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Trade as a cultural identity aspect in a city
A case study on Catania¹

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1. Trade as a cultural identity aspect

The role of trade in today's global society is going through a period of standardisation as regards supply, both from a point of view of individual items sold and the commercial area overall (standardisation of shop windows, reduction in traditional shops selling characteristic items, expansion of branches of national and international chains and the phenomenon of franchising). In fact, our city centres are starting to look more and more like each other. Obviously this is the result of a more complex process which shows itself, on the one hand, in the trend towards a variation in the distribution network with the rapid expansion of supermarkets and shopping centres on the outskirts of town, and on the other, in the changing behaviour of consumers who are increasingly attracted to American consumer habits (Pellegrini, 1996). The traditional interface made up of classic family run local shops or market stalls, specialising in particular products and founded on personal relations and trust is being increasingly joined by, and in many cases substituted by, widespread distribution made up of self-service, a varied and integrated assortment and totally impersonal relations with the consumer (Colla, 1992; Rinella A. and Rinella F., 2000).

The consumer expects more and more in terms of product quality as well as service and above all, requires a wider choice and the opportunity to make shopping an enjoyable experience rather than a chore.

The question, therefore, arises of what role the more traditional shopping structures which characterise the old town centres of Italy, will play. Despite the fact that the latter is presently coming under considerable pressure to make a more or less radical change, there is still the possibility that the particular "trade landscape" which they represent can establish itself as a new development model, capable of yet again promoting city culture alongside the presently expanding functional model, concentrated exclusively in suburban areas (Meini and Monheim, 2002).

New ideas have arisen which attribute a driving role to trade, not only for its economic and employment roles but for the increasingly greater worth it acquires. This worth extends to the image and identity of a city, the quality of life in the city centres and suburbs, the renewal and restoration of neighbourhoods and safety in the less significant areas of the city. Furthermore, thanks to its interdependency with town planning, trade plays an important role in the social-economic and environmental upgrading of the residential fabric and public areas in old town centres and suburbs and has an excellent pull on tourism (Zinna *et alii*, 2003).

These points are in line with the most recent studies carried out by experts in commercial town planning and with the initiatives promoted by the European Union in collaboration with state and local bodies and trade associations which tend to blend urban and trade choices together.

Even national legislation, in particular, legislative decree no. 114 from 1998 (known as the *Bersani law*) and those passed by the Sicilian Regional Council regulating trade, is aimed at programming localised choices, problems linked to accessibility, the social-economic upgrading of residential and productive sites, pull and user areas, territorial hierarchies and city and out-of-town movement, without forgetting the organisational, functional, economic and promotional aspects of trade (Corna Pellegrini and Schmidt di Friedberg, 1993; Ottimo, 1996).

Catania is a city which largely reflects the evolutionary characteristics of the urban system in southern Italy, but with yet more changes and trends found in the more developed regions when outlining decentralising processes of economic, residential activities and social structures. Catania's trade assets, as well as its cultural ones, represent one of the pivots on which the city's identity rotates. A group of resources which constitute strategic opportunities for developing the city and for attracting new trade and tourist flows even from out-with the island.

The importance of trade in Catania is fairly well known and depends on the connecting role which it plays between the production of goods and service sectors and the users, both consumers and companies.

As far as Catania is concerned, it has to be said that trade has always been favoured thanks to its location. The city, in fact, is to be found at the centre of an economically active and socially dynamic vast suburbs as well as occupying a central position in the Mediterranean. To this, we can add the most enduring and energetic traditions which, over time, have transformed the city into a first class trade centre (Bonaccorsi, 1976; Buttà, 1983; Giusso and La Rosa, 1984).

As in other urban areas, Catania has, over the last few decades, registered considerable changes which have conditioned the city's organisation, such as the rapid decline in local and family run shops, suffocated by the competition from supermarkets and the opening of numerous franchising shops; furthermore, the economic desertification of certain parts of the city, has been counter-balanced by the establishment of new attractions, particularly in the small hours, linked to the opening of new night life spots.

The city centre has changed. In fact, it is transforming daily into something else, possibly unbeknown to its citizens. The main identity centre in Catania is via Etnea which, while having become the focus of upgrading and attention from public administrators, has changed both in how it is perceived and used (Nigrelli, 2000). Neither the repaving in "*basole*" lava stone nor the restoration of the squares and public areas, reviving their "Brancatiana atmosphere" of a citizen's drawing room where the Catanese met for an aperitif and a stroll, will be sufficient.

Not only are the characters missing but also the shops which wrote the city's history. The few remaining ones which for decades have characterised the city's distribution panorama, offer niche products. They are mainly family run businesses and it is precisely this factor which has probably allowed them to stay in the market even during times of crisis, as well a passion, considerable ability, together with quality service, highly driven specialisation and above all, the incredible ability to invest, despite everything, in updating and products.

Nowadays, this place has transformed itself into an area for passing through, where supply has turned into a succession of shops which, with their shop windows, "las Vegas" style neon signs and multicoloured fronts have spoiled the old noble palaces (Desideri and Ilardi, 1997).

It is essential that the historical shopping streets, particularly via Etnea, re-acquire the value of a meeting place and an identity. The numerous shops and recreational service industry areas cannot be the only attraction and an overall management which controls both the quality and kind of commercial supply is essential as well as aiming to incite the residence of inhabitants from various social levels (residents create demand even for simple services) and the localisation of new cultural spaces (Nigrelli, 2000).

The division of commercial activities is not homogenous within the 10 municipalities which have their own demographic, social and economic characteristics.

Nowadays, the commercial geography of the city is arranged across a strong central area, counter-balanced by growing external supply. So the central area plays a double role in attracting traffic and generating centrifugal flows with movement by car to reach the suburban shopping centres.

It is precisely in this centre-suburb relationship, that Catania's commercial network shows its dualistic structure. More than 77% of shops, particularly those of a superior level, are concentrated in the three central municipalities (I, II, III) (table 1) which counter-balance the suburban ones whose supply, which is by no means scarce, is much lower than average and therefore insufficient to meet the basic needs of the population (Ruggiero and Cirelli, 1989).

In particular, the most recently built suburbs to the south and east are those with the lowest level of commercial activity and are aimed exclusively at meeting the most direct needs of the inhabitants, who, for occasional purchases go to retail and distribution shops or local markets.

It is precisely this street trade which plays an important role in Catania's commercial supply and boasts a tradition dating back centuries. Moreover, it has been capable, over time, of meeting the needs of a social and economic reality which has evolved considerably.

In the city and out-of-town, a considerable weekly market network has developed, in order to encourage the rotating transfer of the traders and comprehensively meet users' needs (Scrofani, 2001).

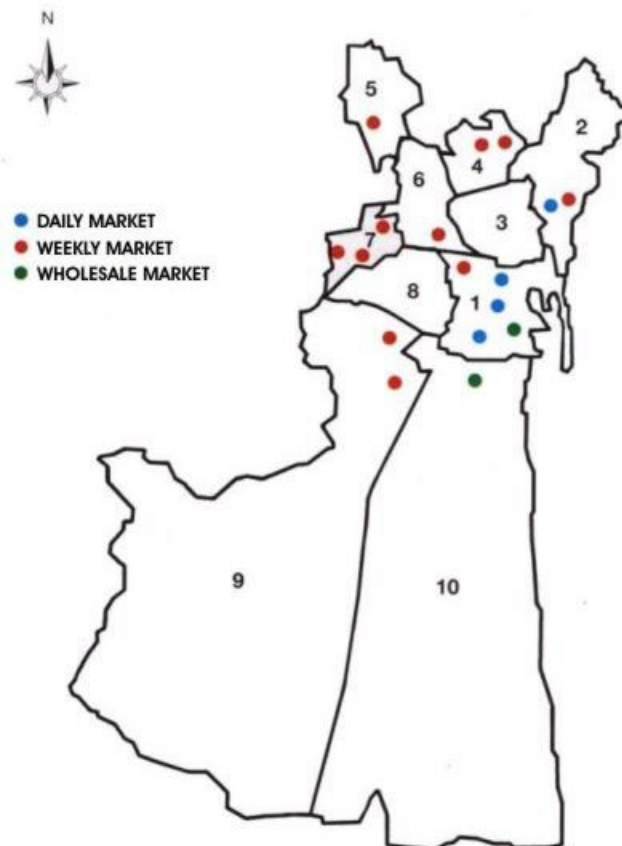
Table 1: Commercial functions in Catania by municipality

Municipality	Area (ha)	Population (31/12/2001)	Food	Clothing	Other	Total
I	528	61,634	948	153	990	2,091
II	665	55,049	539	85	580	1,204
III	364	51,630	339	60	358	757
IV	407	22,892	101	16	105	222
V	326	15,060	33	5	30	68
VI	420	28,359	101	14	107	222
VII	269	14,321	30	5	29	64
VIII	449	36,017	169	25	178	372
IX	7,004	42,300	43	6	43	92
X	7,731	15,671	64	8	76	148
Not assigned	-	2,735	2,367	337	2,496	5,240

Source: Concommercio Catania 2004; our elaboration

But again in this case, the old town centre wins hands down. In fact, here we find the traditional local markets where the greatest concentration of supply and use is recorded, while suburban neighbourhoods record a scarcity of such markets (figure 1) (Cirelli and Faia, 1999).

Figure 1: Distribution of markets in the ten municipalities of Catania



Source: Commerce Councillorship of Catania; our elaboration

Within this central area we can find a considerable concentration of markets. In particular, this area houses those markets which institutionalise the historical meeting places of the local population and generate a flow of shoppers coming not only from all over the city but also from neighbouring towns. Furthermore, thanks to the almost daily service of hydrofoils from Malta, we can count among the visitors, a constant flow from the nearby archipelago.

The main market in the city is the one known to the Catanese as “Fera ò luni”. This is the market in Piazza Carlo Alberto, set up and expanded in one of the key city traffic points, hub of the Central Business District (CBD) of Catania. In an important business centre, divided into the services of main banks, public and private offices, numerous professional firms and a continuous array of shops which follow on, one after another, this century old citizen market fits in. The market offers a varied assortment of products from clothing to household goods and from food to toys. On numerous occasions, proposals have been put forward (proposals, however, which have never really been put into practise by the public administration) to “bring order” among the stalls, but the problem lies not only in convincing the traders, the users themselves would not accept changes to the chaotic atmosphere with its voices, smells, colours and flavours which are so much part of local tradition. Even if the effects of globalisation are starting to spread due to the presence of numerous non-EU vendors who, with their Ethnic and other goods, are acquiring increasing visibility. More recent, though undoubtedly more invasive, is the growing presence of Chinese who not only sell their wares illegally as street traders but circulate in all the streets adjacent to the market with their shops offering goods at highly competitive prices.

The functional aspects of sales in the old market last throughout the week with a change on Sunday. That day, the market changes traders and goods; more than one hundred exhibitors present their wares to the numerous collectors and lovers of small antiques which range from furniture to gifts, prints, toys, porcelain and a vast array of useless items which used to fill old houses. One of the temporary commercial activities in Catania that deserves a mention is the “All Souls Fair” which, in compliance with local popular traditions, is held each November to remember the dead; originally, it sold toys and sweets which children would receive as gifts from their dead relatives; today it offers a variety of goods, but still preserves its appeal.

The other traditional market is the “Pescheria” so called because it was established, considering its proximity to the port, for the exclusive sale of fish. Nowadays, it supplies all kinds of food products and hosts numerous, multicoloured stalls in the open air and shops which liven up the entire area.

Its location at the back of Piazza Duomo, the city’s main square and the market’s attraction, functionally involve the entire surrounding area, rich in historical monuments, creating

numerous mobility problems such as pedestrianisation, transport and parking, sound and atmospheric pollution and the decline of historical buildings.

In fact, in the morning, when the *Pescheria* reaches peak activity, the number of parking spaces needed to cope with the vast flow of cars to the area is insufficient. Furthermore, the movement of public transport is slowed down and despite being favoured with preferential lanes, is forced to wait in long queues of traffic (Cirelli, 1997).

The entire fish market area, once the day's sales are concluded, is at the mercy of rubbish and bad smells while most of the surrounding housing has been abandoned or taken over by non-EU residents. An area which, thanks to its particular folklore is a tourist attraction during the day, by night shows its squalid side and is to be found in a state of total abandon, not easily enjoyed by visitors.

2. The evolution of trade in Catania between the old “Centre” and the new “Central Area”

The two main trading areas in the old town centre (municipality I) and the so called Central Area (municipalities II and III) represent the “past” and “present” of the Catanese trading system and, if apparently in competition, can be considered complimentary in the wider functional urban overview.

In particular, the old town centre, while still today representing the more elevated central area for the presence of services and activities whose importance extends across the entire city area and the commercial specialisation of certain streets, has undergone a considerable transformation which has caused it to lose its localised strength. The decline and depopulation which affected this area up until the end of the Eighties have made it essential to introduce a series of upgrading works thanks to EU funding relating to the Territorial Employment Pact for Southern Catania (*PTO Catania Sud*) and the URBAN programme which have invested equally in the city itself as well as on a social level. The result, which has not yet been fully achieved, is that the old town centre has come to the end of its slow decline into marginality and is re-conquering its antique role of catalyst centre of citizen's activity, both commercial and cultural and broadly speaking leisure (Ruggiero L., 2002).

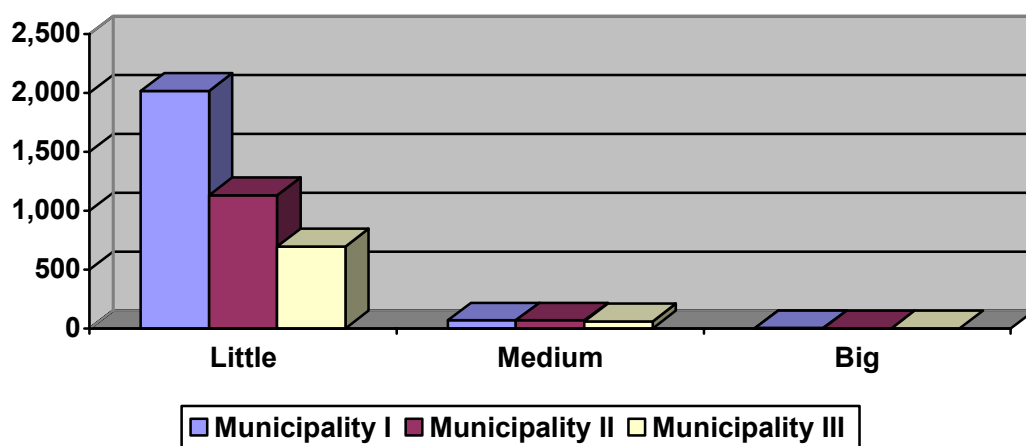
Focusing on the commercial aspect, even the old town centre of Catania, due to the natural vocation of each central urban area, has been the subject of an expansion of the service industry which, among other things, has strongly characterised the whole city's economy starting from the end of the second world war. In particular, the old town centre has undergone a “strong” expansion of the service industry process characterised by the presence of banks, insurance

companies and finance companies, but at the same time and on a greater scale, an even a “weaker” one which broadly speaking, includes all the commercial activity.

In this functional twist only the old markets in Piazza Carlo Alberto and the Pescheria have survived all attempts at modernisation, almost completely preserving intact their exhibitor methods in the open air on stalls or tables with a simple covering of an umbrella or shade. The permanence of these markets with their symbolic significance, appealing atmosphere and their continuous economic value has probably been one of the most important factors in the commercial survival of the old town centre, particularly during the Eighties. The appearance, in fact, of franchising shops (or ones belonging to large commercial chains such as Benetton, Max Mara, Stefanel, Original Marines...) is fairly recent and is a clear indication of a renewed interest in the area. These shops can be found side by side with the few shops now considered *historical* and the large department stores such as La Rinascente, Coin and Oviessa.

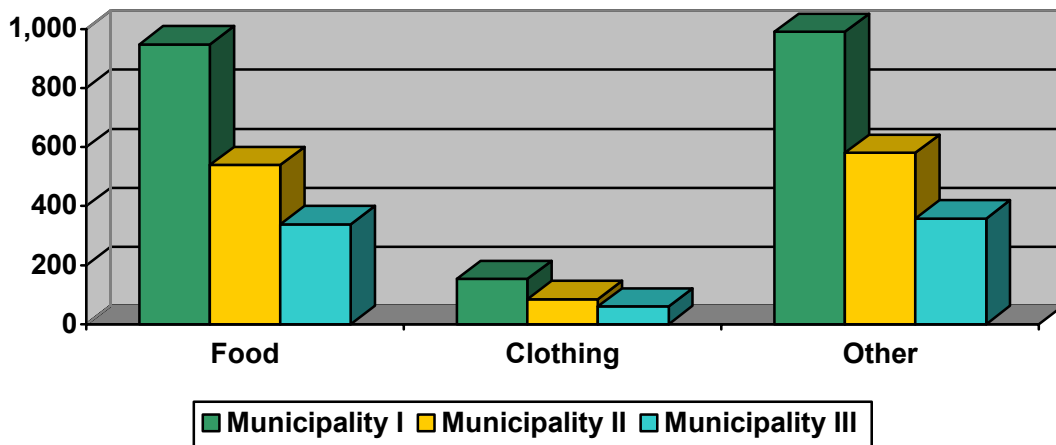
The commercial panorama of the old town centre started to change mainly from the second half of the Nineties thanks to the launch of numerous eating and recreation businesses. Nevertheless, exchange and consumption still hold a place in the old town centre of Catania and the intensity of these exchanges produces a social relations system between it and the rest of the city, injecting life into the situation (D’Amico, 2000). Approximately 40% of trade activity found in the city area of Catania is concentrated here, even if located mainly in a few streets (figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Distribution of commercial activities in municipality I, II and III according to dimension



Source: Productive activities Councillorship of Catania, 2001; our elaboration

Figure 3: Distribution of commercial activities according to sector of activity



Source: Productive activities Councillorship of Catania, 2001; our elaboration

Considering the position of these businesses, the streets can be divided into commercial, financial and residential. Via Etna and specialised streets such as via Manzoni, via di Sanguiliano, via Garibaldi and via Vittorio Emanuele as well as neighbouring areas, are the main commercial streets where the most profitable activities are located and the ones which focus greatly on visibility.

As far as financial activities are concerned, corso Sicilia holds first place in the old town centre. It was established after the clearance of the old St. Berillo neighbourhood in the Sixties and represents the heart of Catania's business affairs; even if over the last few years, possibly due to the considerably run down urban appearance of its surroundings, many businesses in the advanced service industry have moved to some of the main axis points in the new central area such as via Africa, corso Italia and viale Vittorio Veneto (Sabelberg, 1984).

While nowadays still being the most densely populated municipality in the city, the last fifty years have seen a continuous depopulation and at present the western neighbourhoods of San Cristoforo and Cappuccini-Antico Corso which represent, among other things, an economically marginal area, have managed to hold onto their residential role, thanks in part to the solid presence of immigrants (Cirelli and Malafarina, 2000).

An important role in the urban commercial picture is played by the two municipalities which make up the new *Central Area* (municipalities II and III).

The municipalities which extend in contiguity with the old town centre and take up the north-eastern part of the urban area are some of the most densely populated in the city and have a highly heterogeneous structure both from a town planning point of view as well as a commercial one. The area, characterised by a strong dynamism, developed mostly in the second half of the last

century, encompassing separate areas with old origins, within the city fabric. It is here that over the last thirty years most of the new activities and services which have given life to a large central zone out-with the old town centre have established themselves and whose functions have grown to the point that they have extended the gravitation area way beyond the city boundaries. Furthermore, within this area, there is a mix of large areas of working class housing and middle to upper class housing together with a few remaining liberty style villas. A difference which is reflected, through income and consumption, in the quantity and quality of the goods and services offered.

The most representative area is undoubtedly the area of corso Italia - viale XX Settembre, via Umberto, viale Vittorio Veneto, via Giacomo Leopardi - via Gabriele D'Annunzio. Here we find a concentration of the most sophisticated shops in the city, the most prestigious designer wear and numerous franchising outlets.

Alongside the service industry sector we can find the financial sector, particularly in viale Africa and corso Italia where there is also a high number of law firms due to the proximity of the courts.

In the II municipality, a "Natural Shopping Centre" has been set up with the adhesion of one hundred shops backed by Conferescenti, in an attempt to stem the damaging effects caused by the rise of shopping centres on the outskirts of the city. The area was laid out with various pieces of street furniture and promoted through numerous advertising initiatives and games. Despite the fact that in other cities, "street associationism" has created advantages for individual businessmen and spread its positive effects to the entire surrounding area, recovering entire sections of the area, three years after it was launched, this local initiative has yet to take off.

Of particular interest is the situation in a part of the II municipality which runs along the coast, if only because of its long awaited development. It has been pinpointed for an ambitious upgrading project which redesigns the lava coast running from Piazza Europa to the gulf of Ognina, transforming it into an area with a strong image and giving it the role of international centre which Catania hopes to play.

At present, the coastline, while hosting certain important leisure areas such as the funfair, squares and meeting places like the small tourist harbours and bathing areas, restaurants and a hotel, records only everyday commercial activity, mostly for residents, making the area a kind of "residential ghetto" for the middle-upper class Catanese (Porto, 2002).

Finally, it should be pointed out that the III Municipality hosts the former "Vulcania" shopping centre which sprung up at the end of the Eighties with about sixty integrated supply shops and was one of the first city shopping centres in Italy. Despite the fact it was easily accessible, there was a large square, green areas, a play area for children and large car parks, only

a skeleton of the shopping centre remains today. All the businesses have either closed or gone into liquidation with only the bar and a few shops remaining open. Its failure is undoubtedly due to poor management and the rise of shopping centres in the suburbs. There are numerous ideas for reconvertng the structure but these have been obstructed by disagreement among its many owners.

3. Historical Shops

With the term “*historical shops*” we mean a shop which has been around for at least fifty years, still has the same fittings and is in the same location in the city. Undoubtedly this definition is too inflexible compared to the continuous transformation to which the city has been subjected over time and in relation to the individual city situations. A transformation partially due to the expanding city and the “aggression”, so to speak, operated by large scale organised distribution which found plenty of space in the suburbs of city centres, even resolving the problems relating to traffic and parking and partially, to the changes in fashion, taste and the different pace of life imposed by modern day society which have gradually changed consumers’ habits. Despite this, the historical shop continues to be an integral part of city identity, a key to understanding the city and a stronghold in the more complex “*commercial city landscape*” which has to be developed and restored against the flattening generated by modern commercial complexes, the so called “cathedrals of modern civilisation”, a result of the ratification and globalisation which is increasingly characterising the post-modern city. Nowadays, “our cities are increasingly more similar and monotonous. This is happening not only in the suburbs but also in the old town centre.

Yesterday, shops represented the civil and commercial tradition of a city. Nowadays, they reflect the images of large companies which have colonised the places stored in our memory” (Pellegrini, 2001). The historical shop, on a par with heritage and the environment, traditions and folkloristic celebrations make up a “typical” and strengthening element of local identity and as such has to be preserved over time. In order to develop this, therefore, it is essential to establish a link with the historical-cultural context in which it is placed and reinforce the identity of these places.

In order to better understand the importance of these shops, it is impossible to simply talk about them without also making reference to the streets in the city centre where they are and were located, and how society was at that time. The Catanese shops, however, the historical ones in the strictest sense of the word, are few. We can include those which have kept their “name” even if they have now moved location, and those which, while having stayed in the same place, have been completely renovated, losing the structural and identity characteristics of a historical shop in the strictest sense. Paradoxically, Catania in this sense has shown a weak point compared to its desire

to preserve what has always made it stand out, thanks to its glorious past, rich in political, literary, musical and artistic traditions. It has been unable to suitably protect this kind of heritage, which at present is to be found more in “the memory” of our citizens than in the actual urban spaces and thus runs the risk of falling into oblivion for future generations.

To talk about shops which, over time, have represented the symbol of real “*Catania-ism*” means also making reference to those noble palaces where the shops have been inserted, the streets which house them and which became the place for Catanese society in that period to go for a stroll; real gathering places where the city’s problems were discussed and the greatest Catanese and Sicilian writers exchanged ideas.

At present, the network of historical Catanese shops has lost its original identity due to the arrival of specialised shops. In fact, the by now historical La Rinascente has been joined by large stores (Coin, Oviessa...) some large company shops (Max Mara, Elena Mirò) and numerous single label franchising sales outlets. This new commercial supply is located in old noble palaces, such as Coin, Benetton, or McDonald’s and Sisley, to be found in “art nouveau” cinemas which, while preserving their external architecture, have been completely renovated, thus losing their prestigious characteristics from the period in which they were built.

Shops nowadays appear “...increasingly less concrete places of commerce”, from which we can interpret a new concept of a city increasingly intent on being standardised and de-personalised right up to post-modern commercial bases implemented by passing from the showroom, the prototypes of various shops, La Rinascente, Benetton, Stefanel...to new concepts of “commercial spaces”, found in cities around in the world and transformed on a smaller scale in other cities where “shopping” goes hand in hand with the modern paradigm which includes entertainment, cinema, airports and museums. The aggression of this new *spacialisation* could, to a certain extent, verify the slow but inevitable decline of the historical shop. This is why it is essential for trade associations to intervene together with local administrations to protect these shops from a past era.

The policies for evaluating heritage and becoming aware of the dysfunctions in modern society have made us reflect on the need to likewise protect the “historical commercial landscape” which we can find in every old town centre. Some significant examples come from other cities which, while presenting a different territorial layout compared to the one in Catania, have laid the foundations for the protection of these shops and serve as reflection points which could act as a model for other cities as well as an important element for the memory and historical connotation and a valuable representation of culture and tradition. The role of these historical shops is undoubtedly a part of the “cultural body” of each old town centre.

4. The Integrated Commercial Area and Large Scale Distribution

Since the 70's, the suburban area of Catania has been the centre of a re-functioning process, originating from the need for space and greater accessibility by commercial activities linked to wholesale and the creation of important connecting routes. Growing inconveniences set off a migratory movement which led to the establishment, due to spontaneous germination, of the first commercial structures followed by some large scale distribution structures aimed at a market which went beyond the city and encompassed inter-provincial demand.

Therefore, even the local commercial offer tends to re-arrange itself around the logic of new distribution systems linked to the establishment of specialised commercial centres which can offer a much wider range of items than those found in the normal city supply. The development of these centres has been rapid over the last few years and having a strong attraction pull on commercial activity, have become increasingly larger in size, giving life to so called *market-cities* (Pilotti, 1991).

In the southern area of the town of Misterbianco, a vast number of commercial activities have established themselves (food, textiles, toys, furniture, clothing, table and bed linen, household goods, electronic equipment...) with immense sales surfaces, while in Giuseppe la Rena and S. Giovanni la Punta, other important food distribution structures have found the space they need.

Misterbianco, has become one of the economic centres around which not only the entire Metropolitan Area of Catania rotates but also the interests of large scale movement both from nearby provinces and neighbouring regions (Ruggiero L., 2002; Zinna *et alii*, 2003). The Integrated Commercial Area is to be found to the east of Catania along important connecting routes both with the city and neighbouring towns. Furthermore, the location of this Area along the West Ring Road is strategically important because the ring road is the main connecting road axis for the entire metropolitan area of Catania, the motorways to Palermo and Messina and the state roads linked with Syracuse, Ragusa and Gela. This commercial centre is also approximately 8 km from the international airport of Fontanarossa and the services Axis allows for easy access to the Port of Catania.

To the vast product supply we can also add 4 shopping centres with approximately 50 shops, for an overall sales surface area of 35,793m² and a density of 32m² per 1,000 inhabitants. The first site linked to large scale distribution in the commercial centre of Misterbianco was Città Mercato, nowadays Auchan, which arrived in 1988 making the most of the localised advantages the area has to offer. This was the first experience the Rinascente Group had in Sicily and their first overall with a *hypermarket*.

Ten years later, the *Auchan* chain opened another, even larger hypermarket in the tenth municipality of Catania which is a strong attraction to the southern suburbs housing over 70,000 inhabitants.

The growth of hypermarkets in Catania has not been extensive. The Le Zagare hypermarket belonging to the Despar group located in the town of San Giovanni and aimed at the vast client sector in the centres at the foot of Mount Etna and the very important commercial structure belonging to the Emmezeta Group which opened in Riposto, a coastal town, can be added to the two belonging to the Auchan group.

In 2005, the territory in the province of Catania is preparing to host two of the largest shopping centres in Italy and Europe - Etnapolis and La Tenutella.

The first is due to open in Valcorrente, a hamlet in the town of Belpasso, covering a total area of 52 hectares and will host a 18,500m² hypermarket, 110 shops of varying sizes, 14 cinemas, four restaurants as well as six eating areas within the shopping centre.

The La Tenutella project, on the other hand, has been inspired by the concept of “*Shopper entertainment*”.

The La Tenutella Shopping Park will take up a covered area of 39,300m² with 9 specialised structures dedicated to DIY, furnishings, electrical equipment, sport and clothing. The Centre’s core business will be the eating, entertainment and games area, while the commercial supply will make use of 10,000m² of hypermarket and a Gallery with 300 medium/top level shops which will integrate the vast product supply and various additional services.

Even if in Sicily, the transformation appears to be slower than in other places, where a counter-tendency is already taking place which opposes the suburban decentralisation to a central location of shopping centres in an attempt to preserve local city culture, the panorama of shopping centres is changing (Meini and Monheim, 2002). In fact, as well as those mentioned above which are due to open in Catania we can add Central Park, a large suburban shopping structure being built in Syracuse.

These works act as a driving force for Sicilian trade, particularly in view of 2010 when the Mediterranean will become a free trade area and Catania will be called upon, thanks to its strategic position and ancient trading traditions, to play a role of primary importance with North African and Middle Eastern countries.

5. Franchising as a new form of commercial supply

Franchising represents a privileged way to access the market, for businessmen wishing to benefit from pre-tested or successful formulae. This new kind of trade was established both to satisfy the

needs of clients who pay increasingly more attention to image, name and quality and this way can find a “familiar” service or product anywhere in the country. It also aims to guarantee the businessman a clientele already familiar with the label and therefore represents a way of partially resolving any start up problems. Franchising, while being a fairly recent distribution phenomenon, has been well received in Italy since the 70’s. This success will continue to grow thanks to a recent law, Act 129-2004 which has finally made this a “typical” kind of contract. Today we are dealing with a real boom, with the presence of 753 franchisors in Italy at the end of 2003 (in 2002 there were 709 and 230 in 1990), 102,000 jobs and 38,736 affiliate sales outlets. In 2003, turnover reached 14,800 million Euro, recording a considerable increase (6.2%) compared to figures from 2002 (table 2).

Table 2: Franchisors and franchisee in 2003 and comparison with 2002

	2003	2002	Variation %
Nr Franchisor	753	709	+6.2
Nr Franchisee	38,736	35,813	+8.2
Employees	102,870	96,000	+7.2
Turnover (million euro)	14,8	13,9	+6.5

Source: Publimedia Group and FIF Confesercenti, 2003; our elaboration

In Catania, this phenomenon has only become wide scale in the last few years and even if behind the national trend, *franchising* has established itself as an important trend in the city’s commercial panorama and appears as one of the most probable commercial choices in the medium-long term. Most of the companies which adopt this kind of contract were set up after 1996. From the analysis of the proposed data in table 3, we can deduce that the richest sector is personal items (especially clothing).

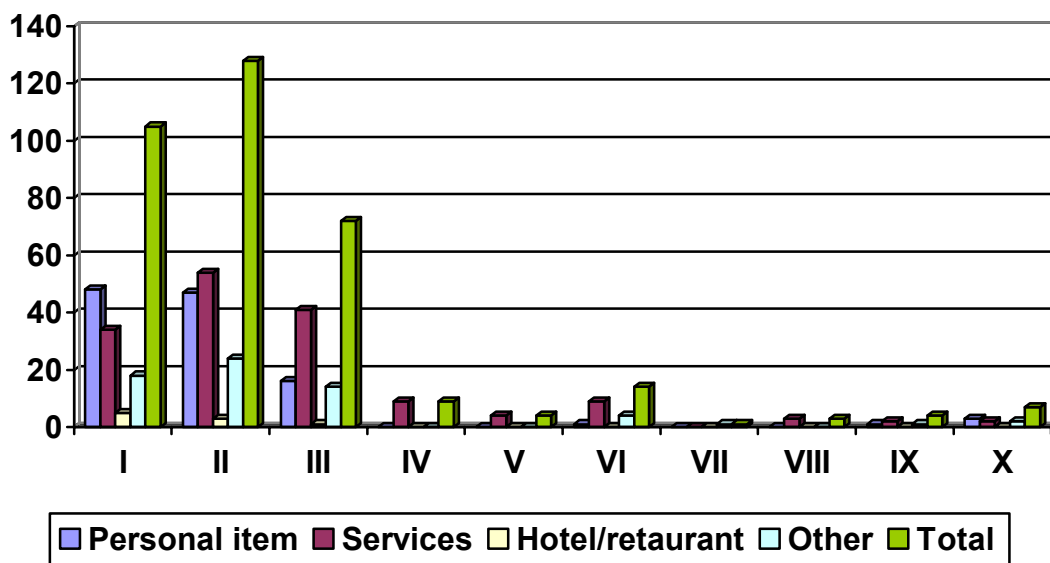
Table 3: Number of labels, franchisees and respective percentage in Catania

Business sector	Nr label	%	Nr Franchisee	%
Personal items	100	40.00	116	33.43
Services	96	38.40	158	45.53
Other specialized commerce	21	8.40	29	8.36
Specialized commerce	14	5.60	21	6.05
Household wares	10	4.00	13	3.75
Hotel/restaurant	8	3.20	9	2.59
Specialized food commerce	1	0.40	1	0.29
Total	250	100.00	347	100.00

Source: Confcommercio Catania 2004

We can, in fact, find different franchisees such as Benetton, Stefanel, Sisley, as regards young people's fashions shops, Max Mara and GB Pedrini for more elegant clothing and Furla for accessories. The location of these shops is one of the crucial points of franchising. A considerable part of their success, in fact, depends on this. Even if the label is well known, successful and backed by the franchisor's experience, it is essential to maintain certain location conditions. Franchising activity in Catania tends mainly to locate in the streets which are considered vocationally commercial: via Etnea, via Umberto and corso Italia. In particular, again in this case the location choice has been reinforced in the central three municipalities (tables 4 and 5) while figures for the remaining municipalities are insignificant.

Table 4: distribution of franchising activities by municipalities



Source: Confcommercio Catania 2004; our elaboration

Table 5: distribution of *Personal item* and *Services* sectors by municipalities

Municipality	Personal item	Services
I	48	34
II	47	54
III	16	41
IV	0	9
V	0	4
VI	1	9
VII	0	0
VIII	0	3
IX	1	2
X	3	2
Total	116	158

Source: Confcommercio Catania 2004; our elaboration

The first municipality (which coincides largely with the old town centre) is where the phenomenon is particularly widespread. A central location is, in fact, essential for the sector covering personal items (particularly clothes shops), which is the most common one (48 outlets) followed by service sectors (34 outlets). From a commercial point of view we are in the part of the city with the oldest traditions, even if lately this has been threatened by competition from new *centres* and supermarkets in the suburbs. The centre, which maintains its attraction pull thanks to historical markets, architecturally impressive buildings and the presence of monuments and museums, is also Catania's tourist area par excellence and therefore franchising presents itself as an additional strategic factor in attracting visitors.

The Central Area municipalities which represent the most recently established commercial area register a net concentration of elegant franchising shops aimed at a clientele from the middle-high classes with a supply aimed at the services sector rather than personal items. These services increasingly include those relating to "individual and company services" (8 outlets), "health and well-being" (14 outlets) and "estate agency services" (7 outlets). Many of the franchising labels in the central area municipalities are found in the first one with the clear aim of integrating their supply in the area.

Catania has been at centre stage over the last ten years as regards shops specialising in mobile telephony. In 1994, there were no more than five. Today, there are 66 (21 Tim shops, 2 of them company shops in via Etnea and corso Italia; 21 Wind shops, 18 Vodafone shops one of them a company shop in the "very central" location of via Etnea's "Quattro Canti" and 16 Tre shops. When counting the various shops, we should take into consideration the fact that many shop owners are multi-brand partners and therefore represent more than one mobile phone company. Shops which have earned a fortune for telephony and which now find themselves in the midst of a market saturation crisis. All 10 municipalities host at least one mobile telephony shop, but particularly the III municipality.

Franchising has brought great energy and vitality to Catanese trade, giving numerous businessmen the opportunity to establish a new activity by setting themselves up in business with limited risk investment. The franchisors, who for some time now have been looking for an inroad into Catania, have obviously also gained considerable advantages from this. One of the greatest difficulties faced by local businessmen has, in fact, always been accessing information: in April 2004 the "Franchising office" opened in the Nuovaimpresa offices, a service offered by Confcommercio in Catania to help SMEs in Italy. The "Franchising office" operates throughout Sicily and aims to encourage franchising by providing suitable information, operational guidelines and help.

Conclusion

The revitalisation of trade does not have to be a choice between the centre or suburbs, between a shop or a shopping centre, but rather we should focus on the fact that people enjoy using these places.

The single aim should be a concrete plan relating to commercial activity sites both in the city and suburban towns which produces a rational and balanced asset to the distribution network and is capable of supporting the competitiveness of local shops, especially in less popular areas, in order to provide greater satisfaction to the user who is obliged to move both within and out-with the city.

In order, however, to optimise trade services efficiency, the phenomena of decline and abandonment must be eliminated in the old town centre and suburbs, because the competitive factors of success in urban transformation are increasingly aimed at the possible pursuit of a high standard of living.

An aim which can be pursued by integrating public and private initiatives which take into consideration the needs of users through financial support, the adoption of trade policies and commercial town planning aimed at the upgrading and development of the sector. It should, however, also focus on re-launching the city's image and identity both in the town centre and suburbs.

A plan which, alongside the upgrading, has a well thought out policy for traffic and parking, "convinces" traders of the advantages of pedestrianisation, creates new attractions and opportunities for enjoyment with the support of territorial marketing and boosts the cultural and social role of trade.

If the city were to be deprived of the "beat" of commercial activity, the liveliness and colour of its markets, it would lose its very function of catalytic space as well as that fundamental connotation which has allowed it, over time, to become a cultural, social and gathering point of reference. Commercial places have always been meeting points and the hope is that the old urban role of exchanging goods can once again become, both in and out-with the city, "an opportunity to observe and be observed, get to know others and let them get to know you, meet and be introduced to others, until the episodes in our individual lives have been enriched with freely exchanged values" (Corna Pellegrini, 1992).

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