

The survival of downtown: Recreational activities with no consumption

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Abstract

The competition between traditional downtown areas and malls is becoming stronger every day. In Santiago, the planning authorities, backed up by local politicians, have built underground parking spaces, provided security services and improved urban furniture and lighting in an effort to maintain the commercial activity in traditional sectors. On the other hand, the malls have incorporated a broader set of activities much beyond their initial commercial orientation; nowadays they harbour artist exhibitions, they incorporate children's playground, organise varied competitions and provide urban, medical and even religious services on Sundays.

The importance of maintaining the level of activity in downtown areas needs to be stressed, not only because of the historical and economic importance of these areas, but also especially in Latin American cities, because they tend to be the few remaining public places where a socio economic diverse population meets and interacts. Although access to commercial centres –malls– is open and free, they are socially characterised by the area where they are located, and tend to be extremely segregated in socio-economic terms.

The research presented in the proposed paper started with the fatalistic idea that this war –which to a great extent was considered a survival war– between traditional downtown areas and malls was doomed to be won by the second. The malls are specialized commercial artefacts of globalisation –as De Mattos (1999) defines them– with a professional approach to maximising consumption and thus efficiently providing the services and products that will attract the clientele.

The research was set out to ask, observe and quantify, qualify and represent the recreational activities carried out in the downtown public space of the city during weekends. The methods used included interviews, counting of pedestrian flows, spatial characterisation of observed activities and configurational analysis. The objective was to identify the potentialities of space so as to maximise these or other uses. Spatial requirements, potential advantages, design possibilities were specially noted.

The interviews showed that an important proportion of the people were coming from peripheral poor areas through public transport, exclusively for recreational purposes. The pedestrian flow studies showed important asymmetries and the

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definition of a specific route: the people entered the downtown area in similar proportions through 15 streets, yet left in a majority through one specific street. Yet the most important result was the great variety of activities found –strolling, observing other people, courting, window shopping, eating, observing informal shows, chess playing, and others– and the fact that most of them are related to movement, yet alternated with short periods of static observation. Thus a programme that aims at promoting activities in a downtown area during weekends, should be more dedicated to the reinforcement of pedestrian routes than with the creation of established programmes.

Finally, the paper concludes that it is more feasible to maintain a reasonable level of activity in traditional areas of cities by supporting the non-commercial activities, thus turning the weakness into an advantage, than by competing in commercial facilities with the malls.

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