The “hidden” city: morphological developments and knotting phenomena in the commercial fabric from the passage to the mall

Dr. Marco Falsetti
Diap - Department of Architecture and Design - University of Rome "Sapienza", Italy

Abstract

Several examples, over the course of history, testify to the formation of specialized fabrics and buildings starting from commercial paths: the linear conception of the market has in fact often determined the creation of complex structures which, over time, have reached an autonomous dimension, typologically coded. The market-type has evolved processually starting from the dimension of a path up to defining a real building organism, that very often, due to the progressive extension of the phenomenon, has assumed an urban character, involving large portions of fabric: gallerias, bazaars and shōtengai are therefore structured according to these aggregative logics, translating an idea with a temporary origin into a stable form. The knotting processes, transformations of originally temporary elements into buildings, have been structured with different levels of complexity, developing the typical characteristics of the fabric in which they were going to settle. In fact, in the absence of an architectural organism suitable to contain the functional principle, the latter has always developed giving rise to “special” spaces, without a typological determination, but which reflect the characteristics of the place in which they are located. And yet the typological migration of a path-function within a fabric and the transformation that it entails are a phenomenon with much more ancient origins:starting from the great plants of the Hellenistic period such as the colonnaded streets of Syria, a taxonomy of “internal” urban spaces has evolved closely linked to the market type. The particular fortune of these typologies in the Near East has given rise to type-morphological families of commercial fabric-buildings such as the souk, the arasta and the bazaar, whose characters have remained unchanged until modernity. Passages and gallerias therefore represent morphological configurations of a characteristic phenomenon of the contemporary city, in which a further evolution of the specialized urban fabric is manifested.

Keyword: Knotting, commercial fabric, passage, shōtengai, underground arcade

Introduction

The aim of the research here proposed is to analyze the typological evolution of modern “commercial fabric” (like passages, gallerias, and covered squares) by examining its processual nature, in order to better understand some recent contemporary developments taking place in different areas of the world. If the phenomenon of introversion of the routes that produced these public “hidden” spaces was evident for the evolution of "historical types" like passages and arcades, an analogous process can still be identified in other architectural examples, in which, the formation of specialized fabrics and buildings is defined through the prevailing action of commercial pathways. In particular we can observe that the linear conception of the market space has often led to the rise of peculiar and complex building structures that, over time, have reached an autonomous -typologically codified-, extension. The market-type has in fact evolved processually, from the linear dimension of a path, to define entire buildings, organisms that often, due to the progressive extension of the phenomenon, have taken an urban character, involving large sections of fabric: galleries, malls, bazaars, passages, arcades, shōtengai have
thus been defined according to these aggregative logic, by permanently translating into matter a provisional idea. The research aims to recognize how some cases of knotting are still present in the contemporary urban fabric - especially in Asia - demonstrating in this sense how this phenomenon constitutes a continuous process and for this very reason vital.

**Background**

The knotting processes, transformations of originally temporary and open elements - such as commercial routes - into buildings have been structured, over the course of history, with different levels of complexity, developing the typical characteristics of the fabric in which they were going to settle. In fact, in the absence of an architectural organism suitable to contain the functional principle, the latter has always developed giving rise to "special" spaces without a typological determination, but which reflect the characteristics of the place in which they are located. And yet the typological migration of a path-function within a fabric and the transformation that it entails are a phenomenon with much more ancient origins: starting from the great architectural complexes of the Hellenistic period, such as the colonnaded streets of Syria and Jordan, characteristics of centers such as Apamea, Gerasa and Palmira, a taxonomy of “internal” urban spaces has evolved, closely linked to the market type. The particular fortune of these typologies - which structure large open spaces but, conceptually, can be assimilated to closed places - in the Near East has given rise, over time, to morphological-type families of commercial fabric-buildings such as the souk, the arasta and the bazaar, whose characters have remained unchanged until modernity. Various late antique building typologies also originated by knotting, introjecting the characters of the original commercial typologies inside civil buildings. Proof of this are some late antique complexes such as the Diocletian’s Palace in Split and that of Galerius in Thessaloniki, in which we can recognize a translation of the eastern colonnaded street, which becomes vestibule and node of the composition. These processes of "knotting", that is the transformation of originally impermanent and open elements - such as commercial routes - into buildings, were configured according to the typical characteristics of the fabric in which they settled, with different levels of completeness and complexity. However, it is good to remember how knotting phenomena do not appear constantly throughout history, but occur depending on certain circumstances related to the ways of living and colonizing anthropic space. In fact, if the typology of the bazaar finds its diffusion more or less continuous chronologically, albeit substantially limited to a precise geographical area - the Middle East -, passages, galleries and urban atriums represent "built responses" to phenomena characteristic of the modern city, in which there is a further evolution of the specialized urban fabric. The urban and social changes produced by the Industrial Revolution in fact modified the relationship between public spaces and urban fabric, defining new connections between the architectural organism and the covered spaces - usually dedicated to tertiary or commercial functions -. My previous researches, which focused on the theme of urban knotting (while the concept of architectural
knotting was introduced by Giuseppe Strappa) have shown the derivation, by specialization, of some types of building-fabric (i.e. buildings with urban scale like Spanish plaza mayor or French place royal, just to name a few) from the matrixes of the market, with which, above all, they share the same character of “internal” urban space.

The study of knotting, developed within the theories of the Muratorian school, was based on innovative methods of reading the historical fabric and, in this direction, I subsequently investigated, in the urban context, the implications of the project in the contemporary city both at theoretical and design methodology level. The research presented here focuses on some further and recent morphological evolutions of the commercial fabric and aims to analyze its typological development in a context traditionally far from that where the typology has matured. The morphological study of the phenomenon is preferred to the latter - and it is precisely the focus of this contribution - precisely because it embraces categories that have not yet reached the sufficient maturity to become architectural typologies. This question, if on the one hand makes it more difficult to trace the characteristics and evolution of the phenomenon (as it has not yet been attested on a codified basis), on the other it allows us to grasp its dynamics and thus recognize its nature. The problem is naturally deeper but it is important to underline that the term knotting indicates precisely the phenomenon (the "welding" of buildings and fabrics around a node or path and their transformation / evolution into a new organism) and not the built outcome (the passage, the plaza mayor etc.). For the latter case, we usually continue to use the usual typological categories, while recognizing for some (those related to open space) their belonging to a macrofamily that I have called "urban-territorial enclosures". At the same time, while recognizing that the knotting processes can give rise to three forms of specialization - linear, polar and branched or network - we will address here only the last two, in which it is easier to recognize the original characteristics of the market type. Due to the vastness of the theme, we will not address here the knotting in the form of a square-enclosure, but the linear and network forms, identifying the procedural nature of these public spaces and contextualizing them within contemporary dynamics. If the phenomenon of path introversion was evident for the formation of arcades and passages, a similar process can still be identified in modern architectural examples, such as the commercial streets of the Far East and the malls, where the formation of specialized buildings and fabrics is still defined through the structuring role of the commercial path. In particular, we can observe how the linear conception of the market has often led to the emergence of peculiar and complex structures, structures which, over time, have reached an autonomous, typologically codified dimension.
Methodology

The evolution of commercial fabric has always been closely linked to the cultural characteristics of the geographical context, as well as to the different ways of experiencing public space. In some areas of the world, particular building types have developed alongside the traditional forms of market-building expressed by markets and emporiums, which profoundly differ from each other even where they share a common matrix. With regard to the relationship between buildings and cities, several authors have pointed out the phenomenon of specialization of fabrics in relation to the commercial function: Alfano, for example, indicates how “some city activities can be integrated into urban life due to certain needs, often ignoring formal facts; these are essential activities that insert themselves spontaneously into existing tissues, by virtue of their own strength of being. The functional principle develops in the absence of an architectural organism suitable to contain it, forming “particular” places without typological determination, reflecting the characteristics of the place in which it is established ” (Alfano 2008). The research here presented analyzes the transformations in the contemporary city with particular reference to the Asian context through a wide-ranging study on the urban phenomena that operate in these contexts and through the understanding of their relationship with the existing fabric. Asia, traditionally less tied to the stable forms of commercial buildings and fabrics, has expressed in recent years some interesting evolutionary paradigms, which seem to indicate the possible future developments of the market-type. In this regard, among the most original models developed in recent years, there are two indigenous types of commercial fabric: the Japanese shōtengai and the South Korean underground arcade.
In Japan the phenomenon of shōtengai is widespread, and represents a form of linear and covered commercial fabric, the origin of which is much older than most of the examples that can be observed today; in fact, the shōtengai was formed in medieval times, following the rakuichi-rakuza issued in 1567 by the daimyō Oda Nobunaga. These economic policies abrogated commercial monopolies by forcing guilds, unions and associations to open up to competitive forms while introducing, at the same time, the possibility for individual merchants to associate freely. The first shōtengai, of a temporary nature, used to form linearly near ports or at the intersection of roads or bridges, however, over time, many ceremonial avenues that led to a temple or a sanctuary also became shōtengai, assuming stable forms and therefore specializing in the typical linear configuration that they have maintained to this day.

Figure 2. The highlighted perimeter shows the extent of the tissue involved in the shōtengai. The urban fabric and the commercial route are knotted around the central axis.

Among the most singular characteristics of the modern typology, the urban role and the heterogeneity of building types involved should be pointed out: in the first case it is found that, normally, it is formed parallel to a large vehicular artery, in order to establish the diversification of scope between the driveway and that of the promenade. This settlement modality of commercial fabrics has precedents in the French passages, which are formed in response to the growing volume of carriage traffic as “urban interiors” which introject the social functions of the street into the lot. As for the second aspect, that is the typological variety, it should be noted that, together with the shops, the shōtengai often incorporates houses or infrastructural elements. Unlike its Western counterparts, such as the aforementioned passages, arcades or gallerias, the shōtengai are almost never planned urban elements; this feature can be easily deduced not only from the absence of a unitary architecture (except for the roof and the accesses, there are no planned elements as is the case in
the sumptuous European galleries) but also through the layout of the buildings "involved" in the shōtengai, from which it is evident that they were built starting from the commercial path and not *a priori*.¹

In the study of the shōtengai phenomenon, however, it must be premised that the term does not designate, in the Japanese language, only the covered and unified commercial route, but also the roads destined for the same function but without coverage and signaled only by the access portals that indicate their name and theme. The shōtengai can also vary significantly at an architectural level, showing a different degree of design intentionality or differences in terms of languages, type of flooring, roofing (but they may also not have one), and even in the type of buildings involved. In this sense the shōtengai very often reveal a spontaneous rather than planned aspect, however, even at the regulatory and statutory level, they behave as a unitary body, regulating the various aspects according to complex internal codes. In some ways, even the state - at least until the 1980s - limited its interference in management issues, and it is no coincidence that many shōtengai still present themselves today as business associations coordinated through joint initiatives. Among the more than 12,000 shōtengai present in Japan today, the most relevant is the Tenjinbashi-suji (天神橋筋商店街) of Osaka, whose origin dates back to the seventeenth century. The Tenjinbashi-suji represents, in size, the largest example of this type in the archipelago as well as an exceptional case of specialized fabric for commercial use, since it extends for over 2 and a half kilometers (which makes it the largest form of linear knotting in the world). The Tenjinbashi-suji originates near the Tenmangu shrine and ends near the Tenjinbashisuji 6-chome station, describing a straight line around which a large number of shops and houses (over 550) are concentrated. Its uniqueness, in addition to the dimensional aspect, is represented by the fact that it is at the same time a commercial and liturgical path, since the traditional procession of the Tenji Matsuri winds along it, one of the most important annual festivals in Japan.

¹ The orthogonality of the lots, related to the path of the shōtengai and not to the block where the building stands, undoubtedly demonstrates how these are subordinated to it and built *a posteriori*.
In the busy urban center of Tokyo, the specialized forms of fabric are more difficult to observe and identify: both in the Ginza area and near the Shinjuku station there are, for example, dense networks of shops (sometimes thematic like the Electric City of Shinjuku) but it is not about shōtengai. In fact, in neither of the two cases does the trade refer to a linear path - a prerogative of shōtengai - and therefore it must be considered as a functional specialization. A linear shōtengai is the Meguro Ginza (目黒銀座商店街), accessible from Naka-meguro station which, however, is not covered. The entrance to the area is marked by the traditional "Arch of Glory" which often defines the type of trade that takes place there. The Shinagawa district is home to the largest and oldest post-war "shōtengai" in Tokyo, the Musashi Koyama (武蔵小山商店街), begun in 1956 and 880 meters long, which houses over 250 shops. The Musashi Koyama originates near the station of the same name and has a curious double shape, with a longer segment and another perpendicular to the first but dimensionally more contained. Other noteworthy examples include the Kita-senju (北千住), a "cluster" shōtengai system that gravitates around the station of the same name. It is exceptional in this case that, alongside the covered linear form, there are "aisle" forms, with the central driveway axis uncovered and the two lateral ones covered (a form similar to medieval Italian arcades but nevertheless almost completely extraneous to the Japanese urban structure). The overhead walkways that depart from the station and connect the entire system provide a continuous indoor journey and allow the commercial fabric to be used without interruptions.
In South Korea, on the other hand, another significant phenomenon can be observed, which is spreading widely, especially in the last thirty years. The origin of the underground arcade can be traced back to a first prototype model - the New Seoul underground arcade - built in the Euljiro area in 1967 by a Japanese-Korean entrepreneur, who had seen a similar example in Japan. It should be noted that, however, in the land of the Rising Sun the "underground" model is almost non-existent (even in cold areas such as Hokkaido), demonstrating the fact that even if it existed, at a given historical moment (and for a contingent cause), a form of underground arcade, the development that it has had in Korea must be considered completely autonomous and with unique characteristics.

The development process of the underground arcade model is therefore intrinsically South Korean and still seems to be subject to further evolutions. Although the term, as often happens in the most famous Middle Eastern examples of bazaar or souk, encompasses the entire category of underground arcades, there are, among the various examples, substantial differences at the morphological, distributive, typological and land regime levels, differences that would impose an in-depth examination of the phenomenon in order to identify its structuring characteristics. In recent years, the SFC (Seoul Facilities Corporation), a state corporation that manages public properties in the metropolitan municipality of Seoul has drawn up a register of underground arcades grouping them by categories, on the basis of an administrative-management criterion. In this sense, three different typologies have been identified in which the 29 underground arcades of the capital are identified: the complexes developed between the 1970s and 1980s as a form of shelter or pedestrian passage belong to the former; the second includes arcades created with private capital in subway stations such as the
"metro shopping centers" and the Yeongdeungpo New Town Underground Shopping Center. The first category, which is state-owned, is managed directly by the SFC while the second by private companies such as Seoul Metro or Seoul Metropolitan Rapid Transit Corporation. Finally, there is a third type, smaller in size, created on a private initiative and managed by small private law companies.

Conclusions

The thirty-year development of underground arcades - which to date, in Seoul alone, number about 2,800 stores - demonstrates how this form of "commercial fabric" is constantly evolving, starting, in some ways, to establish a new paradigm of building-fabric with of the characteristics of both urban scales. The absence of architectural codification, which unites the underground arcade to its Japanese equivalent, has so far meant that the phenomenon could not be uniquely defined in the light of a typological criterion. In fact, it should be noted that, if the settlement principle of the underground arcade remains the same between one example and another, the planimetric configurations (linear, central), the prevailing directions of development (polar, nodal, parallel to a road on the surface) and the spatial-functional criteria vary profoundly (arches that take the place of a square, connecting elements, equipped crossings) defining new possibilities that could help us understand the future developments of the commercial fabric.

References