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Lisbon Shopping Scape

The urban dimension of the Lisbon commercial spaces. 1970-2010.

Abstract:

This is a study of commercial spaces, focusing on the exploration of the existing relationship between the urban shapes and the design of commercial spaces.

The planning of commercial activities cannot limit itself to purely economic and management dimensions, but should be central to any debate on the city. This inquiry contributes to illuminate the mechanisms of production of city and commercial systems that can be either mutually reinforcing or mutually negating.

Our interpretation of the relationship between the commercial spaces and the city is based on the taxonomic study of commercial models that characterised Lisbon from 1970 to 2010. This analysis of its recent commercial history has led to the definition of three macro-categories of commercial systems that illustrate three types of relationships between the city and its commercial dimension: *symbiotic*, *commensal*, and *parasitic*.

Keywords: Commercial space, public space, commerce, city, commercial urbanism, commercial systems

Introduction

It was only after the April Revolution of 1974, and when Europe was already fully living the commercial revolution, that the first timid forms of shopping centre started to appear in Portugal.

However, and maybe due to its late arrival, no other form of commercial concept had ever achieved such success and remarkable expression so quickly. The Portuguese commercial matrix suffered a series of very profound changes in a very short period of time. Such changes did not only affect the physical design, shape, dimension or location of commercial spaces, but also the function and the symbolic value of these shopping complexes, leaving an urban, social and economical footprint without precedents.

The city of Lisbon, by becoming the main economic and financial centre and the biggest domestic consumer market, quickly transforms itself into the preferential place for the development of new ways of being and trading.

Based upon these facts, we review Lisbon's commercial recent history by outlining the different typological models that make up its urban grid and draw its present commercial geography. The period of study runs from 1970 to 2010.

This analysis leads to the definition of three macro-categories of commercial systems that, according to the grid built, open space systems, infrastructural systems and finally, social systems, illustrate three types of relationships between the city and its commercial dimension: *symbiotic*, *commensal*, and *parasitic*.

1. *Symbiotic* commercial systems (from *symbiosis*, greek σύν syn "together"; and βίωσις biosis "living", means of subsistence, 1.f. Biol. Association of animals or plants of different species, specially if the symbionts benefit from living together (Diccionario de la Real Academia Española).

The term simbiosis refers to the narrow and persistent relationship between organisms of different species from which both organisms take advantage. In this study, symbiotic commercial systems are those that establish a relation of mutual gain with the city

2. *Commensal* commercial systems (from lat. *cum*, *con*, ("with") and *mensa*, "table"), 1. com. Each of the people who eat at the same table. (Diccionario de la Real Academia Española).

Commensalism is a relationship between two organisms in which one benefits and the other derives neither benefit nor harm.

3. *Parasitic* commercial systems (from lat. *parasītus*, and from this gr. παρασιτος, *parasitus*, "one who eats at the table of another"), 1. Adj. Bio. Animal or plant organism that lives at the expense of another species, feeding from it, without killing it. (Diccionario de la Real Academia Española).

Parasitism is a biological interaction between organisms from different species, in which one species increases its capacity of survival by using other species for its basic vital needs. Parasitism, in which an organism takes

benefit from another causing its harm, can reach predation when the benefit or survival of one involves the death of the other.

We would like to point out that for the purpose of this study only certain specific commercial typologies were taken into consideration. The type of commercial spaces chosen were those that have had the biggest impact on the history of Lisbon in the last forty years and that have caused the biggest changes in the secular relationship between the public space and the commercial space. Thus, while not denying the importance of the traditional forms of commerce that have always made the city's grid, only the most recent and innovative commercial spaces are the subject of this study.

Each category is associated with one or more commercial typologies present in the commercial space of the Portuguese capital. We emphasise that, due to the time span of this study, we only analyse typologies which in a more unique and distinguished way have characterised the last forty years of the commercial history of the city, being it the reason why this study gives little importance to the different forms of traditional commerce.

2 Symbiotic Commercial Systems

Lisbon's architectural commercial solutions that are part of the commercial system that we have identified as *symbiotic* give prevalence to the commercial spaces that have been reserved and defined by the consolidated city grid, while being capable of exchanging physically and functionally with it. Besides promoting economical activities, *symbiotic* commercial systems produce urban quality as references at the local level. In these systems, the citizen can move as in a public space.

Fundamentally, what we have described is the way traditional commerce has always linked itself to the city, to the point of stating that traditional commercial systems are the most significant of the *symbiotic* commercial systems; street stores, the commercial axis and all kind of commercial typologies that have architecturally shown a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding urban grid. The physical shape of the city and what its capable of sheltering has guaranteed an enormous propensity for exchange. This factor is directly proportional to the intensity of relationships, also understood as the simple presence of humans in the open space in front of the semi-public space of the space of trade. Therefore, the ground floor of buildings can be thought as a set of privileged places while also being a socioeconomic incentive to the city, of which the sales network in itself is part.

As stated before, this study specifically considers commercial spaces that have characterized Lisbon the most in the last forty years; and although we do not deny the importance of some of the traditional trade forms of the city, which are forever present in the city, in this study we consider as an example of symbiotic systems the first complex commercial forms: the "commercial galleries".

With small dimension, the most part of commercial galleries are an exclusive infra-urban phenomenon. They take advantage of the floors closer to street level (the ground floor and basement) of an existing building and in a renting scheme within the consolidated urban grid, they supply mainly the neighbourhood where they are located, often becoming its centre. The open spaces in front of the commercial galleries convert themselves into places for sociability, lively and busy, places where the local community can meet and identify itself with.

In fact, the relationship with users of symbiotic commercial systems is historically settled at the local level; the neighbourhood shops, offering a certain variety, have always fed relationships with urban grids from a predominant pedestrian point of view. The same occurs in the commercial galleries, although some of them no longer only serve the neighbourhood where they are located. In these cases, in general, due to the low numbers of families with cars, these commercial complexes seek accessibility by public transport (underground and tram).

From what was said before, a strong relationship between the commercial gallery and its surrounding public space is established. The traditional shopping street and its delicate net of crossed relationships are crystallised into these commercial spaces that incorporate the city, providing continuity between indoor pedestrian routes and the outdoor system composed of walks and pathways: a patchwork of exterior situations that intertwine with interior situations. Similar to a road that becomes a tunnel and then becomes a road again, without ever stopping being one, the commercial space of the seventies is a private inner part that belongs to the street. It is a covered street, sometimes filled with the mystery of labyrinths; a unitary spatial sequence confined by glass walls that reflects and multiplies goods in order to seduce people.

Therefore, there is a strong complementarity between symbiotic commercial systems and open space systems. The latter are contained and defined by the constructions surrounding it. The connective interstice uniformly integrates the functional characteristics of the commercial space and, hence, it can be understood as an indispensable element for the good performance of the business.

The dependency link between trade and the level of vitality of the public space is very strong. In fact, the more intense this link is, the bigger is the guaranteed of success for the commercial system. In this sense, Jane Jacobs talks about a true ritual of “dance on the sidewalk” (Jacobs, 1961), renewed by pedestrians, bystanders or simply non-interested curious people who, at least in the first instance, are not interested in shopping

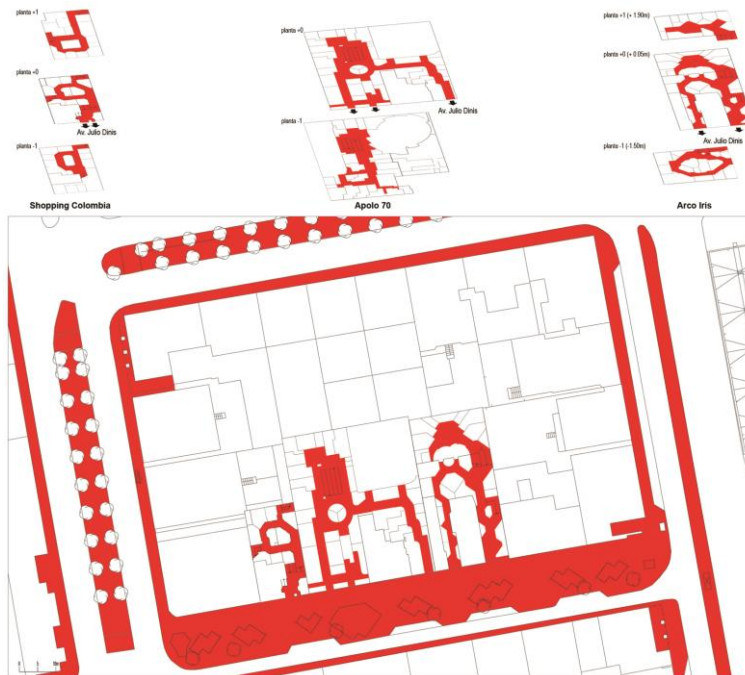


FIG. 1 "Public" tours in the Columbia Shopping Commercial Gallery, Apolo 70 and Arco Íris, which make permeability and urban continuity easier in one of the blocks of Avenidas Novas. Compiled by the author.

The presence of display structures guarantee a certain level of permeability between the public space and the private commercial space, a permeability that is not only created through the possibility of entering the trading space, but also through seeing and perceiving the interior as an extension of the public space. In the best case, the border between the public and private space is shown as a threshold that promotes entrance into the premises as it cancels out the pavement height between the outside and the inside. The crisis and collapse of the commercial capacity of the system is often due to the dysfunction of this mediation system: excessive slopes, little lighting and indoor visibility, low level of permeability of the façades, etc. contribute to the creation of unpleasant and claustrophobic commercial spaces that, despite having "free access", inhibit the consumers' spontaneous voluntary will to enter them

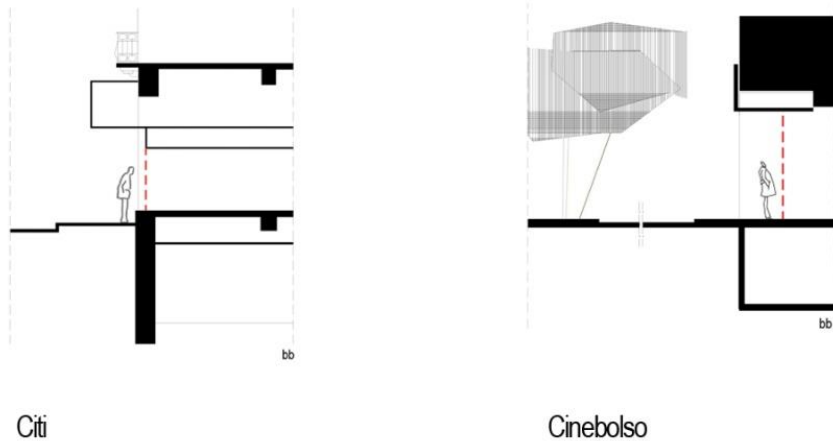


FIG. 2 Sections of two commercial galleries (Citi and Cinebolso). High level of visual permeability between interior and exterior space. Compiled by the author

3 Commensal Commercial Systems

The second macro-category is the “*commensal*” commercial systems.

Commensal commercial systems are understood as commercial structures that, despite being built as autonomous containers, show a symbiotic relationship between the commercial space and the city. They are, in fact, buildings that independently of their large size and “different nature” from the traditional city grid manage to be a constituent of the urban organism, seeking integration within the grids that host them. They act as catalysts of society and create a sensation of people and activity density, as they facilitate the disintegration of boundaries, converting themselves into society engines both at the local and regional level. In either case, different grades of exchange between the building and its context can be identified, showing a close relationship between the type of goods sold and the specific location of the building.

Within the *commensal* commercial systems present on the urban grid, we point out: the local market networks, some medium size supermarkets, big department stores and the so called “New Commercial Galleries”, besides the majority of “Commercial Centres”.

Different types of pedestrian layouts are implemented in the internal paths of these typologies that are now closed building blocks and that allow the use of their interiors as an extension of the street or the public space.

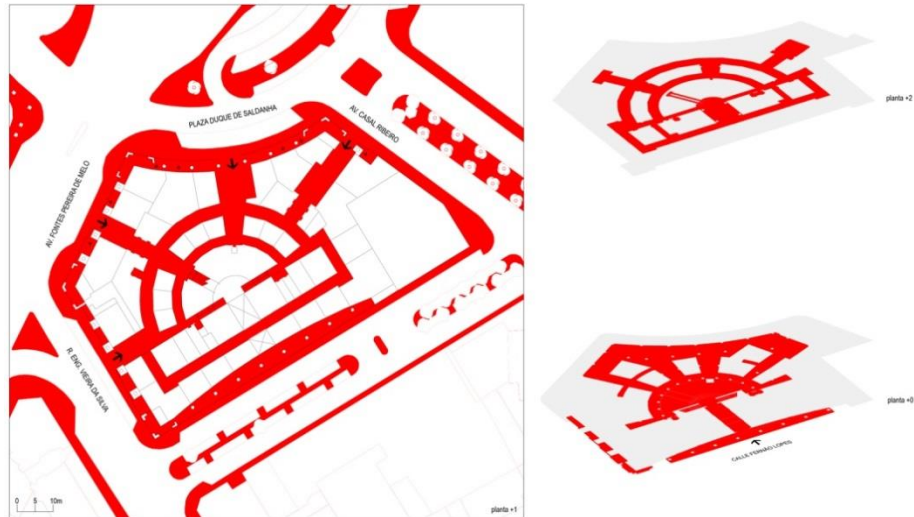


FIG. 3 New Commercial Gallery Atrium Saldanha. Permeability and urban continuity created by the commensal commercial system. Compiled by the author

This type of commercial systems includes sales areas significantly larger than those of the symbiotic commercial systems; however, they are also distinguished for their ability of stand out, and in most cases successfully, in the urban grid. (This specificity is without any doubt more evident in the “New Commercial Galleries”). This characteristic is mainly due to the ground floor configuration and the vertical growth of the façades. In general, the architecture of commensal systems includes a ground floor designed as an articulated system of accesses/shop windows that guarantee the visual and physical permeability between indoor and outdoor environments, and in this way they become, similarly to symbiotic commercial systems, engines of revitalisation of the open space. The buildings that belong to this category can reach a considerable height in relation to the number of floors. The result can be substantially different if the building develops vertically with blind façades, if the façades follow the composition of the bordering buildings, or if on the upper floors the character of permeability shown on the ground floor is valued. The commercial areas can be included in buildings that house other functions (housing or offices). In the cases where there is a beneficial exchange with the local context, these structures are in continuity with the existing business alignment, energising and revitalising the whole system, near entrances/exits, the public space and the public function of the city; the sidewalks guarantee the continuity of the connective pedestrian path

between traditional or symbiotic and commensal commercial systems.

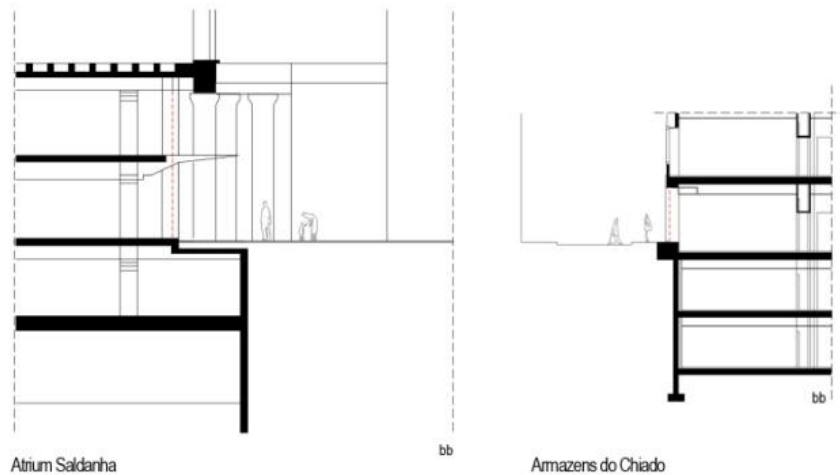


FIG. 4 Section of two New Commercial Galleries (Atrium Saldanha and Armazens do Chiado). The building's limits are quite transparent and allow the visual continuity between outdoor and indoor. Compiled by the author.

Entertainment and catering functions are added to the commercial function of the space, increasing the complexity (positively understood) of the spaces designed for social interaction.

Regarding their location, commensal commercial systems have different locations. "Commercial centres" are located in high-density suburban residential areas and the large majority are designed as an integral part of large housing complexes in new housing developments; the "new commercial galleries" occupy again, similarly to the older Commercial Galleries, some plots of the consolidated city matrix, showing the amazing capacity of adaptation of commercial types.

Due to their location, the commensal commercial systems are not only neighbourhood centres; some also take on the role of regional centres, serving, besides the nearest town, all residential/commercial surroundings.

All of that has consequences referring to accessibility. Commensal commercial structures integrated in less consolidated grids are located near major roads or secondary distribution networks. However, when they are located in high-density areas their accessibility relies on the public transport network: the use of public transport is directly proportional to the articulation of the infrastructural network itself and the increased real estate density. Some of the New Commercial Galleries

located in the most consolidated central areas are capable of integrating themselves within the surrounding grid, their accessibility does not depend on the existence parking lots but it exclusively relies on the public transport network. A good example of these is the Armazéns do Chiado. Their accessibility by public transport mitigates the entropic effects; the location of these commercial structures on exchange nodes allows them to absorb the flows of passengers whose origin and destiny are generated by other functions rather than shopping. Proximity with the residential grid, especially in the case of Commercial Centres, allows the distribution of shopping through time: it is possible to buy less and more often, in a manner that is similar to the traditional forms of commerce

4 Parasitic Commercial Systems

Finally, the progressive dissociation of the close relationship between functions supported by the use of private means of transport leads to a new model of commercial buildings connected to big infrastructural arteries that have an introverted character and are completely closed. The commensal commercial space model, when disconnected from the urban grid and transferred into suburban/extra-urban contexts, loses its symbiotic relationship with the adjacent open spaces and follows a tendency to overemphasise the interior. This is what we refer to as *parasitic commercial* systems. “Shopping malls”, “retailtainment centres”, “retail parks”, “factory outlet centres”, even “hypermarkets” are the result of this process. They are based on a functional logic that, following the principles of liberal consumption and global cosmopolitan culture, places them in a logic of dependency from mobility networks, particularly from those designed for private means of transport, and the only relationship that they have with the surrounding contexts are exchanges with big parking lots and roads leading to major infrastructural nodes.

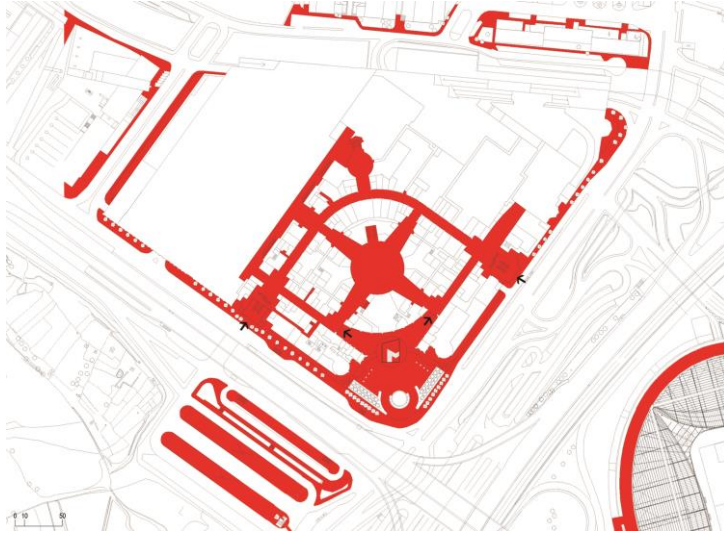


FIG. 5 Pedestrian circulation in the interior and surroundings of Colombo Shopping Mall. There is not any continuity between the urban grid and the commercial structure that transforms itself into an island in the middle of infra-structural arteries. Compiled by the author

The street is not complementary to the commercial space, as it occurs in the symbiotic or commensal commercial systems. In these spaces the street is deceptively understood as the exclusive support of motor connection. Moreover, the increased number of cars completely changes the concept of public space. The street or square, which used to be the domain of pedestrian citizens, is now a circulatory river of cars, dangerous to cross, that push pedestrians towards the edges, making it necessary to build disconnected sidewalks on both sides of the street, and breaking the harmony of public space. The street and square as public elements of relationship disappear from the building plans and the commercial activity, with a high intensity of use, wins representability and recovers the right to its own repository.

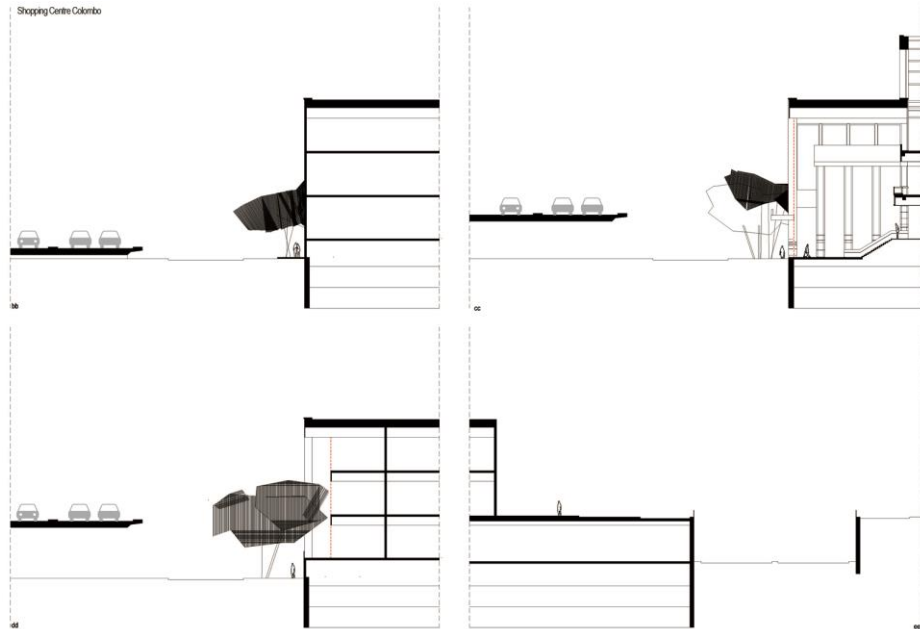


FIG. 6 Sections of Colombo Shopping Mall. The building's limits are not transparent, preventing any relationship between indoor spaces and its surrounding city. The outdoor space is simply filled with a dense road network. Compiled by the author.

New unquestionable urban elements, such as the Shopping Mall, the Retailtainment Centre, the Factory Outlet or the other previously mentioned forms acquire a character of exception in the city and territory, becoming the new benchmarks of the urban scene.

Thus, parasitic commercial systems propose themselves as attraction poles where people can consume and spend their leisure time and, therefore, they become an alternative to the city.

Even the configuration of spaces for circulation contain the embryonic characteristics of a traditional city, trying to become an indoor reproduction of its spatial complexity; the distribution of strolling and stopping places is the same as those of urban squares and streets. What used to be the traditional open space is now a controlled system of spaces, even in terms of climate conditions, which acts as a connector between stores and as a resting place for customers.

Still, even more powerful is the fabulous and rich imaginary that these commercial spaces offer the visitors, imitating the public space in a perfect and admirable way. These *phantasmagorical*¹ reconstructions, even if they undoubtedly answer the wish of getting in contact with the traditional meaning of public space, are, at the same

time, mere copies of fictional places created by a market that reproduces pieces of reality in the shape of fabricated scenarios.

In fact, the surprising Colombo, or the admirable Campera are a lot more than only big markets or a mass of trade areas: they are included within the urban and metropolitan structure as concentrated and introverted adaptations or reproductions of traditional places of exchange and citizen sociability. They are a set of places where objects and images are gathered together to simulate, with the imperious strength of suggestion or nostalgia, a dream city that transmits tranquillity. There, the quotation is redundant, and hedonism dominates all sectors. These commercial spaces reproduce the fascination and the desire for city life; they are its reflected image, its illusion.

However, we cannot forget the city's characteristics that polarizing commercial systems are not able to reproduce: cultural and ideological diversity, the multiplicity of functions and objectives of collective space, the resulting personal interactions and space for urban activities that do not involve nor require consumption. In other words, they do not express the functional and relational complexity of the city. They do not reflect urban life. The essence of the public dimension of space consists in the idea of freedom, the possibility it offers citizens to get together, interact and move without being abided to a set of rules and mechanisms of private control. "Shopping Malls", "retailtainment centres" and all types of similar private commercial structures base their essence precisely on these rules and control mechanisms and, therefore, they cannot promote an intense and pluralistic public and independent life, fostering exactly the opposite.

5 Conclusion

The conflict between traditional commercial systems and large shopping areas should trigger processes of competence oriented towards the reconfiguration of the physical distribution and the management of the commercial network, and as a consequence, of the city itself. In fact, this is where the crux of the argument lies: *reshaping the city*, not only as a place gifted with images that we perceive as positive, but also as a place of authentic functional wealth and spatial complexity; a place where exchanges and relationships between people can happen, and where the *civitas*, besides being its natural user, is also its soul.

Commerce, in its traditional form, can only be replicated in the referred particular conditions. It can only take root in appropriate surroundings and in balance with the city itself. Only a strong relationship between the physical environment, the human presence and the success of commercial systems will allow the urban organism to become a symbiotic structure again.

"There are no differences between the performance of a small shop, big department stores, a craft shop, a neighbourhood supermarket, a restaurant or the food court of a commercial space: each one has a specific function from the commercial point of view

and from the patterns of usage, but each proposal could not achieve the same results if it did not coexist with the others". (Rossi, 1998; author's translation).

Ignazio Rossi also writes, "the crisis of mixed activities should be understood as the crisis of the city" (Idem, author's translation). For that reason, there is a need for action to restore the balance of the functional distribution of the city, through the promotion or elimination of the models that unbalance the city space and the re-assignment of complexity to spaces where it no longer exists. In addition, a correct distribution of functions throughout the territory would mitigate the differences of capacities that are at the base of the entropy that afflicts contemporary metropolitan systems. This does not mean that there is a need to create self-sufficient urban units, but rather a polycentric system in which a single hub, with specific vocations (including commercial vocations), constructively participates in the formation of the whole metropolitan organism. In extreme synthesis: to develop structures not only *for* commerce, but also *with* commerce.

The symbiotic relationship between commercial structures and the city can be reconquered. The challenge is to find the architectural and urban forms, and also the political instruments that make and manage the city, that would meet the identified needs and take control of the urban production, by primarily questioning *how* to join the dissociated parts. Commerce must rediscover the capacity of acting as a binder in a newfound urbanity. It is precisely in this need of the city that commerce and social life can find a new meeting point.

In this sense, do we agree with those who believe that the level of success of a symbiotic commercial system is the ultimate proof of urban quality? Does the crisis of traditional commercial forms coincide with the crisis of the city? And, if so, can the study and design of commercial places coincide again with the building the city? Based on this work, we can state that the answers to these questions are all positive.

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