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Building for consumption: an institutional analysis of peripheral shopping center development in northwest Europe

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FOREWORD

In well-organized cities [retailers] will be pretty well those of feeble physique who are not fit for other work. They must stay around the market, buying for money from those who have something to sell, and then again selling at a price to those who want to buy.

— Plato, Republic II-371

The demise of small shops in central cities ought not to be mourned. Like it or not, much of the general consolidation and restructuring of the urban retail sector is unavoidable and efficient.

— Nivola (1999: 30)

Wie unsere Städte und ihre Randzonen in Zukunft aussehen, ist nicht nur (aber selbstverständlich auch) eine Frage des Marktes, sondern primär eine politische Frage. Wenn die Gesellschaft mehrheitlich der Meinung ist, diese Entwicklung dem Markt überlassen zu können, werden wir lang über kurz amerikanische Verhältnisse haben.

— Hans H. Blotevogel (2000:16)

Five years ago I started laying the groundwork for the book you now have before you. I had just finished reading *Downtown Inc.* by Frieden and Sagalyn, and was challenged to undertake writing a European account of this phenomenon. Since my youth in the United States, shopping malls have exercised a visceral repulsion on me, and I wished nothing more than to write an academic exposition condemning them and all they represent. I had watched how the city center in my hometown had gradually withered and finally succumbed under the weight of two mammoth malls situated on its edge. Borrowing a recently coined term from Koolhaas, I too felt that shopping malls — indeed most “modern” retail spaces — were junkspace: a scourge on urban development, a parasite to the city, a bane to community, not to mention just being garish eyesores.

Since that time, my attitudes towards large-scale retail development have grown more tempered. Soon after beginning this study, it became clear that Europe was in an entirely different situation. The “mallings” of Europe had not (yet) happened, city centers seemed to be thriving and many countries had enacted policy measures restricting out-of-town development. It was obvious that a European version of *Downtown Inc.* was out of the question — the institutional differences were far too great. This however suggested another area of inquiry, namely, to explore Europe’s ambivalent relationship with new retail formats, investigate the conflicts that erupt with each new shopping center proposal and note how these are resolved. This goal has led to taking a more detached attitude towards shopping mall development than was originally envisioned, but hopefully also one that is more balanced and fair to those involved.