

Incarnating the void.

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If as in PSC¹ words the future of the architecture resides in the interior, understood as its durable core in opposition to changeable exterior and interior surfaces, the architecture of commerce may be the designer's ultimate test. Reigning in developed countries, the mall is notably the most important typological form in emerging urban environments where the forces of private realm materialize social aspirations and define the development of cities. By providing a controlled environment both in terms of security and climate, the mall stretches from building to urbanism connecting through fast growing city centres thus creating a novel urban fabric beyond plan, possibly beyond architecture. A journey through to an unlearning journey that the actual design process of such "building" highlights such requirements and the shift in designer's role.

As emerging global megacities become the laboratories of urban future, the rise of emerging supra-urban conditions dramatically change in the definition of public space beyond the traditional civic spaces.

The interior, as a new urban condition, appears in many forms with the ever-increasing footprints and networks of and between Mall at the centre of the transformation. Either through growing networks of interconnected buildings like Toronto's PATH System or enlarged architecture like Chengdu's 1.9 million sq.m. Global Centre, the commercial space designs cities but its architecture remains largely unquestioned.

Bangkok offers a network of elevated pathways that from the original linkage offered by the public overground as evolved by constant addition of floating routes towards malls and in between them. Commerce replaces the state as when one cannot continue in public networks, mall links are the only alternative to the busy street below. The expansion on interiority is as much an answer to climate as it is to the urban fabric. The Thai capital suffers from the absence of street thus creating an extraordinary collision of minimal street space for traffic and over density which is compensated by enlarged buildings; A city of mega buildings. In Hong Kong, the scarcity of space and topography progressively created a vertically functioning city where a new flying network of internalised streets hovers above and pass through the traditional fabric. Expected thresholds vanish, notion of city and ground are challenged and "outdoor" disappears to be replaced by successions of variations in opacities and shops. As the traditional metropolis relies on streets as linkage between buildings, new developments undervalue the street as shared public space by replacing it with extended

¹ Preston Scott-Cohen - Log Magazine, Summer 2013

interiors. Amongst others, the shopping malls of emerging cities are a response to environmental conditions but their sheer size defy the definition of architectural scale with buildings to becoming internal cities. When not by size, the interconnection of buildings by bridge and pathways devised by the private realm suggests as in Hong Kong new elevated streets, alternative routes over streets where the threshold between public and private is blurred.

What is the shared public experience when it is within a choreographed continuous internal commercial corridor? How are these new spaces changing our experience of the city?

From the malleable canvas of the traditional ground plane, the shared public space becomes a manicured continuation of activated space. The scale is not the one of religious or civic buildings with functions to be defined and symbolically derived from elevated and decorated ceilings but an alternative of the domestic scale of long corridors and makeshift piazzas designed to sell.

The design of such environments challenges typical design dogmas by refusing notion of coherence as a whole and especially in traditional ideas of organisation and composition but equally logics of dynamic optimisation. The inherent typological challenges are furthered by conflicts of scale, flow and programmatic "flatness". Our immersion into this exercise revealed the necessary resetting of operational modes as the Mall is a project that as only surface without function, an interior without interiority.

The void is multiple. It is the undefined physical space between myriad of highly defined and purposely individualistic pockets of marketing; the retails. It is the unquantifiable line in budgetary consideration, an absence within the economically driven type. The void is also the absence of program in any operative manner as well as negative answer of context - its voluntary absence being replaced by introverted narration.

The Mall refuses coherence. The establishment of a design process in search of coherence is demoted, as heterogeneity is demanded. The façade, the interior arcades or supporting functions do not demand linkage – be it physical or conceptual. Victim of its own success, the idea goes that variation and accumulations of effect and narratives sustain the experience of an ever challenged customer.

Likewise, alternative that suggests differentiation as variation of controlled generative operations is opposed by the process of definition which depends on conflicting programs. Functions are equal and only differ in degrees between retail and entrainment but all are many to attract for commerce.

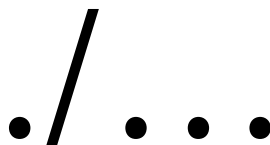
Having a sole and clear purpose, the Mall's program is flat. Beyond few supporting subprograms, the hierarchical consideration leading to articulation of spaces is inoperative for the definition of the public interior. Ideally all shops should be equally accessible and visible. The ratio is inverted as the quantifiable value, the rent, goes decreasing as a consequence of the negotiation of these criteria. Size, shape or light and other architectural traditional values are relatively inconsequential.

It is a container that has to needs to strongly exist but not compete with individual commercial spaces bound to be even louder.

Notion of organization and differentiation have to be replaced by processes with sub programs and architectural elements becoming agents. The departments stores are main attractors in a descending order of obvious attraction while subversively escalators, enlistments, toilets or vegetation are facilitators. A soft control. Design by behaviour replaces traditional diagram. The flock simulation replaces for us thousands of flow charts.

But as sophisticated as the dynamic diagram is, it is challenged in nature by the Kia of unknowns or uncontrolled data. As the void tries finding is shape within is complex it is challenged by movement of the inputs - car park, changing rules or iterations of tenants diverging inputs. The possible coherence of a dynamic diagrams is challenged not by a computable increase in input but the untraceable associations of influencing variables; the conflict of a brand visions.

Commerce defies architecture by giving an incredible place of application whilst changing its definition. No precedents, no typologies but an experience that can be quantified by sales. Architecture with a bottom line.



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