

How to Approach the Upgrade of the Urban Scheme of Yamoussoukro towards Sustainability?

A Focus on Commercial Planning

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Introduction

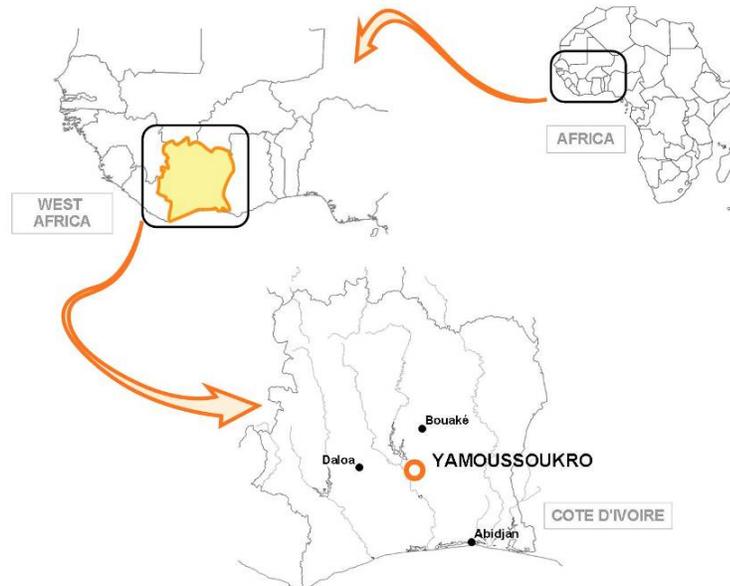


Fig 1: Yamoussoukro, in the centre of Cote d'Ivoire. Source: author

In 1983, in a bid to fight against the economic supremacy of Abidjan, the main city of Cote d'Ivoire, the Ivorian authorities decided to relocate the major national ruling institutions in Yamoussoukro, a small town created from scratch in the centre of the country. Yet even today, none of the institutions, except from the parliament, is located in Yamoussoukro and the entire government still lives in Abidjan. Yamoussoukro has a low population density¹ and lacks a real urban liveliness: the city has not been able to permanently attract enough people for its social and economic development.

To better understand this situation, we have to go back in time, in the 1970s, when the president Houphouet-Boigny (1905-1993) undertook the construction and modernization of his hometown Yamoussoukro, through several public large scale architectural and urban projects (Fig 2), in preparation to the relocation of the capital city. These gigantic projects were made possible by what has been called “*the Ivorian economic miracle*”, a glorious period of economic prosperity in the country. Regrettably the vast majority of the buildings constructed in Yamoussoukro during that period were for politics, education and tourism. They did not include spaces for local economic activities that could generate, in addition to taxes and other financial incomes, some liveliness in the big hamlet.



Fig 2: Major public buildings of Yamoussoukro. Source: author.

The president did not want industries in *his city* because they were considered as polluting activities. He did not want traditional markets neither because they were judged as low standing building for Yamoussoukro. Since the end of the 1980s, due to the economic crisis, the construction of public buildings in Yamoussoukro was almost stopped and construction workers who were a significant part of the population abandoned the city. None of the already constructed building proved to be economically viable: their maintenance cost far more money than they could generate. Despite a sluggish economy, the government still used to spend a lot of money for that maintenance. But this grace was possible only because of the support of the president. Since his death in 1993, the government subsidies to the city fell drastically (Fig 3) and a lot of public buildings have fallen into disrepair.

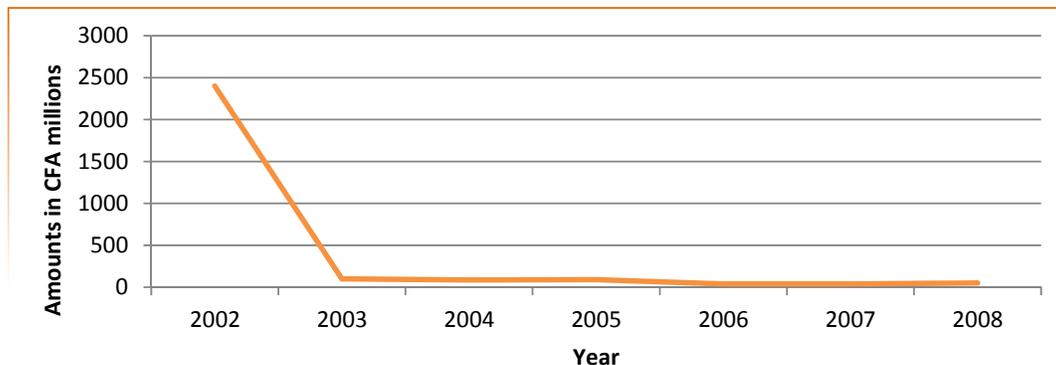


Fig 3: Evolution of state subsidies to the town of Yamoussoukro from 2002 to 2008. Data source: Financial Department of the Municipality of Yamoussoukro. Chart by author.

Today it is clear that the relocation of the capital failed; but the authorities want to give it a try again. They thus created in 2002 the Capital City Relocation Special Programme which aims, by taking all necessary measures, to achieve the effective relocation of the capital city. This was an important first step because it reflected an awareness of the obligation to take into account all the determining factors for the emergence of the new capital. The Programme identified all the required actions for the relocation to be a full success and selected the top priority projects. Unfortunately it is on the way to replicate the same mistakes as in the past. The priority projects are not profitable, nor likely to stimulate real economic dynamics in the city. Even their construction is entrusted to foreign companies who travel with their workforce.

I wrote a dissertation on this topic for my degree. One of the arguments put forward in the dissertation is that economically sustainable projects are a prerequisite to the actual relocation of the capital city. Due to the reluctance of the authorities for industries on the one hand and the commercial potential of Yamoussoukro, notably its excellent location, on the other hand, I explored the trail of the development of the retail sector with all possible connected cultural and leisure activities. This paper is a brief explanation of some planning guidelines suggested to steer discussions towards a smarter development of the retail sector in Yamoussoukro.

Chapter 1: A short diagnosis of the urban context in Yamoussoukro

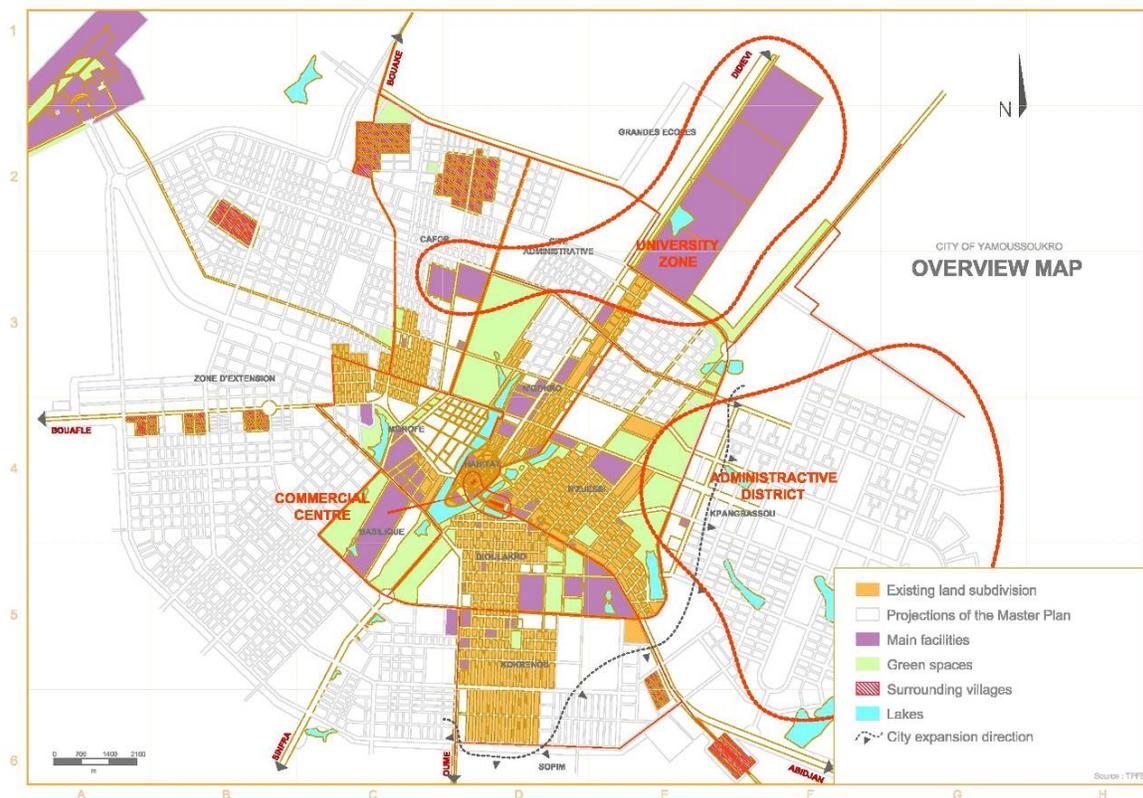


Fig 4: An overview map of the city of Yamoussoukro. Source: author

Strategically situated in the centre of Cote d'Ivoire

Yamoussoukro is one of the main road junctions of Cote d'Ivoire. It is located on the National Road A6 that connects Abidjan to Bouake (the second largest city) and then to neighbouring countries Mali and Burkina Faso. Yamoussoukro is also the gateway to many other secondary cities in Cote d'Ivoire for travellers coming from Abidjan.

The first tourist destination of the country

Yamoussoukro is the first tourist city of Cote d'Ivoire (K. ATTA, 2002). Tourists include diplomats, pilgrims, holidaymakers and other international travellers. The city boasts a luxury hotel (Hôtel President), conference and meeting venues (La Maison du Parti and the magnificent Fondation Felix Houphouet-Boigny), a golf course, artificial lakes with crocodiles, two nature parks (Abokouamekro and Marahoué) and an international airport. Religious tourism plays a very important role in Yamoussoukro as well. Annually, many pilgrimages are organized at the basilica Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix. Seen as a national resource during its inauguration, it had significantly contributed to promote the city as a tourist destination in the 1990s. Unfortunately, the economic recession coupled with the political crises faced by the country since the early 2000s, have dampened the enthusiasm of tourists. Today, erected in the savannah of central Cote d'Ivoire, this replica of St. Peter's Basilica is struggling to attract a small share of visits of the Roman model.

Created from scratch

Yamoussoukro has the reputation to be the only planned town in Cote d'Ivoire. The Ivorian authorities wanted to learn from problems encountered in Abidjan: a poorly mastered urban growth, traffic jams, pollution, etc. In Yamoussoukro, they decided to tackle these issues from the roots by developing planning documents, by planning very large roads (50 m) and by creating several green spaces with artificial lakes. Professional planners were not the authors of this planning, though. The *vision* of the president Houphouet-Boigny was just materialized by his surveyors through basic drawings and maps and implemented on the ground. The planning documents of Yamoussoukro were not the result of a consistent, comprehensive and professional planning approach, which allows making some reservations on the quality of their content. The shortcomings in these plans resulted mainly in an idealistic vision of the city ignoring reality. The most visible consequence of this idealism is the lack of socio-economic foundations that could create and maintain liveliness in the city. The only planned economic facility is the undersized and congested central market which is today, along with the nearby small central bus station and the unplanned small traditional markets in residential districts, the only lively places in Yamoussoukro.

With aged planning references

The last Master Plan of Yamoussoukro dates back to 1997. It serves as a Land Use Plan and is the only planning reference of the city. It tried to correct the lack of socio-economic foundations in Yamoussoukro by planning the expansion of the central market and the creation of small modern shopping centres. But there are three notable problems with that plan. (1) It confirmed the rigid zoning of the city into four distinctive areas: administrative, educative, residential and commercial, (2) it encouraged the horizontal expansion of the city by planning the multiplication of its area by 5 within 20 years and finally (3) it ignored traditional neighbourhood markets. These markets are home to the most dynamic economic sector in sub-Saharan Africa: the informal activities. Despite their absence in the Master Plan, they appeared spontaneously in several places in the city, proving that they cannot be just ignored. It is therefore urgent to upgrade the Master Plan to take into account contemporary issues like (1) mixed use areas, (2) densification or (3) social inclusion. An upgrade was initiated in January 2010 but we still don't have its conclusions.

We contacted the practice in charge of the development of the new Master Plan in order to take a look at the drafts. Unfortunately we were not allowed to. For the time being, the only thing we can confirm about this plan is that its development process is quite questionable: the absence of transparency and community participation doesn't augur well for the content's quality and relevance.

Shaped by traditional retail activities despite the vision of the president

In Sub-Saharan Africa, small traditional markets are local sale points of essential commodities consumed daily by people in cities. They are the ultimate places of exchanges between cities and rural areas. Most of the time, they bring together small businesses from the informal sector: small retailers installed on tiny stalls and itinerant traders. The informal sector is the regulator of the employment market: while waiting for better days, the unemployed (30% of the labour force in Yamoussoukro) try to survive in this sector. Yamoussoukro tried to oust informal settlements in order to build an image of luxury city. But this approach has failed in the retail sector due to the importance of the markets in local economic dynamics and due to the necessity of the products sold there in the daily life of the population, especially the poor. Traditional markets have appeared throughout the city and nobody could do something about it. Their formation in urban areas is closely related not only to the existence of a potential customer base, but also to the presence of a community of Dioula, as this is the case in Yamoussoukro.

The Dioula are a set of trading peoples from the north of Cote d'Ivoire and from neighbouring countries like Mali, Burkina and Guinea. They migrated to southern cities of Cote d'Ivoire since the period of colonization to take advantage of the wealth generated by coffee and cocoa plantations and by port activities. They have the distinction of always gathering into a micro-city in the city. In almost every city in Cote d'Ivoire, there is a micro-city of Dioula followed by their main activity: retailing. In Yamoussoukro they formed Dioulakro, which is today the main residential neighbourhood of the town and its most animated area with small-business activities in every street. Four out of the six spontaneous traditional markets of Yamoussoukro are located in Dioulakro and it is the fastest growing area of the city. Interplays between the growth of Dioulakro and the emergence of small neighbourhood markets explain both the rapid growth of the area and the large number of markets within it. Populations settle in Dioulakro for the proximity of markets. When the distance between the homes of newcomers and the nearest market exceeds a certain distance (about 1 kilometre), a small market emerges next to the new residences by the concentration of small informal businesses. Populations flock again, attracted by the proximity of the new market, and the cycle resumes. Authorities may attempt to evict these informal retailers but they still form another market nearby. This is not a problem just for the authorities because the retailers themselves operate in the constant fear of being evicted at any time. Another issue raised by this uncontrolled development mechanism of Dioulakro is the excessive horizontal growth of Yamoussoukro, extending the city's ecological footprint.

Chapter 2: Thinking a sustainable future for the retail sector in Yamoussoukro

The following sections are planning guidelines for the retail sector in Yamoussoukro, each of which is organized by themes. These themes, with clearly defined targets, are discussion topics formulated to steer reflection towards the identified issues related to retail activities.

A stronger focus on the retail sector in planning documents

Retailing is an essential human activity that should receive special attention in regional and city planning. Unfortunately in Yamoussoukro, as in the other cities of Cote d'Ivoire, there is no local regulatory text or plan for the retail sector. Even at the national level, none of the two laws² about urban planning address specifically retail facilities.

In a bid to fill this gap, the Ministry in charge of Commercial Affairs proposed a draft law on the orientation of retail planning which envisioned the creation of a national observatory with two main responsibilities: (1) the development and the management of the national database of commercial equipment, and (2) the proposal of Commercial Master Plans with the help of local branches. The draft law also recommended the creation of regional planning commissions responsible for authorizing important retail facilities construction. This text is still in draft form, though, because of the chronic political instability of the Ministry in particular, and the country in general.

In the absence of specific planning documents addressing the retail sector, the Master Plan of 1997, remains the only reference. But this old plan has many shortcomings, some of which were mentioned above. Today it is necessary to set up the retail sector at the heart of urban reflection in Yamoussoukro. The other guidelines are based on the assumption that this guideline is implemented. Without this prerequisite, they have no chance of becoming reality. The discussion of two themes can help achieve this prerequisite.

Theme 1: Enhancing retail planning supervision.

In Yamoussoukro, as in the other cities of Cote d'Ivoire, there is no local institution in charge of the supervision of retail activities. Nationally, this mission is for the Department of Retail Facilities of the Ministry of Commercial Affairs. But this department has very ridiculous means³.

Theme's target:

Reinforce the institutions that plan and oversee the retail sector.

Actions:

- Recruit additional staff in the Department of Retail Facilities;
- Provide the Department of Retail Facilities with enough means so that it can intervene effectively in the national territory;
- Finalize the draft legislation proposed by the Ministry in Charge of Commercial Affairs;
- Establish regional branches of the Department of Retail Facilities, as suggested by the draft legislation, starting with the most significant urban areas: Abidjan, Bouake, Daloa, Korhogo and Yamoussoukro.

Theme 2: Shifting towards specific retail planning documents.

The importance of retail activities, both in the spatial shaping of Yamoussoukro and in the economic revitalization of the city, requires a specific reflection on this sector.

Theme's target:

Elaborate planning documents that focus on retail sector issues.

Actions:

- Develop regional databases to collect accurate information on commercial facilities, starting with the five major cities;
- Reinforce the commercial aspect of existing planning documents by leveraging the data collected gradually in regional databases;
- Develop specific planning documents for the retail sector once the local databases are provided in sufficient data.

The revitalization of Yamoussoukro via retail spaces

Most of the urban animation in Yamoussoukro is generated by retail activities; but the history of the city has not given much chance to the development of the full potential of this sector. One of the identified reasons to the failure of the early capital city relocation attempt is the insufficiency of socio-economic activities (retail, leisure, culture) that could attract and maintain people, including the Ivorian officials, used to the large range of services in Abidjan. Today, there is the need not only to consolidate the role of traditional retail activities in the urban liveliness of Yamoussoukro, but also to foster the development of modern retail activities with connected leisure services.

In this regard, productive projects of the relocation programme like the expansion of the central market, the creation of a new primary market and the building of modern neighbourhood shopping centres must be classified as priority actions. However, there is a reservation regarding these small shopping centres. The Master Plan of 1997 tried to address the issue of the insufficiency of modern retail facilities by proposing the creation of small neighbourhood shopping centres throughout the city. The relocation programme has also adopted these projects. Nonetheless, these small scattered shopping centres have very limited ability to attract folks from outside the city and their success is related to the availability of a customer base, which we don't have yet in Yamoussoukro. They don't seem to be very useful at the moment. What appears to be more urgent for the stimulation of the economy of the city is a mall: a big shopping centre with an extended coverage area. This mall would propose, through the alliance between retail, leisure and tourism, a vast variety of activities. The focus on leisure activities in the mall may significantly contribute to its success. Each week-end, thousands of people seeking this kind of activities move from Abidjan, Yamoussoukro and other cities to seaside destinations like Grand-Bassam and Assinie. Many others are discouraged by the congestion of these cities and don't try the trip. With the relevant activities, Yamoussoukro can easily be an alternative leisure destination given its excellent road connection with Abidjan and its very good location in the centre of the country.

Coupled with all the other planned projects in the framework of the relocation, a well thought modern retail hub can revitalize the city of Yamoussoukro and initiate a straightforward urban growth in the city. The planning of small shopping centres and traditional markets makes sense only in this perspective.

Theme 1: Creating a *mega* mall in Yamoussoukro.

Theme's target:

Leverage the great potential of the alliance between retail, culture, leisure and tourism in order to stimulate the economy and increase the attractiveness of Yamoussoukro.

Actions:

- Identify all the activities that could help shape this new business centre, paying special attention to their diversity and their attractiveness;
- Give priority to activities which are not present in the existing recreational destinations like Grand-Bassam or Assinie. The revitalization of Yamoussoukro should not harm their development;
- Undertake impact studies to assess the expected effects of the mall on the town and redirect the project's actions if necessary.
- Develop incentive measures for the development of large-scale business activities in Yamoussoukro (easy access to land, alleviated taxes, etc.);

The integration of some basic sustainability rules in the planning and the design of retail facilities;

Theme 1: Organizing and planning neighbourhood retail services.

A coherent approach to sustainability requires tracking down unnecessary urban travel that consumes fossil energy and produces a lot of pollutant gas. Much of the constrained travel generated in Yamoussoukro by the retail sector between the commercial centre and residential areas can be reined by organizing and reinforcing neighbourhood retail activities. Neighbourhood markets have emerged spontaneously wherever necessary in the city; the city will therefore have to deal with them in the future. In the event of an effective relocation of the ruling institutions bringing great amounts of migrants, the need for modern shopping centres, alongside with these traditional markets, will also arise.

Theme's target:

Strengthen and diversify neighbourhood retail facilities.

Actions:

- Improve existing small traditional markets in Yamoussoukro by providing them with legal secure lands. This can be achieved either by relocating them on vacant land nearby, either by granting them a portion of land from the public domain (Fig 5);
- Plan future traditional markets to anticipate their spontaneous emergence and provide convenient land accordingly;
- Plan future modern shopping centres for affluent and mid class migrants;
- Encourage mixed use areas with retail activities instead of the current rigid zoning of the city. This is especially necessary for the planned administrative district.

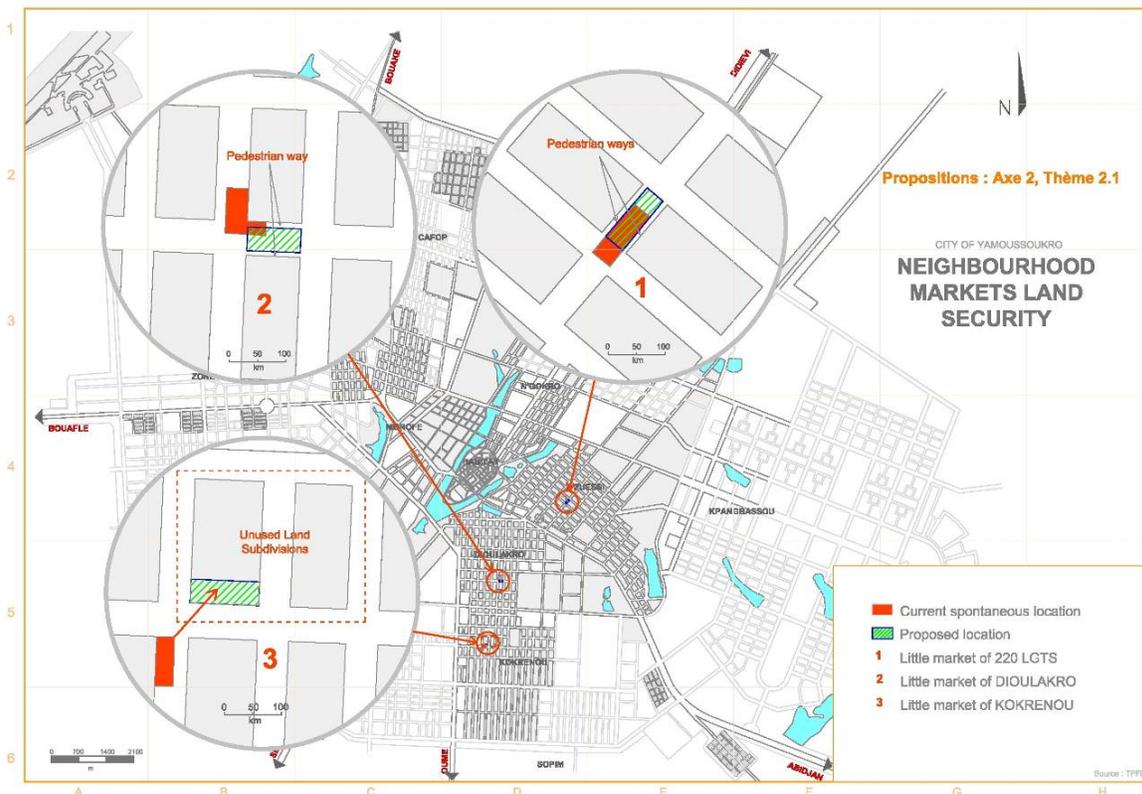


Fig 5: Providing land for neighbourhood markets

Theme 2: Balancing the various sizes of commercial activities

The protection of vulnerable business functions is a matter of social fairness towards disadvantaged people, especially the workers of the informal sector. Competition from large retailers should not prevent the development of small businesses that create essential jobs for this disadvantaged people that represent a large part of the population of Yamoussoukro.

Theme's target:

Protect the vulnerable yet essential retail activities for disadvantage people.

Actions:

- Regulate the creation of large-scale retail facilities, especially in residential areas;
- Conduct impact assessments on small businesses prior to the implementation of large-scale retail activities.

Theme 3: Reducing the distance between large scale retail facilities.

The retail sector contributes significantly to shaping cities. As shown above for Dioulakro in Yamoussoukro, where there is a market or a shopping centre, people will not hesitate to move to. And the attractiveness of a retail facility is proportional to its size. Thus, the retail sector, especially through large scale facilities, may be a determining factor of excessive urban sprawl.

Theme's target:

Prevent urban sprawl caused by an uncontrolled spread of retail points.

Actions:

- Strive to improve and maintain the effectiveness of the existing commercial centre;
- Limit and delay the creation of new major retail clusters in the city in order to give a chance to the densification of the urban fabric around the existing ones;
- Plan reduced distances between new major retail points and the existing commercial centre.

Theme 4: Ensuring optimal accessibility to retail facilities

Intelligent location is a necessary condition to a successful business and should be given special attention while planning. It's even more important for small retail activities which have often very limited means to ensure optimal visibility.

Theme's target:

Support the development and the success of retail activities by making commercial reservations on the most suitable sites.

Actions:

- Organize retail activities along main traffic arteries and road junctions, including the National Road A6 and the *Boulevard Triomphal* (Fig 6);
- Spatially organize activities in retail clusters so that small businesses could benefit from the attractiveness of bigger businesses;
- Promote mixed use facilities in residential areas and in the administrative district, especially for small businesses.

issue of the marginalization of the north and the east of Cote d'Ivoire in territorial development programmes. This situation is often referred to as one of the causes of the socio-political crises that the country went through. For a territorial balance, it may be appropriate to consider the establishment of growth hubs in the other regions where opportunities are not inexistent.

End notes

¹ 110 inhabitants/km²

² Law No. 62-253 of 31 July 1962 concerning urban planning and Law No. 0508/MCU/CAB 23 December 1970 laying down general rules of land use in construction and urban design

³ A staff of 5 employees all living in Abidjan; 1 car; 1 personal computer; 1 photocopying machine and 3 desk phones

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