

# UNPUBLIC SPACES OF EUROPE (U.S.E.)

on places, non-places and other spaces of the european contemporary city

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## Abstract

*“You will find everything sold together in the same place (...): figs, witnesses to summonses, bunches of grapes, turnips, pears, apples, givers of evidence, roses, medlars, porridge, honeycombs, chick-peas, law suites, allotment machines, irises, lamps, water-clocks, laws, indictments”.*

Eubulus, IV century Greek poet (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai* 14.640 b-c)

Between the romanticized version of a Greek *agora* and the intense contemporary shopping centers there isn't probably a disparity as considerable as we can imagine, since both can be easily mistaken with the ancient markets and the public squares of today. Before, as now, there is a clear separation between the production of discourse and the experience of the symbolic spaces of the city. □

On the other hand, it is a fact that public space is not anymore what it used to be. Following the emergence of a new urban condition, other outstanding elements — such as stadiums, thematic parks, artificial beaches, industrial showrooms or multi-purpose indoor arenas — appear nowadays as meaningful places of the contemporary metropolitan landscape, in addition to the traditional network of public spaces.

Amongst them, the shopping center is not only one of the most striking elements of contemporary city, but also a "quasi"-urban component where notions such as "public" and "private" or "non-place" and "place" are challenged by the ambivalent nature of this architectural typology.

And shopping centers are, in fact, more than just mere sites for consumption. In the scenic environments of its “streets” and “plazas” — like in the historic, dense and “compact” city — we wander, eat, drink, rest and consume symbols and merchandises. So visiting them is, today, not so different of going to the “center”.

If today, undoubtedly, urban daily life is both linked to the use of public spaces and shopping centers; it's not surprising that phenomena such as urban tribes, sport celebrations, strikes or political demonstrations are both visible in city squares and shopping center plazas, where these are increasingly more and more common. □ And therefore, shopping centers are currently urban elements that we cannot continue to ignore in the theorization of the present and future of urban public space.

## KEYWORDS

places and non-places; public and private spaces; shopping centers; collective use spaces; urban culture; contemporary city; Europe.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: beliefs and misconceptions

The European city has, in the last decades, suffered a significant physical expansion that extended it beyond its own limits; becoming an entity whose scale and complexity makes it difficult to understand its true role and nature.

If we find today the term "crisis" linked to its recent evolution, the truth is that the history of the European city, as a whole, is itself a process of dramatic changes that shook its own foundations. Events like the destruction of stonewalls of medieval cities, the introduction of the first hygienist and orthogonal urban plans or even the expansion of automobile were equally critical moments in its history.

Jürgen Habermas pointed out — in his seminal book "The structural transformation of the public sphere" (1962) — that the concept of "crisis" was appropriated from the lexicon of Medicine; referring to the stage of a disease process, in which the body has no strength to recover its normal state or health.

By analogy, the term is used in urbanism to describe a state of degradation of the identity, structure and physical form of the city. However wrongly, because the idea of an urban crisis is, by definition, a misconception due to the fact that the city is a constantly changing entity that will never return to a previous or ideal form. Even if the notion of "city" is commonly associated with a certain sense of "nostalgia", linked to a condition that has been, or qualities that have already been lost; the truth is that the city will never ever be as it was once before.

Today, notions such "center" and "periphery", "public" and "private" or even "place" and "non-place" are challenged by the hybrid nature of new urban conditions, where renovated outstanding elements appear as meaningful places of the urban landscape, in addition to the traditional network of public spaces.

This phenomenon, common to most European urban areas, is today materialized as an hypertext of recreational and commercial facilities — such as shopping centers, stadiums, thematic parks, industrial showrooms, nightclubs or multi-purpose indoor arenas — that structure a network of uses of a post-urban culture, condensed in time and scattered in space.

It is, therefore, an indisputable fact that, today, public space is not anymore what it used to be.

Following the emergence of a new urban condition — embodied in a city that tend to relate as a network of fluxes and nodes — the European city has suffered, in the last four decades, numerous transformations and metamorphoses. And, in order to approach to the new urban configurations of the early twenty-first century, we need to confront them with a, more or less recent, set of dualisms that dominated, until today, the history of the European city.



Fig. 1: "The metropolitan street", Álvaro Domingues (2011)

The first of them is precisely the conflict between a "traditional" model of "compact" city and a "non-historical" model of "extensive" city (Portas et al, 2003), materialized during the expansion of its metropolitan areas. And contrasting with this dichotomy, we will today observe the emergency of a series of new territories "between cities" (Sievarts, 2005) of liquid densities, boundaries and contours, where do live most of the population of the European metropolitan regions, marked by hyper-velocity networks and condensation nodes in which accumulate equipments, functions and merchandises.

And if in the "compact city", the density is organized around historic buildings and public spaces, in these "in-between" territories this is a role played by other urban elements that will shape the contemporary landscape.

But, understanding this "new urban condition" is also to address another dualism that historically dominated the city from its very beginning: the distinction between public and private.

And although this dichotomy has remote and secular roots, these are notions that have gradually acquired new contours. Besides these two elementary categories, we can see today other kind of spaces that contradict this dualistic division of the territory of the city.

On the one hand, we will find clear traces of an increasing privatization of the public space, embodied in phenomena as diverse as esplanades and other private concessions, advertising, installation of televisions and screens in public spaces, or even product demonstrations and themed events in plazas and gardens.

On the other hand, we will see how a lot of recreational and retail facilities acquire similar or even more intense levels of use than some traditional public spaces; being difficult to distinguish the effective boundary between both domains, such as in transport interfaces, stadiums and sports complexes, privately owned plazas or shopping centers. Thus, alongside with this gradual privatization of public spaces and the progressive fading out of the borders between public and private realms in the contemporary city, we will also see the emergence of collective uses in these private spaces.



Fig 2: "Athens", Martin Parr (1991)



Fig 3: "Ocean dome", Martin Parr (1996)

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The resulting mutation of the forms of appropriation of the contemporary city, will also imply a reconfiguration of the hierarchy of meaningful places and, therefore, putting into discussion a more recent dualism: the dichotomy between "place" (Norberg-Schulz, 1976) and "non-place" (Augé, 1992), associated to each of these categories and spaces.

Not only we will witness a mutation in the condition of many of these spaces — visible in the way some "places" become effective "non-places" (due to privatization, touristification or gentrification processes), or how some "non-places" became "places" (due to the increase of its social representativeness over time) — as well as we observe the emergence of a series of "others spaces", difficult to categorize, which do not present any of the above conditions.

Ray Oldenburg, at the end of the 1980s, introduced first the concept of "third place" (1989) — relative to private spaces where users can find a "neutral ground" in which they may gather and build a social network, distinct from the one embodied in the public realm —; Edward Soja, at the mid of the 1990s, talks about a "thirdspace" — the diffuse dimension of the contemporary urban system, where the boundaries between public and private use are dimmed, and indicates precisely the shopping center as an hub piece of the "exopolis" (1996; 2000) —; and Mario Paris and Corinna Morandi, at the end of the 2000s, establish the concept of "super-places" as a category of "polyfunctional places" that create local and supra-local fluxes and act as nodes of city users' daily life (2009).

Despite the different terms used to characterize these new urban configurations of the contemporary city, the fact is that this system of heterotopic private-ownership-collective-use spaces acquire gradually more and more representativeness to city users, as they go "beyond" their mere condition of nodes of intersection of fluxes, representing instead a real possibility of condensation of centrality in the actual urban landscape. And that's why, due to this particular condition, we chose to call these private-ownership-collective-use spaces as the "new (public) space" of the contemporary city.

## **2. SHOPPING (&) PUBLIC SPACES**

Amongst this network of private-ownership-collective-use spaces, shopping centers are not only indispensable places of consumption itself, but also "quasi"-urban components that represent increasingly one of the key places of daily life.

However if going to the "shopping" is a common and universal experience; the actual role of the shopping center is indeed a controversial topic. For some, these typologies have altered the notion of contemporary urban space, reducing public use to collective practices that they consider "undemocratic" (Sorkin, 1992:xi-xv), "militarized" (Davis, 1992:154-180), "artificial" (Jackson, 1985:260), "panoptic" (Elin, 1997:73) and that "reject the activities of a true center" (Whyte, 1988:208),

as well that circumscribe the notion of civic space to a set of "consumption oriented activities" (Ghirardo, 1996:66). Others, point out the inevitability of its hegemony in a "generic city" (Koolhaas, 1997:3-12), arguing that consumption is, in fact, "one of the last remaining forms of public life" (Leong, 2001:128-155), as well that this retail spaces facilitate new "social and coexistence synergies" (Amendola, 1997: 259), provide a "safe urbanity" (Rybczynski, 1995: 210) and are, certainly, one of the most important architectural paradigms of the twenty-first century, in a "world that, itself, has already turned into a shopping mall" (Crawford, 1992: 3-30).



Fig 4 and 5: "Centro Colombo (Lisbon)" and "Via Catarina (Oporto)"  
[Images courtesy of Sonae Sierra©]

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But, most of all, it is difficult to remain indifferent to this ambiguous and complex object, simultaneously "paradise" and "hell" of the contemporary city (Cautela & Ostidich, 2009).

And, if the shopping center is, by definition, a group of retail commercial establishments that is planned, developed, owned and managed as a single property with the aim of maximizing profit; nevertheless, today, shopping centers are more than just mere sites for consumption. In the scenic environments of its "streets" and "plazas" – like in the historic, dense and compact city – we wander, eat, drink, rest and consume symbols and merchandises. So visiting them is, today, not so different of going to the "center".

Due to its particular qualities, the shopping center is — in its essence — an unorthodox and even contradictory object. Simultaneously, a place of business and leisure; open to all, but closed on itself; public in its use, but private in terms of ownership; with a wide geographical influence, but detailed in its scale; general in its themes, but representative to each individual user.

Along with a broad offer of products and services, we will also find in today's shopping centers, increasingly, a new set of recreational and cultural facilities with a clear goal: to create friendly spaces that invite to stay and consume. Thus, besides being an expression of the actual retail industry – where products are shown, tested and sold — shopping centers are also progressively places where uses, functions and activities — previously reserved to the realm of urban public spaces — are also supported, transforming themselves in highlighted icons of the contemporary European scene, where these commercial structures represent nowadays also nodes of the metropolitan landscape in which they operate.

### **3. THE EUROPEAN AND PORTUGUESE CONTEXTS**

Particularly, in Portugal there were, in the early 2000s, a total of 61 shopping centers with over 5,000 square meters — adding up about 1.4 million square meters of gross leasable area (C&W/H&B, 2002) — this would be a number that would register a continuing increase over this decade, and it would reach in 2009, more than 160 shopping centers with over 5,000 square meters, putting together more than 3.3 million square meters gross leasable area (Aguirre Newman, 2009). Demonstrating that, in Portugal — despite an unfavorable economic scenario — it would prevail, in the late 2000s, a growing trend in the number of openings of medium and large sized shopping centers.

In fact, Portugal it is — by its nature — a quite unique scenario at a European level. Here, we would find, in the early 2000s, the highest proportion of European users between 15 and 34 years, and the highest percentage of gross leasable area (GLA) per inhabitant of southern Europe (C&W/H&B, 2004). This phenomenon is, moreover, a striking reality in the Portuguese context, as evidenced by the



nearly 26 million and 21 million visitors per year (equivalent to approximately 2 million users per month), that visit, respectively, the Centro Colombo and NorteShopping; by far the most significant examples of the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Oporto (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2008).

In general, development trends would present themselves as quite similar across the European context. From the 1970s to the 2000s the general tendency was of continuous growth, with particular strength in the past decades; notably between 1990 and 2004, when the growth rate was 2.5 times higher than that evidenced in the 30 years before (C&W/H&B, 2004b). And if we restrict the scope of analysis to the last 5 years of this period, this growth was even more pronounced in Eastern Europe countries — like Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia — as well as in Greece, that suffered an increase of GLA of over 75% (C&W/H&B, 2005).

But, from 2009 onwards, we would feel a slowdown in this growth rate (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2009), although it would reach, at the end of the decade, an overall sum of more than 128 million square meters of GLA in Europe (C&W, 2011).

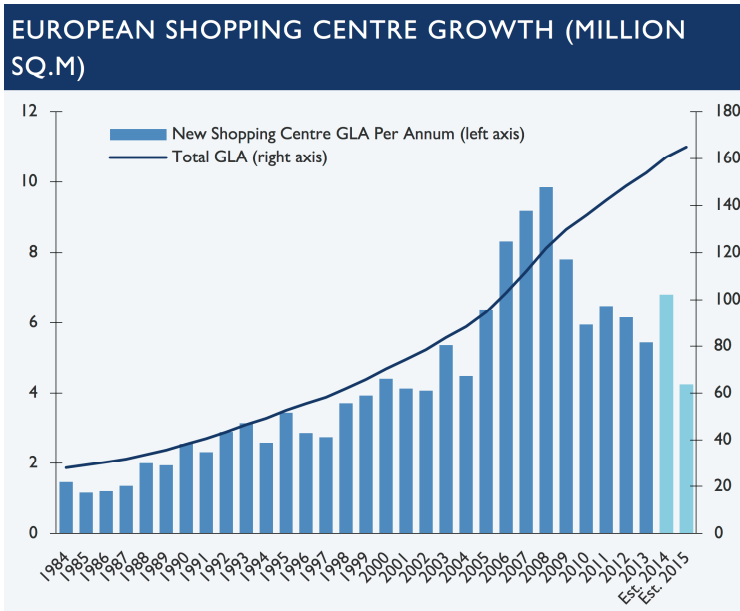


Fig. 6: "European Shopping Center Growth [million sq.m.]" (C&W, 2014)



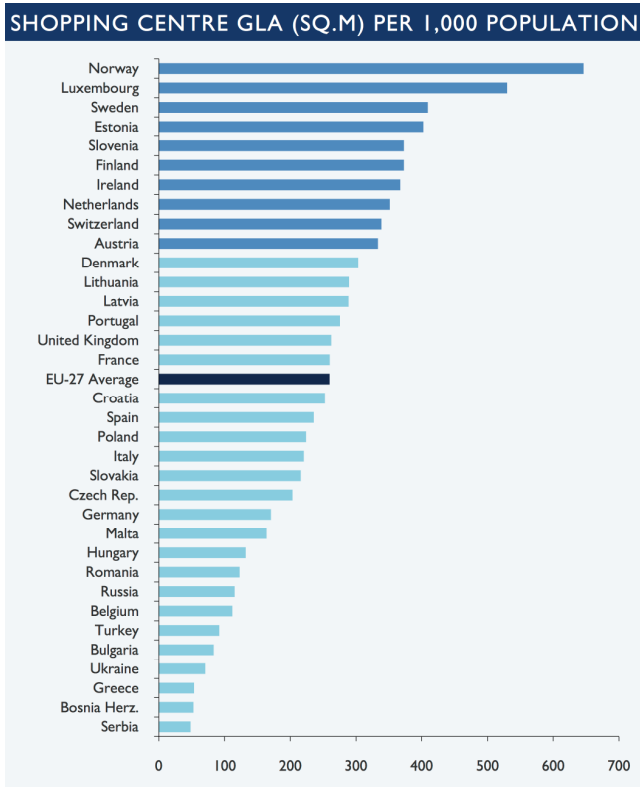


Fig. 7: "Shopping Center GLA [sq.m.] per 1,000 population" (C&W, 2013)

Result, above all, of a continuous increase in the number of shopping centers in Europe and demonstrated by a significant European average of 225.6 square meters of GLA per 1,000 inhabitants, that we would find at the end of the 2000s; as well by the expressive 271 square meters of GLA per 1,000 inhabitants — above the European average — that we would find in Portugal (C&W, 2010).

However — during the years 2011, 2012 and 2013 — we would witness, throughout Europe, to a clear decrease in the rate of openings; although we would observe a slight increase of global GLA, consequence not of new investments in this retail sector, but of opening of projects in pipeline, started before the beginning of the decade and inaugurated in the last two years (C&W, 2012). Specifically, in Portugal, it would only be inaugurated in 2011 more 113,900 square meters of GLA, a value that corresponds to nearly a third of the average of openings in the previous decade (Revista Imobiliária, 2012). During 2012, it wouldn't open any commercial structure, as well it were canceled or suspended the opening of several

shopping centers across the country, as Vivaci Beja, Évora the Shopping, Fórum Setúbal or Dolce Vita Braga, this last one having its opening date postponed three times. In 2013, it would only be expanded an already existent shopping center — Algarve Shopping — and in 2014 it's projected just a refurbishment of an existent hypermarket into a shopping center — Alegro Setúbal.

The decrease of openings, however, will not be a phenomenon that will empty the "squares" of the existing shopping centers in Portugal. Even being a scenario that affects the entire economic sector — from real estate enterprises to tenants — as well as the purchasing power of the consumers themselves, it will not imply — as it is quite visible at the high levels of intensity of use that these spaces continue to hold today — that shopping spaces are no longer one of the favorite places of city users.

However, the actual scenario of economic crisis will reflect itself in a clear shift in the way people relate to shopping centers. Not only at inducing changes in consumer habits with less purchasing power, which will become more sensitive to use than consumption, as well at the level of the urban image and representativeness of shopping centers, visibly affected by a diminishing rate of apertures and even the closure of several units. Demonstrating that these are not permanent and immutable formulas, but rather consist of flexible and limited duration elements that, as the industrial facilities of other times, might be the future "brownfields" — of forthcoming urban regeneration plans — of a city yet to come.

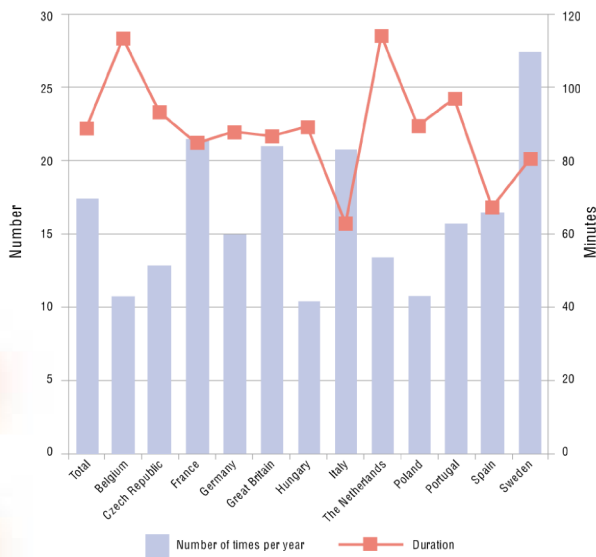


Fig. 8: "Number and length of visits to shopping centers in Europe" (C&W/H&B, 2004)

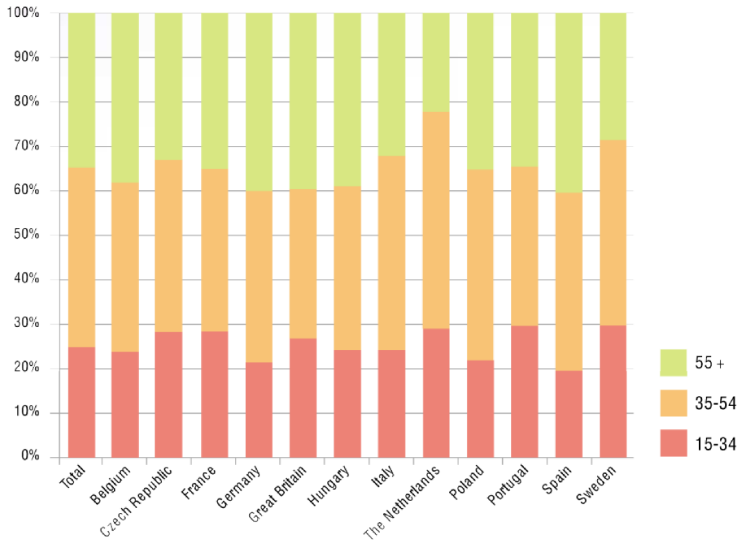


Fig. 9: "Number and length of visits to shopping centers in Europe" (C&W/H&B, 2004)

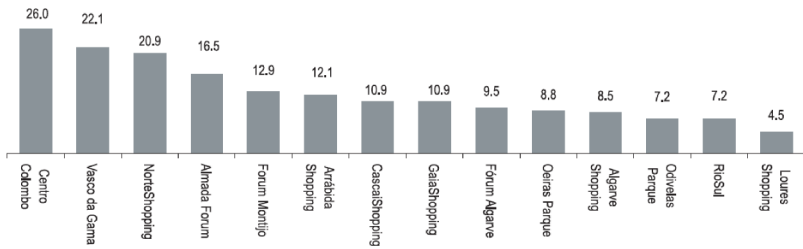


Fig. 10: "Number of visitors by year [millions] of major Portuguese shopping centers" (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2007)

However, despite the actual international crisis scenario, something wouldn't change. The significant role that shopping centers still have in the urban daily life of contemporary European city.

From Lisbon to Istanbul, from Naples to Rotterdam, or from Lille to Berlin, we will find today in Europe a close relationship between city users and its retail spaces. On average, a European citizen visits a shopping center 17 times a year, or approximately every 3 weeks. Spending on average 1 hour and 30 minutes on each visit, stating that shopping centers are a good place to spend their free time and when using them, only in 25% of cases with the intention to purchase a specific product (C&W/H&B, 2004).

Consumer trends are, in fact, very similar along European countries. On average, three quarters of consumers are female, only standing out Italy and Spain respectively with 84% and 91%. The age distribution of the consumers is generally balanced, existing about one quarter of users between 15 and 34 years old and the remaining three quarters evenly distributed between individuals with ages from 35 to 54 years old and those over 55 years old. Among European countries, Portugal — as we have already seen — and Sweden have the highest proportion of consumers between 15 and 34 years old; the Netherlands lead in terms of the predominant age group between 35 and 54 years old, and Spain and Germany have the greatest number of consumers over 55 years old. In terms of frequency of visits, Swedish consumers visit shopping centers significantly more often than all other countries, that is, on average more than 27 times a year. In the Netherlands and Belgium, users spend however more time on each visit, i.e. about 2 hours, a value which stands about 30 minutes above the European average. By contrast, the Italian and Spanish consumers carry out briefer visits, spending just one hour on each visit to the shopping center (C&W/H&B, 2004).

### **3. FINAL REMARKS: PUBLIC?**

This essay tried to address the actual role of private-ownership-collective-use spaces, trying to re-center the view on the way people appropriate the places of contemporary city, putting side-by-side public uses and shopping practices.

However, between the romanticized version of a Greek agora and the intense contemporary shopping centers there isn't probably a disparity as considerable as we can imagine, since both can be easily mistaken with the ancient markets and the public squares of today.

It is a fact that shopping centers are, in general, seen and used as effective "public spaces" of the contemporary city. Not only the consumption practices, carried out on them, are effective builders of identity, collective memory and new daily life habits; but they are also places that we actually recognize as receptacles of lifestyles and gradually complex socialization processes.

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Consequently, the condition of place of centrality that the shopping center progressively gains, mainly in the "non-historic" city, will definitely put into discussion the actual role of the public space itself. And, even though, the distinction between the public and private realm are one of the more striking civilizational cleavages of all times and, both of them, are pillars of the western urban planning; its helenistic-well-delimited-and-studied archetypal formulas are also disputable.

If we find, clearly, the roots of this dichotomy — like, masterfully, Hannah Arendt clarified in "The Human Condition" (1958) — in the ancient Greek opposition between polis — as the self-governed, autonomic and independent community of citizens that share a common ground — and oikos — as the familiar basic unit that share a common house —; the effective materialization of the public and private space were quite different from the idyllic philosophical definition of these terms.

Much different from Aristotle's and Plato's descriptions, that immortalized the agora as a participative democratic space; Eubulus, a Greek poet from the IV century described this founding archetype of "public space" in western civilization, basically, as the place where "you will find everything sold together in the same place (...): figs, witnesses to summonses, bunches of grapes, turnips, pears, apples, givers of evidence, roses, medlars, porridge, honeycombs, chick-peas, law suites, allotment machines, irises, lamps, water-clocks, laws, indictments" (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai* 14.640 b-c).

Before, as now, there is a clear separation between the production of discourse and the experience of the symbolic spaces of the city. □ Just a few blocks away from where the Athenian agora was, and still is, located we will find Syntagma Square. Here, since last year, organized and non-protesters gather around the plaza, making assemblies and taking decisions by raising their hand in the air, like it was more than 2,500 years ago. With one difference, today there's no restriction neither on the speech nor to the voting on women, youngsters, "foreigners" or "slaves".

From "slow protests" — like the one in Tahrir Square, whose occupation in 2011 developed progressively during more than one month — to "fast protests" — like the ones that happen recursively, during the last year, in Puerta del Sol, that in an afternoon change the configuration of the plaza —; we witness, around the world, to the putting of the occupation of the public space on the political agenda, integrating the participative democratic praxis — i.e. the debate, the co-decision and self-organization practice — with the temporary occupation of public space.

Conforming what Pedro Bandeira would call the ultimate form of "kamp+ism"; that is to say, a protesting form that combine transitory settling ("kamp") and political rhetoric ("ism").



Fig. 11: "Kamp+ismo", Pedro Bandeira (2011)

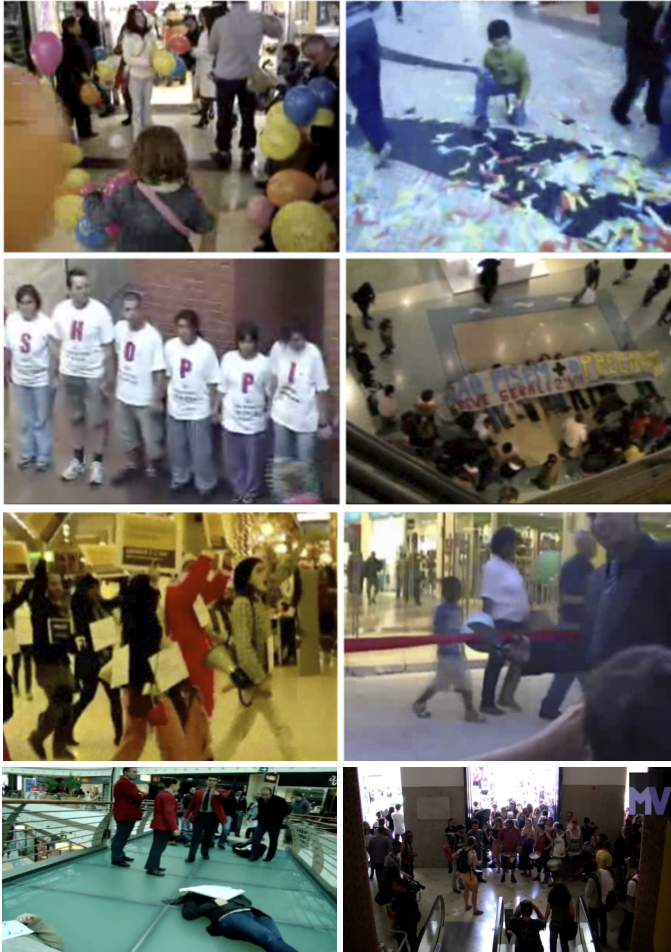
However if today, undoubtedly, the urban daily life of its inhabitants is both linked to the use of public spaces and shopping centers; it's not surprising that political demonstrations are today both visible in the "occupied" city squares and the shopping center plazas where demonstrations are also more and more common.

Precisely, this "quasi"-public condition of contemporary shopping centers will enhance the doubt on what role these retail typologies may yet take part in the construction of the European city. And if we don't know what is it going to be; we have, however, a strong suspicion: that, in a near future, these will be more "public" than "shopping" places.

And, evidence of this, is the way we see emerge today phenomena that were hardly visible but in public spaces, like urban tribes, sport celebrations, political demonstrations and strikes, or even bizarre events, such as suicides practiced in their spaces. Traces that, taken together, make us consider on the true nature of these heterotopic places.

Particularly, the figure of political demonstration in shopping centers is probably one of the most striking examples of this miscegenation between the public and the private realm of the contemporary city, giving a completely new meaning to the well-known Jordi Borja and Zaida Muxi's assertion that "public space (...) is [the place] where society makes itself visible" (2003:15).

And, if we do not know what role this hybrid typology may yet take part in the contemporary city, these are nowadays formulas that have changed the way we see and use public and private space. But, most of all, shopping centers are today urban elements — accumulating the condition of being both places of consumption and centrality in contemporary metropolitan regions — that we cannot continue to ignore in the theorization of the present and future of urban public space.



Figures 12 to 17: Examples of political demonstrations in Portuguese shopping centers  
[Via Catarina, Porto (2007); Centro Colombo, Lisboa (2008);  
NorteShopping, Matosinhos (2007); C.C. Vasco da Gama, Lisboa (2010);  
Fórum Almada, Almada (2011); Dolce Vita Tejo, Amadora (2012);  
C.C. Vasco da Gama, Lisboa (2012); Armazéns do Chiado, Lisboa (2013)]



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