

On Urban Planning in Portugal

José Tavares

on Carlos José Lopes Balsas. *Urbanismo Comercial em Portugal e a Revitalização do Centro das Cidades*. Lisboa: Temas de Economia, Gabinete de Estudos e Prospectiva Económica, Ministério da Economia, 1999.

The twenty-first century has finally caught up with us. Among the most frequent images it conjures, from literary to cinematic utopias, is the image of a city. The organization of work, commerce and leisure in densely populated areas is and will remain one of the most important endeavors of human societies. Or at least so we believe.

Portugal, unlike what is suggested by traditional imagery, is today a country with very high indices of urbanization. In the last two decades alone, the population in agriculture has fallen dramatically from around a fourth of total employed population to levels comparable to the United States. A large percentage of that population has moved and continues to move to cities. As a result, Portugal is progressively becoming a strip of continuous urban settlement, from Braga in the North to Setúbal in the South. The metropolises of Lisbon and Oporto remain important poles of attraction but, fostered by continuous improvements in transportation infrastructure, the reality is increasingly that of a continuous conurbation along the Atlantic Coast, similar to the Boston-New York-Philadelphia urban system in the United States.

This populational and societal shift calls for careful academic analysis. The progressive concentration of people and activities has to be accompanied by a renewed emphasis on the quality of life. Sustained material progress in complex systems such as cities requires the collection of data and its systematic analysis, the basis for coherent public policies. This reason alone makes it an invaluable asset: published under the auspices of the Ministério da Economia in Lisbon, *Urbanismo Comercial em Portugal* is a step in the direction of serious evaluation of urban policies in Portugal. Carlos Balsas received his Masters degree in Regional Planning at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, after completing an undergraduate degree in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. The author's academic and life experience in a middle-sized Portuguese city most certainly

inspired his masters thesis, "Retail Planning in Portugal: Implications for City Center Livability." The current book is an analysis of the impact of new commercial offers in retail commerce in city-centers, based on the case studies of Aveiro and Coimbra.

The difficulties of retail commerce in urban downtown areas are well known, ranging from accessibility issues to the loss of amenities and attractiveness. The poor and deserted downtowns of many large US cities are a vivid reminder of this problem. In Portugal the problem is intensified by recent migration towards the cities and, especially, the emergence of powerful new forms of commerce such as shopping malls and the aptly called "hypermarkets." The greater accessibility and sheer scale of the aforementioned outlets, evident in their designation, have turned them into powerful economic players, with significant economic and social consequences.

In contrast, public authorities in Portugal have been slow to formulate a public policy response to these developments. When present, that response is restricted to issues such as licensing and opening hours of new outlets. Retail planning has been mostly a reactive response to new realities rather than a process of analysis and forecasting that serves as the basis to direct future developments. In-depth studies in retail planning have emerged only slowly in tandem with the increased availability of specific funds from the European Union. This study thus constitutes a timely eye opener, emphasizing the importance of planning and analysis for the future of city-centers in Portugal. Its objectives are clearly stated: identify the policy areas in which local authorities can contribute to city-center livability; analyze city-center planning in Aveiro and Coimbra within the "4 A's" framework (accessibility, attractiveness, animation, and action); finally, develop a body of useful basic principles to improve city-center livability. The methodology starts from a bibliographical and data analysis and proceeds to the study of the main characteristics of actual retail planning policies in Aveiro and Coimbra. Finally, the circle is closed with a series of interviews with key policy-makers in Portugal, the United Kingdom (Association of Town Centre Management) and the United States (International Downtown Association), who present experienced personal evaluations of retail planning policies.

The study's main conclusion is that retail commerce is an integral part of city living, making retail planning a critical element in local policy-making. The view of Portugal as a country of small retail outlets is progressively

disappearing, a consequence of new consumer habits, improved means of transportation and a populational move to suburban areas. The Portuguese citizen shows a desire for mobility that is met by improved transportation and larger commercial outlets outside urban centers, within a public policy framework often lacking coherence. Retailers may have an active role in preventing the decay of urban centers, at the same time as furthering their private economic interests. Some options are "bottom-up" associations, similar to the Business Improvement Districts in the US or mixed public-private initiatives like the Town Centre Management Schemes in England. Here as elsewhere, the search for profit can be a motor of efficiency and innovation. In Portugal, the associative process is still at its beginning and public authorities have taken the lead, fostering undesirable expectations of financial boons. Carlos Balsas' conclusion that the impact of these programs has been very limited comes as no surprise.

Urbanismo Comercial em Portugal opens with an introductory chapter presenting the issue at hand, the objective of the analysis and the method employed. Chapter 2 surveys the conditioning factors of retail commerce development in Portugal in the nineties. From a description of its growth and complexification, the author moves to the detailing of different forms of intervention by public authorities. One of the important contributions is the comparison of the Portuguese "Baixa" with the American downtown and the European city center. National revitalization strategies such as the Business Improvement Districts and the Town Centre Management Schemes in the United States and the United Kingdom are used as the background to analyze current Portuguese projects. Chapter 4 analyzes the case studies, Coimbra and Aveiro, in light of the conceptual framework and international experience. The book closes with conclusions and recommendations. The appendices present the legal background and a complete list of approved retail planning projects in Portugal. The content of the book, namely its completeness insofar as background information, certainly contributes to making this work a timely reference for policy-makers and urban planners, practitioners as well as researchers.

One of the most praiseworthy achievements of this book is the balance between the closeness to the object given by the case-study approach and the conceptual clarification provided by the theoretical literature. Placing the experience of Portuguese cities in an international context is certainly one of

the most important contributions of this study. The experience of the United States, in particular, provides invaluable clues for the “do’s and don’ts” of retail planning, as developments in the United States tend to precede those in other industrial countries. The emphasis in middle-size cities is particularly welcome: a large fraction of the urban population in Portugal resides in these cities, whose problems differ from those of metropolises such as Lisbon. The study’s main shortcoming, as acknowledged by the author himself, is the absence of a quantitative analysis to complement the qualitative analysis. The completion of the quantitative analysis had to be put on hold until data from European Union sponsored projects become publicly available. The current study gives us many reasons to look forward to that.

As Elizabeth Jackson, President of the International Downtown Association, states in the preface: “The thesis puts forward a strong appeal to the rebirth of city-centers, based neither in government intervention nor in a laissez-faire capitalism.” *Urbanismo Comercial em Portugal* is an innovative study, a serious step towards systematic policy analysis in a context of incipient urban planning in Portugal. This and future studies by Carlos Balsas promise to help channel the rising interest in urban issues in Portugal towards a higher quality of urban living.