia continue to be the same as before [51].

The horizontal solidarity, the complementarity among different commercial establishments, of the superior circuit in the Sants-Creu Coberta strips is weaker than in Passeig de Gràcia because there is less variety of shops and, at the same time, there are no luxury shops. The socio-economic structure of the neighbourhoods is similar to that of the Barcelona Metropolitan Area in terms of average income per household per year (38,988 €) [96]. This circuit is characterised by companies that produce general consumption and convenience goods and services, which rely on passersby. Food distribution companies stand out because they have changed the commercial location model from peripheral hypermarkets to a model based on proximity to demand, within the neighbourhoods, as other research in Argentina [97] and Portugal [98] has already shown.

The superior circuit also includes commercial activities of personal accessories such as perfumeries and jewellery shops. The services of the superior circuit are characterised by a semi-intensive use of capital, whether from medium-high trained workers, fixed capital, or a relatively high stock of products. These characteristics are complemented by commercial health services and establishments related to hearing and optics, for example, typical of a neighbourhood with an ageing demographic structure. The group of services also includes bank branches which, although they have disappeared en masse, are still present in the area under investigation.

The dominant role of the lower circuit in the Carrer de Sants-Creu Coberta strips is a result of the characteristics of the urban built environment, with a strong weight of small plots and family businesses due to the social-political composition of the neighbourhood. Despite their dominance, lower-circuit family businesses have been declining as they have not been able to cope with inter-company competition and online sales. Family businesses with rental agreements have been the worst off, and many have had to close once the owners retired [99].

The high price of real estate in cities such as Barcelona and the growing involvement of private investment funds [100] have made the real estate market an important analytical dimension for understanding the functioning of the two circuits [42]. Although it is not directly linked to the process of e-commerce, which through the revolution in logistics is driving the increase in commercial flows and, in parallel, the disappearance of fixed assets, the increase in the cost of commercial premises is hindering activity on ground-floor rental premises. This fact affects both the superior and lower circuits albeit with different intensities.

Regarding the superior circuit, the increase in the price of land is corrected by the use of logistics centres located in the metropolitan area and last-mile logistics (Ranieri et al., 2018). The luxury sector acts differently, maintaining shops in central locations as an advertising strategy through flagship stores related to the symbolic economy of the central streets [101].

On the other hand, the lower-circuit shops of Sants-Creu Coberta, which employ migrant, low-skilled workers, can afford to pay rent. Most of these shops are small food establishments (less than 150 square metres) [61,102] that the legislation allows to open until 11 p.m. or services related to cosmetics such as hairdressers, pedicures and massages. Additionally, there are several family businesses that own their commercial premises and therefore have a higher affordability index, resulting in greater economic viability. Although the ownership of the premises is an advantage that helps them extend the life expectancy of the business, they cannot compete with others that strongly invest in logistics, e-commerce and advertising [103]. This process can be seen in sectors such as electronics and clothing.

The greater social inequalities in Latin American metropolises compared to Barcelona are likely to enhance our understanding of the different behaviors of urban economic circuits in these two contexts. There is a significant vertical differential between Passeig de Gràcia and Sants-Creu Coberta in Barcelona. However, the presence of superior circuits in less central neighbourhoods is much more pronounced than in the peripheries of Latin American metropolises. In these Latin American peripheries, the lower circuit focused on survival dominates [42,45]. In contrast, top companies of superior circuits in Barcelona have also expanded into the more popular areas of the city. An example of this expansion into Barcelona's popular peripheries is the major Spanish food retailer Mercadona [104]. Nonetheless, the increasing social inequality in the Catalan metropolis suggests a convergence in the paths of commercial modernisation between these two territorial contexts. Retail activities related to the survival of lower-income groups are also expected to expand across all areas of Barcelona.

6. Final Evaluations

Theoretical and empirical conclusions can be presented after analysing and discussing the relationships between urban economic circuits and commercial desertification in two areas of Barcelona. Firstly, Table 2 summarises the relationships observed through the matrices and their cartographic representation. Thus, retention and assimilation result in three forms: concentration—the expansion or permanence of a circuit in an area where it is already dominant—dispersion—the expansion or permanence of a circuit in an area where it is not dominant—and desertification—expansion of premises without activity.

Table 2. Analytical diagram of the relationship between the circuits of the urban economy and commercial desertification.

Trend	Behaviour	Relation	Forms		
			Activity		Non-Activity
Continuity	Resilient	Retention	Dispersion	Concentration	Desertification
Change	Predatory	Assimilation	Dispersion	Concentration	Desertification

Retention is an internal relationship of each circuit, where resilient behaviour manages to keep control over a certain location, thus reinforcing the tendency to continuity. On the other hand, assimilation responds to a predatory behaviour through which the circuits absorb premises of the opposite, assuming a changing trend. It is important to note that this theoretical and synthetic approach to the relations between circuits and commercial desertification does not seek to homologate the superior and lower circuits, which, by definition, cannot behave in the same way. The fact that the lower circuit is dominant—more present—in a strip does not mean that it does not operate under the logic of domination of the superior circuit, as is exemplified by the use of credit and other financial instruments by the establishments of the lower circuit.

Secondly, this research uncovers which and what type of relationships are present in each strip. The data shows concentration forms in both axes, resulting in a retention ratio of 65%, indicating a high degree of continuity. However, concentration can also be due to an assimilation ratio, explained by the position of the strips within the system of metropolitan centralities. Thus, geography matters. That is to say, those shopping centres specialising in the lower circuit, such as Sants-Creu Coberta, increase their concentration in this circuit through the assimilation of establishments from the superior circuit and vice versa; shopping centres specialising in the superior circuit, such as Passeig de Gràcia, increase their concentration in this circuit through the assimilation of establishments from the lower circuit.

The differences arise in the dynamics of change. While Passeig de Gràcia shows two significant forms—concentration and desertification—as a result of a relationship of assimilation, the Sants-Creu Coberta strips show all three, adding dispersion because the superior circuit assimilates premises from the lower circuit, where the former is not dominant.

Nevertheless, and looking now at the values that define the structures of the axis—the percentages in grey in the diagrams (Figures 6 and 7)—and not so much at the relationships between the circuits and commercial desertification—the percentages in colour—more diversity of assimilation relationships does not necessarily translate into structural changes.

Thus, although there is a greater diversity of relations in the Sants-Creu Coberta strips, the structure is more static, with fewer changes, than in Passeig de Gràcia. This is explained by the rotation intensity between circuits, which means that movements are compensated in Sants-Creu Coberta and not in Passeig de Gràcia. In the latter, there are more uncompensated structural changes derived from a strong increase in total commercial desertification (from 1% to 9%). In the case of Sants-Creu Coberta, the percentage of premises that have opened and have been closed in the lower circuit is the same. The most significant conclusion to draw from this is that commercial desertification is the primary cause of the change. This is because it alters the values of concentration and dispersion, rather than inter-circuit relations, which have already demonstrated concentration [45].

Desertification has impacted both axes, rebuilding the commercial landscape and changing the values of concentration and dispersion. At this point, the research formulates the hypothesis that e-commerce and the land market play a role in commercial desertification, affecting both areas but with different intensities. In Passeig de Gràcia, the rapid growth of online sales among superior circuit retailers has led to significant commercial desertification in the last five years. On the other hand, the desertification on Carrer de Sants could be related to the increase in the price of land and its effects on the market for rental premises—especially among those on a rental basis—which explains why, in 2016, the percentage of closed establishments was already very high on this street (7%).

It is necessary to understand in more detail how the commercial upheaval represented by COVID-19 has specifically manifested in the two commercial strips. What is known is that, in general, there has been an increase in the number of closed ground-floor premises in the whole of Barcelona (between 2019 and 2022, closed commercial premises have increased by 4578, reaching 7180). Some ground-floor premises have remained closed due to exorbitant rental prices, as has happened in streets like Ferran in the historic centre, while in the neighbourhoods, establishments have been closing due to changing consumer habits. It is also known that the number of restaurants in 2022 increased significantly compared to 2019. In conclusion, this paper assists to evaluate with more precision the impacts of COVID-19 on the accentuation and characterisation of a trend—retail apocalypse—that, as demonstrated, began years before the pandemic.

The analysis of urban economy circuits emerges as a powerful theoretical tool for addressing urban complexity. Traditional classifications of economic activities, such as the United Nations' International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC), are becoming less explanatory in today's context. The dialectical process of capital concentration underscores this theory by allowing for the identification of uneven geographical development through retail activities. The theory's explanatory capacity should facilitate better design of retail policies. Currently, retail policies and their regulation are predominantly based on superficial aspects and classification centred on supply. The theory of urban economy circuits would enable the formulation of urban policies with a more holistic perspective of the contemporary urban economy. It would address issues related to labour, social inequalities, and the technologisation of everyday life, thus complementing the traditional perspective focused on commercial supply. This approach highlights the importance of qualitative fieldwork in urban and commercial geography, a crucial analysis technique for better understanding contemporary urban complexity.

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