

# REFLECTION

[RETAIL ARCHITECTURE]

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## **Introduction**

Looking through my graduation works from the beginning until P4, the research part originated from the existing and then contributed to the design part, while the design proposal visualized and materialized the research results and expressed my manifesto towards retailing architecture as a commercial fulfillment center. In this reflection paper, several highlights during my research and design process will be included, with wider insight into social aspects being discussed in the end.

## **Bricolage -- from IKEA bag to Molenpoort**

The story began with the deconstruction and reconstruction of an IKEA bag, which is an example of extension of what a product used to be by using “bricolage”. Bricolage is a way of thinking, researching and designing. In the story of Robinson Crusoe, he collected all the resources at hand and used the wisdom of bricolage to build his own kingdom on an uninhabited island. Similarly, from the perspective of architect, we build our realm using the existing constructing logic and limited materials, to make something different and new from the old, which seems to be a low-key but efficient way for building renovation of Passage de Molenpoort.

## **Collective research -- beast or beauty**

Date back to 1972, the popularity of the American shopping mall gave birth to de Molenpoort in Nijmegen, the first shopping mall in Europe. Because it is a product of emulation, the Molenpoort did not take root in the city, but isolated from the context and grew savagely in the city center. On the one hand, ignoring the problems and simply protect it as a heritage building make no contribution to the rebirth of “dead mall”. On the other hand, totally replace the Molenpoort with another building will also be a loss for Nijmegen.

During P1, our group (shopping group) conducted a collective investigation and research on the Molenpoort itself, including the history of passage, distribution of shops, customer behaviors and future plan. The huge building takes up a large proportion of the urban block in the city center, and the entrances of which lure customers in for shopping, just like a beast. But as we stepped into it and started to uncover more of its secrets, stories and history, our perception changed drastically: we found there still existing fascinating aspects which make it unique, and the “dead mall” was actually a “sleeping beauty”, waiting for a second life. In the next step, we dived into the position of Molenpoort in the city and the commercial potential in this block.

1. Position: The mapping shows the function distribution of shops on the ground floor. On the Tweede Walstraat there are mostly residential areas, and they hinder the future extension of the commercial atmosphere towards south. For the position of Molenpoort in the city, it is more like a passage instead of shopping mall, because the existing passage direction, which we perceived as the most valuable point, connects the Molenstraat and the Ziekerstraat, and it needs to be preserved.

2. Commercial potential: Based on the interviews to customers, we found that Molenpoort is able to attract not only local residents but people from cities around Nijmegen, though it is not function well. The fall of Molenpoort is the result of incorrect business positioning, uncoordinated architectural planning and outdated retailing mode, instead of total negation of commerciality.

In this case, the concept “reverse of passage” was introduced in our urban proposal and the program included a retailing building and two dwelling buildings between the inner ring and outer ring. Most of the structures were preserved and the

huge volume was transformed into smaller scale with more transitional space for both shopping and living.



## Research and design -- a whole package of goods

At the same time, I conducted my research on retailing architecture. In the process of adapting to the continuous expansion of commerce, the architectural form of the retail industry is also constantly changing forms to reconcile this contradiction. In my opinion, grasping the formation of retail building and space, as well as the contradiction, is the key to guiding the design of retail building and commercial space in Molenpoort, which is also the reason why I chose this topic and this plot (marked in red, for retailing).

The research question is how can retail building and commercial space expand by interacting with the society? The design question is what is the role of shopping in today's tech-driven, social media-focused society? There are four aspects abstracted from collective work, all of which will be aligned to the design process, thus research and design can be a whole package.

### 1. Typology of retailing architecture

The private owner of the Molenpoort is an American investor, and the half-passage half-mall typology is apparently the combination of American shopping mall and European style of shopping. I started the research by looking into the genealogy of retailing typologies in different countries by following a space axis. Each typology originated from its era, conforming to political and economic trends, but limited by construction technology and people's shopping concepts at the same time, which makes the old typologies continually replaced by new ones. Thus I proposed a multifunctional space using combination of fixed walls and movable elements: flexible sliding doors and curtains are introduced here to further divide and control the openness of space. It is able to form a closed shopping place like department store, or form a corridor with shops on both sides like passage, or a central courtyard with shops around. The ambiguity and flexibility not only contribute to the multiplicity of activities and experiences of customers, but also serve as an evocation (bricolage) to several contemporary retailing typologies being converted according to ever-changing demands of customers.

### 2. Distribution and positioning of shop

The purpose of retail spaces is to maximize the satisfaction of people's consumption needs, and the layout of space and circulation depends on the distribution of shops. According to the development of the retailing mode, the layout includes homogeneous commercial clusters with equal small and medium-sized shops or heterogeneous commercial clusters dominated by several magnet stores, the latter of which is similar to the layout in the Molenpoort. It is really a center for the small entrepreneurs from Nijmegen, and these unattractive small shops need big "magnet stores", that is the Coop, Xenos and Big Bazaar which locates in the best hallway of the two passages in the middle. In my proposal, the target groups are still small entrepreneurs and start-ups, but they have more chances to collaborate with young artists and architects to create something different for their experimental brands or products in the innovative center. Besides, the positioning of shops,

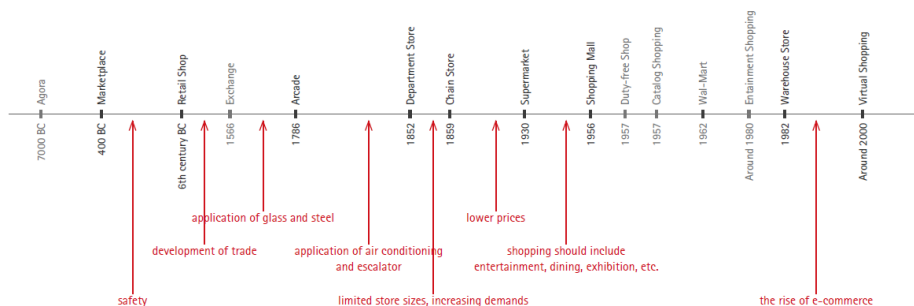
unlike previous ones without interaction, is able to interlock with the innovative function and together contribute to a commercial fulfillment center for interaction, innovative practice and brand engagement. In this case, all the shop owners, working like bricoleurs, are encouraged to re-use and re-create (like how I made the IKEA bag), and the products they made can be exhibited and sold here, which is exactly the idea of bricolage.

### 3. Commercial collective space

With comfortable environment and convenient facilities, public spaces are able to meet not only the needs of customers to walk, rest and communicate, but the needs of retailers to extend their commercial area and carry out promotional activities. Generally, because the information transmission channels in public spaces are unobstructed, the collective commercial space can effectively increase the stay time of potential customers, continuously motivate them to participate in various commercial activities, guide and stimulate their consumption, and attract people to visit again with a good atmosphere. The site has huge commercial potential due to the outdoor and indoor collective spaces, which make the Molenpoort different from other retailing typologies in the Netherlands. The courtyard, roof garden and undefined interior spaces in my proposal, together with the inner ring, the outer ring and the square in our urban design, maximize the opportunities for interaction among people as well as organization of for-profit or non-profit events. Retailers of shops on both rings and near the church garden are allowed to extend the scope of their shops into the urban area, which further respond to the design topic, that is interaction of retail with other social activities in the public realm.

### 4. Future plan: Online retail vs. offline retail

Since the “future plan” by the government may be an unsatisfactory solution to some extent, the new trend for shopping in the foreseeable future is an intangible driving force for the evolution of retailing space. A timeline was drawn to show the evolution of retailing space and the logic behind it. Each time the society, technology, finance and people’s demands change (or evolve), they will contribute to a great leap on the evolutionary process of retailing buildings and spaces. Then the question occurred: what is next for us?



Shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity (Koolhaas), and there is no doubt that virtual shopping is the outcome of modern technology and logistics in this era. Due to the rise of e-commerce and the emergence of unknown disasters (like epidemics), the traditional forms of shopping are constantly being challenged. However, in my opinion, the physical retailing will not be replaced by online retailing in the future; otherwise there will no longer be any physical social activities at all. In this case, the concept of New Retail was introduced in the Commercial Fulfillment Center -- the integration of online, offline, logistics and data across a single value chain. While most of the colleagues chased retailing out of the city and inserted ideal programs into the site, I reinvent retailing and make it return back to the urban realm.

### Social relevance

Zoom out from Nijmegen to all the European cities, retail buildings is one of the most important public facilities in the society, and my graduation work of renovating the “dead mall” will be an attempt and suggestion to the evolution of retail architecture in the future. “We are on the brink of the biggest transformation in retail ever seen”, said Wijnand. It is a fact

that most of the stores are struggling to keep up with the changes to the see-choose-buy behavior of consumers and start offering an online website. We saw the department store of Vroom & Dreesmann (V&D) went bankrupt and ended the rich history of a department store that had branches in many Dutch cities, and probably the same ending for the legend of de Bijenkorf or other retailing buildings. From my point of view, however, this trend does not mean the virtual shopping will take over all the physical shopping.

On the one hand, Richard Sennett, in his book *The Fall of Public Man*, he also talks about rise and fall of people's interacting abilities in the Western public sphere like marketplace. The more primitive and natural the shopping behavior is, the less likely it is to be replaced, because it contains much more than only buying and selling. For example, no matter how efficient online shopping is, it cannot be compared to people's shopping experience in the market (interaction between people and goods; interaction among people; interaction with the natural environment). The more artificial the shopping environment is, the easier it is to be replaced by more advanced and efficient new typology due to the ever-expanding demands of people.

On the other hand, when customers indulged themselves in the virtual world, seduced by all kinds of attractive images, commodities and services, this online illusion on the contrary provokes a desire for authenticity: physical space, real materials, handmade, organic and tactile. Since shopping is becoming a deeply personal experience through all the aspects of the customer journey, the meaning of shopping is the experience of interacting with goods, people and other social activities in the urban realm.

## **Conclusion**

The Architecture track and Urban Architecture Studio allows me to deal with problems on different levels, from city scale to architecture scale. The topic "bricolage" is an attitude and method, thus ideas and theories from different angles of retailing and interdisciplinary fields are bricolaged together, aiming at creating a Commercial Fulfillment Center on the "retailing island". In the coming final phase, I plan to continue research on the materials and building construction, the atmosphere of scenarios, and the drawings for final presentation.