Shopping Spaces and the Urban Landscape in Early Modern Amsterdam, 1550–1850

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# Shopping Spaces and the Urban Landscape in Early Modern Amsterdam, 1550–1850

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In memory of my parents, who were both shopkeepers and the children of shopkeepers.

# Table of contents

# Preface

This book is based on a more extensive Dutch-language study of the retail trade in Amsterdam between 1550 and 2000, which was published by Verloren publishers in 2013.[1] I am grateful to Thys VerLoren van Themaat for granting permission for the early modern part of the study to be published here in English. When producing the English-language edition, I benefitted from the expertise and advice of Inge van der Bijl at Amsterdam University Press and from Vivien Collingwood's translation skills. This English-language edition would not have been possible without the support of four funding institutions, and it is with pleasure that I mention the financial contributions from—in alphabetical order—the Amsterdam University Fund, the De Gijselaar-Hintzen Fonds, the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam and the Professor van Winter Foundation.

The research that underlies this book is based on a very considerable quantity of archival material, and I would like to thank the employees of the Amsterdam City Archives for their contribution to this project. This consisted not only of lugging around large quantities of records and helping me to find yet more archival material, but also of the trouble they have taken over the years to digitize many thousands of images and make them available via the image archive (*Beeldbank*). In this study, these images form an important source of information on the exterior and interior of shops. I also looked for visual material elsewhere, and in doing so I benefitted, among others, from the expertise and suggestions of Mrs Miekie Donner, who managed the collection of the Royal Antiquarian Society of the Netherlands (het Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap). I am also grateful to the late Dr Henk Zantkuijl, who provided detailed answers to my numerous questions about front steps, *pothuizen* and display cases in Amsterdam, and who also put me on the track of relevant prints and architectural drawings. Finally, colleagues, students and former students informed me when they came across images that might be of interest to the research. Without mentioning specific names, I am extremely grateful to them all. I should add that I am aware of the limits of visual material when reconstructing the material life of the past, and that is precisely why the results of the image-based research were constantly tested against what was recorded in written sources on shops.

For the analysis of patterns of accessibility in Amsterdam's urban grid—to be discussed in the chapters to come—the Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment at University College London generously made computer software available. I am pleased to mention that it was Dr Marlous L. Craane, at that time a doctoral candidate at Tilburg University, who informed me of the existence of the software in question. She also advised and assisted me during my initial attempts to analyze the Dutch material from this perspective.

It would not have been possible to conduct the research without the skilled and helpful staff and excellent collection of the University of Amsterdam's library. In the University Library, one seldom fails to find a title contained in some exotic journal or book, and when it comes to cartographic material on Amsterdam, the Library nearly always comes up with the goods. The History Department of the

1 Lesger, Clé, *Het winkellandschap van Amsterdam. Stedelijke structuur en winkelbedrijf in de vroegmoderne en moderne tijd, 1550-2000* (Hilversum 2013).

University of Amsterdam facilitated this study by twice granting me an exemption from teaching, by never complaining about the large numbers of copies and prints that were made as part of the research, and by providing me with office supplies in all shapes and sizes. I am grateful for the collegial atmosphere that I have enjoyed there over the years. Once I had a text, this collegiality was also expressed in the willingness shown by my now former colleagues, Dr Boudien de Vries and Prof. Piet de Rooy, to read and comment on the Dutch manuscript. Their remarks and suggestions contributed to the final result and saved me from making several blunders. During the research, my former colleague Prof. Jan Hein Furnée proved to have a similar interest in the history of shopping and the retail trade, and I have fond memories of our joint efforts in this field.

I would once again like to thank all those, named and unnamed, who contributed to the creation of this book, and I hope that I have done justice to their efforts with the end result. In line with established academic practice, but no less sincere for that, I should like to conclude this preface by stating that any errors in this work are the responsibility of the author alone.

Clé Lesger,

Haarlem/Amsterdam, 2019

# Introduction

Watching the hordes of people spilling out of Amsterdam Central Station into the city's shopping streets on a Saturday or Sunday, it is hard to imagine that just a few decades ago these same streets were beset by a lack of occupancy and decline. The affected streets included not only Kalverstraat and Nieuwendijk, the city's best-known shopping streets, but also streets in old working-class areas such as the Jordaan. In the 1960s, one shop after another closed. Some retailers packed up and left for the new districts that had been built on the city's periphery after the Second World War. Others abandoned entrepreneurship for wage employment, singing the praises of fixed working hours and holiday pay, whilst older shopkeepers muddled through until a redevelopment grant or old-age pension allowed them to shut up shop for good. In that same period, the sun shone on the freshly painted apartment blocks in new districts, and the shops there enjoyed a brisk trade. Nowadays, the situation is very different. Particularly on the edges of what are no longer such new districts, shops have almost disappeared altogether, the vacant retail spaces filled by offices, physiotherapy practices and other service providers. By contrast, today the shoppers are back in force in Kalverstraat and Nieuwendijk, and these streets have the highest rents in the Netherlands. As a result of gentrification, even streets in what were once run-down working-class neighbourhoods are now experiencing a thriving retail trade and the high shop rents that come with this.

It was recent changes in the retail landscape such as these that initially fuelled my interest in the early modern history of shops and shopping. Shops—and retail trade in general—have played a much more important role in our towns and cities than the relatively small amount of attention paid to this phenomenon by Dutch historians would suggest. In a strictly economic sense, shops and markets are the final link in the chain connecting producers to consumers. They are where people purchase the things that they are unable or unwilling to produce themselves, thereby profiting from the expertise, skills and also, in many cases, lower wages of producers located both near and far. We should add that what they select from the offering is not accidental but a reflection of their personality and sometimes, too, the impression they wish to create. This applies both to clothing and shoes and to the objects with which they surround themselves at home and the food they eat.

There is also a spatial aspect to the economic, social and cultural dimensions of retail trade, and it is on this aspect that I shall focus in this study; and this is hardly surprising, given that we are looking at retail trade. A whole series of factors plays a role in the successful exploitation of a shop, but ultimately it is via a shop's location that goods are made available to the consumer.[1] Ghosh and McLafferty put it thus: 'prices can be matched, services can be extended and improved, merchandise may be duplicated, and promotion can be imitated, but a retailer's locational advantages are difficult to assail or neutralize'.[2]

1 This only changed in the recent past with the introduction of mail-order companies and Internet shopping.

2 As cited in Van Duren, *De dynamiek van het constante,* p. 72.

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The aim of this study is thus not only to tell the history of shopping spaces in early modern Amsterdam but also to understand the location patterns in retail trade. I am interested in questions such as: where were shops located in early modern Amsterdam, why were they located there in particular, and which factors caused shopkeepers to change their location behaviour? The obvious answer to these questions is that shopkeepers based their businesses where they expected to find customers, and that they either ceased to trade or moved their shops when customers stayed away. Whilst all of this is undeniably true and many shopkeepers have experienced this firsthand, in order to get a better understanding of the underlying dynamics, we need to examine the spatial purchasing behaviour of consumers in more depth. In this study, I shall argue that the spatial structure of towns and cities—that is to say, the pattern of streets, squares, canals and alleyways—has a dominant influence on the movement of consumers through the urban landscape and thereby on the attractiveness of certain locations for retail trade, too. Disasters aside, as fundamental changes to the structure of the urban grid occur during periods of urban expansion and the restructuring of the urban landscape, in the following chapters we shall pay considerable attention to the spatial development of Amsterdam in our attempt to understand the relationship between the city as a physical structure and its functioning as an economic space.

The urban retail landscape has more than two dimensions, however, which means that our analysis should not be limited to studying location patterns in two-dimensional space. After all, it is particularly in the external appearance and interior design of shops and shop premises that the retail landscape presents itself to consumers, and these aspects therefore make an important contribution to a city's atmosphere and vitality. Nowadays, it tends to take large-scale shop vacancies to make us realize how iconic the shop has been in the urban landscape, but the situation in the past was no different. Shop windows and displays in front of the façade functioned like small exhibitions, as shopkeepers attempted to lure customers with their more or less refined presentations. In early modern Amsterdam, shops and shopping districts also had distinct appearances and characters. In this way, they sent out a message to potential customers and played a role in the complex game of appearance and behaviour with which people present themselves to the world.

Shops fulfil such functions almost cursorily, and until recently their presence in the urban landscape was so self-evident that we seldom reflected on it. It is perhaps for this reason that retail trade has largely eluded the attention of Dutch historians to date.[3] The Netherlands lacks the studies that geographers and historians have devoted to retail trade in other parts of the world, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. Many of these studies are rooted in policy. The dramatic decline in many American inner cities in the second half of the twentieth century was also reflected in the shrinking of the central retail facilities—a predicament that called out, as it were, for studies that

3 Notable exceptions are Furnée, 'Om te winkelen'; Furnée, 'Winkeletalages als moderne massamedia'; Steegen, *Kleinhandel en stedelijke ontwikkeling*; De Nijs, *Op zoek naar de verdwenen middenstand*; Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*; and Furnée, '"Our Living Museum of Nouveautés"'. Less recent are studies on large-scale shopping businesses like Miellet, *Honderd jaar grootwinkelbedrijf*; Miellet, 'Immigratie van katholieke Westfalers'; Hondelink, 'Vroom en Dreesmann'; and Jager, *Arm en rijk*. In Flanders, research into the retail trade is more extensive. See the historiographic overviews in Blondé et al., 'Retail Circuits', and Van Damme, *Verleiden en verkopen*.

analyzed and explained the process itself and its underlying causes. The urban crisis in the Netherlands never reached the scale witnessed in the US, and to a great extent, the inner cities have been spared large-scale interventions in the urban fabric. Perhaps it is for this reason that less need has been felt in the Netherlands for reflection and documentation.

In the United Kingdom, which finds itself between mainland Europe and the US—and more than just in the geographical sense—it was likewise the problems of the inner cities that undoubtedly stimulated academic interest in retail trade. But the history of retail was also studied within the broad framework of the Industrial Revolution and the modernization of British society, particularly in the nineteenth century. It will come as no surprise that older studies drew a direct link between these dramatic changes and the development of the modern retail sector. Much less attention was paid by these studies to retail trade in the early modern era, which was often seen as traditional and underdeveloped. Some were even of the opinion that prior to around 1800, shops—defined as fixed sales outlets for goods that are not produced on-site—did not exist, or hardly existed. It was thought that retail trade largely overlapped with market trading at that time.[4] In recent decades, this account of a process of modernization covering almost every aspect of society and a sharp break between the early modern and modern periods has proved untenable in many respects.[5] Likewise, in research on British retail trade and consumption patterns, it has become clear that things that were once described as typically 'modern' were less novel than they initially appeared. In many respects, it seems to have been a case of evolution rather than revolution.[6]

The direct relationship that was initially assumed to exist between developments in the retail sector and the changes set in motion by the Industrial Revolution not only reflected the modernization perspective that was dominant at the time but was also a matter of a lack of sources. For the period prior to around 1800, we lack many of the sources, mainly quantitative, that have formed the basis for research into nineteenth- and twentieth-century retail trade. This hampered the comparison with the early modern period, and for some, this evidently led to the conclusion that the lack of source material was an indication that the phenomenon under study simply did not exist at that time. But as well as the near-compelling logic of the modernization perspective and the limitations of early modern source material, there was also a third factor at play. With the exception of London, British towns in the early modern period were relatively small and not especially populous. In 1650, London had around 400,000 inhabitants, making it Europe's second most populous city after Paris. Edinburgh, the second-largest city in the British Isles, was home to just 35,000 inhabitants, and Bristol and Norwich tied in third place with no more than 20,000 inhabitants. The other towns were even smaller. A century later, the population of London had grown to 675,000, and Dublin (90,000 inhabitants) and Cork (58,000 inhabitants) had assumed second and third place. But most British towns never had more than 20,000 inhabitants, and many had far fewer.[7]

4 See for example Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain*. Willan, *The Inland Trade* is one of the first studies in which the myth of an underdeveloped early modern retail trade was challenged. Also important in this respect is Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*.

5 Compare De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution'.

6 See among others Glennie, 'Consumption, Consumerism and Urban Form', p. 933 ff, and Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*

7 Population figures for European cities in De Vries, *European Urbanization,* appendix 1, and also in Bairoch, Batou and Chèvre, *La population des villes Européennes*.

Given these population numbers, it was hardly possible for a highly developed and spatially differentiated retail system to emerge.[8] This would only happen when the existing towns expanded considerably in the nineteenth century, and new industrial towns penetrated the highest echelons of the urban hierarchy. From this perspective, it is perhaps unsurprising that the development of retail trade has largely been seen as a nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon.

In the present study, I shall examine the development of shops and shopping over a long period (from around 1550 to 1850) in a city whose size did not preclude beforehand the emergence of a differentiated retail system: the city of Amsterdam. From the late sixteenth century, Amsterdam enjoyed a period of unprecedented economic and demographic growth, and around the mid-seventeenth century, it was one of the five largest cities in Europe. A century later, its growth would lag behind that of front-runners such as London and Paris, but with around 230,000 inhabitants, Amsterdam was always a member of the select group of very large early modern cities. And it would remain so, even after a prolonged period of stagnation and decline that began in the mid-eighteenth century and was reversed only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the long view that is taken here allows us to trace continuities and discontinuities that would otherwise remain hidden.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is useful to reflect briefly on a number of concepts. In a book about shopping spaces, we need to consider, first and foremost, the concept of the shop. The term is used here to describe a fixed location for the sale of consumer goods that are not produced or consumed on-site. A number of activities are thereby excluded from this definition; they include market trade, for example, and the trade plied by the many itinerant sellers who passed through the city until well into the twentieth century.[9] The same is true of the workshops run by artisans who sold the fruit of their labour directly to consumers. In a study with a particular focus on location patterns, it makes sense to exclude itinerant trade. Artisan trade also deserves a separate study, as artisans have to consider many factors when making location decisions, not just accessibility, which is so crucial to shops. When the term 'retail trade' is used in the following chapters, I am thus referring to shops as they are defined here. That is not to say that Amsterdam's markets will be disregarded altogether; they come into the picture when their presence affected the location behaviour of shopkeepers and the spatial purchasing behaviour of consumers.

The goods sold in shops can be divided into numerous categories, but studies on the location of shops usually distinguish between daily necessities ('convenience goods') and durable goods ('shopping goods'), on the grounds that these categories generate contrasting location patterns. In the next chapter, we will focus in more detail on the theory of shop location patterns. The composition of the convenience and shopping goods categories is explained at greater length in the appendix.

Finally, a brief word on the topography of the city. To avoid the reader losing his/her way in the many streets and neighbourhoods that inevitably come up for discussion, I have included a large number of maps on which the

8 Glennie, 'Consumption, Consumerism and Urban Form', p. 944 for a similar argument. For location patterns in small cities, see Wild and Shaw, 'Trends in Urban Retailing', figure 2, and Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden,* figures 3.8 and 3.10.

9 I do pay attention to market trade and itinerant sellers in my upcoming chapter in *A Cultural History of Shopping in the Age of Enlightenment* (*1650–1820*) (London: Bloomsbury).


Figure 1: The urban area of Amsterdam, end of the sixteenth century.

topographical indications described in the text have been marked where necessary.[10] Aside from this, it should be noted that in this study the terms 'the medieval city' or 'city centre' are used to refer to the area of Amsterdam encircled by the waters of the Singel, Kloveniersburgwal and Geldersekade canals and the open harbour front to the north, which is nowadays separated from the IJ by Amsterdam Central Station (see Figure 1). By the 'early modern city' I mean the crescent-shaped urban area (including the city centre) that was established after the large urban expansions of the seventeenth century, encircled by the Singelgracht canal (not to be confused with the Singel). Strictly speaking, the Plantage neighbourhood also formed part of the early modern city, but no residential homes were built there until the mid-nineteenth century (see Figure 2).

With the Plantage, though, we have already drifted far from the era in which our study of shops and shopping in Amsterdam begins. In the next chapter, we therefore turn

10 Since the urban grid and street names in Amsterdam have survived the passage of time relatively unchanged, the streets mentioned in the text can also be found on modern maps and on the Internet.


Figure 2: The urban area of Amsterdam, ca. 1665 to the mid-nineteenth century.

back to the sixteenth century. We shall also consider some of the theory of the location of shops in the urban landscape, including a method that allows us to measure the accessibility of streets and street segments within the larger whole of the urban grid. The foundations are thereby laid for an analysis in which general location principles are linked to the morphological specificity of Amsterdam in the early modern era.