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

with reference to Palmerston North.

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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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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.