



ARCADIO GIL

ARCADIO GIL, MANAGING PARTNER OF LASBA, WRITES ABOUT THE KEY ROLE OF RETAIL ON URBAN REGENERATION DEVELOPMENTS ACROSS EUROPE.

Traders and artisans were the blood bringing life into the urban framework of the early burgs and cities by the Middle Ages. After centuries of dramatic changes and transformations, retail is still today the most dynamic economic component of our towns and inner-cities, and it remains the vital component of our concrete physical urban entities.

There is nothing as suitable as the shopping and leisure activities to make today a city centre act as the civic centre of its community. What is real in any single residential community, it is also true when speaking of large cities and conurbations. The vibrant and dynamic high streets of our modern towns are the blood allowing our city centres to develop an active real life of their own.

This could probably be the reason why, for some years now, retail has also become the most important factor at work in the ever increasing demand for urban regeneration of towns and city centres across Europe.

The industrial decline suffered on the late 20th century by many important cities and conurbations has been behind many dramatic cases of declining and derelict areas, right in the middle of or within the urban frame of our cities. But other reasons, as the lack of reinvestment, the evolution of population residential needs, the changes on the mass transportation patterns, and the sociologic transformation of entire neighbourhoods, have also been producing underdeveloped areas, if not brownfields, within the urban frame.

Urban planners and elected city officials have been dealing with this problem for decades and still today this is one of the most dramatic challenges the modern European city is facing. Engaging successful long term urban regeneration processes of such areas is the game.

Only huge investments allow those redevelopment operations to turn those areas down and transform them into new urban frames where normal residential and economic activities can bring social activity back into streets and squares.

Taking both, public and private investment, into a coordinate action is the key to open that door, and only a really long term powerful engagement by public authorities can ensure such investments to come to fruition.

Since the paradigmatic example of Covent Garden in Central London in the eighties, retail complexes have been behind hundreds of efforts and examples of urban regeneration. The power and efficiency of Covent Garden to

RETAIL AS A CATALYST FOR URBAN REGENERATION



LA MAQUINISTA, BARCELONA, SPAIN

lead the regeneration process do not lie on the individual success and attraction of the market redevelopment, but on the catalyst effect it produced on its surrounding areas.

Nobody is primarily thinking of the busy shops, restaurants or stalls of the Covent Garden market when referring to such a phenomenal urban regeneration process, but rather of the hundreds of new businesses, retail units, and professional offices flourishing all around, not to mention the dramatic re-tenancy of houses and flats on the neighbourhood.

It is not the building alone, but the whole district that has dramatically evolved to a completely different urban paradigm. Nothing of all this would even be imaginable without the catalyst effect triggered by the initial success of the transformation of the old and abandoned market into a modern shopping and leisure centre.

Plenty of new brilliant examples followed this initial one, across different European countries, throughout the following three decades. And it is true that none of them has been easy, or has not demanded high risks to be taken, either for the local authorities or for the private developers involved.

And the list of additional difficulties against the retail developments on such environments is huge indeed: much higher land costs, much more expensive parking lots, difficulty to accommodate mid size retail units, more vertical construction

required, trickier licensing processes, refurbishment construction extra costs, etc. Not to mention the much longer term for any of such developments to be successfully brought forward.

In spite of so many difficulties, the list of cities across Europe that today enjoy successful urban regeneration processes led by the retail component is really long. Just among the most recent redevelopments we can mention Liverpool with Liverpool One, Belfast with Victoria Square, or Norwich with Chapelfield, but also what Bull Ring achieved for Birmingham or The Oracle for Reading. All of them in the UK, but also in The Netherlands, with Entre Deux in Maastricht or Almere City Centre in Almere. Or in Germany with Forum Duisburg in Duisburg, or Reim Arkaden in Munich. Or in Spain with Megapark Barakaldo in Bilbao, or La Maquinista in Barcelona. Or in Poland with Manufaktura in Lodz, or Stary Browar in Poznan.

But if the list of good examples is today happily long, the additional list of areas claiming for regeneration processes still to be planned, operated and enjoyed, is even longer. Behind each of those regeneration needs, a potential opportunity for retail developments or redevelopments is laying ahead. A strong official commitment by local authorities is needed, today more than ever, to allow those processes to be initiated. But again shopping centres and retail complexes are to take central place in each of them.

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