Marketing an Urban Identity: The Shops and Shopkeepers of Ancient Rome

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the development of fixed-point retailing in the city of ancient Rome between the 2nd c BCE and the 2nd/3rd c CE. Changes in the socio-economic environment during the 2nd c BCE caused the structure of Rome’s urban retail system to shift from one chiefly reliant on temporary markets and fairs to one typified by permanent shops. As shops came to dominate the architectural experience of Rome’s streetscapes, shopkeepers took advantage of the increased visibility by focusing their marketing strategies on their shop designs. Through this process, the shopkeeper and his shop actively contributed to urban placemaking and the distribution of an urban identity at Rome.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper employs an interdisciplinary approach in its analysis, combining textual, archaeological, and art historical materials with comparative history and modern marketing theory.

Research limitation/implications – Retailing in ancient Rome remains a neglected area of study on account of the traditional view among economic historians that the retail trades of pre-industrial societies were primitive and unsophisticated. This paper challenges traditional models of marketing history by establishing the shop as both the dominant method of urban distribution and the chief means for advertising at Rome.

Keywords – Ancient Rome, Ostia, Shop Design, Advertising, Retail Change, Urban Identity

Paper Type – Research Paper

Introduction
The permanent Roman shop was a locus for both commercial and social exchanges, and the shopkeeper acted as the mediator of these exchanges. By providing a vital link between producer and consumer, shopkeepers were uniquely positioned to react quickly to new trends, allowing retailers to market new ideas alongside new products in their shop environment (Walsh, 2000, p. 92). As such, the shopkeeper and his shop contributed in no small way to the development of an urban culture in ancient Rome. All the same, the Roman shop has never been subjected to a systematic study, especially in regard to how the shopkeeper used and interacted with the shop environment, and how the relationship between shop and shopkeeper impacted urban culture. This study attempts to address these questions through an interdisciplinary approach to the evidence. The first section outlines the evolution of shop architecture between the Republican and Imperial periods to demonstrate how the fixed shop became the dominant method of retail and a central component of the commercial landscape at Rome. An analysis of the physical remains of shops from Rome’s harbor town Ostia in the second section shows how Imperial shopkeepers, capitalizing on this increased visibility, focused their marketing strategies on the shop design. Through this process, the shopkeeper and his shop actively contributed to urban placemaking and the distribution of an urban culture at Rome.

Problematic evidence may be partly to blame for the lack of scholarly interest in the Roman shop. During the Imperial period, shops dominated the architectural experience of Rome’s streetscapes; however, due to the city’s two thousand years of continuous occupation, only a fraction of those shops remain extant for study (e.g. La Casa di Via Giulio Romano: Packer, 1969, pp. 129-35; Piazza Colonna: Wallace-Hadrill, 2000, pp. 203-04 and Gatti, 1917; Chiesa dei SS. Giovanni e Paolo sul Celio: Wallace-Hadrill, 2000, pp. 206-07; Piazza dei Cinquecento: Pettinau, 1996; Via Sacra: Haselberger et al., 2002, s.v. and Van Deman, 1923). Although shops appear to be the most frequent architectural-type depicted on fragments of the Forma Urbis Romae (FUR), a 3rd c CE marble plan of
the city, one should use caution in accepting these identifications (Mac Mahon, 2003, p. 9). First the function of the plan may have been more decorative and symbolic than actually functional, which raises concerns over the accuracy of what is depicted. Moreover, the FUR only delineates the ground floors of structures and does not include characteristic features of the Roman shop such as wide doorways, grooved thresholds, or shop counters. In consequence, the tradition has been to identify any one or two-room space with a rectilinear plan fronting onto a street, courtyard, or portico as a potential taberna or shop (Staccoli, 1959 and Ziçans, 1941). While it is probable that some of these spaces had commercial functions, it is impossible to label rooms on the FUR as shops with certainty on the basis of a quadrangular plan alone (Holleran, 2012, p. 109). Auspiciously, excavated examples of shops at Rome and the evidence from the FUR exhibit striking parallels in form, layout, decoration, and context to shops from Imperial Ostia, where the archaeological record is much better preserved (e.g. Pettinai, 1996, pp. 180-81; Packer, 1968/9, pp. 132-33; Staccoli, 1959, p. 57). For instance, excavations in the Piazza dei Cinquecento near the Termini train station in Rome revealed an insula (C) dating to the 2nd c CE whose ground floor consisted of two rows of single-room shops arranged back-to-back. Several of the fragments from the FUR depict the same shop arrangement, which is also found in insulae throughout the port city of Ostia (Fig. 1).


While Ostia may offer useful comparisons, the archaeological record is still incomplete. The majority of Ostia’s shop spaces were excavated before the advent of scientific methods in archaeology in the early 20th century. Workmen hastily uncovered more than a third of the city between 1938 and 1942 in anticipation of Mussolini’s Esposizione Universale Roma. Consequently, while Ostia’s commercial landscape contains over 800 shops, much of the stratigraphy and material culture associated with these spaces have been lost or poorly documented. In general, those shops that have been subjected to careful excavation seldom have substantial material remains to recover. Shops in pre-industrial economies rarely used permanent installations or furnishings (e.g. Fig.8 and Fig.9); fixtures such as tables or shelves were frequently made of perishable materials, leaving little trace in the archaeological record (Girmaldi Bernardi, 2005; Mac Mahon, 2006, p. 291; Baratto, 2003, p. 69; Clark, 2000, p. 59; Welch, 2005, p. 151). As a result, it is difficult to determine on the basis of architecture or plan alone the specific commercial function of a shop and how its interior space was organized or used. For these reasons, the small number of articles and book chapters that deal with the subject tend to focus on the architectural design, categorizing the shops of a specific town based on structural variants or, when identifiable, functional categories (e.g. Ziçans, 1941; Staccoli, 1959; Girri, 1956; Gassner, 1986; Monteix, 2006; Pirson, 2007). While such taxonomies are useful for organizing the large dataset of physical evidence, shops were not empty architectural hulls devoid of a social
context; instead, they were dynamic multi-functional spaces in which commercial and interpersonal exchanges occurred.

A new approach is needed that will enable us to move beyond identifying form and commercial function toward a more holistic understanding of the shop environment that includes a discussion of how the shopkeepers and their clientele were actively interacting with the space, each other, and their local urban environment. For the last 40 years, marketing researchers have acknowledged that shop environment has a considerable impact on consumer behavior (Bohl, 2012). This theory, referred to here as retail atmospherics, is based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model borrowed from environmental psychology (e.g. Kolter, 1973; Mehrabian and Russel, 1974; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). Simply stated, S-O-R assumes that environmental stimuli affect an organism’s emotional state, which in turn influences an organism’s responses (Mehrabian and Russel, 1974, p. 4).

Applied to marketing research, the shop environment, comprised of ambient, design, and social factors, influences a consumer’s emotional state and determines shopping behavior (e.g. Kolter, 1973; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Bitner, 1992) (Fig. 2). Consumers responding positively to a shop environment exhibit approach type behaviors, such as lingering to browse, interacting with salespeople, and ultimately purchasing an item. Alternatively negative responses to the shop environment result in avoidance type behaviors. Retail atmospherics also affect the employee’s behavior since the retailer interacts with clientele within the servicescape (Bitner, 1992, p. 85). An employee with a positive response to the shop environment in which he/she works is more productive and willing to engage with customers, which contributes to a positive impression of the shop in the mind of the consumer. Empirical evidence gathered from numerous marketing studies proves the efficacy of retail atmospherics, which receives additional support from physiological reasoning (Bohl, 2012, p. 3).

Attempts to apply modern economic theory to the ancient economy are sometimes met with skepticism. I do not suggest that Roman shopkeepers were modern marketing strategists. To complicate the issue, it is practically impossible to capture the emotional state of an ancient Roman retailer or consumer since responses to physical stimuli are largely determined by intangible variables like an individual’s mood at a given time, their socio-economic background, or purchasing intentions (Monroe and Guiltinan, 1975; Bohl, 2012, pp. 13-17; Raajpoot et al., 2008; Westbrook and Black, 1985). Moreover, because many economic historians believe that shopping did not develop into a cultural activity until the 19th c, the concept that pre-industrial retailers might have actively designed their shop environments or adapted their service styles to make shopping a more pleasant experience has never been considered (Cox, 2000, p. 13, pp. 140-5). While it is probably true that for most Romans shopping was functional rather than a form of entertainment, evidence exists to suggest that some consumers did view it as a leisure activity. For instance, Martial (Epig. 9.59.2) provides an account of Mamurra, who spends his day browsing the luxury shops in the Saepta at Rome driven by no apparent purchasing motivation other than to peacock about in public.

The basic concept of retail atmospherics – environment impacts behavior – is culturally transferable. We already use environmental psychology in our discussions of Roman domestic space and monumental architecture (e.g. Wallace-Hadrill, 1996; Zanker, 1990; Favro, 1998; Hölscher, 2004). If we allow that elite Romans used architecture as a vehicle for self-representation, then we may assume that Roman shopkeepers were likewise capable of manipulating their retail environments to send visual messages to potential consumers. Retail atmospherics provides an approach to how commonly occurring less ephemeral environmental cues in Roman shops (e.g. layout, furnishing, and décor) may have affected the organization and use of space, shaped buyer-seller relationships, and impacted consumer perceptions of shop image and shopkeeper.
The Development of Shop Architecture at Rome

Defining what actually constituted a shop space in ancient Rome is somewhat difficult. The Latin term *taberna*, which is most commonly associated with the modern concept of a shop, has been used by archaeologists to denote a standardized and uniquely Roman architectural-type identifiable in urban centers throughout the Roman empire. Nevertheless, commercial space was extremely flexible in ancient Rome, and goods could be sold from almost anywhere in the city both formally (e.g. shops and market buildings) and informally (e.g. domestic spaces, street corners, arcades). According to Ulpian, shopkeepers could keep shop within a *tabernula*, *pergula*, *horreum*, *armarium*, or *offinca*, which suggests that the concept of a ‘shop’ was tied more to the location where selling took place than a specific structure (Ulp. *Dig.* 5.1.19.2; Holleran, 2012, p. 22). Moreover the term *taberna* in the literary sources and epigraphic record denoted in different contexts as shop, booth, stall, workshop, inn, or tavern. Fundamentally, a *taberna* was any permanent structure useful for habitation (Ulp. *Dig.* 50.16.183; cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.4.13). Retailing categories were also fluid in ancient Rome with no clear distinctions between wholesaler, producer-retailer, specialized retailer, or service provider. To account for the flexibility of the term, the multi-functional nature of the space, and the fluidity between retail trades, I adopt a very broad definition for ‘shop’ in this paper, including in my analysis any permanent space with a commercial function.

The basic layout of the *taberna* – a single rectilinear room – on the basis of archaeological data changed little over time from the early Republic down into the Late Medieval/Early Modern period (e.g. Clark, 2000, p. 58, p. 61; Welch, 2005; Evans and Lawson, 1981, p. 120). This homogeneity has encouraged scholars of the Roman economy to take not only the standardized form, but also the existence of shopkeepers for granted. While obvious, the fundamental relationship between a *taberna* and *tabernarius* must be emphasized: before permanent shops, there were no shopkeepers. It follows then that the practice of shopkeeping developed out of and alongside the fixed-point retail trade, which became an important marketing channel in the city of Rome during the 2nd c BCE. Consequently, a clear understanding of the shopkeepers’ trade must take into account how shop architecture changed between the Republican and Imperial periods and how these changes shaped the use of shop space and the buyer-seller relationship. As this section demonstrates, shop architecture was not static, but instead responded to changes in the socio-economic environment.

While it is difficult to measure, for much of its early history, the city of Rome had a predominately agrarian economy and a relatively small urban population, which generated a low level of demand easily supplied by a provisional retail institution (De Ligt and de Neeve, 1988, p. 402). One of the
earliest known marketing systems in Rome was the *nundinae*, a temporary market held every eight days (e.g. Dio. Hal. 2.28). During the Republic, markets provided a vital link between town and country, acting as a marketing channel for local small-scale farmers who wished to sell their agricultural surpluses as well as an essential distributive channel for supplying food to the urban inhabitants (Holleran, 2012, pp. 181-89; De Ligt, 1993, pp. 52-53, pp. 106-17; and Morley, 2000, p. 220. These markets also offered craftsmen with an important, albeit periodic consumer base on which they relied while the level of demand was too low in the city to support a large network of fixed-retail establishments (De Ligt and de Neeve, 1988, p. 401). In fact, holding the market every eight days limited any disruption to agricultural production, which allowed rural inhabitants the opportunity to come into the city not just to sell, but also to purchase any products from urban craftsmen, which they could not make or obtain on their own. Similarly *mercati*, periodic fairs, which were also held at Rome probably form a very early date, were often connected with the celebration of a *pangegyreis*, religious festival, or *ludi* (e.g. Cic. *Rep.* 2.27). These fairs were held less frequently than the *nundinae*, but would have lasted for several days, attracting a larger consumer base from greater distances than the weekly markets (De Ligt and de Neeve, 1988, p. 395; De Ligt, 1993, pp. 14-15, pp. 78-91; and Holleran, 2012, pp. 189-93).

Fig. 3: Relief of a vegetable-seller’s market stall. Ostia Antica (first half of 3rd c CE). Ostia Archaeological Museum.

A retail system dominated by temporary markets and periodic fairs obligated consumers to make large purchases in order to acquire enough supplies to see them through until the next market day (e.g. Davis, 1966, p. 22). Such purchasing behavior necessitated consumers to invest in a certain amount of planning, forethought, and saving in order to acquire and store the requisite amount of commodities to hold them over until the next market day or fair. Due to their temporary nature, Republican markets and fairs had very little impact on the urban landscape and have left no visible traces in the archaeological record; however, art historical evidence from the Imperial period and comparative historical material from Medieval and Early Modern markets offer some insight into their appearance and organization (Fig. 3). In fact the structure of open-air markets has changed very little down into the present day so that the weekly fruit and vegetable market at the *Campo de’Fiori* or the large weekly bizarre at the *Porta Portese* in Rome may invoke, to a certain extent, the experience of an ancient Roman market. Exchanges in markets and fairs took place out of doors, in the open before makeshift trestle tables and market stalls, facilitating the regulation of exchange, collection of customs and taxes, and reducing the risk of deceit by buyer or seller. Commercial exchanges in this period were presumably completed through barter or the exchange of goods since the silver *denarius* was not introduced until the end of the 3rd c BCE and smaller denomination bronze coins did not appear in
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circulation until the late 1st c BCE (Harl, 1996). The impermanent and flexible structure of such markets required very little capital investment from the state to maintain or oversee.

According to Livy (1.35.10) the first permanent shops at Rome appeared in the 6th c BCE when the king Tarquinus Priscus re-systematized the Forum (cf. Dio. Hal. 3.67.10). These shops most likely resembled permanent market stalls constructed between the arcades of the porticoes that flanked the Forum. We should approach Livy’s narrative of Archaic Rome with caution since he was writing several centuries later in the 1st c BCE; however, the earliest archaeological evidence for fixed shops at Rome dates to this same century (530/20 BCE) and was uncovered when excavations on the lower slopes of the Palatine hill revealed two Archaic atrium-houses fronted by pairs of shops opening onto the via Sacra, a major thoroughfare through the Forum (Caradini, 1990; Cristofani 1990, p.97) (Fig. 4). References from Livy (39.44.7 and 44.16.10) indicate that it was fairly commonplace for elite houses surrounding the Forum to include shop space in the Early and Middle Republican periods. At some point in the 5th century a row of wooden butchers’ stalls was erected along the north side of the Forum near sacellum Cloacinae, which corresponded to the tabernae novae still standing in the same location in the 1st c BCE (Livy 3.48.5, 26.27.3, and 40.51.5). Recounting the story of Verginius, Dionysus of Halicarnassus (11.37.5), a Greek historian and contemporary of Livy, indicated that these butcher shops had bars situated at the front of their stalls. In the 4th c BCE, these booths received a second storey with balconies fronted by a colonnade from which spectators could view the gladiatorial games staged in the Forum (Vitruv. de Arch. 5.1.1-2). The addition of a second storey underscores the permanence of these structures, whose walls must have been sturdy enough to support the upper floor and balcony. In addition another row of shops was added to the southeastern side of the Forum, which were known as the tabernae veteres (Plaut. Cur. 474, 480). By comparing these literary references with the archaeological evidence, an image emerges of the early Roman shop: a single quadrangular room arranged in rows or incorporated into the fronts of houses concentrated around the Forum, which at this time is where the majority of commercial activity took place (Livy 9.7.8). It is probable that shops existed elsewhere in the city from an early date; however, with the exception of a single reference to the citywide closing of shops in 458 BCE (Livy 3.27); references to shops outside of the Forum only begin to appear in the late 3rd c BCE.

Fig. 4: Plan of Republican atrium house with shops (3) on the southeastern slope of the Palatine Hill. Rome. (Source: Drawing by S. J. Hales, after Carandini (1986/8))

A growing number of scholars have suggested that the major period of economic growth and commercial development occurred, not under the Principate, but between the late 3rd c BCE and the 1st c BCE; however, no study exists on how the transformations that characterized this period affected the distributive trades (e.g. Kay, 2014, p. 5; Bang, 2009, p. 202; Morley, 2010, p. 76; Bowman and
Wilson, 2009, p. 47). And yet, it was during the 2nd c BCE that the retail trade at Rome evolved from a system characterized by temporary markets and fairs to one based chiefly on fixed-shop retailing. Although Rome had completed its conquest of the Italian peninsula by the end of the 3rd c BCE, it was experiencing financial hardships due to the destruction and costs of the 2nd Punic War as well as suffering from grain shortages and natural disasters (Dyson, 2010, p. 21). Nevertheless, the city had grown to become one of the largest urban centers in the Mediterranean with an estimated population of 200,000 within a walled area of ca. 426 ha. (Morley, 1996, p. 39; Scheidel, 2007, p. 344, n.88; Kay, 2014, p.10). Rome was already comparable in size to Venice and London in the 17th c, which had populations of 140,000 and 200,000 respectively (De Ligt, 2012, p. 338). The scarcity of archaeological evidence and textual sources complicates any reconstruction of the urban character in this period. Livy (5.55.3-5) writing two centuries later characterized Mid-Republican Rome as relatively unsophisticated. Construction had slowed on account of the financial crisis, but any building undertaken continued in an uncontrolled and haphazard fashion, employing local materials, such as wood, tuff, and terracotta decoration, and local dry stone construction techniques. In addition, Rome was seriously deficient in urban amenities, lacking permanent market buildings, warehouses, public latrines, large public baths, a permanent theatre, or amphitheater. The supposedly rustic character of Rome made the city an object of derision at the Macedonian court in the early 2nd c BCE, because it was “still unadorned in both its public and private spaces” (Livy 40.5.7).

By 146 BCE, Rome had acquired an empire. Developments in the socio-economic environment triggered by Rome’s expanding hegemony over the Mediterranean in the 2nd c BCE caused the retail system to evolve. The influx of an unprecedented amount of indemnities and booty from wars of conquest caused an intensification of agricultural production, as a portion of this new capital was invested in the production and processing of cash crops. For instance, exports of Italian wine to Gaul rose rapidly over the course of the century as evinced by shipwreck evidence and an increase in the production of Dressel 1 wine amphorae (e.g. Parker 1992; Wilson, 2009, p. 23, fig. 9.4). And both population growth and the redistribution of the population in urban centers led to the rapid urbanization of the Italian peninsula. Estimates suggest that the total combined free and servile population of Italy increased 57% in the 1st half of the 2nd c BCE and another 18% in the 2nd half of the century (Kay, 2014, p. 182). W. Scheidel (2007, p. 327) assumes that the population of Rome grew from 150/200,000 to 600/800,000. A growth in the number and size of urban centers would have necessitated growth in agricultural output so that urban inhabitants, now reliant to a large extent on markets and shops for their food, would not go hungry.

Population growth also led to a rise in demand, especially in the city of Rome where a significant consumer base and elite purchasing power concentrated. Conquest introduced new wants and fashions to Rome by exposing the populace to the Hellenistic koine of Greek cities. Driven at first by elite demands, especially for slaves and luxury items, markets in the 2nd c BCE expanded, integrating into an interregional trade network (Kay, 2014, pp. 207-10). Eventually, in order to supply growing demands from all levels of society, certain industries developed large-scale production centers in the Italian peninsula (Wallace-Hadrill, 2008, p. 371). Previously, producer-retailers manufactured items in small independent workshops. With the growth of nucleated workshops the scale of production increased, encouraging a separation of production and retailing functions. The *terra sigillata* industry, which specialized in the production of a red-slipped tableware exported widely across the Mediterranean, developed in northern Etruria during the 1st c BCE and provides a hallmark example of this process (e.g. Fülle 1997). A complex multi-channel distributive network developed to handle the transportation, storage, and marketing of the imported and manufactured goods, with shopkeepers occupying the end stage of this supply chain, selling the product to the final consumer (Hollерan 2012).

Moreover the standardization of currency and rapid spread of the silver denarius over the course of the 2nd c BCE encouraged increasing levels of monetization in both town and country (Howgego, 1992, pp. 20-2). While barter probably continued to be an important method of commercial exchange, the denarius system included smaller denominations of bronze coins, which were minted in large numbers in the first half of the 2nd c BCE (Kay, 2014, p. 93). The introduction of small denomination coins into the economy would have allowed consumers to make smaller purchases on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, bankers became more visible at Rome, signaling an important shift in the financial structure of the economy (Andreau, 1987, p. 333). By offering credit, bankers created credit and money beyond the amount of coinage in circulation, which encouraged commercial activity and economic expansion (e.g. Temin, 2004, p. 705; Harris, 2006, p.13, p. 22; Kay, 2014, p. 107). It is worth noting that shopkeepers could also act as informal creditors, offering lines of credit to their
customers, which would have stimulated market growth by making goods affordable to a larger base of the population. While exact figures are impossible to calculate, through a synthesis of the evidence, Kay has estimated that Rome experienced an estimated 72% increase in real per capita growth between 150 and 50 BCE (annual compound growth rate of 0.54%) while the per capita income of the free non-elite population of Italy grew by 77% (Kay, 2014, pp. 182-83). With more people, more money, and more goods flowing into the city, temporary and periodic markets, which met the demands of the Early and Mid-Republican city, were no longer adequate for supplying the increasing demands of an Imperial capital (Roth and Klein, 1993 and Brown, 1987).

In response to these environmental factors, the state invested considerable sums over the course of the 2nd c BCE in repairing and expanding the existing infrastructure, building utilitarian structures connected to trade and commerce, and increasing the status of the city through the introduction of new architecture inspired by Hellenistic Greek cities (Davies, 2013, p. 442). In England during the 17th c, civic improvements, such as paving streets, constructing sidewalks, and introducing street lamps encouraged commercial activity in urban centers by creating ‘an environment conducive to the pastime of shopping’ (Cox, 2000, pp. 66-67). While it is highly unlikely that Roman magistrates undertook utilitarian projects specifically for the benefit of retailing, nevertheless improvements to the civic infrastructure, specifically projects concerned with cleaning and maintaining the streets along which permanent shops were becoming more and more concentrated, indirectly encouraged commercial activity by promoting a healthier, more pleasant street environment.

Shops began to appear in new contexts throughout the city associated with innovative architectural-types. The first basilicae, whose architecture and function were reminiscent of the Hellenistic Greek stoa, appeared in the Forum in the first quarter of the 2nd c BCE. Although these buildings hosted a combination of judicial, administrative, and commercial activities, their close association to the earlier shops in the Forum emphasized a commercial function. The Basilica Aemilia was constructed just to the north of the tabernae novae in 179 BCE and incorporated another row of shops into its façade (Livy 40.51.5). In 170 BCE, the tabernae veteres were razed to make room for the Basilica Sempronia, whose plan included small rooms in the rear of the building to replace the shops that had been destroyed (Livy 44.16.10).

The city received its first macellum, covered market building, in the early 2nd c BCE. The censor M. Fulvius Nobilior constructed a fish-market surrounded by shops and a market square and colonnade outside the Porta Trigemina in 179 BCE (Livy 40.51.5). The standard macellum consisted of an open courtyard surrounded on all four sides by one-room rectilinear shops, which specialized in the sale of perishable commodities (e.g. Ter. Eun. 2.2.4; Plaut. Aul. 2.8.3; De Ruyt, 1983).

In the second half of the 2nd c BCE, horrea (warehouses) also appeared for the first time in the commercial landscape, the Horrea Sempronia in 123 BCE and the Horrea Sulpicia (Galbana) toward the end of 2nd c BCE/beginning of 1st c BCE (Rickman, 1971, pp. 149-50). Even though these structures functioned primarily as storage facilities, evidence from the Imperial period indicates that they also housed commercial activities. For instance, epigraphic evidence indicates that a cloak-seller (sagarius: CIL 06, 33906 (p 3896) = ILS 07584 = AE 1898, 00145) and a female fishmonger (piscatrix: CIL 06, 09801 (p 3470, 3895) = ILS 07500 = MNR-01-02, p 33 = CEMNR p 137 = Term p 478) both kept a shop in the Horrea Galbana at some point in the mid 1st or 2nd c CE. The association of shopkeepers with innovative commercial architecture such as the horrea, basilicae, and macella signals that an important shift was underway in the structure of the distributive network at Rome. Large-scale warehouses were built for the purpose of stockpiling goods to insure that a steadier stream of commodities and products reached the Roman people. Rather than waiting for a weekly or monthly market, urban inhabitants now had the opportunity to purchase small amounts of goods on a daily basis from permanent market buildings and fixed shops.

While the majority of structures built in the first half of the 2nd c BCE continued to rely on wood, local stone, and traditional building styles, by the end of the century commercial structures were being built in concrete masonry styles (Kay, 2014, p. 217, p. 221). Concrete construction techniques revolutionized the building industry by reducing both the cost and time of construction. The introduction of concrete may have encouraged public and private investments in commercial architecture on a scale previously unseen (Kay, 2014, pp. 220-21). Concrete also allowed for the construction of multi-storey insula buildings, which freed space on the ground floor of private structures for more commercial space.

Unfortunately there is very little archaeological evidence for Mid-to-Late Republican shops at Rome. Through a comparison of the better-preserved remains of Republican shops in other Italic
towns, we may cautiously say that the typical Roman shop in this period continued to follow the simple plan established in the 6th c BCE: a single quadrilateral room (c. 3.5 to 6 m x 3.5 to 8m) or room with retrobottega which opened onto a street, plaza, or courtyard from the ground floor of a building (Baratto, 2003, pp. 69-70). Even though shops were now appearing in more monumental contexts, shop design remained relatively basic. Walls were adorned with white plaster or, in some instances, simple geometric designs like those found in the Republican shops at Paestum and Herdonia (Baratto, 2003, p. 69 (catalog nn. 2, 3, and 4)). The majority of shops in Italy dating to 2nd c. BCE contained beaten earth floors covered by a thin layer of plaster or opus signinum (Baratto, 2003, p. 69 (catalog nn. 3, 4, 6, 11, and 17)).

As the city of Rome transformed itself into an Imperial capital over the course of the 2nd c BCE, fixed-shop retailing became established as an essential service of urban life and an important component of Rome’s burgeoning urban identity. Shops now appeared in a variety of contexts, dispersed widely in almost every street and neighborhood of the city. The growing number of shops in the urban topography corresponded to an increasing number of shopkeepers in Roman society. The shift to shop retailing at Rome improved the economic and social status of shopkeepers, who emerged in the 1st c BCE as a visible and politically active social group linked together by strong horizontal ties of proximity in the urban environment, occupation, relative social and economic status, and membership in professional and religious associations (Vennarucci, 2015, ch. 3).

Rome was fundamentally a “city of neighborhoods”; people by and large lived out their lives within the local community of their vicus (Wallace-Hadrill, 2003, p. 195; Lott, 2004; and Holleran, 2011, p. 261). Life in a Roman vicus centered both physically and metaphorically on the street and compita or crossroads where people gathered to socialize. These streets were more than mere traffic conduits: they functioned as the common man’s Forum where commercial exchanges, production, political canvassing, religious rituals, and leisure activities all took place (Laurence, 2008 and Holleran, 2011).

While the following passage concerns Camillius’s trip to Tusculum in the 4th c BCE, Livy’s description of the town most likely reflected his perception of the urban environment at Rome in the 1st c BCE (6.25.9):

“As he entered the town, he saw doors wide-open, shops open for business with all their merchandise out on display, and craftsmen intent on their own work. He heard children shouting out letter games and he found the streets full of people, women and children wandering at will to do whatever they needed.”

As the passage indicates, shops were prominent fixtures of Late Republican city. Shops like streets were also multifunctional spaces, providing a backdrop to the lived experiences of the neighborhood’s inhabitants. They functioned as distribution centers, cook shops, workshops, hubs for gossip, rumor and the exchange of information as well as both informal and formal meeting places. The ubiquity of shops in the streets placed shopkeepers at the core of the neighborhood life and, consequently, at the very center of urban life (Purcell 1994, p. 659). By providing numerous opportunities for sociability, the activities focused in and around the shop created more multiplexed personal networks between neighbors, contributing to urban placemaking and the emergence of a local neighborhood identity (Purcell, 1994, p. 666).

In the 2nd half of the 1st c BCE, Augustus launched an extensive and transformative urban renewal program, which concentrated on civic improvements and the construction of a positive urban image (Favro 1996). Augustus invested considerable sums in the construction of new entertainment venues and public amenities so that the capital might now rival the Hellenistic cities of the eastern Mediterranean. We may assume that these new venues, in addition to encouraging commercial activity by drawing large crowds to the city, would have also included space for permanent shops. For instance, when Augustus reconstructed the Circus Maximus after it was badly damaged in a fire in 31 BCE, shops, each with their own independent entrance and space above for habitation were built into the exterior portico of the stadium (Dio. Hal. 3.68.1-4). Such a development encouraged the construction of shops in new contexts, tied closely with public amenities, which promoted the sophistication of new Augustan Rome. Through this process, the permanent Roman shop and the act of shopping became more closely integrated with the concept of leisure, entertainment, and urban culture.

Augustan urban reforms integrated the neighborhoods into his large-scale urban renewal program. He re-organized the city according to 265 vici distributed through 14 Regions, establishing the
neighborhood as the basic unit of municipal administration (Lott, 2004). He devoted large amounts of capital to improving the physical appearance and living conditions of the *vici* by installing public water fountains and decorating compital shrines. His efforts benefited permanent shopkeepers by making the streets, which their shops flanked, a more sanitary, beautiful, and pleasant environment. Two *magistri vici*, elected annually from among the neighborhoods’ inhabitants, were responsible for the maintenance of the streets, fountains, and compital shrine in their *vicus*. No evidence directly links a shopkeeper to this position in the Augustan period, but the relative economic stability of shopkeepers and their high visibility in neighborhood life would have made them excellent candidates for the office. A *cippus* dedicated in a shrine of Hercules, a patron god of commerce, records that three *magistri vici* donated a set of commercial scale weights to their neighborhood with the promise to watch over them (CIL 6.282 = ILS 5615; Lott, 2004, Appendix #28). While not specifically identified as shopkeepers, the inscription suggests that the *magistri vici* were at least concerned with, and perhaps to a certain extent even regulated, commercial activity in their neighborhood, connecting them to shopkeepers. Augustan urban reforms would have benefited shopkeepers socially by providing them with opportunities for social mobility.

The urban fabric changed very little in the 50 years after Augustus’ death (Favro, 1996, p. 140). The next large-scale intervention in the urban fabric occurred under the reign of Nero after a disastrous fire in 64 CE destroyed a large percentage of the city, creating an opportunity for a massive restructurung of the urban environment (Tac. Ann. 15.40; Marin 1989, 19-72). To facilitate new construction at a rapid pace and protect against future conflagrations, Nero issued the *Lex Neronis de modo aedificorum urbis*, which regulated the construction of new buildings facing onto streets and public spaces. According to Tacitus (Ann. 15.43), the *lex* mandated that new structures should not exceed a certain height, should utilize fire-retardant brick, should be built adjacent to the lines of the streets, and should not share party walls. It also mandated that the streets be widened and lined with porticoes as another measure of protection against future fires. While these reforms had a utilitarian function, as Tacitus stated, they also improved the appearance of the city by creating a more uniform urban image. Because Neronian building codes focused on standardizing the streetfronts, shop architecture, which dominated the street, would have also undergone a process of standardization (Ellis, 2011, p. 164, p. 171). The impact of the *lex Neronis* on construction at Rome is difficult to document; however, as Ellis argued, the ‘architectural revolution’ that occurred in the buildings and *insulae* at Ostia during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE reflects the efforts of a centrally regulated state code of construction. The standardization of complexes at Ostia built in this period extended to the systemization of the shop fronts and streetscapes. Evidence from the remains of shop counters and shop thresholds at Ostia indicate that the majority of shops adopted a “right-side threshold”, forcing people to enter the shop space on the right (Ellis, 2011). Moreover, the construction of porticoes, which in this period lined the majority of streets at Ostia, unified the shop facades and streetscapes. Based on the evidence from Ostia, the Neronian building codes would have made great steps at producing a unified urban image comprised of systematized streets fronts, lined with standardized shop façades.

In the Imperial period, the majority of excavated shops at Rome conform to the standard one-room type, which, setting aside the issues of interpretation, is also the most common type of shop identified on the *FUR* (Staccoli, 1959; Ziçans, 1941). Likewise at Ostia, 57.5% of identified shop spaces were comprised of a single rectilinear room (Girri, 1956, p. 36). The single-room type may have dominated shop design, but variety in layout did exist. As evinced in the plan of an *insula* depicted on the *FUR*, several variations on the single-room shop appear within the same complex: 1. shop with a sottoscala; 2. simple one-room corner shop with double entrance; 3. shop with retrobottega, 4. shop with two retrobotteghe; 5. shop with two retrobotteghe and access onto the interior courtyard; and 6. possible multi-room shop complex (Staccoli, 1959, p. 64) (Fig. 5). Several of the excavated shops at Rome have also produced evidence of a cenaculum or mezzanine floor built above the main shop room, which the shopkeeper could have used for storage or living space (Packer, 1969, p. 134). The shop with mezzanine was the second most common shop-type at Ostia (23%), which may support the wider prevalence of this type in Rome than our current evidence reflects (Girri 1956, p. 36). Variation in the size and layout of Imperial shops may suggest that competition existed among retailers, attesting to the presence of a “free market economy” in the city of Rome (Mac Mahon, 2000, p. 159). However, variety in layout may also be explained by a difference in retail function. While a single-room shop may have suited specialized retailers selling ready-made products, a producer-retailer or the proprietor...
Fig. 5: *Insula* illustrating the possible variety in shop-types in Rome (Stanford #37Aae and Stanford #37Ade). After Staccoli 1959, Fig. 2, 62.

The major transformation of shop design between the Republican and Imperial periods did not occur in layout, but in the quality of construction materials and decoration (Mac Mahon, 2000, pp. 155-56, p. 240). During the Imperial period, shops underwent a process of monumentalization, which should be understood within the context of the systematic program of urban renewal launched by Augustus and continued by his successors (Baratto, 2003, pp. 70-71 and Mac Mahon, 2000, p. 162). Imperial shopkeepers, imitating trends in public and domestic architecture, replaced the whitewashed walls and simple geometric designs of Republican shops with more colorful and elaborate wall paintings. Marble was also used to adorn shop counters and other furnishing within the shop. The influence of domestic art on shop design is also visible in other historical contexts. After the ‘classical style’ was introduced to domestic architecture at the end of the 17th c, London shopkeepers emulated this style in their shop designs (Borsay, 1977, pp. 588-89). Evidence from shops outside of Rome reflect this process. For instance, as part of a larger restructuring of the Forum at Luna, a northern Italian town, shops along the western side underwent a major renovation in the mid 1st c CE. The shop furnishing and socle of the interior walls received marble-cladding with slabs of Carrara, Numidian, and Tenarian marble (Baratto, 2003, pp. 81-2). Moreover, for the first time masonry shop counters were built in three of the shops. Because of their high visibility in the urban landscape of the city, opulent and fashionable shop designs in effect advertised the power and prosperity of the Imperial family and the Roman empire more effectively than other architectural forms. After all, many shopkeepers were selling the spoils of Roman imperialism.

The enhanced design of Imperial shops reflected the presence of a more socially confident and economically stable occupational group of shopkeepers in Roman society (Mac Mahon, 2000, p. 162). Even though it is probable that very few shopkeepers actually owned their shops, the fitting out, maintenance, and rental of a permanent shop still required a capital investment (Holleran, 2012, p. 262). Committing resources to the decoration and stocking of a shop came with a risk due to the frequency of natural disasters like fires, inundations, and the danger of building collapse in the city of Rome. The fact that the number of shops not only continued to increase in the Imperial period, but that
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shopkeepers were willing to invest capital in quality construction materials and decoration indicates that members of this occupational group had the financial stability to undertake that risk (Mac Mahon, 2000, p. 159). Shopkeepers may have been willing to make the venture by investing capital back into their shop spaces largely because, as argued below, shop design functioned as the shopkeeper’s chief marketing tool.

The Affect of Consumer Behavior on Roman Shop Design

Transitioning from open market to enclosed shop was not a simple matter: it required a corresponding shift in consumer behavior. Comparative evidence from Medieval and Early Modern Europe suggests that people who were accustomed to shopping in open-air markets and fairs viewed permanent shops with suspicion (Welch, 2005, pp. 161-62; Davis 1966, pp. 23-24). The privacy shop interiors afforded raised serious concerns over the trustworthiness and decorum of the proprietors who could be doing anything unseen inside from doctoring products to plotting government conspiracies. Various categories of ancient evidence indicate that similar anxieties existed in Roman consumer culture. On the whole, Latin authors regarded Roman retailers dubiously and often characterized shopkeepers as avaricious and deceitful (e.g. Ovid Fasti 5.674-88). In addition, Roman shops, especially those involved in the service industry, were regularly associated with immoral, vulgar, and subversive activities such as gambling (Lanciani, 1892), drinking (e.g. Cic. Phil. 2. 69, 13.24; Suet. Cl. 40.1, Nero 26.1; Dio. 80.13.2; Amm. Marc. 14.6.25), and prostitution (McGinn, 2004, pp. 267-90; Hor. Sat. 1.5.82; Catul. 37.1; Apul. Met. 8.1; Ulp. Dig. 3.2.4.2; 4.8.21.11; 23.43.pr.; 23.2.43.9; 54.23) as well as providing meeting places for dissident collegia (e.g. Suet. Nero 37.1) (Fig. 6). Perhaps in consequence of these concerns, even though shops dominated the commercial landscape in the Imperial period, the majority of commercial exchanges continued to take place outdoors as in market exchanges, in front of shops not inside. In praising the emperor Domitian for issuing an edict that prohibited shopkeepers from spreading beyond their thresholds, the poet Martial complained that doing business in front of the shop was common practice and a serious public nuisance to pedestrians and street traffic at Rome in the 1st c CE (Epig. 7.61):

“The cheeky retailer had overrun the entire city and nowhere was the boundary of the threshold respected. You, Germanicus, ordered the congested streets to grow and in this way that which had been a path before became a boulevard. Now no column is encircled with chained flagons nor is the Praetor compelled to walk in the middle of the mud. Nor is a razor drawn blind in a dense crowd, nor does a sordid cook shop occupy every street. The barber, the shopkeeper, the cook, and the butcher stay within their thresholds. Now it is Rome, what was recently a giant shop.”

The edict was apparently ineffectual or difficult to enforce and had to be reissued in later centuries (Papin Dig. 43.10.1.3-5).

Despite official attempts to restrict such behavior, the physical layout of the shop actually reinforced it. For instance, the shop counter, a characteristic component of the Roman shop, was generally located prominently just inside the doorway, creating a physical barrier to those entering the shop (Mac Mahon, 2000, p. 166) (Fig. 10). Thirty-nine shop counters have been identified at Ostia (Hermansen, 1981) while 158 counters were preserved in the ruins at Pompeii (Ellis, 2005, p. 50). As mentioned above, shop counters were often clad in marble or decorated with colorful painted plaster with the most eye-catching and exotic designs appearing on the exterior vertical faces in order to entice potential customers passing in the street. For instance, seven (17%) of the extant shop counters at Ostia and 81 (48.7%) of the 166 counters from Pompeii and Herculaneum exhibited marble cladding (Fant et al., 2013, p. 182, p. 185). The interior walls and floors of the shop room generally received less attention and adornment, presumably because these interior spaces were commonly reserved as storage for stock or as workshop space and/or domestic space for the shopkeepers and their families (Fant et al., 2013, p. 192). Shops involved in selling and serving food and drink stand out as an important exception to this trend, since customers often lingered or dined in the interior spaces. In sum, long after the transition to the permanent shop, the placement of the counter and its exterior-oriented decorative scheme reflects a preference for business conducted “in the open” before potential witnesses and market regulators who could encourage honesty in commercial transactions between both the buyer and seller.
The Shop Design as A Marketing Strategy

The study of advertising in pre-industrial societies has been hampered by the traditional view among economic historians, which asserts that advertising was a modern innovation, developed in the mid-19th century as a result of the expansion of print media (e.g. Jefferys, 1954; Davis, 1966; Mathias, 1967). In short, no one has investigated the marketing strategies of ancient Roman retailers, because such strategies were believed not to have existed. C. Walsh has discredited the dominant view by demonstrating that already in the 18th c London shopkeepers were actively employing marketing strategies centered on shop design and the display of goods (Walsh 1999, 2000). In following her approach, I argue here that the promotion of goods through the shop by the shopkeeper, a strategy of consumer manipulation wholly independent from print media, not only existed, but also was crucial to the economic success of Roman retailers in a pre-industrial economy where goods were not standardized. Since buyers could not rely on a brand name to denote the quality of most products, the reputation of the retailer – his knowledge, trade connections, and business ethics – became synonymous to the quality his products (Walsh, 1999, p. 384; 2000, p. 91).

This correlation between shopkeeper identity and product value was problematic for the Roman retailer whom, as aforementioned, society mistrusted as a depraved and deceitful profiteer. In response to social stereotypes, shopkeepers were compelled to promote their reputations alongside their goods in their shops. As a result, shop design – a physical construct of shopkeeper identity – became the primary means for self-representation and the principal method of advertising available to Roman shopkeepers. Marketing strategies focused primarily on the shop façade (Mac Mahon, 2000, pp. 233-41). Wide-open entryways and status indicators like polychrome marble created an appealing and disarming shop image that influenced consumer perceptions of store image, financial security, and product quality (Walsh, 1999, p. 361; 2000, p. 91; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Bitner, 1992).

At Ostia, although the pervasive and large-scale construction programs of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE have obscured the Republican and Early Imperial phases of this retail evolution, the cityscape as it stands today represents a culmination of the trends sketched above for the city of Rome. Over 800 shop spaces have been identified in the ruins of Ostia, the majority of which date to the period of urban transformation, suggesting that a considerable amount of resources was invested in commercial architecture under the Antonines and Severans (Bakker, 1994, p. 79). If we estimate the town’s population at ca. 50,000, then Ostia achieved an impressive level of retail provision during the Imperial period with a shop-population index of 1:62.5. According to Scola (1982, p. 158), a shop-population index of 1:145 represents a very low level of retail provision while a 1:50 index
characterizes a well-provisioned urban center. In 1751, London had an impressively high level of retail provision (1:30) with c. 21,603 shops for a population of 650,000 (Mui and Mui, 1989, pp. 38-40). Both the public and private structures erected in this period were designed to maximize the relationship with adjacent street frontage and incorporated shop spaces in their ground floors. As the distribution of shops and workshop spaces at Ostia demonstrates, the shop, more than any other structural-type, would have dominated the architectural experience of a pedestrian wandering the streets of Ostia (Evans and Lawson, 1981, p. 117) (Fig. 7). Accordingly, the shop façade would have offered a highly visible and extremely effective method for communicating new trends and new ideas to the population.

Fig. 7: The distribution of shop spaces at Ostia. Topographical map: Ostia-antica.org.

A wide-open entryway containing a long, grooved stone threshold was the most characteristic component of shop architecture (see Livy 6.26.9 above). In addition to making the products visible to potential buyers, the shop door was the main source of light and air for the interior space of the shop. The door also acted like a display window, allowing passersby visual access into the interior where they were able to glimpse not only the products for sale, but also the workshop, stock room, or domestic space of the shopkeeper. Permitting visual access into the private interior of the shop may have been a further testament of transparency on behalf of the shopkeeper who wanted to reassure buyers that he had nothing to hide. On the other hand, a wide open door made the shop vulnerable to theft, which we know from the literary and epigraphic texts, was a serious concern. For instance, Alfenus (Dig. 9.2.52.1) recorded a dispute between a shopkeeper and a thief, who stole a lamp hanging above the shop counter. In a graffiti written outside a shop in Pompeii (CIL 1 IV.64), a shopkeeper promised a reward of 65 sestertii for the return of a copper pot stolen from the shop and more money for information leading to the capture of the thief.

As a result, while the door enticed buyers with visual access, a conveniently placed shop counter located just inside the doorway restricted physical access to the interior of the shop and the products therein. Hermansen (1982, p. 187) identified over 30 masonry counters at Ostia, but we should imagine that many more shops used less permanent installations such as wooden tables or makeshift
trestle tables, which have not survived (see Fig. 3). Such a set-up obliged interested buyers to engage in face-to-face negotiations with the shopkeeper, who often served from behind the counter. The fact that most shops did not have a lot of space, only a small selection of products could be displayed on the shop counter or hung from poles or racks in or just outside of the door. The majority of merchandise was probably stored inside on shelves or in chests, crates, and baskets (Grimaldi Bernardi 2005) (Fig. 8). This organization of space meant that potential buyers were unable to browse goods on their own; instead, they relied on the shopkeeper, who would retrieve, display, describe, and replace items for them to inspect (Mac Mahon, 2000, p. 181) (Fig. 9). This process of shopping was fundamentally different from the ‘self-service’ style of shopping introduced in the 20th c.

Fig. 8: Relief depicting the storage and display of goods in a shop selling legumes and cereals. Unknown Provenance (2nd/3rd c CE). German Archaeological Institute, Rome.

Fig. 9: Scene in a textile shop with shopkeepers displaying cloth for seated customers. Vigna Strozzi, Rome (1st c CE). Uffizi Gallery.
This one-on-one service style was no doubt labor intensive for the retailer and time consuming, if only one customer could be attended at a time. In fact, it is not uncommon to find benches located outside shops for the comfort of waiting customers. Nevertheless, the practice benefitted both buyer and seller (Harnett, 2008) (Fig. 10). Before print advertising became a popular marketing strategy in the 19th c, the shopkeeper’s specialist knowledge was one of the most powerful methods of advertising non-standardized goods (Walsh, 2000, p. 88). Face-to-face negotiations afforded shopkeepers with the opportunity to show off their expertise and expose potential buyers to their merchandise as well as introduce new products. Shopkeepers took to their counters as a senator to the rostra, employing their sales rhetoric to persuade consumers to buy. But buyers were not passive in the process; instead, they were afforded the opportunity to inspect and physically handle the goods and ask questions about the products, which ultimately led to a more confident and informed purchase decision. Ultimately the shopkeeper, who controlled what items to present or not present and what information to reveal or withhold about a product, had the upper hand in such an exchange. With this in mind, we should perhaps understand the process of buying and selling as a social transaction in addition to a commercial transaction. While haggling over price and quality, the buyer and seller simultaneously negotiated and renegotiated their power relationship and social status (Purcell, 2013). Repeated patronage of a shop over a period of time may have strengthened the social bond between buyer and seller, resulting in the establishment of a mutual trust and reducing the risk of deception by either party. The creation of a social bond between buyer and seller may have also encouraged the development of an informal credit system through the shop. A graffito from the 1st c CE preserved on the wall of a bar in Herculaneum may record a customer’s tab (<i>CIL</i> 04 10674). Roman shop design, by physically encouraging a verbal and visual, active and interactive, face-to-face service style, reflects the embedded social nature of the retail trade: business was always personal in ancient Rome.

Due to the relatively standardized plan of the Roman shop and the fact that commercial transactions largely took place at the threshold, the physical appearance of the shop was as crucial to making a sale as the shopkeeper’s rhetoric (MacMahon, 2000, pp. 202-03). Writing about 18th London shopkeepers, Walsh (2000, p. 91) states that “the design of the shop could underline the fashionability of the stock available, suggest financial security to customers ordering expensive items, persuade customers to invest in untried products, or simply lure customers into enjoying the pleasurable environment – and thus into spending more time shopping”. Evidence from Rome and Ostia suggest that Imperial shopkeepers likewise employed quality construction materials such as polychrome marbles and mosaic as well as wall painting styles, which were <i>au courant</i> in the domestic architecture of the period, to influence consumer perceptions of the shop, the shopkeeper, and the merchandise.

The heavily-restored shop façade on the via di Diana, which was built along with four other shops into the ground floor of the <i>Casaggiato del Termopolio</i> (I.II.5) at Ostia during the first half of the 2nd c CE, offers an example of retail atmospherics at work in a Roman shop (Hermansen, 1981, pp. 130-32) (Fig. 10). The bar most likely functioned primarily as a food and drink establishment, especially since the layout included an interior space and courtyard outfitted with a bench, fountain, and marble basin where customers could dine-in. However, Roman bars sometimes dealt in the provision of food and drink, and the presence of a large sunken <i>dolium</i> or storage vessel the interior may suggest that this bar straddled both categories of service and provision (Holleran, 2012, pp. 142-3). The marble-clad bar situated conspicuously in the open doorway of the shop acted as the focal point in the shop’s décor (MacMahon, 2000, p. 166). The counter was the largest stationary fixture in the shop and would have been one of the first things a customer would have seen when approaching the entrance; and consequently, the shopkeeper invested in embellishing the counter with re-used marble slabs in the 3rd c CE (Calza, 1915, p. 29). While the interior space of the shop received a simple tessellated floor, the entrance to the shop was further ornamented with a stylish black and white geometric mosaic in a pattern identical to the one preserved in the courtyard of the <i>Domus del Tempio Rotondo</i> (I.XI.2-3).
Furthermore, the front of the shop was protected by an overhanging arch, which offered customers some protection from the elements without sacrificing light or visual access to the interior of the shop space. Two benches were built in opus vittatum against the travertine consoles on the interior sides of the arch to either side of the shop’s entrance, which advertised the level of care and service the shopkeeper provided for his customers. Although the arches and benches obstructed pedestrian traffic along the sidewalk, they also allowed the shopkeeper to extend the shop space beyond the threshold. Customers waiting on the benches and/or standing in the shade beneath the balcony would have been affective advertising for the prosperity and trustworthiness of the shop (Hartnett, 2011).

High quality paintings dating to the late 3rd c/early 4th c CE adorned the walls of the arch above the benches. Since the arch projected out in front of the shop door, these paintings would have been the first thing a passer-by saw of the shop while walking down the via di Diana. If approaching from the east, the passer-by would be met with a 4th style wall painting centered on an unidentified figure framed within an architectural design (Fig. 11). This figure may have served as an emblematic symbol in a shop sign. Shop signs have been discovered elsewhere in Ostia and a number of examples exist from Pompeii (e.g. Fig. 12). These signs generally include a simple image or symbol related to the function of the shop or the merchandise sold and were located on the façade of the shop or affixed to the portico in front so that they would be visible to passersby. The preference for symbols over text is significant, as it reflects the fact that Rome was a semi-literate society, which relied on visual culture as its main mode of communication.
Anyone passing the shop from the west would have seen a painting imitating porphyry and giallo antico marble (Fig. 10), which, like the marble-clad counter, suggests opulence and economic success. The faux porphyry, which may have been chosen for its connection to the imperial family, features predominately in this painting. According to the archaeological evidence, the color we would think of as “red” was apparently common color in shop design at Ostia (Girri, 1956, p. 4). Color psychology – the effect of color on a person’s mood or emotions – is a popular topic of research in Retail Atmospherics. Color symbolism is of course culturally determined: the way ancient Romans thought about color is different from how we view it today. We learn from Pliny (HN 35) that several different pigments were used in wall paintings to produce hues of “red”, including the mineral minium and purpurissum, a by-product of the coveted purple-dye purpura. Minium was a sacrum pigmentum used for painting the face of cult statues belonging to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and triumphal generals.
(Pliny HN 33.111). Purpurissum symbolized luxuria, nobility, and power among other things (e.g. Elliott, 2008; Bradley, 2009, ch. 7; Reinhold, 1974). Both pigments were expensive and extremely popular. Whether or not the shops actually used these pigments or a less expensive artificial mixture, by choosing to emphasize this color in the shop design, the shopkeeper may have been consciously evoking the impression of luxury or economic prosperity, or even claiming the official sanction of Jupiter, who was the divine witness and protector of oaths and contracts.

The choice – and ability – to include marble, black-and-white mosaic, and stylish wall paintings in a shop design, luxury materials and fashions more often associated with high-class private residences and public buildings than commercial spaces, may have lured customers to the counter with the promise of an opulent and prestigious shopping experience while at the same time promoting the financial stability of the shopkeeper and the stylishness of his goods (Fant et al., 2013). Although somewhat diluted, the fashions borrowed from domestic architecture present in shop designs would have been more accessible, more visible, and more widely consumed through the shop environment than through private houses.

Such expenditure on the shop décor was not restricted to the service industry, but appeared in shops selling commodities as well. The Taberne dei Pescivendoli (IV.V.1) were inserted into the northern portico of the macellum (IV.V.2) to either side of the monumental entryway in the 3rd c CE. These shops occupied prime real estate, fronting one of Ostia’s busiest crossroads (Bivo del Castrum) where the via della Foce branches off from the Decumanus. The marble featured in these shops’ design promised a luxurious fish-buying experience: prominent fixtures clearly visible from the street included two marble tables, a marble basin for keeping live fish, and the marble-clad bar counter of a shop space to the rear (Fig. 13). In addition, a stylish black-and-white mosaic decorated the floor, a rare decorative element for commercial spaces. The mosaic is of the black-and-white figural, single-view point style, which became popular during the 1st c CE. The subject of the mosaics – marine figures – not only advertised the product sold – fish – but pays homage to the black-and-white figural mosaics which were more commonly found in private Ostian residences and public bathing complexes, such as the Terme di Buticosus (I.XIV.8) or the Terme di Nettuno (II.IV.2). The mosaic is oddly positioned so that a customer would have to walk into the store and face back toward the entrance in order to read it; however, this in itself may have been a ploy to entice people to enter. If you were not convinced from the décor that this was one fashionable and economically booming fishmonger’s shop, the mosaic of a dolphin with the text: INBIDE CALCO TE (envy, I tread on you) was there to remind you on your way out. The text is apotropaic, there to ward off the “evil eye”, which was often associated with invidia or envy. To quote Ovid (Met. 2.780-81): “[invidia] is not glad to see men prosper and withers at the sight”. In addition to protecting his business, the mosaic is a not all that subtle reminder to his customers that his business was so successful that it needs protecting.

Fig. 13: Taberne dei Pescivendoli (IV.V.1) viewed from entrance off of the Decumanus. Photograph: Phosphor-ostia.org.
Conclusion

Starting in the 2nd c BCE after Rome had secured its hegemony over the Mediterranean a number of changing in the socio-economic environment caused a major shift in structure of retailing in the city of Rome. Increasing investments in commercial architecture led to a growth in the number of permanent shops in the commercial landscape, allowing the fixed-point retail trade to surpass temporary markets and fairs as the chief method of distribution in Rome. While the basic layout of the shop changed little over time, shop design was more dynamic and underwent a gradual process of monumentalization from the 1st c BCE to the 2nd/3rd c CE. This process reflects both current fashion trends in monumental and domestic architecture and, more important, the newfound economic stability enjoyed by Imperial shopkeepers. As shops came to dominate the urban landscape, competition among retailers intensified. Variations in the size of shops and in the quality of materials used in shop décor emphasize the individuality existent among shopkeepers and their differing levels of prosperity. Successful shopkeepers were able to invest capital back into their shop environment, focusing predominately on the façade, which served as their primary means of advertising. On account of society’s damning opinion of their trade, it was imperative for shopkeepers to market their reputations alongside their merchandise in the shop environment. By manipulating factors in the design and decoration of their shops, shopkeepers aimed to encourage approach type behaviors in potential customers by underlining their own trustworthiness, virtues, and economic prosperity. For the Imperial capital of Rome and harbor-towns such as Ostia where a not insignificant portion of the consumer base was comprised of visitors, travelers, and seasonal inhabitants, who could not rely on long-nurtured social bonds with local retailers, this method of shop advertising would have been of particular importance.

This paper has demonstrated how retail atmospherics can be used to enrich discussions of the Roman shop by advancing our understanding of how the shopkeeper and consumer actively interacted with and within the shop environment. Environmental cues still extant in the archaeological remains of shops in Rome and Ostia offer meaningful insight into service styles, marketing strategies, and consumer behavior. By focusing on the typology of form and function, previous work on the Roman shop has failed to fully consider the human element of a shop environment, which, in pre-industrial societies, was the fundamental component to any commercial exchange. When we consider how the shop dominated the architectural experience of the urban landscape at Rome and Ostia, we may begin to appreciate the significant contributions that shopkeepers and their shops made to physically constructing their local urban environment. A visitor to Rome would have been met with street after street of uniform, unbroken shop facades behind decorative porticos, decked out in luxury building materials, advertising the latest trends in architectural fashion. Through their shops, Roman shopkeepers advertised the prosperity and power of the Roman Empire and marketed in effect an urban identity, which was eventually consumed widely in Roman towns across the Mediterranean.

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