OPINION Let's go to Scandinavia! suggests Alexander Otto
RETAIL INVESTMENT Emerging demand for better quality
REPORT The economic crisis hits Portugal hard – including its shopping center industry
More than 50% of the world’s population now lives in cities. In some countries in Europe, where the city was invented, this figure is 80%. The city is the most sustainable form of human habitat. All social revolutions have originated in cities, not to mention cultural achievements. But what does this hymn to the city have to do with retailing? Retailing has always been a driving force behind cities. Some of them owe their foundations to retailing; many of today’s cities originated as the crossroads of important transport routes. Retailing and the exchange of goods and ideas are still vital for cities. Added value is created by accepting diversity in dense packages: diversity of people, cultures, food, colors, smells, sounds, and so on.

If the discussion about e-commerce spreads fear among traditional retailers, and if they hope that this will be a temporary fashion that will not be sustained, then I am convinced that their hope is forlorn. Thankfully, human ingenuity has always used technological progress to achieve greater comfort in the long run. The truth is that the IT industry has only just started to combine the digital world, which is still doubling its capability every 16 months, with the real world. Applying this fact to the retail industry means that shopping and the shopping center industry are facing some fascinating new challenges. It of course also means revolutionary tasks for cities. It is finally time for new challenges, just as the industry was starting to complain about being boring. Same tenants, similar concepts, same culture, same smell, and same atmosphere in Helsinki and in Naples: a total contrast with the qualities of the city described above. But the transformation of a large warehouse for consumer electronics like Saturn into an interesting showroom like an Apple Store is definitely a move towards a more vital city environment.

Shopping becomes sexy when it moves from meeting basic demands towards social entertainment. And there we are. No one needs a single square meter of additional retail space to meet simple material needs. But we need endless new square meters of innovative special solutions for entertaining spaces in which to live, amuse ourselves, AND shop. And we need these spaces downtown and elsewhere, even outside cities. Otherwise these facilities will not survive. These changes are definitely not limited to shopping centers and high streets, but will conquer all kinds of shopping and we will see a fascinating number of new shop formats. The shopping center in particular, which was originally invented to create an urban environment for non-urban structures and to enrich retail space with the social functions that had been lost in the strip-mall type urban sprawl of the American Midwest, is waiting for the next generation of multi-use typology. Hundreds of centers all over Europe are ready for such a relaunch and therefore, we are all looking forward to a fascinating time ahead, full of creative challenges and driven by the search for quality and added value on behalf of customers, tenants, owners, and cities.

Productivity is the foundation, creativity the task, and the collaborative networked society of the 21st century the final goal. Let's do it together with the best examples of European cities. I can hardly think of a better description for a good shopping center than the high streets of the cities of Tuscany, still valid as the best examples of sustainable shopping centers.