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THE EVOLUTION OF OLD SHOPPING CENTRES IN THE TOWN CENTRE OF BRAGA, PORTUGAL

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Abstract: Cities are innovative places. Retail is one of the key features that better define them. In this paper, we study one of the most dynamic retail concepts — shopping centres. Using a case study methodology, we analyse the main features that characterise the evolution of shopping centres located in the main town centre of Braga, a medium-sized city in the northwest of Portugal. Data from fieldwork conducted by the author in 2017 in 16 shopping centres was compared with pre-existent databases from 1995 and 2008. Findings of this paper are in line with previous studies on the same city and they show that a marked downward trend is affecting the large majority of the shopping centres analysed, which is reflected on the high vacancy rates and changes in the importance of some retail categories, causing structural modifications in the tenant mix and questioning the economic viability of several of these retail precincts.

Key Words: *shopping centres, dead malls, retail categories, Portugal.*

Introduction

Looking at cities, one may find a place where innovative and evolutionary processes take place. Effectively implemented in full or not, for some time, urban agglomerations have been considered for urban experiments in order to improve the living conditions of their inhabitants. Examples can be found in models such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden cities (Beevers 1988, Allmond 2017) or Le Corbusier's ideas of an ideal city expressed in the plan of the *Ville Radieuse* and implemented in Brasilia, Brazil, and Chandigarh, India (Lehmann 2016). However, these are not always in-depth changes. As mentioned by Hall (2001: 2), changes are "gradual [...] through processes of accretion, addition or demolition"; adding to that, among others, academics have been using the following terms to describe some of these changes: "… from industrial to post-industrial, from modern to post-modern, from Fordist to post-Fordist" (Hall 2001: 3). These changes are observable in a wide range of sectors that characterise cities. Retail is one of these sectors and it is decisive in the structuring of space (Barata-Salgueiro 1989). Urban retail systems ensure the supply of the population — whether residents, daily commuters or occasional passers-by, such as tourists. Some changes in society, such as increased purchasing power and time available for leisure, as well as the massification of tourism among a wide range of interconnected features, have supported the rising importance of consumption, seen as a combination of both the purchase of products and the enjoyment of the whole environment built around that very purchase. Besides, retail has always performed an important social function (Wu and Lo 2018). For instance, traditional retail markets were important places for encounters of local residents (Guimarães 2018a), strengthening social bonds in local communities. Strongly characterised by innovation, retail has evolved over time (Bromley and Thomas 1993, Reynolds and Cuthbertson 2004). Within this evolution, one of the trademarks of the sector is the appearance of new retail concepts. Supermarkets, hypermarkets, shopping arcades, department stores, retail parks, shopping centres are all part of the innovation path of retail. Although some of these concepts have greater deployment in certain countries or regions, they are well-known by the majority of the world's population. In this paper, we will devote our attention to shopping centres, one of the most innovative of all retail concepts. This is a concept endowed with great dynamic and mutability; and since its inception and dissemination in the second half of the 20th century, shopping centres have been spreading across the world and at the top of consumer preferences. However, they are not immune to failure and they can decline (Guimarães 2018b). In the face of the rather scarce but growing body of literature devoted to the evolution of shopping centres, especially the one concerning dead malls and demalling (Mccusker Feronti 2003, Cavoto 2016), this article aims to provide new data regarding a specific case study and to contribute to the scientific literature on the subject.

Using Braga, a medium-sized city in the north of Portugal, we will analyse the evolution of shopping centres in this city's main historical centre. The paper is organised as follows: after this introduction, the next section discusses the theoretical framework; the third section introduces the methodology employed; the following section presents the analysis of our case study; and finally results are discussed and conclusions withdrawn. The research developed in this paper is anchored in the following research question: "What are the main features of the evolution of shopping centres in the main historical town centre of Braga?" By means of the significant transformations felt in the retail fabric of the analysed city, our research hypothesis is the following: "Shopping centres located in the main centre of Braga have gone through a negative evolution, losing retailers. This evolution has led to the decline of a large part of the retail precincts and to the consequent loss of their economic viability".

Literature Review

Understanding the process of evolution of cities is by no means an easy task, perhaps impossible if one tries to summarise it in a single paper. A wide range of reasons explain the appearance of cities, either for trade, military, religious or other reasons (Kotkin 2011), seen individually or together. Nevertheless, what is consensual is the idea that each city is unique and it "has an individual character" (Pacione 2005: 2). Consequently, also the reasons for the spatial growth of each city are difficult to generalise as global assumptions. Nonetheless, abundant literature has been devoted in the theorization of cities, their internal structure and evolution (Legates and Stout 1996), which has led to broader explanations such as Carter's (1995) referring to three causes of urbanisation: (i) economic development; (ii) agglomeration economies; (iii) political, cultural and social influence. Within this field of research one should also enhances the Chicago School from the beginning of the 20th century and the models that emerge from it and the more recent attempt from California researchers being more focused on the relation between urbanisation and capital (Dear and Scott 1981). Noting the difficulty of obtaining wide generalisations and theories about the evolution of cities, even if centered in a specific period of time, we share Hall's (2001: 4) view: "the diversity of city types and processes of urbanisation cannot be reduced to a simple, linear evolutionary process". Thus, aware that the complexity of cities forces us to choose some paths and discard others, we will restrict ourselves to specific elements that concern retail, namely shopping centres, our object of study. Although the designation of shopping centre actually covers a substantial variety of retail precincts, a widely disseminated definition is the one established in the 1950s by the Urban Land Institute:

> "A group of architecturally unified commercial establishments built on a site that is planned, developed, owned, and managed as an operating unit related by its location, size, and type of shops to the trade area that it serves" (Urban Land Institute 1957, as cited in Scharoun 2012: 7).

Following Beaujeu-Garnier's (1980) discussion, cities can be seen simultaneously as subject and object. As a subject, because cities influence and shape their inhabitants. As an object, because cities attract inhabitants and supply them with the amenities they need to live, such as retail and public services and facilities. Although it is not the only retail concept that ensures this, shopping centres fit here by supplying the population with the goods they need. Aware of the urban development that has characterised most of the developed world for several decades, retail promoters have been using the urban space for the reproduction of capital. As Harvey (1985: 13) stated, "the urban process implies the creation of a material physical infrastructure for production, circulation, exchange, and consumption". This partially explains the significant expansion of shopping centres, especially peripheral retail precincts due to great road connections and increasing motorisation rates.

Although with some noteworthy differences between the evolution of shopping centres in the US and in Europe, in both contexts, the urban space and its added value is appropriated by retail developers. According to Clark (1982), significant urban growth can be traced back to the UK, at the time of the industrial and urban revolutions. In most Western European countries, urban growth was a corollary of industrialisation. In the US, Clark (1982) states that urban growth was due to the industrial changes in the East and to the settlements' dynamics in the West, and its patterns can be clearly defined by the existing means of transport. This historical background has clearly influenced the dissemination of shopping centres.

Across North America, the dissemination of shopping centres is closely connected with suburbanisation (Kellerman 1985). Suburbanisation, which characterised the growth of several American cities throughout the 20th century, enabled and strengthened the necessary conditions for shopping centres to be built in peripheral locations, to the point where they began to be a typical feature in the landscape of those regions. Nevertheless, this development was also linked with the structural issues of the consolidated urban fabric of town centres, particularly with the difficulty of moving and parking in that area associated with the growth in the motorisation rate (Balsas 1999). The first planned peripheral shopping centre — Country Club Plaza — was developed in 1923 near Kansas City (Beaujeu-Garnier 1980). Since then, the shopping centre industry has evolved significantly. According to Jayne (2006: 67), more recently, new shopping centres opened in the 1980s and 1990s "extended the cultural significance of suburban shopping […] a safe, privatised, highly controlled version of the crowded street, free from 'contamination' and benign disorder". Furthermore, they "could be replicated in any part of the city and constructed to meet the needs of middle-class consumers" (Jayne 2006: 67). Besides being a commercial space, shopping centres have acquired significant relevance in other aspects of everyday life in North America. In some cases, they even possess the same representation as town centres. To this purpose, as stated by Staeheli and Mitchell (2006: 977), "in North American cities, shopping malls are heralded as the new town square". In the same way, Pyyry (2016) enhances the role of shopping centres as social spaces. Within this understanding, Howard (2007) highlighted the role of leisure as an important feature of shopping centres.

In Europe, the process was initially slower, not only due to the less intense expression of the process of suburbanisation, but also because of the lower economic capacity following the Second World War (Melo et al. 2001). Additionally, urban sprawl has not reached the same level as in North America, which has led to a more constrained pattern of shopping centres, quite often in the vicinity of the main town centres. In time, peripheral shopping centres did begin to be a common commercial feature in the landscape of several European countries. The first modern European shopping centre opened in the 1950s in Sweden (International Council of Shopping Centers and European Shopping Centre Trust 2008). Since then, they have spread throughout Europe, anchored in some urban and social transformations, such as suburbanisation, the increase in the activity rate, the rise of purchasing power and the growth of the motorisation rate (Pereira et al. 2002). Possibly the most studied country in Europe regarding this aspect is the United Kingdom, where several large-scale peripheral shopping centres were built during the 1980s complying with liberal non-restrictive retail planning policies (Adams et al. 2002). This evolution is not exclusive of the UK and one may find similarities to what happened in Sweden (Forsberg 1998), Denmark (Sorensen 2004), and other European countries (Guimarães 2016a), where the process of retail decentralisation also occurred with the same delay regarding North America.

Overall, the decentralisation of retail through the appearance and dissemination of shopping centres caused impacts in the pre-existent retail structure of town centres. Although some authors state that this relation deserves further evidences and discussion (Cachinho 2005), some literature states that these impacts do exist (Howard 1993, Balsas 2001, Observatório do Comércio 2002). Guy (2007) illustrates how the opening of peripheral shopping centres will lead to the decline of the commercial environment of town centres. However, although these impacts are felt in the entire retail structure, some retail concepts may be more affected than others. As analysed by Guimarães (2014), the opening of new large peripheral shopping centres may not only impact the traditional street retail stores in town centres but also the existing shopping centres in the surroundings. This conclusion is in line with Tsai (2010), according to whom the "massive overdevelopment leads to mutual cannibalisation among shopping malls". In fact, in face of the evolution in retail, shopping centres are not invulnerable and they can lose their capacity to attract consumers, losing viability as a retail precinct, and therefore declining. The term dead mall has been used to characterise this evolution (Smith 2014, Ferreira 2015, Garfield 2017). It refers to shopping centres that lost a substantial part of their vitality and viability, although they may still be operating. It is a concept that originated in North America and it describes the evolution of a shopping centre to the point where it is considered dead due to the aforementioned process — the regular opening of new shopping centres that may cause a decrease of the vitality and consequent viability of older shopping centres (Mccusker Feronti 2003). Also related with the negative evolution of shopping centres, it is the uprising subject of 'demalling', which refers to the transformation of declined or declining shopping centres into something else (Cavoto 2016). This process also arose and gained relevance in the US, a geographical context where it is still of particular importance (Rossi 2014). While the subject of dead malls alone mainly concerns in providing the status of the viability of shopping centres, demalling concerns the implemented strategies to overcome the decline of shopping centres (Sobel et al. 2002, Techentin 2005), of which the existent literature stresses the transformation of enclosed retail precinct into open-air shopping areas (Rosenbaum et al. 2018). Because of the size of the area occupied by shopping centres, because of their location, whether central or peripheral and because in some cases they play a social function within the local community (Kusumowidagdo et al. 2015), the decline of shopping centres is an important topic of discussion in urban planning. This evolution of retail seems quite anarchical or, at least, left to the will of retail developers, who, because they are private stakeholders, end up making use of the territory without great concern for the impacts their actions might have. However, in this scenario, public authorities are not oblivious to their responsibility to care for the public interest. This intervention of the public sector on retail is performed through retail planning policies, understood "as the regulation carried out on the retail sector which must reflect, directly or indirectly, the national development strategy of the sector" (Guimarães 2016a: 377). These retail-related policies have long been established in the European context (Dawson 1979, Davies 1995). In addition to being planning measures, these policies are the result of political choices. Thus, they have fluctuated between a greater restrictiveness and a greater permeability and deregulation (Guimarães 2016c). In fact, when permeability and deregulation are more noticeable, retail ends up experiencing periods of true innovation and development (Guimarães 2016b). Hence, the appearance and dissemination of retail concepts may not be seen merely as a consequence of the natural evolution of the sector and they should be framed as part of a choice made by the public sector that has fostered the conditions for such an evolution to take place.

Methodology

This paper focuses on shopping centres, a retail concept that has significant dynamism, as we have already mentioned. Using a case study methodology, the author aims to analyse the evolution of this retail concept in the city of Braga, a medium-sized city located in the northwest of Portugal. According to data from the latest national census (Statistics Portugal 2018), the population in the municipality went from little more than 140 thousand people in 1991 to more than 180 thousand in 2011.

Sampling is a key issue in research and researchers are faced with several constraints (Burgess 1997), and thus must justify their choices. Therefore, we have chosen to sample the area where the fieldwork was going to be developed. Other shopping centres are still operating in Braga but because the focus of this paper was the main town centre, the fieldwork was only developed in this area in line with other studies already developed on the city (Guimarães 2014, 2015, 2016b). Thus, our analysis will focus on the 16 shopping centres that exist in that area. The dataset is composed of information from three different years: 1995, 2008, and 2017. Due to the scarcity of data on retail, data from 2017 was collected in person by the author through direct observation (as discussed by Quivy and Campenhoudt 2005). Our subject of analysis — the retail fabric within the shopping centres we analysed — did not play any role in the data collection. The exception is the data from 1995, which was collected by the Braga Chamber of Commerce (Associação Comercial de Braga 1995) and the data from 2008, previously collected by the author (Guimarães 2009). In the case study that is analysed henceforth, three other shopping centres are mentioned and included in the discussion. This is only due to their relevance in the overall retail fabric of Braga, which justifies their relevance for the evolution of the sector in that city. The classification of retail stores used in this paper is based on Guy's study (1998) on the subject.

Results

Background

The construction of shopping centres in Portugal occurred with some delay when compared to the same process in North America and even in Europe. This delay is explained by intertwined social and political reasons (Barata-Salgueiro 1996). Until 1974, the country was under the influence of a dictatorial regime that favoured protective measures against the entrance of foreign capital, which did not encourage any investment of large retail developers (Guimarães 2018c). In addition, the low purchasing power of the Portuguese population was also decisive. Regarding regulations, a specific legislation came into force in 1985, defining as shopping centres all the developments which cumulatively: had a minimum of 500 sq. metres of Gross Leasable Area and 12 stores dedicated to retail and services; were located in a single building; had an underlying management structure; and operated during common working hours. Because capital associated with large retail developments was slowly introduced in Portugal, the first stage of shopping centres is mainly characterised by small developments linked with local developers. These local developers, responsible for the construction of this first generation of shopping centres, regarded these retail precincts as mere real estate developments.

Shopping centres in Braga

The urban retail system of Braga is still highly characterised by the existence of a traditional organisation of its retail structure, where the main historical centre still plays an important role in the city and it is seen as an important commercial destination (Guimarães 2016b). Besides being the area where several of the most renowned high streets, monuments and other cultural facilities of the city are located, it is also Braga's buzzing hotspot for locals to meet, where famous cafés and their terraces have gained much importance. With increasing relevance in the last few years, tourism has still to produce some kind of visible and noteworthy impacts on the area, although it is the most visited area of the city. At the policy level, the City Council has, for some decades, recognised this area as one of the most important areas in the city, and therefore most urban regeneration projects have targeted the area (Guimarães 2016b). In this central location of the city, sixteen shopping centres can be found (Fig. 1). The oldest one opened in 1977 and half of them were inaugurated in the new millennium.

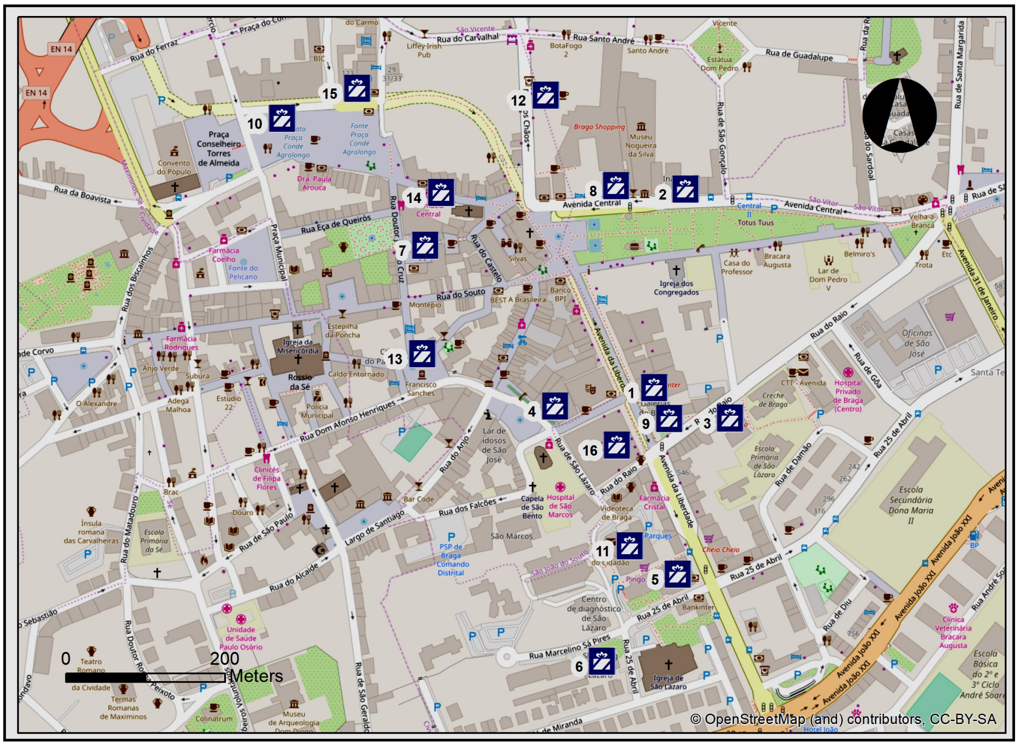

Fig. 1 **– Shopping centres located in the main historical centre of Braga**
Source: Author 2018

Legend: 1: Gold Center; 2: Galerias Lafayette; 3: Rechicho; 4: Santa Cruz; 5: Granjinhos; 6: São Lázaro; 7: Santa Bárbara; 8: BragaShopping; 9: Galerias do Bingo; 10: Galerias do Campo da Vinha; 11: Loja do Cidadão; 12: Galerias dos Chãos; 13: Galeria dos Janes; 14: Alameda shopping; 15: Galerias dos Claustros; 16: Liberdade Street Fashion

Some of these retail precincts do not fill the formal requirements to be considered shopping centres, mostly because some are small-sized and their stores do not operate within the same working hours. As mentioned before, this is due to the late appearance of large retail developers in Portugal. As a consequence, these retail precincts were built by local real estate companies. Because the majority of these companies did not possess sufficient knowledge of the commercial sector or expertise to develop managerial structures that could manage these spaces as retail precincts, most of them were merely seen as real estate assets.

Beside these shopping centres in the city centre, similar retail precincts are scattered across the city in their vicinity. Nevertheless, what characterises the shopping centre industry in Braga is the existence of three large and modern retail precincts which are located outside the boundaries of the city centre (Fig. 2). Nova Arcada is the newest of the three. It was inaugurated in 2016 and it has 102 stores. Its main anchor is an Ikea store, the fourth to open in the country, after one in Porto and two in the Lisbon metropolitan area. BragaParque is located just outside the city centre, between this area and Minho University campus. This shopping centre evolved from a small shopping arcade inaugurated in the late 1980s. After several deep renovations involving the physical structure and its tenant mix — the latter already in this decade — BragaParque is currently the main commercial centrality of the city, mostly due to the number of stores it has and the existence of several anchor stores. Lastly, Minho Center was inaugurated in 1997 to the southeast of the city centre. When it opened, the area where it is located was expanding and it is now completely integrated into the dense urban grid of Braga.

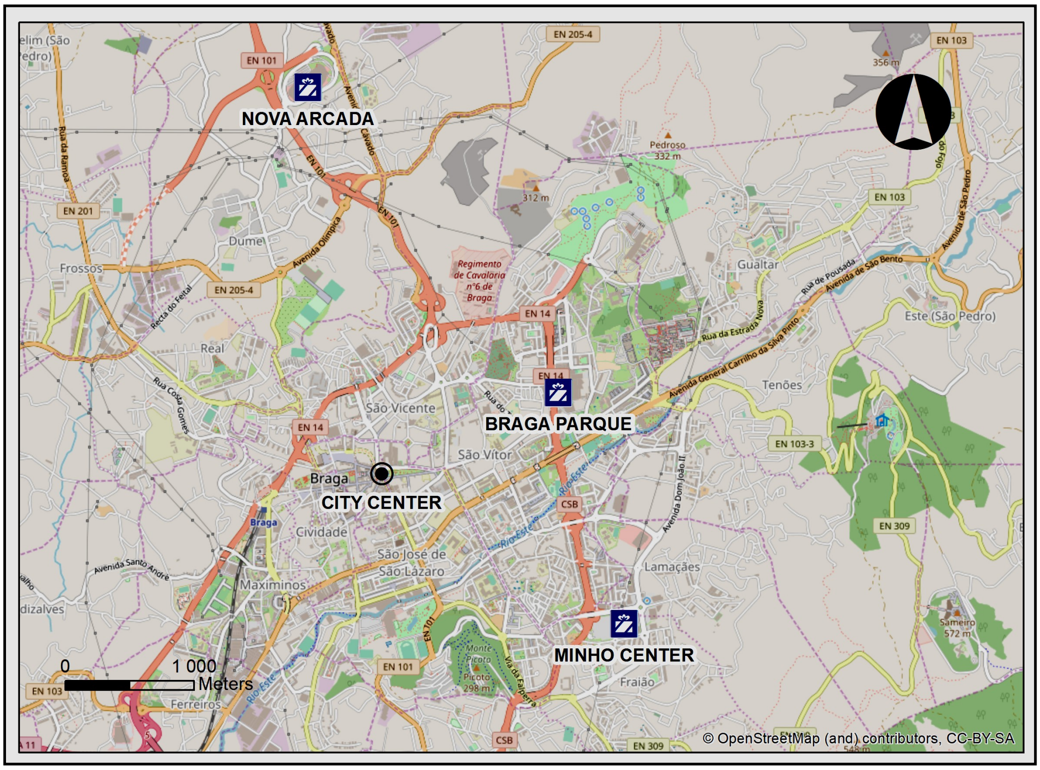

Fig. 2 – **Location of the three largest shopping centres in Braga in relation to main city centre**
Source: Author 2018

The opening of these shopping centres, particularly the two oldest ones, was very relevant due to their size and also because each of them originated a new commercial centrality in the city. Similar to the recently inaugurated Nova Arcada, BragaParque and MinhoCenter have both had a hypermarket from the start — this is one of their main anchor stores that simultaneously makes a distinction between these shopping centres and the remaining (none of which with relevant anchor stores) and it strengthens the status of those three shopping centres as the main commercial centralities of the city.

Table 1

Main features of existent and vacant stores in the analysed shopping centres

Shopping centre	Total of occupied stores			Vacant stores			Total of stores spaces			Vacancy rate (%)		
	1995	2008	2017	1995	2008	2017	1995	2008	2017	1995	2008	2017
BragaParque #		128	156		4	2		132	175		3	1
Minho Center #	0	59	45		6		0	65	45		9	0
Rechicho	62	48	22	14	28	54	76	76	76	18	37	71
BragaShopping	62	109	80	0	6	35	62	115	115	0	5	30
S. Lázaro	33	19	9	12	26	36	45	45	45	27	58	80
Galerias Lafayette	32	27	10	5	10	27	37	37	37	14	27	73
Gold Center	33	16	21	0	17	12	33	33	33	0	52	36
Granginhos	48	56	24	18	10	42	66	66	66	27	15	64
Santa Bárbara	85	60	25	9	34	69	94	94	94	10	36	73
Santa Cruz	61	44	20	11	28	52	72	72	72	15	39	72
Galerias do Bingo	-	7	7	-	1	1	0	8	8		13	13
Galerias do Campo da Vinha	-	5	6	-	11	10	0	16	16		69	63
Loja do Cidadão	-	4	3	-	2	3	0	6	6		33	50
Galerias dos Chãos	-	9	2	-	3	10	0	12	12		25	83
Galeria dos Janes	-	3	3	-	7	7	0	10	10		70	70
Alameda Shopping	-	2	2	-	8	8	0	10	10		80	80
Galerias dos Claustros	7	4	3	3	6	7	10	10	10	30	60	70
Liberdade Street Fashion	-	-	7	NA*			-	-	7	NA*		
Total (without BragaParque and MinhoCenter)	423	413	244	72	197	373	495	610	617	15	32	60

Source: After Associação Comercial de Braga (1995), Guimarães (2009), fieldwork performed by the author (2017).

** Information note: it was not allowed to collect information on the number of vacant spaces.*

 # The incorporation of these shopping centres is to be viewed from a purely indicative point of view.

Regarding the shopping centres that are located in the main town centre and are the object of study of this research, some profound changes have been occurring. Overall, it seems clear that shopping centres in the city centre are in a downward trend. According to data in Table 1, there has been a very significant decrease in the total number of stores that are actually operating. The data from 1995, in general, cannot be compared with subsequent years because some of the shopping centres opened after that year. Nevertheless, looking into the retail precincts already operating in 1995, between this year and 2008 only Granjinhos and BragaShopping increased the number of stores still in business. The latter can be explained by a renovation performed on the building, which expanded its gross leasable area. Regarding vacant stores, again Granjinhos stands out as the exception to the general increase in the number of stores without any commercial exploitation and thus vacant. Analysing the evolution from 2008 to 2017, this decline is even more evident, with almost twice the number of vacant stores. In 2008, the analysed sixteen retail precincts had 197 vacant spaces, which increased to 373 in 2017. As regards the total number of spaces available for commercial use, only BragaShopping suffered some changes due to the aforementioned physical renovation that enlarged the retail precinct. Considering the relation between available spaces for stores and vacant spaces, one may find that the vacancy rate is growing fast. Even if not fully comparable, it has doubled in the analysed years. Where in 1995 the vacancy rate of the then existing shopping centres was 15%, in 2008 this number increased to 30%, which is a sure sign of decline. Currently, through the fieldwork conducted in 2017, this evidence became even clearer and the vacancy rate reached a new high of 60%.

Shifting the focus of our analysis from shopping centres examined individually to the evolution of retail categories, we can find some common features (Table 2). The first one is the loss of relevance of the category “clothing, footwear and other personal goods”, probably one of the most relevant types of stores concerning the attraction of a large number of consumers. Other categories, such as the ones that involve the sale of large-sized products, had an expected decrease (Household and Do-it-yourself). Some other categories remained steady with a similar number of stores or they suffered a small decrease. However, because the overall number of retail stores has diminished, this eventually means these categories have actually gained some relevance in terms of the percentage they have in the tenant mix. Restaurants and cafés are an example of this because — although there are less 4 retail stores between 1995 and 2017 — this category grew in percentage from 10 to 16% in the same period. The highest increase was seen in the categories of “Health services” (on the back of the rising sector of gyms), and “Repair services”.

Table 2

Evolution of the tenant mix of analysed shopping centres

Classification of retail goods and services	Number of stores (Nº)				Number of stores (%)		
	1995	2008	2017	1995-2017	1995	2008	2017
Clothing, footwear and other personal goods	230	157	81	-149	54	38	33
Non-specialised retail	13	18	4	-9	3	4	2
Do-it-yourself goods	3	0	0	-3	1	0	0
Professional goods / telecommunications	3	9	5	2	1	2	2
Household goods	47	42	14	-33	11	10	6
Recreational goods	24	22	20	-4	6	5	8
Pharmaceutical and beauty goods	9	21	9	0	2	5	4
Food	3	3	1	-2	1	1	0
Total retail	**332**	**272**	**134**	**-198**	**78**	**66**	**55**
Restaurant and cafes	43	49	39	-4	10	12	16
Other services	24	34	11	-13	6	8	5
Financial services	0	7	4	4	0	2	2
Repair services	1	6	13	12	0	1	5
Health services	1	14	16	15	0	3	7
Personal services	22	31	27	5	5	8	11
Total services	**91**	**141**	**110**	**19**	**22**	**34**	**45**
Total of occupied stores	423	413	244	-179	100	100	100
Total store spaces (with vacant)	495	610	617	122			

Source: After Associação Comercial de Braga (1995), Guimarães (2009), fieldwork performed by the author (2017)

Overall, another key feature is the antagonistic evolution of stores found when we look at the two major categories: retail and services. Where in 1995 there were 332 stores dedicated to retail, in 2017 this number dropped to 134, which means that this category lost 60% in terms of stores (less than 198 stores). Regarding the services in the same period, the evolution was radically different with an increase in the number of stores from 91 to 110. However, an in-depth analysis allows us to see that the evolution of services was significantly high between 1995 and 2008 and then decreased from 2008 to 2017. In general, considering the percentage of each major category, there is a clear alignment trend of the stores in the retail and service typologies (Fig. 3).

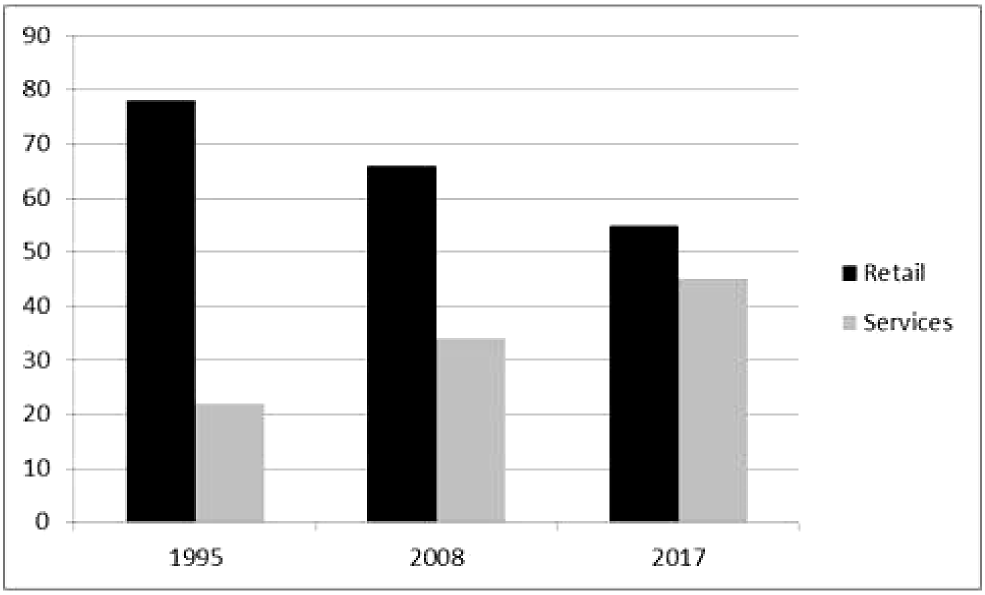

Fig. 3 **– Evolution of the share of retail stores and services stores in 1995, 2008 and 2017 (in percentage)**
Source: After Associação Comercial de Braga 1995, Guimarães 2009, fieldwork performed by the author 2017

Discussion

The data presented and analysed previously enlightened us about the significant transformations affecting the shopping centres of Braga town centre. Overall, two main features characterise the evolution of shopping centres in the main town centre of Braga. The first feature concerns the overall declining trend that is affecting the analysed shopping centres. Looking into the data in depth, one can see that the number of occupied stores significantly dropped from 423 stores in 1995 to 244 in 2017, which implies a decrease by 42%. The number of vacant stores is tied with this figure — in the same period; it went from 72 to 373, representing an increase by more than 400%. This negative evolution that is reflected in the data also concerns the number of available store spaces that has increased by 122 stores in the analysed period (from 495 in 1995 to 617 in 2017). Looking into the data from 1995, one can see that some early signs of decreasing viability of the existing shopping centres could already be found. In that year, a 15% vacancy rate should have been seen as indication that something should be done to reverse that situation. However, data from 2008 shows us that the city followed a different direction. A substantial number of new shopping centres opened in the town centre and, at the same time, MinhoCenter and BragaParque established themselves as Braga's main commercial centralities. This evolution meant further pressure on the existing retail precincts. Data from 2008 demonstrates that this evolution culminated in the worsening of the commercial environment of the analysed shopping centres. Between 1995 and 2008, only two shopping centres increased the number of occupied stores, proving that the low viability of these retail precincts was already evident in 2008, which is clearly related to the general increase of the total number of store spaces. By this year, the vacancy rate had reached 32%. For the current analysis, this also shows that the global economic crisis that began in 2008 did not play any role (either direct or indirect) in the beginning of the declining process. The information regarding 2017 proves that the state of decline has further deteriorated. Despite the situation of deep decline of the shopping centres in the town centre between 2008 and 2017, a new retail precinct — Liberdade Street Fashion — was inaugurated, which posed even more difficulties regarding the viability of existing shopping centres in the area. This opening is most probably related with the goal of the developer that perceived this investment not as a retail investment but as a mere real estate investment. The number of available store spaces is slightly similar in 2008 and 2017, but, in the latter, vacancy rates have soared to 60%. Although we might argue that in 2008 shopping centres were experiencing severe viability issues, in 2017, and in face of the numbers, we have to ask whether these retail precincts can still be called shopping centres. Since there are more closed stores than the ones that are occupied and given that they do not have any anchor stores, those retail precincts can hardly be vibrant, liveable and attract consumers.

The second feature concerns the restructuring of the tenant mix. Not only has there been a decrease in the number of operating stores, but also some changes in the importance of certain retail categories. The most significant of these changes is the decrease in the number of stores from the category “clothing, footwear and other personal goods”, which is a sign that the analysed shopping centres are becoming less attractive. The evolution of other categories is related to the evolution of the town centre’s centrality and accessibility, such as household goods stores that, due to the size of the products they sell, now have a location other than the city centre, because of their low accessibility through individual transport. This idea is further reinforced by the growth of not so relevant categories, such as “repair services”. Actually, through the fieldwork conducted, it was possible to confirm that the majority of new businesses that are opening in the analysed shopping centres has less added-value and it is taking advantage of the declining phase these retail precincts are going through. Because of this situation, rental values in shopping centres are decreasing and it is this tendency that allows for the new businesses to become viable. Nevertheless, they do not add value to the tenant mix of the retail precincts, which clearly questions the capacity of these shopping centres to overcome the declining trend. All of these changes in the retail categories are not exclusive to the tenant mix of shopping centres. Previous studies regarding street retail in Braga point to the same trend (Guimarães 2014, 2015, 2016b).

Conclusions

In this paper, we aimed to analyse the evolution of shopping centres in the main city centre of Braga. Given that retail is a dynamic sector, the shopping centre is a highly relevant and also very dynamic retail concept, which has led to changes in the commercial environment of several cities. Our main methodology was based on a theoretical discussion on the subject and on fieldwork that updated previous databases from 1995 and 2008. The fieldwork was conducted individually and in person by the author. Resuming our research question — “What are the main features of the evolution of shopping centres in the main historical town centre of Braga?” — we have concluded that, as aforementioned in the discussion section, the evolution of analysed shopping centres can be characterised by two major features, and both point to the confirmation of the initially defined research hypothesis — “Shopping centres located in the main centre of Braga have gone through a negative evolution, losing retailers. This evolution has led to the decline of a large part of the retail precincts and to the consequent loss of their economic viability”.

Overall, one may also state that retail is a private sector and the analysed shopping centres seem to have resulted from speculative investment in real estate. Despite the early signs of decline that we traced back to 1995, private retail developers chose to open new shopping centres, which further exacerbated the existing problem. In fact, despite the rising levels of vacancy rates, Braga's town centre saw the number of shopping centres increase and consequently high numbers of available retail stores that only emphasised the scale of the existing problem. Connecting with the established theoretical framework, the data that we have presented in this article leaves no room for misconceptions and it means that dead malls is a problematic that fits well the reality of analysed shopping centres in Braga. High vacancy rates are a sign of decrease in viability. Furthermore, the general modification of the tenant mix is simultaneously a cause and consequence of the lower vitality of those retail precincts. However, in contrast with the North America literature that focuses on the issue of dead malls regarding peripheral shopping centres, usually with a regional catchment, the data from this article show us that a similar problem affects shopping centres located in town centres. The geographical context is obviously very dissimilar and even for what we have analysed in the literature review one should be cautious when proceeding with generalisations. Nonetheless, if the present results may not be immediately comparable to North America, to some extent, they may be analogous to other Western European cities where, in general, suburbanization of retail did not reach the same levels. In what concerns demalling, fieldwork did not provide insightful views on the subject. This is mainly because no measures were so far implemented. Still, because of the number of shopping centres that are experiencing decline, it is not expected a positive turn in which the analysed shopping centres increase their vitality and viability and return to be retail destinations as they once were. Thus, demalling emerges as a future inevitability but, because the analysed shopping centres are in prime location in the main town centre, they also emerge as an opportunity. As referred in the literature review, shopping centres affected by demalling can acquire new functions, such as office centres, residential use and other. Nonetheless, because the problem associated with the evolution of these retail precincts is related with the evolution of the city itself, the solutions must be found in connection with broader urban planning guidelines from the local authorities.

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