

# The Revitalization of Urban Fabric in Contemporary Public Spaces; A Case of Shopping Spaces



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**Abstract:** Public spaces such as shopping areas are indispensable places for humans. The buying and selling of goods plays a very important role in the development of towns and cities [1]. Shopping places have changed with modern movement. At the same time, these spaces embrace particular events that have collective social, historical and cultural associations; projections of these events influence the physical transformations, which can each be re-identified through time. One of the basic features of traditional shopping areas is the association between urban fabric and social structure [2]. However, contemporary shopping places have emerged as a closed box, independent from the texture of its city losing their spatial values. Therefore, especially in historical cities, the unity of ‘urban fabric-shopping place’ is impaired. The “space- time” relation in modernity shifts due to societies breaking ties with their traditions, which is leading to the loss of identity [3]. This study discusses the space design of contemporary shopping areas as important public city places and the interpretation of traditional impression in today’s modern architecture to refer to values of place. With this aim, “Mediacite” shopping center in Belgium designed by Ron Arad and the eastern covered bazaar will be examined as a case study. The “Mediacite” was created in the context of modern design criteria however the architect has revived the sense of traditional design principles in the place. This project ties together all the disparate elements of its site to create a new axis through the city of Liege [4].

**Keywords:** Urban fabric, public space, shopping place, contemporary, traditional

## Kentsel Dokunun Çağdaş Kamusal Alanlarla Canlandırılması; Alışveriş Mekanlarının Konusu Üzerine

**Öz:** Alışveriş alanları gibi kamusal alanlar insan için vazgeçilmez yerlerdir. Kasaba ve şehirlerin gelişiminde alım ve satım, çok önemli bir rol oynamıştır [1]. Modern hareketi ile beraber alışveriş mekanları da değişmiştir. Aynı zamanda, bu alanlar, toplumsal, tarihi ve kültürel olayları kucaklamaktadır; Bu olaylar, fiziksel dönüşümleri etkileyerek zaman içerisinde yeniden tanımlanabilmektedir. Geleneksel alışveriş alanlarının temel özelliklerinden biri, kentin sosyal yapısı ve dokusunu ilişkilendirmektir [2]. Ancak çağdaş alışveriş alanları, mekânsal değerlerini yitirerek kent dokusundan bağımsız olan kapalı kutu gibi ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu nedenle, özellikle tarihi şehirlerde “kentsel doku-alışveriş mekan” nın birliği ve ilişkisi bozulmuştur. Modernite ile beraber “zaman-mekan” ilişkisi toplumların geleneklerle olan bağlarının kopması ve kimliğin kaybolmasıyla, değişmiştir [3]. Bu çalışmada, çağdaş alışveriş alanlarının mekansal tasarımı, önemli kentsel kamusal alanlar olarak ve günümüz çağdaş mimarisindeki geleneksel izlenimlerin nasıl yer aldığı sorgulanarak, değerlendirilecektir. Bu amaçla, Mimar Ron Arad tarafından tasarlanan Belçika'daki “Mediacite” çağdaş alışveriş merkezi ve geleneksel doğu alışveriş yerleri olan kaplı çarşı örnekleri incelenecektir. “Mediacite”, modern tasarım kriterleri bağlamında tasarlanmış olsa da, geleneksel tasarım ilkeleri ve izlenimlerini taşımaktadır. Bu proje, Liege kentinde yeni bir eksen yaratarak, şehrin farklı elemanlarını birbiri ile ilişkilendirmiştir[4].

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Kentsel doku, kamusal alan, alışveriş mekanı, çağdaş, geleneksel

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

As Vitruvius mentioned in 15 century B.C. “the discovery of fire is the main reason why people come together and live with each other”. The light and heat of fire have been the main reason and the first step of social exchange and living together. According to the statements of Vitruvius, since the beginning of the Ancient Greek and Roman Architecture up to present, the key role of fire forms the concept and design of public places such as commercial areas where people come together [5].

In the traditional definition the city is defined as the center of social life; significant both for the number of the inhabitants and for the ability to deliver multiple economic, political and cultural functions. Today, the city means the urban space where most of the population lives following the ongoing rhythms and dynamics: the city is the culture that must be constantly nourished and renewed and with it our civilization, it is a place of communication [6].

Urban public spaces have been the critical sites of cultural, social, political, and economic life since the early civilizations until the present day. The form and function of these spaces have varied dramatically, based on particular cultural, social and technological arrangements and requirements, yet retaining a host of similar features [7]. This study aims to analyze traditional architecture impression on contemporary design in the manner of shopping places. The changes and transformations of these places as public spaces will be discussed in terms of form and function.

The introduction of new spatial structures into the historical urban complexes and their skillful integration with the historical context as well as the adaptation of existing buildings that have historical significance are important issues in today’s urban planning and modern architecture [8]. Detecting the various expressive components as clear representations of a unique cultural orientation that capture a historical moment, is what makes up the culture of a city [6].

This study evaluates the architecture of contemporary shopping areas and the ways of integrating them with historical environments. From this point of view, “Mediacite” shopping center, as an example of contemporary design, is untied with the historic fabric of Liege city. As Gambassi [6] mentioned in the sense that everything flows and changes, preservation is transformation and mutation: storage is also mutation, launching a project phase that is responsible and aware of cultural identity. So there is no conservation without innovation. The study is going to analyze the different approaches of modern architecture when it faces the historical cities. Commercial buildings have been constructed in different types, scale and application form for their purposes throughout the history. With today’s vital physical changing and development, the differences of architectural identity should be discussed.

## **2. SHOPPING PLACES AS PUBLIC SPACES**

The definition of public space is closely related with the meaning of its “public” component and the space’s relation with the public realm, the domain of social life. As these descriptions differ, so do the meaning, role and form of public spaces due to different socio-cultural structures of societies., Despite the differences across societies, it can be said that throughout history in all societies the public spaces have enabled some basic activities such as exchanging information, demanding personal and political rights, and carrying out social conduct; i.e., the formation and continuation of social groups [9]. Due to the required balance between the public and private activities that present the values of societies to some extent, each culture places different emphasis on public life. This diversity of public life appear in different kinds of public spaces among societies based on their historical, cultural and social identities. Since the balance between public and private activities is a shifting one, the value that is put on public space also evolves and changes throughout the history and is determined through physical, social, political and economic factors [9, 10].

Smithsimon (2000) defines public spaces as the centers of social life where people are provided with the possibility of interacting with each other, learning and identifying the society they live in through their daily conventions. This conception also incorporates privately owned spaces like shopping centers and retails besides publicly owned spaces like public parks and streets. As Carr et al. [9] define, shopping places are not only retail environments; they are also a type of public space that mostly aims to satisfy “needs in public space”.

The history of public spaces begins with Greek agora and continues with Roman forum. Greek’s agora, usually located in the center of the polis and the focal point of the town, both functioned as a market place and the gathering place for political assembly. In other words, it had both an economic and political importance [9, 11]. It also served as the meeting place of citizens for daily communication and formal and informal assembly. Historical narratives often abruptly jump from these classical settings to the medieval Europe where plazas and public squares were the main places for public life with the important buildings in which people gathered, made public celebrations and performed plays during the Middle Ages and Renaissance [9]. The shopping streets and marketplaces with their central location, which remarkably grew since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, were the crucial public spaces of the medieval times. In medieval cities, a great part of the business life was also taking place in the narrow, open streets of the city. The street was the work place, the place of buying and selling, meeting and negotiating and the place where religious and civic ceremonies were held [12].

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the rise of bourgeoisie, the shopping streets developed in Europe [13]. Just before the Industrial Revolution, the market places in cities were no longer spatially sufficient for the evolving trade. As a result, starting from Italy in 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in northern Europe in 17<sup>th</sup> century, the central streets of cities were lined with shops, pubs and coffee shops, where the shops were organized according to their types [14]. Besides the growth of new public spaces for leisure and public entertainment in 18<sup>th</sup> century, 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked with the emergence of new consumption places that also serve as important public spaces like the shopping arcade, passages, shopping street, bazaar and department store [15].

Since the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the globalization with the increasing use of technology in the design of several spaces forms, usages, characteristics and definitions of shopping places have been changed dramatically. The blurry boundary between public and private, especially in the economic sphere, has led to the popular emergence of semi-public spaces such as shopping malls as public spaces which are well-maintained, attractive and secure for most [16]. The activities that were once taking place in public spaces such as streets and squares, now are shifting towards to take place in closed spaces like shopping centers. The increasing use of closed shopping areas as gathering places and social life centers which are isolated from the rest of the urban fabric can be seen in the developed communities [17, 18]. The integration of urban fabric and the modern shopping centers as enclosed public spaces is crucial for the quality of the city urbanity. The characteristics of the contemporary public spaces affect the identity of historical cities and urban fabrics.

### **3. HISTORIC URBAN FABRIC AND PUBLIC SPACES**

The city is never finished: it is actually a continuous spatial activity. The “culture of the city” is the identification of the various units of expression as obvious and sensible representations of a specific cultural orientation that characterizes a historic moment [6]. According to Topçu [19], the identity of a city depends on the identity elements resulting from different factors such as the city’s history, cultural values, architecture, social and economic structure, topography, climate, region i.e. being an easterner or a westerner city and openness to other cultures and so on.

According to Kostof (1999), the urban fabric consists of an urban society, the inhabitants of the area, individual/civil housing units, street patterns or street networks, monumental buildings and public spaces, such as squares, parks commercial areas or open spaces. The components of any city exude a definite sense of place and identity that form the urban fabric.

As Özaslan [21] defines, there is a need for understanding the true architectural values, background and inherent qualities of a historic urban fabric in order to avoid both possible imitations of past forms and further destruction and to achieve a functional, meaningful and identifiable contemporary design.

During the last century, the unprecedented development of the urban environment has strongly influenced the urban transformation. Rapid urban expansion, densification, inappropriate modern interventions, gentrification, and changes in uses are occurring worldwide, directly affecting the historic urban environments [22].

Auge's [23] definition of "absent-space or non-space" gives a clear account of the following facts; first, the transformation of urban space, and the loss of social, cultural and historic characteristics of urban fabric that is re-constructed within buildings. According to Auge, a contemporary shopping center is a building within which non- place or non-space is defined just as the other building types of modern city. The senses of place and space, which contributes to the formation of collective memory, seem to disappear in shopping spaces that are designed to replace public spaces in the new cities of modernity.

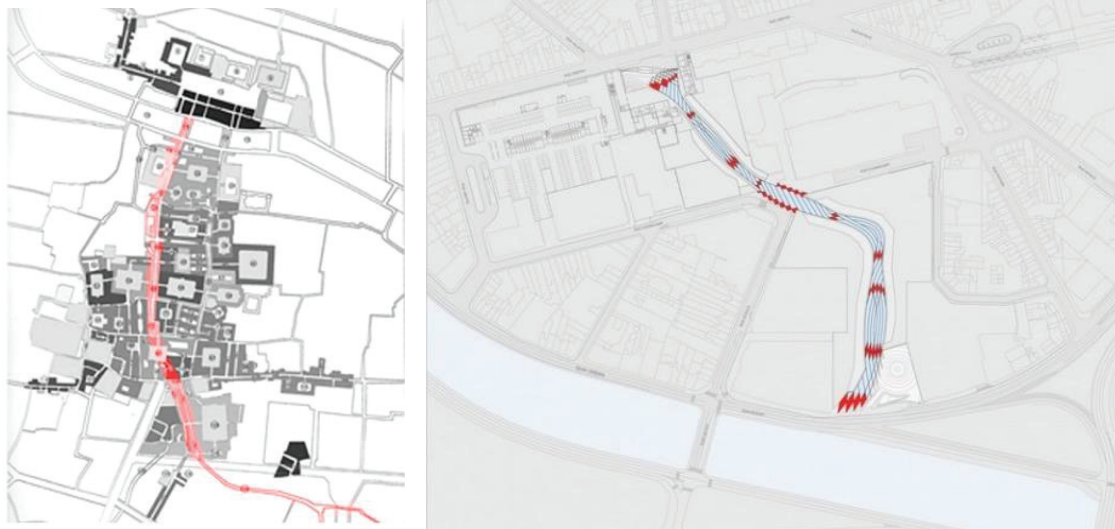
#### **4. THE MODERN ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT "MEDIACITE" IN THE OLD CITY OF LIEGE**

In the modern era, the functional integration of the ancient city has almost completely disappeared. The technological innovation and the use of new transport and communication technologies that followed the Industrial Revolution have caused a fragmentation of the city, undermining its public spaces [24]. Urban areas and public places evolve and change according to the needs of their inhabitants. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to determine the role of contemporary architecture in contributing to this change in ways that preserve the special character and quality of the historic environment and combine the two [25].

As it was mentioned previously, shopping malls are accepted as urban public spaces because of their urban public space qualities. Although they are private properties, as Gruen and Smith [26] claim modern shopping places become the centers for urban regeneration projects in the world and "multi-purpose town centers". The integration between urban fabric and traditional shopping areas (such as bazaars, arcades, passages and etc.), in both east and west architecture, could be seen clearly as one of the crucial criteria of design. As architect Ekinici [27] criticizes, contemporary shopping centers are settled as mono block boxes independent of their environment and disintegrate the urban fabric. This situation could cause loss of identity and cultural values in the city particularly in the historic urban fabrics.

In this context, the eastern bazaar does not present itself as an enclosed, box- like building object but rather as a land-like, topographical and fabric articulation. Bazaar persists through time and retains its historical and cultural values in the contemporary world as it is not only "formed" but also "formative" [28]. In order to clarify our argument, "Mediacite", an example of modern shopping center in Belgium and an "eastern covered bazaar" as an example of the traditional shopping places will be compared in what follows in terms of design features and integration with the urban environment (Figure 1). Mediacite exemplifies a model for how the qualities of a traditional bazaar become a reference for the formation of an alternative modernity in a historic city.

Linguistically, the term used for Bazaar, originates from the Persian word, *chihar/char*, which means *four*. This word, as it is used in the original Persian form, *Char-Su*, does not signify any trading place; it simply means *four sides*. In eastern culture *four* suggests the intersection of four directions, which can be (socially) interpreted as meeting or coming together around a meeting point. The architectural embodiment of this concept gave the shopping place its overall shape. In fact, the bazaar can be considered as a complex which is constructed by the interconnection of meeting venues through a street-like pathway (or in some cases it can be an alley or a passage). The organic structure of bazaar causes the topographic extension and integrates with the urban fabric [29].



*Figure 1. Schematic plan of Tabriz Bazaar in the left and Mediacite shopping center in the right. The circulation and connective axes in the middle are descriptive common elements [30] (www.archdaily.com).*

Mediacite Shopping Center was constructed at one of the oldest districts of Liege, named Longdoz (Figure 2). The construction of *Gare de Longdoz*, Longdoz Train Station, in 1851 converted this agricultural place to an industrial one. Due to the train station, several factories settled around the area and this accelerated the development of the region. The train station improved the area not only on an industrial level, but also on a social level leading to the opening of shops, cafes, hotels and transportation companies, which all made the region a popular place. However, in the late 60's the region lost its popularity and vivid life as factories and other industrial centers closed, which also led to the closure of Longdoz Train Station as a natural consequence. Liege, one of the world's foremost centers of steel production was since in an economic decline and the contemporary design of Israeli architect Ron Arad, the Mediacite Shopping Center stands as a symbol of the city's revitalization in 2009 today [29].



*Figure 2. The topographic extension of Mediacite shopping center in Liege, Belgium  
(<http://www.ronarad.co.uk>)*

Mediacite is an outstanding contemporary shopping design because of its most obvious features. This building is the first BREEAM certified retail center in Europe. The Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method, or BREEAM for short, sets the standard for best practice in sustainable building design, construction and operation and has become one of the most comprehensive and widely recognized measures of a building's environmental performance. Médiacité meets all of the BREEAM criteria for sustainable development. This ecological building, accommodates economic, retail, cultural and leisure activities in the same place [29].

According to Leatherbarrow [28], fluidity is the fundamental element that leads to a topographic formation. The feature of connectivity encourages the interaction of inside and outside spaces as well as inside and outside communities. As in the case of the bazaar, connectivity and fluidity are the key elements for Mediacite, which has caused it to be developed in a land-like form. Arad describes the building in various ways such as a “river”, “snake”, “souk” – even a “commercial favela”, but just as Calatrava has built a 21st-century railway shed, Arad's structure is a 21st-century descendant of the roofs that bridged old Europe's shopping arcades and eastern bazaars [31]. The mall snakes through the fabric of the refurbished old market at one end extending a total of 350 meters long to connect to the new Belgian national television center at the other.

A new urban axis has been taking shape in the Southern Belgian city of Liège, starting at the Santiago Calatrava designed train station, via a pedestrian bridge, and up until a shopping and audio-visual center designed by Ron Arad. Two entrances of Mediacite Shopping Mall are the starting and ending points of the main axis of the transparent tunnel construction (Fig. 3). The different forms and lighting of these two entrances are the indication of specific binding of two culturally different points of the city together. The first entry in the intersection point of the structure and at the heart of the city in an outdoor form while the other entrance reaches the sea side as if the city was designed to be covered.



Figure 3. Two entrances of Mediacite shopping center from city center and river Muse side (<http://www.ronarad.co.uk>)

The crucial point in the design of the entire structure could be called a transparent tunnel construction located as a street bazaar in the middle axis. This tunnel is 350 meters long, starting from the center of the old market town lying along the urban while the other end is connected to the new building of the Belgium national television. The enlarged spots along this tunnel, which undertakes the role of a main axis, has created gathering and meeting areas like four sides of traditional bazaar (Figure 4).

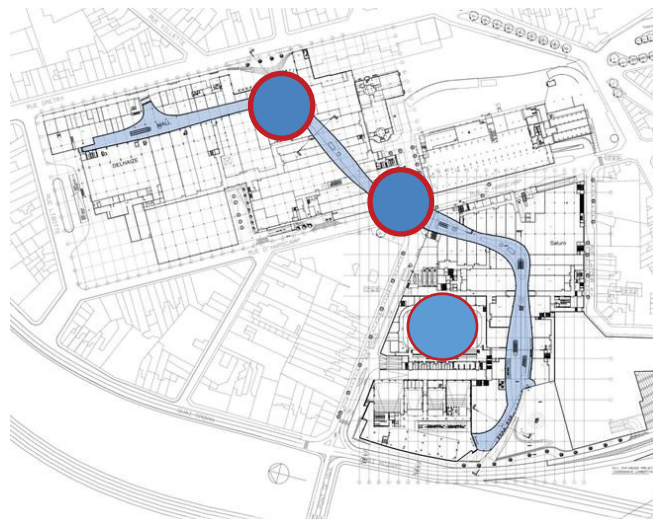
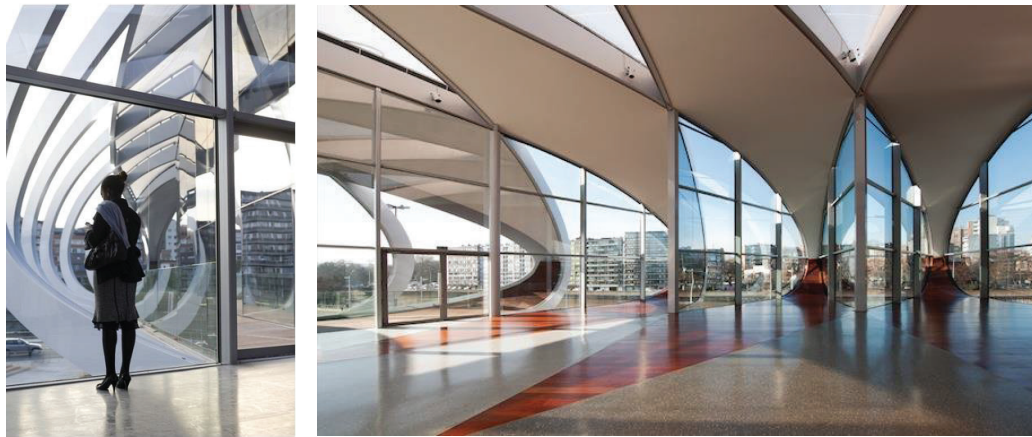


Figure 4. Meeting points along the main axis of Mediacite (<http://www.archdaily.com>).

The building form and shape of the structure has managed to become a part of the city fabric and has nested inside urban development. This feature quite clearly shows itself in the interior spaces. Transparent materials and natural lighting has provided indoor-outdoor connection enabling the visitor to feel the urban fabric of the city and watch the views inside at the same time (Figure 5).



*Figure 5. The relation between inside and outdoor in Mediacite Shopping Mall  
(<http://www.archdaily.com>)*

The atrium of Mediacite Shopping Center that connects two different spatial points of the city is a long thin axis. This axis, which is designed in the form of a “tunnel”, is roofed with a material of which the color and transparency has been successful in reviving the central areas of the social space. Ron Arad, preferred red material, to create a sense of movement and vivacity on the users of the space. The artificial red material used in the structure and texture has also caused movement and vitality in the city. This material composed a sense of contradict with the calm texture of the city while being a part of it. The design of the roof bonds with these elements through a network of steel ribs which undulate over the cores of the mall’s length, sculpts the volume of the commercial space below. Mirrored into the floor pattern, it draws a curved pathway which pulls one through each of the zones, revealing diverse vistas along the way (Figure 6). As it exits the volume of the main building – at two piazzas linking the old market and the new mall – this overhead ribbed structure wraps downward, merging into the facade to close the envelope [29].



*Figure 6. Interior space of Mediacite atrium (Personal Archive).*



## 5. CONCLUSION

This study attempts to reveal some principles which could help us deal with the question of creating a more responsive alternative modernity and at the same time a more negotiable ground between tradition and modernity in a historic city. Mediacity could be considered as a model which demonstrates an alternative approach to contemporary shopping architecture in a historic urban fabric.

Cities which have lost their old populace, could regain the former prestige of urban fabric with contemporary designs. However, instead of producing *timeless* and *non-place* designs like today's box-shaped enclosed shopping centers, these places should be a part of the urban fabric and unity as an enduring negotiation between historical background and present. Within this framework, the eastern traditional bazaar has kept its existence for centuries as a connective and continuous ground between past and future. Arad's attribution to the bazaar with respect to his modern design Mediacity can be interpreted from this aspect. Likewise, the concern of Arad in the topographical approach is to construct a more flexible ground for the negotiation of what is existing and what is new.

Mediacity, along with the new *Gare des Guillemins* (train station) by Santiago Calatrava and the opening of Grand Curtius – a mega museum housing gems from the heritage collections of Liege – in 2009, are all drivers for economic redeployment and cultural-social regeneration within the Liege city.

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