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 “malling” 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.