RETAIL COMMERCIAL CENTRES

The characteristics of the main Belgian retail centres are identified on maps 1 and 2. These are based on an original enquiry by the Institute for Social and Economic Geography at the Catholic University of Leuven (Professor E. Van Hecke) and the SEGEFA (Service for the study of fundamental and applied economic geography) at the University of Liège (Professor B. Mérenne-Schoumaker) conducted between 1992 and 1995. A questionnaire was distributed by geography teachers to be completed by the parents of children in the fifth and sixth grades of secondary education and the children themselves (at various levels of general, technical and professional education). From some 50 000 questionnaires that were handed out, 30 000 were recovered and analysed in order to set up a data bank.

Since the chosen target-population was principally made up of " young and active " adults we have used two corrections, the first of which was to augment the figures for purchases made in the same commune or/and in the neighbouring town by 20%, this correction being based on investigations which show that persons over 65 years of age do most of their purchasing locally; secondly, the results of the survey concerning the purchases made by young people have been considered to count for 15%. Furthermore the results of the whole survey have been compared to data concerning the commercial amenities (number of retail units and jobs), and adapted to them.The information thus obtained seems to be very reliable and this has been confirmedthrough several case studies. However, we have not taken into account neither the purchases made by tourists, and more particularly by foreign tourists, nor the purchases made in Belgium by those living in frontier areas. Those areas were not covered by the survey. For example, the absence of La Panne from the first two maps could thus be explained, as well as certain weak catchment rates outside communes in the frontier areas.

By commercial centre we mean a group of shops identified as a unit and visited as such. The questions of the survey relating to the place visited being open, the answers usually referred to the former communes (that is to say the layout prevailing before the amalgamation of communes of 1-1-1977) or to smaller subspaces that we have grouped together in the same way. On the other hand, in order to obtain the population catchment of each centre, we have extended the results obtained from the sample to the whole population of each commune (new definition).
On the whole we have identified 307 distinct centres attracting at least 7 000 inhabitants either for everyday shopping needs (that means goods purchased most frequently such as food and cleaning materials) or for semi-frequent shopping (that means other regular purchases such as clothing, shoes, toys, household goods, records..). It is also worth pointing out that the purchase of exceptional items (such as jewellery, leather goods, decorating articles..) being generally related to semi-frequent purchases, it was decided not to assign them a category of their own; in the same way the responses relating to everyday services (dry cleaning, banking..) were very close to those given for everyday shopping. From the 307 centres kept, 301 have been mentioned as those for every day items and 185 for semi-frequent purchases; however 179 are found in both categories, 122 in the first category and 6 in the second one only.

Map 1 displays the results for everyday shopping and therefore includes 301 centres. For each of these two variables have been mapped: the population catchment (circle surface) and the degree of attraction or the relationship between the population outside the commune that use the centre and the population of the commune that say they use it (colour of the circle), the layout here taken for calculation being the present commune layout. Many centres are relatively small (263, i.e. more than 87%, attract less than 50 000 people) ; the greater part of these centres attract most of their shoppers from the commune itself rather than from outside. This is due to a very dense network of centres serving daily needs and to the size of many urban communes after their re-arrangement (1.1.1977) with the communes of their agglomeration. The only exceptions to this rule are some large peripheral centres around the major cities and regional towns, and centres in a rural setting which sometimes play an important supra-communal role.

Map 2 is devoted to semi-frequent shopping. It shows 185 centres and the method of representation chosen is the same as that for map 1. Nevertheless this map is very different because of, above all, the more important differences between the sizes of the population catchments; thus 34 centres attract more than 50 000 inhabitants, six centres more than 200 000 and fourteen more than 100 000 inhabitants. Moreover, many centres attract more customers from outside their commune than from the commune itself. The distribution of the centres is thus more hierarchical and a number of centres play a real regional role. Nevertheless, it is not always the more important centres which attract most of their clientele from outside their commune: for instance, with the exception of Bruxelles-Ville, the highest scores in terms of attraction are frequently to be found in the outlying parts of the agglomerations or in certain regional towns.

Map 3 shows up an important component of the new geography of commercial centres: planned shopping centres and hypermarkets. A planned shopping centre is a collection of businesses and services planned and developed as a unit and usually having their own parking area for customers' use, in contrast with a commercial centre (or spontaneous concentration nucleus of commercial functions, such as a road, a quarter, a small market-town...), it is the result of concerted action; a shopping centre is also different from a passage or an arcade (that is to say a grouping of shops on both sides of one or several covered ways) because of its planned commercial structure generally aiming to satisfy the total needs of the population in its catchment area (market radius). Passages and arcades have not been shown on map 3 since many of them are old and have been integrated into the traditional commercial nuclei and do not constitute new centres of attraction. Furthermore the total surface area of such galleries and arcades is nearly always much reduced compared with that of the planned commercial centres. A hypermarket is a large self-service selling unit providing in a sales area of more than 2 500 sq.m. (in most cases more than 5 000 sq.m.) a large assortment of goods, both food and non-food; almost all hypermarkets are located in out of town sites or in suburbs and provide large parking areas. Like the planned shopping centres, they have often created new commercial poles and have led to the nearby installation of specialized medium-sized shops selling garden equipment, furniture, cars, family leisure equipment and even clothing. Some hypermarkets have recently been added a gallery (for instance the Cora centres) and in some cases there is a hypermarket within shopping centres replacing an original large shop (Ring at Kortrijk; Shopping Center Genk I), or because of the birth of a new centre (Belle Ile at Liege); in these two cases, the centres have been placed in the category "planned shopping centre with hypermarket". On the other hand, the Makro shops which are "cash and carry" or wholesale self-service establishments have been considered as hypermarkets because their functions are very similar to those of hypermarkets, entry cards to them being widespread.
The information which has been used in the preparation of map 3 comes, on the one hand from the Belgian Committee for Distributive Trades which takes an annual census of all large food shops, including hypermarkets, and on the other hand from a personnal statement. The surfaces depicted on the maps are the sales area of the hypermarkets, that is to say the area accessible to customers; these have been totalized for each commune. In contrast, for the hopping centres, the net surface areas to let have been represented separately for each centre. All the circles have been placed at the centre of the commune to which they refer; when two circles relate to the same commune, the smaller one is superimposed on the larger one.
As remarked on map 3, the planned shopping centres and the hypermarkets have greatly contributed to the suburbanisation of the commercial function in generating new poles of commerce in the periphery of urbanized areas. In general, their distribution is strongly correlated with the importance of the main towns; however their development seems more marked in the urban and industrial areas developed during the 19th century, often poorly structured, than in the peripheral areas that have developped since the 1950s. Hence they are much more numerous in the outskirts of Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Charleroi than around Ghent, Hasselt or Namur.

Map 4 expresses the commercial activity through the employment in each commune. The data come from two sources: the ONSS (= social security), which provides wage-owners and salaried employment and the INASTI (= social security for self-employed persons), which provides the self-employment. Four reservations must be made about the data: the place of the censuses differs (salaried staff and wage earners are counted at their place of work while self employed are related to their home address), the INASTI data are not available separately for the 19 communes of the Brussels Capital Region (hence represented by a single circle), the ONSS employment data do not only relate to the workplaces in shops but also to the head offices (consequently, self employment is relatively lower in Brussels and Antwerp) and, finally, for both sources, full time and part time workers are counted in the same way. In general, the map shows a distribution of employment fairly correlated to the population distribution. This confirms the commercial function is rather induced than inductive. The distribution of employment also shows an intermediate relationship between the two maps representing the centres; this seems on the whole somewhat logical because the function of the retail business is at the same time a common (every day) function and a semi-frequent one.