

## Shifting Spaces of Consumption: An Institutional Analysis Of Retail Policy And Development In Northwest Europe

*David Evers*

*University of Amsterdam (AME)*

*Nieuwe Prinsengracht 130*

*1018 VZ Amsterdam, Netherlands*

*Tel.:+31 20 525 4279*

*Fax:+31 20 463 5995*

*E-mail: D.Evers@frw.uva.nl*

One of the most socially important, yet often neglected, aspects of spatial behavior regards how and where goods are obtained. Shopping, be it for everyday items such as milk or bread or durable items such as washing machines or stereo systems, constitutes a major activity which is clearly linked to the existing physical structure. It is widely accepted that changes in individual shopping habits can create new traffic patterns and even alter social and cultural relationships (Zutkin, 1998; Miller *et al*, 1998). Furthermore, the ramifications of major shifts in the retail structure, the establishment of a large out-of-town regional center for example, can have profound effects on the viability and vitality of town centers (DETR, 1998) and can place the consumer choice of less-mobile segments of the population at a disadvantage.

Since the retail market has generally proved swift in reacting to consumer demand, it has generally been thought to function well, and thus require comparatively little guidance from the public sector (Davies, 1995). Regulation, when it does occur, usually takes the form of rules regarding opening hours, distribution, antitrust laws, and more importantly, land-use planning. The latter offers a particularly wide range of indirect and direct mechanisms to control the retail sector, from transportation and environmental policies which tend to favor certain types of development, to conscious promotion of inner cities through urban renewal programs and zoning ordinances. Despite its potential, however, little continues to be written about public sector retail planning policy. This is confirmed by the virtual studied neglect within the spatial planning literature: despite its uncontested importance to the fabric of the urban environment, planning textbooks often fail to devote a chapter or even a section to retail issues (Cullingworth, 1997). In fact, barring a few exceptions (Davies, 1996; Guy, 1994), little has been heard from academic

circles in this regard. This paper seeks to partially redress this deficiency by examining the mechanisms and ideologies underlying retail development policy in the Netherlands, Germany and the UK.

Developments in the retail sector over the past thirty years have led some authors to proclaim that a “retail revolution” has taken place (Dawson, 1983). The physical manifestation of this can be seen in the proliferation of superstores, retail warehouses, hypermarkets and regional shopping centers, often in out-of-town (i.e. off-center) locations. However, as with all revolutions, some groups clearly reap the benefits, while others do not. A study carried out by Bromley and Thomas (1992) in Swansea, England, for example, has shown that car ownership is the most salient factor for the decision to patronize superstores — almost 70% of car-owning households made their main food purchases at a superstore as opposed to 31% for carless households which remain oriented towards the city center. Services such as teleshopping and free buses seem to only marginally mitigate this disparity (Davies, 1984). Considering that superstores are able to pass on the benefits of inexpensive land prices and economies of scale to their customers, which one study reported could be as high as 20% (Guy and Wrigley, 1987 in Bromley and Thomas, 1992), this places those with access to a car at an economic advantage over the carless, and often less affluent, counterparts. It also adds a social dimension to retail policy and opens up the issue to ideological inquiry.

A second aspect of the “retail revolution” concerns the economic impact of large-scale off-center developments on traditional urban cores. The fear is that these will siphon off the purchasing power of the middle classes and thus further polarize and impoverish the social, cultural and economic landscape of city centers, as had happened previously on a large scale in the United States (Frieden and Sagalyn, 1989). The outmigration of retail functions and expanding economies of scale can profoundly affect smaller businesses which depend on the drawing power of larger establishments, such as department stores, in the vicinity. Moreover, small business organizations often lament the fact that planned shopping centers often exclude independent retailers in favor of established multiples. Even where such centers are built in traditional city centers, the positive effects this has on these businesses, often hailed to be a necessary ingredient

of the urban core's unique flavor, is debatable. Indeed, some traditional centers are becoming increasingly homogeneous in terms of their retail structure as multiples begin to dominate the European market even in these areas (Davies, 1995; Dawson, 1995). These factors also add a normative component to the intersection of retail and land-use policy in which values such as protecting traditional retail structures occupy an uneasy position vis-à-vis economic stimulation and neoliberal noninterventionist ideology (Thornley, 1991).

The public and private sectors in the three countries studied have responded to the retail revolution in largely different ways, which in turn has affected how the new retail trends have been incorporated into the built environment. These responses have also evolved over time. Much of this dynamic can be traced back to specific administrative structures, ideologies, institutional relationships and policy environments which are reproduced (imperfectly) over time (Healey, 1997). This is closely tied to the notion of regimes which do not constitute specific objects but "a set of social relationships that enable and constrain the making of various policies" (Terhorst and van de Ven, 1997, p. 63). Thus, the research will seek to tie the choices made regarding the location and characteristics of retail development to the regime from which these choices emerge in the Netherlands, Germany and UK. Axiomatic to the research is that each country has its own specific set of rules (often written into law), market and policy trends and specific experiences which color the relationships the various actors identified as relevant (developers, local and superlocal governments, etc.) have.

This project will first concentrate on mapping out the institutional context of these developments. More specifically, it must be known: who are the relevant *actors* (stakeholders), what are their *interests*, and what *means* do they have at their disposal to effectuate their desires? In addition, the webs of *relationships* between these actors (e.g. antagonistic, alliances) must be investigated as well as the administrative/legal/traditional backgrounds which constitute their perceived *parameters* for action. The data used will be largely qualitative in nature and will be derived from primary and secondary source material, interviews and possibly a temporary/part-time internship. Furthermore, the time factor is exceedingly important. It is not enough for an explanatory study to simply posit the situation across the different countries at a particular point in time without

addressing the underlying mechanisms which had led up to it. A simple comparison between current Dutch and British retail policy, for example, will show that the former takes a more regulatory stance than the latter. However, this observation discounts the more interesting facts that Britain is now rediscovering retail planning policy, while the Netherlands is beginning to experiment with relaxing its controls. Changes in retail policies, administrative structures, ideology and market forces must all be contextualized to arrive at academically sound conclusions.

This contribution will argue that by understanding the underlying structural developments and the interrelationships between social actors within them, one can begin to explain the differences in retail policy and its impact on spatial development in their varying contexts. The research will identify a select number of regions for each country where major large-scale retail development is taking place for investigation. A provisional selection has already been made for the Netherlands (Villa ArenA area in the Amsterdam metropolitan area), the UK (Bluewater Park in Kent County in Southeast England) and Germany (CentrO in the Ruhr area). These cases will serve as a backdrop to illustrate and deepen the general understanding of the mechanisms involved in retail development.

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