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Shipping Container Mall: A Rising Typology

Abstract:

Nowadays, it is rather unusual to find someone that hasn't come across –either on the streets or in magazines– small shops made out of shipping containers. These little boutiques, so appealing, have often become the flagship stores of iconic brands such as Freitag, Puma or Uniqlo. However, few are the ones who are aware of the existence of shopping malls made out of these same containers.

Neither a building, nor a stall –and despite their unusual construction material– they still are mostly considered architectures, but their singular constructive qualities produce a particular architectural outcome worth to be studied thoroughly.

The purpose of this paper is twofold.

Firstly, to analyze and compare their architectural attributes with those of traditional shopping mall architecture.

Secondly, to reflect on whether these new architectural solutions can be considered conceptual models to inspire future commercial typologies, able to respond better to certain arising architectural, social and urban demands.

Keywords: Boxpark, 7th Km Market, Shipping, Container, Shopping, Mall

1 Shipping Container Architecture

Shipping Container Architecture –also known as *Cargotecture*– has always generated controversial debates. Many consider it as a temporary practice already outmoded today, while others don't even recognize it as a form of architecture.

The shipping container was never conceived to be occupied or inhabited by man, and its morphological qualities invite to consider it as an object, rather than as architecture. Still, with the passing of time and because of various reasons, architects were able to see in it an accessible constructive element with numerous qualities; so many, that soon these industrial storage objects were absorbed by our discipline and transformed into architectures. Container architecture became such a widespread practice that even architectural publications started to echo it.

Originally invented and patented in 1956 by Malcolm McLean, –an American businessman, owner of the fifth largest trucking company in the United States–, the emergence of the shipping container was revolutionary: it was the first universal solution for the transport goods, which not only protected the merchandise from damages, but helped to reduce the time and costs of load and download during its distribution process. This system took a while to set in, and has been improved over time, but the initial prototype is practically the same to the ISO container model we know today. The container can be considered the strongest mobile and modular structure in the world.

Despite its worldwide fame, initially there was no interest in this industrial object by the arts or the architecture. We had to wait almost two decades for this to change.

Only a few years after its adoption as a universal transport system, a particular phenomenon begun: the oversaturation of containers accumulated in the ports of Europe, result of an asymmetry in the import of goods from the Far East. Europe and USA tended to import more than to export, and because chartering the empty container back to its place of origin was much more expensive than producing a new one, enterprises used to abandon them in Western ports. Logic immediately pushes to think about a possible solution to recycle these objects devoid of their original function.

It is the Architect's Journal magazine who in 1968, in an article entitled '*What's happening in the ports*' (Wheeler, 1968) echoes for the first time this phenomenon of container accumulation, and shows an interest in its potential impact. The architecture immediately sees in them an important source of modular elements – accessible, resistant and free or very cheap–, and the germ of an idea: its use as the

constructive element of a new building system, environmentally friendly, economical and fast.

Some pioneer minds had already detected the possibility of using this object to build architecture, even before this first article came out in 1968, but all were mainly initial prototypes never built.

Although the life of the container is little more than fifty years, its impact on the industrial and architectural world has been decisive, both practically and theoretically. Since its inception, two main critics were always present: the poor quality of the constructions -Initially, its harsh aspect was often concealed with more *noble* materials-, and a strong scepticism towards all those who claimed that it could be 'the' architectonical solution for the future. However, despite the fact that many of these architectonic proposals might have been addressed as temporary solutions, and some might have lacked of outstanding constructive innovation, most of the designs have proved to be extraordinarily ground-breaking and of enormous interest.

The use of containers in architecture has followed a slow process, but eventually, was introduced with strength, getting to be considered an architectural element in itself. This fundamental role that container architecture has played in the evolution of architecture deserves to be claimed.

2 Objective

As mentioned before, the aim of this paper is twofold.

Firstly, to analyze and determine the aspects in which shipping container's malls substantially differ from other traditional shopping mall typologies.

Secondly, and more important, to reflect to what extent these differences in their conceptual model might lead to consider container architecture a more flexible, and therefore more suitable solution to build certain commercial typologies.

There are already several brands that have chosen to create small pop-up stores made out shipping containers. Well known examples are, among others, the Freitag Shop by Annette Spillmann & Harald Echsle -currently set in Zurich (2006)-, the Puma City by LOT/EK -travelling shop (2008) - or the Uniqlo Pop-Up store also by LOT/EK -travelling (2006).

These small stores were conceived with a temporary purpose. Designers chose to build them with containers as it allowed them not only to easily change of location but to flexibly colonize diverse sites, and above all, to create a powerful and iconic image for the brand.

And while these tiny commercial icons have had a much stronger repercussion than initially expected, not the same has happened with other commercial typologies. Despite shipping container shopping malls have not only a more important scale, but are more significant from the point of view of their architectural, urban and socioeconomic repercussion, unfortunately, most remain unknown.

In order to understand the reasons of this phenomenon, and to prove these arising typologies deserve all our attention, this paper will study in depth two representative examples of container shopping malls, that turn out to be particularly relevant.

3 7th Km Market -or 7th Km Mall



FIG. 1 The 7th Km Market. Credits: Myers, Stephen. 'From Soviet-era flea market to a giant makeshift mall,' *New York Times*, 2006, May 19

The first example to be examined is *the 7th Km Market, -or Sedmoi* ('seventh' in Russian)- located not far from the port city of Odessa, in Ukraine.

It spontaneously arose as a small Sunday market in the early 60's, occupying a constrained walled-in area of 150m wide and 250m long of this port city. As in many other ports of Europe, in the docks of Odessa containers were starting to accumulate. Traders immediately saw the possibility of reusing them to provide their tiny shops a much more solid structure than the canvas-covered ones with which their little stalls used to be constructed. The idea was a complete success, and the market started to spread and prosper.



Fig. 2 Its current location: a new area 7km outside the city, along the main road leading to Romania and Bulgaria. Credits: *Google Maps*

In 1989, during Perestroika reforms, the market had attained such dimensions, that the government decided to expel it to its current location: a new area -previously a dump and garbage incinerator- 7km outside the city limits -hence its name-, along the main road leading to the airport and to Romania and Bulgaria.

Since then, it has been growing till it has reached the present day 70 hectares, stretching further that the eye can see -To make a comparison, the largest shopping centre in USA is 40 hectares-.

While some still can regard it as an extensive outdoor market, it is actually the largest shopping mall in Europe. This is how even journals, like the New York Times -in its article entitled "From Soviet-Era Flea Market to a Giant Makeshift Mall" (Myers, 2006)- define it. The 7th Km mall -as we will denominate it from now on- is also the region's largest employer and one of the main sources of income of the national economy. Practically anything transportable that can be found traded, from cheap Asian goods to luxury items.

The reused shipping containers can be rented from \$2,300 a month to \$6,000 -or more-, depending on the location. They can also be bought, but their price shoot up from around \$1,000 in the late 1990s to \$240-250,000 in 2007 (*Skvirskaja, Humphrey, 2007*).

While numbers are not official, it is estimated that there are more or less 16,000 traders and 150,000 customers coming per day by bus from as far as Russia. The

mall, owned by the business magnate Viktor A. Dobriansky and three partners, is daily run by almost 1,200 members of staff –mainly guards and janitors.

3.1. Urban Impact

Due to these massive numbers, its economical impact and the fact that it mainly functions according to its own laws and rules¹, many are the ones who define the 7th Km Mall as *"a state within a state"*. However, these are not the only reasons that allow us to consider it as such. The impressive dimensions and infrastructures deployed there, lead to conceived it and live it as a *'city inside a city'*.

From a distance, the silhouette of the market expanding over the open fields is fascinating; the ocean of shipping containers creates a beautiful and colourful metallic carpet that seems to be infinite.

The site, preceded by a vast extension of parking lots, isn't surrounded by any wall or protected by anything beyond a fence, and has a clear spatial lay-out. Subdivided in different areas called 'sectors' and 'stations', despite its massive dimensions, the structure is so organised, that it can be easily assimilated by the user.

Its particular architecture also contributes to it. The market is shaped by the old steel shipping containers, stacked in two highs, and organized in long rows, separated by tiny aisles colour coded and long enough to be called streets.

Recently, some smaller but more permanent constructions in the form of tiny two-story buildings and canvas-covered structures have also been built by the owners - three health clinics providing emergency care, a fire station and toilet facilities (Myers, 2006)-. But what fundamentally configures the 7th Km mall is still the assembly of 30.000 metallic boxes.

Despite all this, this modular, cell-like and spreading configuration still contrasts strongly with the vertical ambitions of the city.

3.2. Architecture and Functioning

Lined up like little children's colourful blocks, the ground floor containers open their steel doors at one end –a table is setup at the entrance for display-, to effortlessly transform them into basic shops and use them for retail, while the ones on the upper level serve to store all these imaginable kinds of inexpensive goods.

¹ Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko did announce in 2005 that he intends to enforce tax laws on the market's thriving shadow economy.

It is fascinating to see such example of ability and ingenuity. The way the merchandise is stocked in tiny spaces and yet instantly accessible is an example of optimal storage managing.



FIG. 3 The lower lever serves for retail, while the upper is used to stock the merchandise. Credits. <http://albornophotography.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Ukraine-7th-Km-Market/G00008ekUcez09SY/I0000y6gPkWaxwLI>

3.3. Similarities

When studying the *7th Km Mall*, one can immediately see some resemblances with traditional conceptual models of shopping malls.

Firstly, is its location, outside the city. Both share therefore the problems arising from their lack of accessibility.

Secondly, the global dynamic of shopping is almost identical. Both function as an aggregation of independent selling units, all configured by a frontal area destined to display and the attraction of customers. Walking through the alleys, can be a very similar experience to any urban shopping structure.

3.4. Differences

However, when examined in detail, some significant differences turn out to be particularly relevant.

The first might probably be the reason for the creation of the whole mall. The 7th km mall aroused fundamentally from necessity and pragmatism, and is only a product of resourceful minds.

This originates a second main difference: its appearance. When first conceived, there was no seek for a particular aesthetic, level of comfort or atmosphere, and despite its evolution during decades, today, buyers still have to find their way through narrow and dusty alleys.



FIG. 4 The Mall was born from pragmatism. The canvas-covered alleys protected from sun. Credits:
<http://albornophotography.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Ukraine-7th-Km-Market/G00008ekUcez09SY/100005fK7f7QqY8Q>

Thirdly, unlike ordinary shopping malls, it has no overall structure that encloses it and provides to this *dispersed system* a global image. This, together with the fact of being the visible result of an unplanned and uncontrolled process, makes it appear as an organic aggregation of completely independent units. This appearance substantially differs from any traditional shopping mall and rather recalls the urban structure of a commercial neighbourhood.

The fourth main difference is that while physically independent, these units are organised according to a certain underlying order and the mall does actually function as a global entity.

The shops are regrouped and located in sort of 'neighbourhoods', depending on the type of commodity they sell. Often, these correspond to ethnic aggregation, as some nationalities have traditionally tended to sell some particular things. This social and

ethnic component is particularly singular. But also, the fact that one can easily determine where to find a particular item



FIG. 5 The way the mall functions might resemble more to a city than to a commercial typology. Credits:
<http://albornphotography.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Ukraine-7th-Km-Market/G00008ekUcez09SY/I0000rkKeREUE0Ho>

The two previous characteristics lead to another interesting particularity.

The appearance of commercial neighbourhood together with the way of functioning as an enclosed entity, makes it look as an autonomous structure, a frame, in the middle of which, trading can also independently happen –more or less, as if it was in the streets of a city or the alleys of a bazaar.

Another aspect that distinguishes it is its *life* after closing time.

In the readymade mall, business starts early in the morning –around 4 o'clock-. After the market closes in the early afternoon, when all the buses and cars have departed, nothing remains but a desolate landscape of battered containers, a few box-like concrete shops with steel shutters, and plastic bags blowing in the wind.

On the contrary, traditional shopping malls keep a completely different timing. Shops may close in the early evening, but the rest of the mall remains open and starts its second life, attracting customers to movies, bars and restaurants.

Finally, the 7th Km Mall main peculiarity is to be neither experienced as an ephemeral trading structure, nor as a rigid architecture, but rather *lived as a city*.

And this has a direct effect on the way the container is used and conceived. Unlike a shop of a mall, the space of the container adopts a double function. While the front is used for retail, in the back, a tiny area is *domesticated*, given a homely atmosphere,

and transformed into a place where retailer's family and friends can gather. The constrained inner space of the metallic box is at the same time a shop, and a living room where to drink, eat and play cards.

4 Boxpark Mall



FIG. 6 The Boxpark Mall. Credits:

<http://seedifferentlythinkdifferently.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/boxpark-cultural-insight.jpg>

The second project to be analyzed is the Boxpark Mall.

Situated in a Shoreditch-an area of East London known for its unexpected approach to retail-, the Boxpark Mall takes advantage of its particular location and creates a unique shopping and dining destination.

Conceived by Roger Wade in 2011 and designed by Waugh Thistleton, this shopping structure claims to be the world's first pop-up mall. The project was born with the idea of creating not only a commercial but also an urban and cultural opportunity through retail and entertainment.



FIG. 7 Situated in Shoreditch, a developing area of East London. Credits:
<http://unlike.net/london/shop/boxpark-shoreditch>

From the commercial point of view, it pretends to allow the owners of smaller brands to overcome the barrier of internet and to interact face to face with customers. The retailers are offered a one year contract so that they can test the idea, and if they prosper, they are offered a 5 year lease.

From the urban one, it occupies temporarily an unused site, with two objectives.

On one hand, to take advantage of this free -or almost free- space till future construction is developed by the current owners -according to plan, not before the end of 2015-.

On the other, as explained further, to create a new dynamic urban centre that will regenerate the whole surrounding area.

Finally, socially, it intends to originate a creative community where culture is promoted in the most diverse ways, and where talent and innovation have their place. The musical and artistic events reinforce this capacity of regenerating the neighbourhood.

As a whole, their creators define it not as a mall, but as an 'anti-mall': "*it is above all, a place to hang*".²

² See <http://vimeo.com/boxpark/boxparkshoreditch>

4.1. Urban Impact

There is no doubt its singular industrial aesthetic has generated a powerful visual identity –which in this case, additionally, reflects the character of the place.

Though refurbished and with a unified exterior aspect, the container still maintains its character, and concepts such as industry, solidity or mobility are immediately associated with it.

When using it as a construction system, the resulting project emanates the idea of instantaneity, and customers perceive it as an example of architecture able to change as fast as fashion does.

Still, despite its strong visual identity, as a whole, the mall's controlled scale, consistent materiality and discrete colouring makes it completely integrated in the urban structure of the neighbourhood.



FIG. 8 The mall intends to regenerate the area. Credits: <http://www.studiomakgill.com/work/boxpark>

4.2. Architecture and Functioning

The mall is constituted by 60 containers, stacked in two floors high. On the lower level, 40 containers house the shops for small exclusive brands, while the 20 containers on the upper level –disposed around a terrace–, are dedicated to entertainment in form of art galleries, restaurants and cafés.

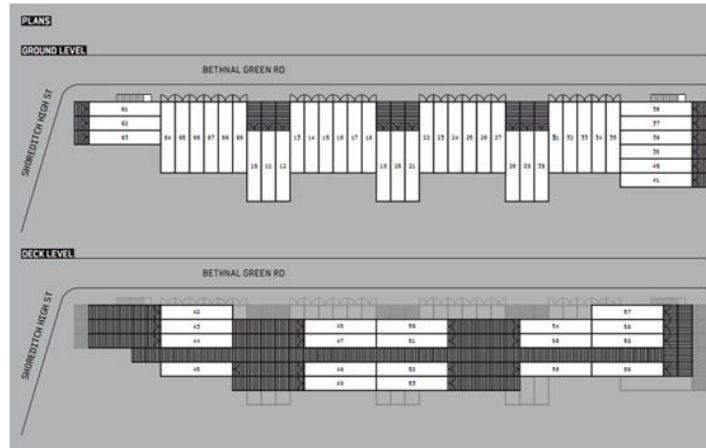


FIG. 9 Plans of the ground level (above) and deck level. Credits: <http://archdezart.com/2012/08/16/boxpark-shoreditch-london-uk-waugh-thistleton-architects/>

The choice of container architecture for this project was clearly intentioned. As its creators explain, the main idea behind this decision was that since the early 60's, the container had brought the world together, and therefore this metallic box seemed a perfect way to unify the diverse uses under a unique and low-cost module.

But the shipping containers also turned out to be an ideal building material: they're cheap, stackable, weather resistant, and thanks to their standardised sizing, they allow the creation of great modular combinations. Units can be fabricated elsewhere, and later easily inserted in the structure of the mall. Usually, the containers are first stocked in a deposit, where in a period of three months, retailers can decorate their space as creatively as they wish -the shop-fit includes heating, air-conditioning, modular shelving, storage and supplies rooms-. After that, the modules are transported and placed in the mall.

This flexibility is not only interesting from the constructive point of view. It also implies that the mall can constantly be evolving. Renewed and adapted according to the diverse demands and needs, it generates a truly dynamic architecture that is not only interesting as an architectural system, but that also reflects with the image and principles of these brands.



FIG. 10 The container can easily unify diverse uses. Credits: <http://www.boxpark.co.uk/>

4.3. Similarities

Once analysed, unlike the 7th Km Mall, one can identify in this project numerous similarities with traditional mall architecture.

The first analogy would be the fact that its creation was the product of a deliberate and planned project. Every decision made during its conception process was clearly intentioned.

The Boxpark Mall does lack of an enclosing structure but still has a sort of facade - painted on one side of the containers-, which provides the project with a global identity.

It also has a set of boundaries more clearly defined, as it happens in other commercial buildings. Some gates can even be closed at night.

Another similarity would be that the narrow alleys between the containers are exclusively used to organise and connect the different shops, and will never be used as a place for spontaneous trading.

And finally, the shops and leisure spaces are grouped each one in a separate level, but not according to an underlying order depending on the goods they sale.

4.4. Differences

However, there are still a few differences.

Unlike most of the urban shopping malls, Boxpark Mall is located at the heart of a city, and is much more accessible.

Conformed by standardised and independent units that can be moved, removed or replaced according to necessity, it generates a truly dynamic model of architecture that strongly contrasts with the rigidity of widespread commercial typologies.

The Boxpark Mall shows a strong industrial identity, very different from the traditional aesthetic of shopping malls.

Finally, its choice of a constrained scale, results into an architectural solution much more integrated within the structure of the city.

5 Conclusions

As evidenced through the whole analysis, there are several aspects that differentiate both study cases, but with any doubt, the fundamental distinction between the two is the *purpose behind their creation*. While in the 7th Km mall, everything was spontaneous and pragmatic, in the Boxpark Mall project every choice was deliberate, and specially, the one of building it with containers.

Still, both 7th km Mall and Boxpark Mall share a key aspect, which turns them into fascinating architectural models: the fact of being made out of a modular system based on shipping containers. This particular constructive model implies specific architectural characteristics which turn out to be attributes, and allow us to consider both projects, not only pioneering solutions, but also, ideal references in the generation of new conceptual prototypes of shopping mall architecture.

Its first main feature of container architecture is the generation of a feasible modular solution.

Modular architecture has the virtue of, while being based on a simplified scheme, being able to generate an open, rich and dynamic space.

In this type of architecture, space is defined in a more essential way. There is no place for any superficial element -not even a facade, usually shaped by the cladding of the own modules-. And often, this apparent sobriety has led to underestimate container architecture: projects were considered to be lacking of both, exterior presence and interior spatial diversity. But this is far from reality.

Exteriorly, it loses its massiveness and adopts a more human scale, while maintaining all its iconicity.

Interiorly, its spatial layout allows space to be *read* and experienced by the user in an easier way.

Its second fundamental attribute is its architectural flexibility.

On one hand, this is embodied in the infinite possibilities that this standardized system allows modules to be stacked or combined, and to coexist in harmony, while maintaining a considerable functional independence. Still, despite its organic tendency, the global appearance and functioning of container architecture is one of a compact, ordered and controlled composition. Even when the possibility of expansion or transformation exists, the project can still be interpreted as a single and complete entity through all its phases.

On the other, it is materialised in its capacity of adapt itself to the most diverse contexts –urban or rural-. It can occupy great horizontal extensions, narrow sites, steep pieces of land, or take the form of small towers to liberate it from the oppressive density. It can provide a solution to occupy specific locations that no other architectural solution would enable, and this capacity has often justified its choice as an architectural solution.

But this flexibility can be also experienced in the configuration of the architectural module itself. Though space might be extremely constrained and standardised, neutral cells allow personal appropriation and can be creatively adapted to every function needed.

The third specific characteristic is the singular type of relations it establishes with its surrounding territory.

The zones for commerce have traditionally occupied the heart of the city –the squares in front of the main church-, but in the last decades, they have progressively been pushed to a *grey zone* just outside its limits, in the boundary with rural land. However, they still exert a notorious influence on the city development and dynamics and the occupation of this extraterritorial land with commercial activities frequently activates the generation of new urban centres.

As we have seen previously, container architecture projects can either be located in the heart of a city, or outside of it. But whatever the site, they have proven to operate not only as punctual interventions, but as solutions with a territorial repercussion able, for example, to create new urban structures or to impact on the landscape organisation.

Moreover, container architecture transforms its surroundings in a powerful way, while preventing from leaving an imprint once dismantled and, thus, helping to preserve the natural land intact.

The fourth key feature of this architectural system is its impermanence.

Container architecture projects allow modules to be moved and relocated elsewhere. Its constructive system enables these to be detached for maintenance or even

removed for replacement when obsolete. It provides solutions that avoid rigidity and remain open to alterations: growth, wane or displacement.

Because of this self-evident freedom of the system to modify itself through time, it constitutes a truly dynamic architecture: a project that is always complete and at the same time unfinished, almost like an artificial organism that is in the middle of a mutation process. Container architecture seems able to evolve as fast as what is contained, or as the context in which it is immersed.

Last feature, though not strictly architectural -but still fundamental-, is the iconicity of the own container.

In this type of architecture, the metallic box has often been associated with consumerism, industry, and throwaway. But in the specific case of shopping malls, the constructive module possesses a new symbolism that refers to its inner use: the container that transports the merchandise shapes the buildings in which it is sold.

Either chosen spontaneously for functional reasons -7th Km Mall- or deliberately pursuing a precise image -Boxpark Mall-, the fact is that the container gives a totally new dimension to shopping mall architecture. It provides a powerful visual identity and symbolic meaning, transforming not only the way it functions but the way it is interpreted.

Container architecture has often been underestimated. Main critics have probably aroused from its rough aesthetic and from the fact of being based on the reuse of a previously rejected element. But through history, container architecture has proven to be, above all, a visionary solution. Both examples here analyzed -and despite their different origins- have revealed four main virtues of this architectural system:

Since it isn't constrained to a rigid underlying structure, it can function as an open system susceptible of being modified. With this construction method as a basis, container architecture succeeds in *creating a generic typological system, rather than a specific architectural object*.

This architectural system is also a successful reference particularly from the point of view of the *social and cultural dynamics it is able to generate*, and the capacity of *transforming the territory in which it is immersed*.

The shipping container has no monument image, and yet, this industrial product has been able to capture the attention of the architectural world with equal force as any other noble architecture *through its powerful visual identity*.

Ultimately, container architecture has allowed architects to break with the strictness and immutability of the own discipline, and to suggest there is room for other forms of architecture, in which, for example, the *time factor becomes a key design element*.

Some say that in times of crisis, the mind becomes sharper and most ingenious ideas are born. Others, however, argue that it makes us cling towards what we already know.

Here, we have inspiring examples of straightforward, economic and anti-academic architecture, born of pragmatism and creativity, which are worth all our attention. And when revolutionary architecture is able to transform its concerns into engaging visions and guidelines, these usually happen to be so powerful, they are able to inspire many coming generations.

Hopefully, this is what will happen in this case.

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