

PASSAGES

Transitional spaces for the 21st-century city

Marcel SMETS, Chairman of the IVM scientific and steering committee

Early Passages

From the earliest days, passages have helped human beings to cross barriers. They took the form of valleys and gorges, carved out by watercourses that created openings through and into the heart of mountain ranges. They formed naturally in places where retreating riverbanks or changing land conditions created fords that human beings and animals could cross. Elsewhere, natural crossings or tracks could be improved by building makeshift bridges to span chasms at their narrowest points.



Primitive passages, crossing barriers

The common feature of this kind of early passage was to create a shortcut. By following the passage, people could avoid long detours imposed by land formations, rivers or soil characteristics. They could shorten their journeys by incorporating a route that could only be used with an understanding of their specific characteristics and customs. Using a passage therefore required familiarity with its position and direction, the capacity to handle weather conditions, to defend against theft and attack, to cross stretches of potential danger. Although it might be accessible to everyone, its use was largely confined to those ready to risk the venture, in the knowledge of the rules. That is why, in general, “guides” (*passseurs*) were needed to cross mountains or navigate seas. Indeed, early passages usually belonged to no one. They were part of the “no man’s land” between two countries,

for the very good reason that national borders generally coincided with natural boundaries. Because of their informal nature (by contrast with the regular border crossing), passages were not subject to the police or the laws of the countries in question. They had a separate status: in principle open to all, but governed by rules imposed by the users.

Linked to this idea of evading boundaries is the transitional nature of the passage. Originally, this related to the change from one set of standards on one side of the barrier to another set on the other side. In cases where the natural barriers overcome by the passage correspond to the boundary between territories with specific rules, the passage expresses the sudden change from one state or social system to another. The passage thus resembles a journey in a capsule, i.e. a form of transport that creates a sensation of a separate world – a boat, a plane, a motorway – which brings one to a different universe. The resulting transition is then symbolized by the passage's entry and exit points, which constitute the starting point and destination of the crossing.

This idea of the natural passage as a way past an obstacle is paralleled in traditional urban structures. For example, mediaeval bridges, often erected between mud banks in a river, in order to shorten their span. Or passages created within urban blocks by the formation of a communal path at the end of gardens (in *bastides*), or by the longitudinal connection between houses laid out around a shared internal courtyard (in the traditional typology of the Chinese *do long* or the *traboules* of old Lyon). All these applications reinforce the idea of the shortcut. They construct an environment whose status is determined by the habits of their users: the extramural supply route in the case of the bridge, the communal private domain in the case of garden-end paths or transversal walkways. The transitional element, already apparent in the differentiation between the informal route within the city block and the formal order of the street, is strongly marked in the case of the bridge, where it expresses the allegorical distinction between left and right bank, between the original town and the town “beyond the river”.

These notions of the shortcut, a transition between different milieus or atmospheres, and of a public domain primarily reserved for regular passers-by, are essential in distinguishing passages from other kinds of pedestrian space which seem similar in form. It is true that in the history of cities we find the development of corridors that define specific parts of the street, but these are not passages. One example is the “galleries” formed by the alignment of contiguous overhanging rows of first-floor apartments, archetypal in the formation of the streets of old Bologna or the “porticoed” squares of *bastide* towns. In Great Britain, “arcades” have a similar origin, although they are generally elevated relative to the street. The aim of these “covered passages” is to separate pedestrians and vehicles, to provide protection from heat and rain, and to exploit these advantages to attract shoppers. Nevertheless, these “galleries” or “arcades” are in reality simply a particular type of “street”, in which separate sections are set aside for pedestrians and vehicles, but they in no way fulfil the distinctive criteria that identify a passage. A similar observation can be made regarding “souks” or “bazaars”, which generally take the form of overlapping covered sections of a few main streets, whose roofs provide shelter for market stalls.



Primitive passages

Modern Passages

The typology of the commercial “passage” usually referred to in modern usage dates from the late 18th/early 19th century. It was the culmination of the speculative process on which the development of the industrial city was based. Initially, the new urban structure reproduced the layout of the former agricultural plots, which often gave rise to unevenly shaped and excessively large blocks. In the quest to improve land yields, inserting a “passage” increased general density by urbanizing the interior of these overlarge blocks. To achieve this, facing streets were linked by a pedestrian path running through the block – generally in the form of a roofed glass corridor at ground level lined with shops, bars, restaurants and even cabarets, with offices and apartments on the upper floors. The prestige and size of the passage, the range and quality of the shops, the social status of the residences and establishments, varied depending on the appeal of the neighborhood, the available space and the level of investment, but its form and appearance remained recognizable and it constituted a specific urban typology, explored by Walter Benjamin,¹ frequented by the surrealists and other artistic movements and inventoried by J.F. Geist² and other architectural historians.

¹ Walter Benjamin: *Das Passagen-Werk*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1982 - (French edition: Walter Benjamin: *Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle. Le livre des Passages*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 1989)

² J.F. Geist: *Passagen, ein Bautyp des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Prestel Verlag, München, 1969 - (English edition: J.F.Geist: *Arcades: The History of a Building Type*, MIT press, 1985).



Modern passage, a new typology based on a speculative process

The success of the passage in the modern city has a number of explanations. Apart from the land use benefits, passages through city blocks also created an alternative to the urban space of the boulevard. In terms of traffic, these cuts-through established an obvious hierarchy, by opening up pedestrian routes within the primary street network. In terms of urban functions, the passage brought greater diversity of shops, homes and services, by creating uses specific to the new networks. So, for example, the shops or cafes in the arcade were distinct in kind from the stores and brasseries along the boulevard, whereas housing above the passage united the quietness of inner courtyards with immediate proximity to the city center. And finally, in terms of social life, the passage became a world apart, less controlled by the standards and routines of the busy public sphere. It could be used for less legitimate activities, in particular because of its direct vicinity to the socially regulated space of the surrounding boulevard. The bourgeois could visit the cabarets in quest of clandestine experiences, and then easily rejoin the adjacent streets without arousing suspicion.

These different reasons for their success in fact reflect the features outlined above as inherent to early passages. The interior passages interwoven into the shared street network form a network of successive shortcuts that city dwellers can use to move rapidly to their final destination. At the same time, the difference between street and passage generates a transitional effect each time one leaves the street to move into the covered inner gallery, where the traffic consists of individual strollers, where street sounds are muted and the atmosphere quiets to the mutter of window shoppers interrupted by the sudden clamor of a hidden bar. Often, this transition is marked by a threshold, a more impressive entry building or a well-placed street corner facade or shop window. In addition, the

passage in the industrial city is clearly public. It is freely accessible to all at any time of day. However, the way it is used becomes spontaneously codified depending on the functions it performs. So, passages often tend to become specialized, offering a range of comparable and mutually enriching uses. For this reason, they often attract an informed public, drawn by the shops or amenities provided. In addition, the types of people who frequent them often change throughout the day, as one or other store or attraction opens.

Unlike early passages, there is nothing natural about the modern passage. They are not the result of fortuitous or spontaneous events, a route through a difficult landscape. On the contrary, they have all been designed and developed by architects working for property developers. In this respect, the world apart they represent is the result of a complex and unique conception, which combines several layers of activity within a single environment and thereby creates a variable and transitory world in an identified and recognizable space. This wealth of experiences and sensations adds to the density of the existing urban fabric. Yet it is the result of a single, comprehensible and legible act, entirely feasible and appropriately calibrated in time. A small-scale and essentially modest intervention, whose impact on the quality of its urban surroundings should nevertheless not be underestimated.

Technocratic passages

These are the large infrastructures that supported the growth of activity in the industrial city. They served transport, public health, communal life. Within the framework of our discussion, however, they also underpinned the development of another type of passage, designed to cross the barriers generated by these different structures. Initially, the latter were primarily railways, docks and canals which, grafted onto the network of tracks and streets, fragmented the urban fabric. Then appeared the big trunk roads, urban transport systems, gas storage facilities and other impenetrable installations. Then, when the growth of the car required an effective and autonomous traffic system, expressways penetrated the city, along with beltways, intersections and orbital roads in cases where the choice was made to channel through-traffic to the periphery and outskirts. And finally, today, BRTs and other dedicated public transport lanes are sometimes carved into dense neighborhoods in such a way that they resemble a rift or an impediment more than a key amenity.

Each time, local people were faced with the problem of crossing these barriers erected to serve trans-local interests. The result was a conflict between infrastructures with different hierarchies, built and managed to serve different purposes: street level urban planning by local authorities and professionals, as against infrastructural development conceived by a sectorial administration supported by a body of specialist technicians. For the latter, the problem of the passage is not the coexistence between structures, but liability in the event of conflict. Instead of seeking to integrate the new structure into an existing situation, the primary concern is therefore to avoid accidents. Passages are thus designed to cross the large infrastructure without impairing its operation, running below or above, at sufficiently frequent intervals to ensure that the detours required are not so long that local users risk venturing onto the track.

The method of meeting this objective has changed over time. Before World War I, we can see that railway lines and canals tended to adopt large-scale adjuncts on their arrival within the walls of the established city. Railway lines often ran on viaducts, whether imposing and massive brick or stone arched structures or slim and refined transparent filigrees of cast iron or steel. These became landmarks on the sections of the boulevards where they ran. The openings in their embankments often coincide with the urban fabric around them, reflected in the continuity of the transverse streets. The location of the “passages” is logical, even if they often resemble black holes, with no natural lighting in the center and no activity along the way. This tunnel effect grew worse with the functionalist period. The crisis of the 1930s and the exponential growth in development in the post-war period prompted constructors to avoid the costs associated with strict vertical separation. As a result, passages became restricted to an underground tunnel or elevated bridge, usually located at a few, sparse strategic spots.

Everywhere in the world, experience has shown that these technocratic passages achieve exactly the opposite of their intended purpose. Except in cases where their use is the only possible way to move a large number of customers – for example in the case of a connection between two subway lines, and provided that this connection is secure, well lit, regularly cleaned and kept up-to-date with advertising hoardings – we find that their supposed beneficiaries invariably refuse to use them. This lack of use generally leads to neglect. Once they become abandoned, even for particular parts of the day, undesirable activities move in. Because of lack of monitoring, they become perfect places for waste disposal, graffiti, improvised toilets, the homeless. A spiral of decline begins, potentially ending rapidly in nightmare. In particular, there is the fear of being molested – especially amongst women and children – which prompts the most vulnerable to stay at home or venture onto the main road and risk their lives by refusing to use the safe crossing.



Technocratic passage: an obligation more than a choice

It is clear that, when this happens, the crucial features of both early and modern passages are lost or take on an entirely different meaning. Because infrastructural barriers generally mark boundaries, the passage is likely to transport one into a different type of neighborhood. However, being devoid of landmarks, the blind walls of the tunnel (or the continuous view of passing cars from the bridge) eliminate the sense of transition. At the other end, the impression of sudden contrast prevails over the slow adjustment usually wrought by changing vistas during a journey. The lack of activities conducted within the passage gives makes it a “wasteland”, a space with which nobody identifies. Paradoxically, this indeterminacy arising from the lack of clear ownership reduces the public character of the space. Indeed, it lends itself to occupancy by people and uses that are not accepted elsewhere. They impose social practices that inspire fear and prompt passers-by to find alternative routes. The aforementioned “world apart” here takes on an extreme character, because it limits the use of the passage to those who have taken up residence, and thereby eradicate the essential nature of the passage. Instead of expressing a choice inspired by the shortcut it offers, the technocratic passage is used under duress, only because however long the detour required to access it or however arduous the climb, at least it removes the danger from road traffic.

The passages of today: increasing the attraction

This clear rejection of the technocratic passage, epitomized by graffiti, stink or the pileup of garbage, is prompting a movement of restoration. Clearly, however, the powers-that-be are confusing cause and effect. They imagine that it is the accumulation of squalor that prevents people using the passage, so try to improve the situation by cleaning and painting. Without fundamentally changing the physical form of the tunnel or bridge, they aspire to improve the experience of users by correcting its lighting, safety and image.

There are numerous examples of this type of initiative. In the case of underground passages, they run from artistic competitions to decorate the internal walls to experimental light shows to generate a different experience. Frequently, such interventions – perhaps combined with the installation of illuminated advertisements – are nothing more than window dressing. By contrast, initiatives that genuinely alter public perceptions are those where the aim is more than embellishment. Successful changes of this kind exploit the fundamental nature of passage walls, i.e. the fact that they are seen by a throng of passers-by. Instead of regarding these blind walls as a fault to be covered up by decoration, they recognize their potential as a large exhibition space and play on the profoundly public aspect of the passage. Good examples of these are the frescoes covering the walls of the moving sidewalk in Montparnasse Bienvenue Metro station in Paris, the poster museum embellishing the down ramp to the tram station under the Spui at The Hague, the exhibition of local artists in the subway at Bethesda, Massachusetts in the US. We find the same idea in the “utilitarian” artistic concept created by Tesco in Philadelphia, where passers-by can use their smart phones to scan the photos of products displayed all over the subway walls, and have them delivered to a chosen location.



Underground in Philadelphia, USA (Tesco)

The most extreme example of this approach is when the whole tunnel is transformed into a sensory experience. Once again, these sound or light installations exploit the darkness of underground passages: the idea is that it is better to use the need for artificial lighting as a source of pleasure rather than anxiety, i.e. to create a fantasy world, like the world of the cinema, rather than perpetuating the dark and poorly lit atmosphere of the alleyway. This optical illusion can take two types of form: either the stable image that remains in the spectator's mind, or the changing picture that generates surprise. The first approach is exemplified by the vision of contained space that James Turrell projects in the underground passage linking the Houston Museum of Modern Art in Texas to its extension, by illuminating the ceiling and floor, and the lateral walls, with contrasting colors. For its part, the shifting picture concepts can employ changes in either time or space. The former offers a succession of sensations from one relatively homogeneous image to another, equally recognizable, visual frame. This is the idea of the magical installation in the Bund foot tunnel under the Huangpu in Shanghai, where the optical effects are linked in time. The other concept, of change linked to progress in space, generates a cumulative sensory impression from the sum of impulses experienced throughout the journey. The installation designed by Skertzo, Disonic, which playfully transforms the security gallery of the Croix-Rousse road tunnel in Lyon into a pedestrian passage and public transport route, is a good example of how this can be done.



Security gallery of the Croix-Rousse road tunnel in Lyon, France (Skertzo, Disonic)

Embellishment is also a popular way of enhancing the acceptability of elevated technocratic passages. Here, the idea is that improving appearance will increase use. This form of architectural determinism often results in the production of attractive objects, but does not always achieve the desired end of remedying the weaknesses of technocratic models. A typical example of this approach is the trellised tube or beam accessible by staircases on both (or various) sides of the barrier structure. This kind of solution is a way to introduce daylight and open up views, but remains detached from the ground and thereby breaks up the continuity of the route. Notable examples are the footbridge over the inner ring road in Paris at Evry (arch. DVVD), over the railway lines at La Roche-sur Yon (Bernard Tschumi, Hugh Dutton Associés, architects), or at Shengzuen and other secure footbridge crossings in China. By contrast, the footbridge designed by Oscar Niemeyer to span the urban expressway and connect the Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro to the Gavea sports facilities, manages to incorporate the ascent up to platform level into the general form of the composition by a series of sloping pathways that make the elongated ramps part of the fluid lines of the total structure.



Footbridge over the inner ring road in Evry, France (DVV)

The passages of today: showcasing to revive a neglected route

In other cases, the attempt to intensify use goes beyond embellishment alone. The intervention is not confined to decoration, visual transformation or the appeal of an innovative aesthetic, but seeks to change the appearance of the structure with which the passage or passages are associated by inserting reassuring or innovative features. The purpose of these measures is to change the social practice of the space in question by incorporating new uses, or to modify the perception of the place by infiltrating appealing interstices.

A typical instance of the first process is to introduce shops into unattractive and joyless passages. We see this approach everywhere in the world, but especially in North America and Asia, where it often takes the form of underground or elevated connections between skyscrapers in the central business districts. Originally designed to protect pedestrians from car traffic, these passages gradually developed into an alternative network, a genuine public space in the urban basement. These collective spaces, private but open to monitored public use, mostly tend to be dull and uninteresting, attracting too little use to justify the cost of their construction. Prompted by the desire to increase their efficiency, the owners of buildings linked by these passages sign agreements with chain stores to install branches in the empty corners of these galleries.

Once again, we find the confusion between cause and effect. From current economic perspectives, stores or customer services are installed where it is thought they will be able to exploit the window shopping generated by the intrinsic large-scale movement of passers-by. This is true of the “commuter tubes” found in large stations or intermodal hubs, where traffic is generated by the

movement of people arriving from one major point of origin and departing towards a major destination. Here, trade benefits from the natural traffic and freedom of access characteristic of real public space. This is exactly the opposite of the “forced” presence of chain stores in the networks of privatized underground or elevated links in the heart of high-density metropolises. When shops and, in particular, cafes are introduced in these spaces in order to attract passers-by, the functional failure is made very apparent by their emptiness, except at mealtimes when fast food chains fulfil the needs no longer met by office cafeterias. The attempt to reproduce the familiar and reassuring appeal of the “mall” results in no more than a purposeless and soulless imitation, except at peak times.



Network of underground passages linking skyscrapers with shops and fast food chains

The other process, that of showcasing the passage as an object of beauty in the urban panorama and identifying a particular section of a longer route by means of this captivating structure, originates in the persistent pursuit of “design” in infrastructure. It is particularly common in places where feats of engineering are needed to span differences in levels or surmount obstacles. An example of this is the vertiginous structure of the urban elevator in Pamplona (Echavacoiz Norte by AH Asociados) or the footbridge that floats above the valley in Covilha in Portugal (Carhillo da Graça Arquitectos). However, this attempt to use iconic objects – such as a distinctive footbridge over a road or river – to identify an entire urban itinerary, also seems to be a preferred remedy even in operations where no such engineering feat is required.



Footbridge above the valley, Covilha in Portugal, (Carhillo da Graça Arquitecto)

Various examples come to mind: the bowstring bridge over the River Humber in Toronto commemorating the presence of native peoples (Montgomery Sisam Architects), which extends the walking and cycling path along Lake Ontario; the Millennium footbridge over the Thames in London designed by Foster Associates, linking the St Paul's Cathedral district with the South Bank (notably the section housing the Globe Theatre and Tate Modern Museum) and forming part of a more extensive walking route across the city; the Arganzuela footbridge in Madrid designed by Dominique Perrault, which constitutes the central element of a walk linking the two banks of the Manzanares and dominates the whole riverside Park with its imposing appearance.

This concept, which seeks to enhance the quality of the structure by the refinement of its form, is based on an approach that is a persistent presence in architecture. In general, the outcome has been iconic constructions that are designed more for their formal strength and their impact at a distance, than for the user's experience. Despite their visual impact, these "emblems" have often marked an interruption in the journey, with no real connection to nearby attractions or inherent social qualities. The transitional process instantiated by the passage is here more like a discontinuity. By appealing more to visual responses and distant vistas than to tangible and immediate sensations, it tends to stand apart or at least distinct from the rest of the itinerary.

The passages of today: optional crossings becoming popular public spaces

As was the case with the 19th-century shopping arcade, today's cities include itineraries that stand out from the familiar network of primary streets by their unexpected appearance and intrinsic appeal. They attract strollers by their distinctive situation, the hospitable atmosphere they generate and the links they establish with other destinations. In short, their success arises from a combination of two factors: the simultaneously inspiring and reassuring nature of the place formed by the passage, and the movement generated by the connections the passage generates. Depending on the prevalence of one or other of these factors, we arrive at an analytical framework that can be used to identify three categories.

The first category is characterized by the exceptional nature of the route compared with familiar itineraries within the neighborhood or city in question. It is the distinctiveness of the route that arouses curiosity and prompts people to use it. Often, this distinctiveness is produced by enhancements in the surrounding landscape. Following this itinerary provides an unexpected view of the city. It reveals an unusual and distinctive panorama, generates new experiences, and opens up vistas of sudden beauty. It is this original view of an essentially ordinary district that explains the success of the Viaduc-des-Arts in Paris (*arch. P.Berger /pays. Ph. Mathieux & J. Vergely*) or the High Line in New York (*arch. Diller Scofidio + Renfro/ pays. Field Operations*). These two elevated promenades along former railway lines provide an unexpected view of the artisan neighborhoods of Bastille and Chelsea. This reframing also changes perceptions, to the point that these previously gloomy districts have become precious and memorable. Here, the development of a neglected public space has triggered a general process of regeneration around it. The reputation and exceptional quality of the place makes it a tourist destination and the additional value generated by these visits has spread to the immediate surroundings.



High Line in New York, USA (arch. Diller Scofidio + Renfro/ pays. Field Operations)

Two other, probably less well-known examples constitute a more robust version of the same kinds of idea: the ramp leading up to the roof of the submarine base, designed by Manuel de Solà-Morales as part of the dock conversion project in Saint-Nazaire, and the “Malecon del Salado” pedestrian and cycle bridge at Guayaquil, Ecuador. Both operations seek to revitalize the surrounding district by requalifying the public space. In order to do this, they invent a new type of “passage”, alien to the typical morphology of the neighborhood, which shows the existing fabric in a new light for passers-by to rediscover and reassess. In the Saint-Nazaire case, the impressive climb up to the roof of the colossal submarine base bunker opens up an entirely new panorama over the docks, the landscape of warehouses and cranes, and the sea behind. At Guayaquil, the bridge over a minor arm of the river bypasses the informal housing district, and leads to a series of sports facilities and city squares. It creates a protected route on the edge of the district, which links up with the water and provides views over previously unfamiliar urban and river landscapes. It structures a shared area for all the local people, which can be perceived as a communal space for everyone, since previously it belonged to nobody.



“Malecón del Salado” pedestrian and cycle bridge at Guayaquil, Ecuador.

The second category of modern passages that form public spaces, attracts people by establishing itineraries. They are not – unlike the previous examples – places to visit in themselves, but are adopted because of the links they create. However, during the journey, the experience of the specific configuration or atmosphere of the passage create such a strong impression that the experience and the place leave a permanent memory. One example is the winding passage linking the elevated subway station to the big surrounding shopping centers in Bangkok in talent, which provides access to potential customers without the need to negotiate road traffic. Very quickly, this public transport area becomes a great hall of apartment stores, under surveillance to exclude undesirables, and converted to comfortable and attractive place for retail therapy. In Hong Kong, by contrast, where the glass enclosed escalators provide protection from the weather and an attractive alternative to walking up the sloping streets, these transport spaces draw in strollers and tourists to enjoy the experience.

Perhaps more controversial, because dominated by the quest for a refined architectural form, are a few ostentatious footbridges that link associated activities above a busy road. Examples include the passage designed by Enrique Browne at Zappalar in Chile to connect the city to the new social housing complex built on the other side of the F-30-E road; or the footbridge built by DVVD architects at Villeteuse to link two university hubs on either side of a railway line. One is tempted to say that these structures are more than mere connections. They not only make the necessary link between two associated activities, but also showcase it through their iconic design. As a result, the welcoming shell in which residents or students traverse the barrier that breaks the continuity of their day-to-day lives, becomes a prominent and symbolic location. They acquire clear significance as undisputed public spaces.

The third such category of modern passages is dominated by connections and the transitions they effect. In general, in these cases, it is the journey that counts, as one moves between two fundamentally different places: from a poor area in the outskirts to the town center via the nearest bus or subway station; from an agitated, unpredictable and turbulent district to calm, secure and quiet neighborhood.

Nonetheless, this transition is only enriching if it operates in both directions. In this case, the passage becomes an encounter between two spheres, bringing together worlds that do not otherwise meet. To achieve this feat, there must be a reason for the communities at either end of the route to make the journey. For destitute areas, the reason is obvious, because their inhabitants need the opportunities available in flourishing districts. In order to reverse this movement, attractions are required – or policies to create them – in order to draw the well-off to peripheral areas.



Metrocable in Medellín, Columbia

Excellent examples of this connecting function have been implemented in Medellín, Caracas and Rio de Janeiro, which have recently built “metrocabes”, cable cars linking the favelas (located on high points in hard to access places) to the city center (or to public transport commuter hubs). The most effective systems include public amenities at the intermediate stations, bringing together people with different purposes, a public space of exceptional quality. The most striking in this respect is without doubt the three black “cubes” that form the “Bibliotheca Espana” at the top of the Santo Domingo metrocable in Medellín. It contains a mass of printed and digital resources for all ages. Because of its form and its unique collection, and its location in the heart of a favela previously dominated by the drug trade, it has succeeded in making the neighborhood safe by attracting visitors from all social categories. The experiment has inspired similar initiatives in certain South American cities where the proximity of rich and poor neighborhoods generates great contrast: one is again in Medellín, where an immense escalator was constructed between the impoverished hilltop district of Comuna 13 and the urban center. Its connecting platforms house schools and sports facilities. In Rio de Janeiro, a massive urban elevator links the Ipanema-General Osorio subway station with the lower parts of the Cantalago and Pavão-Pavãozinho favelas. Even though the residents still have a way to climb, the public platform at the top of the elevator opens up a superb panorama over the upmarket neighborhoods and Ipanema beach and has become a tourist attraction and a place where people meet and socialize.



Escalator in Comuna 13, Medellín, Columbia

The passage-school designed by Li Xiao Dong's architectural practice at Fujian Pinghe in China uses the same ideas of a continuous scale, reflecting the village context of its location. The building, which is distinctive for its delicate structure, forms a bridge over a small, deep-set river running through the rural town. It creates a strategic link between the two public spaces in front of the collective barns on either side of the natural divide. This public crossing consists of two passages leading to a widened space in the middle, which acts as the entrance to two classrooms on a platform that follows the gentle slope of the bridge. Education thus becomes an integral part of daily life, although the classrooms also have a separate entrance with a terrace over the river. Passers-by can witness the lessons, and the position of the school encourages people to cross the watercourse to the other bank of the town. The passage both constitutes and explains an itinerary between two previously separate areas.



School, Fujian Pinghe in China (Li Xiao Dong's architectural practice)

Passages and their content today: conclusion

For the right kind of passages to be built, we need to define the contemporary notion of the term “passages” and to specify the criteria that they need to meet in order to make a significant impact on the quality of movement in the modern city. Our outline of the meaning of the words in different periods of history will have been helpful for this purpose, because we want to provide an inclusive framework for ideas. It is not a reaction against an earlier period, as in the case of modernism. It is inspired by everything previously thought and produced, in an attempt to separate out the foundational elements of a contemporary approach to the passage.

When we compare early passages with modern passages, we find profound similarities. Both cases incorporate the idea of the shortcut, of a place subject to norms dictated by its users, and the effect of transition engendered by the journey through the passage. The difference is primarily the role in a hierarchy of routes: early passages focus on bypassing natural obstacles, obstructions on the established path. They concentrate on the missing sections in a system of routes. By contrast, modern passages emphasize the production of a new typology of routes. This form is an alternative to the streets surrounding the block they pass through, affecting neither the status nor the configuration of those streets. This disparity between the idea of extending the itinerary beyond a barrier, and the idea of creating a secondary itinerary in order to improve the quality of movement, suggests two different applications of the passage concept today. In the first case, the purpose of the passage is to make travel possible (or facilitate it, e.g. by inserting mechanical systems). In the second case, creating the passage opens up a choice and leads to the distinction between a route primarily dedicated to movement and an itinerary associated with recreation, pleasure or relaxation.

However, in order to avoid every missing section in a road network being considered as a “passage”, we need to add one further criterion. That is why we propose that an essential feature of this type of “passage” – which extends the existing street hierarchy – should be that it entails significant

transitions. Meeting this condition will distinguish “passages” from the uniform appearance of the infrastructure onto which they are grafted. They will constitute exceptions, moments we remember and which mark the itinerary: crossing cities, large rivers, mountains; or instances where the physiognomy of the route changes and takes on a different character: when it becomes a tunnel or sunken track, an endless viaduct, a toll station or service area. In “passages” that offer a secondary route to the primary network, this idea of a transition is more naturally accomplished. It is linked with the shift from one traffic system to another. The deliberate choice to travel by the “scenic route” instead of directly by motorway, or to follow a track that crosses the space between main roads, are motivated by the quality of the alternative itinerary. They express a choice to take the “passage” and avoiding the main road.

The introduction of new transport systems throughout the modern era has gradually led to the creation of barriers, and therefore the need for interconnection. Facilitating mobility in this model of contemporary urban life therefore demands ways of resolving the conflicts and making connections between transport systems with different characters and hierarchies. So the situations we face today are caused by what were essentially “technocratic passages”, but now clarified by an awareness of the problems that they have produced. To meet the expectations of an informed public, therefore, “contemporary passages” will need to be easily accessible, inclusive of all social categories and characterized by clear contrasts at each end; they will need to generate real, dynamic, stimulating and secure public space, and be able to manage the conflicts between occupants and passers-by.

From the analysis of historical models, therefore, we are able to formulate the key points of an equitable conception of the modern passage. First, it must clearly meet the user’s travel needs. In other words, a cul-de-sac passage is necessarily an anomaly. However, its role as a shortcut encourages the use of the passage, but is not its only *raison d’être*, because as well as saving time, its existence can also contribute to well-being by enhancing comfort, tranquillity or a sense of wonder. Second, it must be convenient to access and use: its location must correlate with normal travel needs and extend ordinary routes. Its position must be easy to identify and its entrances clearly marked. The position of its outlets must as far as possible match the level of the routes that lead to them. If the difference in level is unavoidable, sloping climbs or descents are preferable to staircases. In any case, the upward slope should be gentle and gradual, or aided by escalators or other facilities for people with mobility difficulties.

In current urban conditions, where physical and infrastructural barriers often separate economic activities and social classes, passages create transitions between contrasting worlds. By taking them, one is gradually permeated by what awaits at the other end. In other words, the passage acts as a threshold to the other world. It is a place where neckties are tightened or removed. In this respect, taking the passage marks a significant transition. This capacity to channel the traveler’s feelings is one of the fundamental characteristics of the passage, and should be revealed in the specificity of the place. The capacity to be identified as a particular section of a wider journey thus seems to us to be a third property that should be manifested in contemporary passages. However, this does not mean isolation. It does not argue that the passage should be perceived as something separate. To the

contrary, the moment of transition to which the passage should give meaning is intimately linked with its role in crossing the city. So the aim is to give it a capacity to signal the moment of a change of atmosphere within a longer journey. What is needed to achieve this is a space with an intermediate character, able to reconcile the contrasting behaviors, representations and ambiances of the neighborhoods situated at the two ends of the passage. The inclusion of activities or amenities aimed at different social groups helps to create a passage in which everyone can find something of themselves.

In consequence, it is the specific nature of the passage as a public space that embraces the previous requirements in a final synthetic principle. To act as a shared space, the passage needs to maintain “neutrality” that enables it to become an object of appreciation and desire for those who use it. However, neutrality does not mean an absence of qualities. To the contrary, the passage should possess personality. It should signify a “place” where passers-by are aware of the attention and care given to its arrangement. This sense of attention can be achieved by highlighting the natural beauty of the surroundings, but also by the definition and consideration given to the deployment or decoration of the walls by the activities installed there. In order to reconcile this focus on specific identity with user comfort, this identity should not be invasive. The passage should therefore communicate a distinct atmosphere, without excluding anyone. The desired “neutrality” should thus entail a use of space that leaves room for those who experience it to feel a sense of fulfilment, an instinctive sense of community between residents and passers-by.

This aspiration to create a simultaneously stimulating and reassuring place, open to everyone, is undoubtedly crucial. However, it needs to be part of a well thought out policy of economic viability. For by definition, the passage occupies a strategic position in the mechanisms of mobility. It is here that travelers assemble in an intermediate space whose exceptional character expresses an act of choice within a wider journey. In this respect, the passage becomes an iconic space, representative of an entire travelling experience. Because of this strategic element, it acts as a lever that amplifies the initial forces applied. It forms a pivot, from which the quality attributed to it extends to the whole transport network. Its impact far exceeds the small effort that goes into its construction. For through its impact on the most crucial links, the passage perfects the entire mobility system. And given that mobility spaces have today become the main centers of public encounter, the impact of a well-designed passage radiates to the quality of urban life as a whole.

Marcel Smets

14 04 2014