In the Western World, shopping is becoming the most refined activity of the human race. The consumption landscape where shopping activity takes place is a mirror of our modern culture (Simon 1992). Shopping malls are today’s Greek agoras, Roman forums, Medieval marketplaces and contemporary cathedrals of consumption (Gruen and Smith 1960, 17–18; Gumpert and Drucker 1992). Their evolution raises different ethical, political, economic, social and design questions. The nature of the space being added to the existing urban fabric, their peripheral location usually only accessible by car, and their objectives of embodied consumerism and of profit making by only a few are some of the questions normally associated with this kind of commercial developments (Hopkins 1991; Crawford 1992; Goss 1993, 1999; Zukin 1998).

The shopping center (or shopping mall) is one of the few new building types created in our time (Gruen and Smith 1960, 11). It was first developed in the US during the 1950s and 1960s and it is now considered “the most important space created by American society in our generation” (Simon 1992, 248–249). The first shopping malls, also called “markets in the meadows”, were developed in suburban locations, mainly in reaction to traffic congestion downtown. Accessibility, in addition to a new set of amenities and conveniences (e.g. parking, climate controlled, variety of goods, low prices, one stop shopping), made these new buildings successful commercial developments, immediately replicated throughout the country. From 1960 to 1970 more than 8,000 new shopping centers opened in the United States—twice as many as in the previous decade (Rybczynski 1993, 100). They became more than commercial places, they soon started to act as civic, cultural, social and latter on as recreational centers. Throughout the late seventies and early eighties, shopping malls became also key ingredients in
the urban revitalization of American downtowns. By 1990, there were 36,650 shopping centers in the US, and “the time spent in shopping centers by North Americans followed only that spent at home and work/school” (Goss 1993, 18).

Contemporary malls and shopping centers are different from their predecessors. They have evolved like urban organisms reflecting and shaping our contemporary society. They have suffered not only quantitative changes (they grew in size, e.g. from the regional to the mega-mall) but also qualitative changes (Jackson 1991). Unlike the first generation’s shopping centers, which performed only a commercial function, today’s malls attempt to perform all functions (shopping, dining, entertainment). The West Edmonton Mall in Canada and the Mall of America in the US are at the top of this evolution. They are huge in size and attempt to be more than mere places of consumption, they are also entertainment and vacation destinations (Butler 1991; Urry 1995; Goss 1999).

In Europe, the largest entertainment park included in a shopping mall can be found in the Colombo Shopping Center in Lisbon. This is not the only reason why a comparison between Portugal and the US needs to be conducted. In a European context, Portugal is one of the latest countries experimenting its retail revolution. Retailing in Portugal has been characterized as a mixed model of traditional city-center retailing with a strong majority of small, family operated firms, and new large out-of-town commercial developments populated by multinational companies with new sales techniques (Balsas 1999).

If the shopping mall industry in the US has evolved since World War II, in Portugal, this evolution was not only shorter but also much faster (Salgueiro 1996). The first shopping centers (i.e. commercial galleries) were only developed in the two largest Portuguese cities during the 1970s (e.g. the Dallas in Oporto and the Apolo 70 in Lisbon). However, only in 1985, the opening of the first regional shopping center in Lisbon (the Amoreiras Shopping Center) marked the retailing revolution in Portugal (Salgueiro 1996; Cachinho 1991, 1998). During the 1990s, developers started constructing shopping centers in the metropolitan suburbs and in medium size cities throughout the coastal zone, e.g. Coimbra, Aveiro and Braga (Pereira and Teixeira 1997, 26). The Colombo Shopping Center, the Portuguese counterpart of the Mall of America, opened in September 1997. This megamall was the second tourism destination in Lisbon after the World exhibition EXPO’98. The fact that Portuguese developers are importing commercial formats