

Erotic commerce downtown

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Abstract

The paper presents research on the development of erotic commerce in the downtown area of Santiago de Chile.

Unlike other Latin American big cities and capitals, where the historical centres have fallen into obsolescence and decay, the foundational and historical centre of Santiago still maintains a high degree of vitality and offers an operative CBD. Downtown Santiago keeps housing the main public buildings, the central offices of most financial institutions, a major proportion of the headquarters of the main companies, and attracts one third of the trip destinations carried out in Greater Santiago. For the majority of the population the historical triangle is still the social and commercial centre of the city.

This valuable resource has been explained by a major renovation that the city underwent in the 1930's. The renovation plan proposed by the Austrian urbanist Karl Brunner and implemented by the authorities of the time, with the contribution of talented architects inspired by the innovative modern movement, managed to modernize and vitalize the heart of the city while at the same time keeping its identity. The new reinforced concrete buildings that came to replace the mud brick colonial constructions, maintained the foundational orthogonal grid, but raised it to eight story height buildings with a continuous façade that enhanced the perimeter of the blocks. Nevertheless, these perimeters were perforated at ground level with galleries that offered a pedestrian alternative grid where commercial activity was developed.

In recent years this traditional CBD is showing signs of obsolescence. Many medium size offices of professional consultants, and commerce oriented to mid-income groups, are moving out to secondary centres of the city or to the suburbs, and are being replaced by smaller offices of less qualified personnel and lower level commerce. This can lead to lower rental and land price, and eventually to obsolescence and decay.

One significant phenomenon of the problematic situation of the CBD –which can be interpreted as symptom, product or cause– is the proliferation of erotic and sexual commerce in the area. Apart from the fact that the development of this type of activity affects the neighbouring premises and the use of public space, it is considered especially important to study the phenomenon due to the lack of

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information and of normative regulations in the country. In fact it is not recognised in Chilean planning legislation, and therefore there is no information or control regarding its urban aspects.

The proposed paper starts by a typological characterisation of this sort of activity. Four types of erotic commerce are identified and described: products (libraries, porno shops), spectacles (shows, cinemas, topless café), places (motels, apart hotels and hotels), and services (prostitution). The identification of these activities was done through direct observation, interviews to local informants and review of advertisement in newspapers. A maximum of places –hopefully all– where this type of activity was being developed was identified and located in georeferenced maps

The analysis included identifying and comparing the location characteristics, type of access to the premises, advertising system to capture clients, effect on the neighbouring premises, as well as the relation to integration patterns and pedestrian movement. The results show that the four typological cases differ considerably in their patterns of location, access and advertisement, as well as in their effects on the neighbouring premises. The commercial gallery system, mentioned before as a major urban characteristic of downtown Santiago, was shown to be both particularly attractive and vulnerable to this type of activity.

The results also confirm that erotic commerce does not detonate obsolescence –which is a much more complex process and probably involves cultural changes and the whole city system– but it can have a local effect of expulsion on secondary activities, thus building into the obsolescence process a vicious circle of abandonment and decay.

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