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Retail Change, and the Impact of These Changes on 'High Street'

with reference to Palmerston North.

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ABSTRACT.

Although the retailing sector is highly significant in post-fordist advanced capitalist societies, the sector has been largely ignored in the academic and professional journals. The limited published work in this area tends, by and large, to be descriptive rather than a theoretically informed analysis. This thesis adopts a theoretical framework derived mainly from the work of Harvey, Barras, Ducatel and Blomley, in an attempt to show that the causes of the locational shifts which have occurred in the retailing sector in Palmerston North over the last fourteen years are not necessarily unique to the location. It further points to ways in which future research may better theorise the retailing industry.

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ABSTRACT.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
PREFACE.....	3
THEORISING URBAN PROCESSES.....	5
Introduction.....	5
The Cyclical Theory of Economic development.....	6
The (Overall) Circuit of Capital.....	9
Commercial Capital.....	12
International Commercial Capital.....	14
The Political System.....	15
Conclusion.....	17
THE RETAILING INDUSTRY.....	18
Introduction.....	18
Downtown Decline.....	18
Response (to Downtown Decline).....	21
The State.....	22
Concentration of Capital.....	23
Internationalisation.....	24
Empirical Retail Studies.....	26
Shopping as a Leisure Activity (Funshopping).....	29
Conclusion.....	30
PALMERSTON NORTH CASE STUDY.....	31
Introduction.....	31
Palmerston North.....	31
The Palmerston North Retailing Sector.....	33
Planning in New Zealand.....	38
Locational Shift by Central City Retailers in Palmerston North.....	41
The Locational Shifts which have occurred on 'High Street'.....	42
The Central City Boundaries.....	42
Re-numbering of the Central City Area.....	42
Defining the term Retailing.....	43
Factors affecting results of the Central City Re-numbering exercise.....	45
Pedestrian Counts.....	47
Vacant Retail Space (in the C.B.D.).....	47
Reasons for using three empirical studies.....	48
Results of the Central Area 'Re-numbering' Study.....	48
Pedestrian Count Findings.....	50
Vacant Retail Space Findings.....	53

Common Findings found using the three empirical studies.....	53
Change in Retail Outlet Type.....	55
Micro-Locational Study.....	58
The Plaza.....	58
The Link.....	64
Mid-City Court.....	65
Downtown.....	65
Broadway Mall.....	68
Commercial Union Building.....	70
Square Edge.....	70
The shopping centres' tenants.....	70
Conclusion.....	71
CONCLUSION.....	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	79
APPENDICES.....	91
Appendix A.....	91
Appendix B.....	119

Fig 1	Location of Palmerston North.	p 32
Fig 2	The locations of the local shopping centres.	p 34
Fig 3	The Central Area boundaries.	p 35
Fig 4	The Square.	p 37
Fig 5	Coleman Mall circa mid 1980s.	p 37
Fig 6	The Central Area Zones.	p 40
Fig 7	Advertisement in <u>The Tribune</u> for The Law Shop, 1991.	p 44
Fig 8	The location of the shopping malls/arcades.	p 46
Fig 9	The results of the Pedestrian Counts conducted in 1987, 1988 and 1990.	p 52
Fig 10	George Street.	p 54
Fig 11	Abode Interiors.	p 56
Fig 12	The D.I.C. building which in more recent times was owned by Arthur Barnett. The building is at present vacant.	p 57
Fig 13	The P.D.C. and Cantlon buildings from Church Street. Foodtown is the building at the back on the left hand side.	p 59
Fig 14	The Church Street entrance to the Plaza.	p 60
Fig 15	The K-Mart entrance and some of The Plaza Car Park.	p 61
Fig 16	Floor plan of the Plaza.	p 62
Fig 17	Stafford Arcade.	p 64
Fig 18	The Link.	p 65

Fig 19	Downtown.	p 66
Fig 20	The Broadway Avenue entrance to Downtown.	p 66
Fig 21	The Food Halls in Downtown.	p 68
Fig 22	Inside Broadway Mall.	p 69

PREFACE.

The Retailing industry has changed from being a '... dull business backwater ...' (Gardner and Sheppard, 1989, 1) into being one of the most visible and dynamic sectors within post-fordist consumer societies. Its transformation has been succinctly described in the following manner;

'Once upon a time, shopping was just well shopping - a quick, simple financial transaction between shopkeeper and customer, and then home with the goods. But something has changed ... retailing has been imbued with a whole new ethos, a new significance, a new cultural meaning ...' (Gardner and Sheppard, 1989, 43).

The impacts of the high profile presently enjoyed by the retailing sector are matched by its importance (in terms of scale and the number of people employed¹) to the economies of the advanced nations. In spite (or maybe because) of the sector's visibility and accessibility to all, retailing has been largely ignored in the academic and professional journals. (Dawson, 1986). Why retailing, which is now such an important part of the urban landscape in western nations, should be ignored is difficult, if not impossible, to understand. One suggestion is that the tendency for researchers to regard production and consumption as two separate spheres (with the productive sphere being regarded as the domain of the male and the consumptive sphere, which includes shopping, being the 'non-productive' domain of the female) has relegated retailing to such a position that unlike some of the more 'masculine' areas of study, for example manufacturing, retailing has not been thought worthy of detailed analysis. (Gardner and Sheppard, 1989).

The lack of research focusing on the sector has been briefly commented on by numerous authors but few have attempted to analyse retailing using a theoretical framework. Most of the articles which have been published tend, by and large, to be descriptive and/or heavily dependent upon the use of the quantitative techniques which came into vogue with

¹ Wrigley (1988,5), for example, claims that retail corporations in Britain now have '... profit levels, employment levels, and sheer market and political power sufficient to rival the traditional giants of UK manufacturing industry'.

the advent of modern urban geography. Rather than attempting to analyse the universally recognised changes which are occurring in the retailing sector, such as the growth of retail corporates and the increasingly international nature of the industry (in the Western world) one or two general statements are made about, for example, the demise of the department store or the decline in the importance of retailing on 'High Street' (Central Business District) and then a unique situation is described in detail.

In this thesis, general theories on economic development in capitalist societies are introduced. This framework helps to explain the cyclical nature of building activity (and the subsequent pattern of over and under supply in the market) and the operation of the overall circuit of capital with particular regard to commercial capital and one of its subforms retail capital as well as the seemingly powerless position of both local and national governments in the face of rapidly internationalizing capital. A case study on (in particular) some aspects of locational change by Palmerston North's central city retailers over the last fourteen years can be used to demonstrate how these general theories can be applied to a unique situation. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the applicability of the general theories to the Palmerston North retailing sector and comments on the possible reasons for some of the discrepancies.