

Vital City Form

Anthony Fuchs

TU Delft
Department Urbanism
Berlageweg 1
2628 CR Delft
The Netherlands

Tel: +31 62 1106 620
Email: a.fuchs@tudelft.nl

Co-Author: Stephen Read

ABSTRACT

Vitality, if understood in its societal dimension, can be best grasped if understood as an urban condition generated by the mere presence of people – as simple its definition so complex its actual achievement.

In this abstract we want to reflect briefly on a new understanding on the urban to frame new potentials for sustainable urban vitalities by analysing a city's retail landscapes.

Cities from time being were per se places of human exchange. Although the social exchange quickly was surmounted by the economical these two dimensions remained strongly interlocked and the major magnetic forces that drew people from the countryside to the urban centres.

Since industrialization and the spread of consumerism our cities have considerably changed: Alienation and individualism increasingly eroded the social substructures of society – the “Gemeinschaft”, community, family – and with it their spatial expressions within the urban – city, district, block. Small-scale and thus more intimate contacts diminished over the last decades (Sennett), as a consequence nowadays social interaction mostly take place on the anonymous city level, by individuals following similar interests or even lifestyles. If we draw the impact of this alienation on urban vitality, a strong tendency of polarization manifests enhanced by other large-scale spatial changes like a continuous flight to the periphery. This additional lost of urban thickness (a thinning out towards a Zwischenstadt (Sieverts) reformulates a new perspective on feasibilities of urban vitality.

The urban function of shopping is undoubtedly the most promising and attractive one to generate vital urban areas but bear certain risks of commercialisation our cities. Due to its own success, shopping often inversed the relation to the urban environment and started to drain energy instead of generating synergic spin-offs. A broad understanding is needed to enable the best and avoid the worst. Surprisingly, although post-war shopping is a major research field, little is understood about the spatial implications of shops in a larger system.

We would base the envisioned long paper on ongoing research on Berlin and the Randstad that investigates the retail landscape on a city scale. Seeing shops in their totality and as a system generates new possibilities to analyse urban form. Furthermore, the fast mapping tool of shops allows investigations of urban centrality and vitality.

Until now surprising new insights emerged, revealing a complex interplay of different urban conditions, starting from more obvious ones like accessibility (infrastructure) and human density (working + living) to less evident ones, as direct links to social composition and urban morphology. The large-scale perspective is their implementation into current and future urban planning.

Key Words: vitality, shopping, urban form