

DEBATE

# Can supermarket buildings ever be good architecture?

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Alex Lifschutz of Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands says supermarkets are well-designed when they improve neighbourhoods but Mitchell Taylor Workshop's Piers Taylor believes the design is just building as hoarding



'Yes'



Alex Lifschutz, Director, Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands

Supermarkets are responsible for selling approximately 90% of food in the UK. Even if we wished for an increased market share of independent retailers, supermarkets will dominate for the foreseeable future, so there isn't any choice – they have to be well designed.

The key to good supermarket design is in the promotion of place. Supermarkets are aware of the need to create better environments for customers and employees, and the penny is beginning to drop that they also need to improve the local neighbourhoods in which they operate.

Compressing the building bulk or choosing sites that can accommodate large footprints is the starting point. Responding to and improving the local context is easier if the store relates in scale to buildings in the neighbourhood, or at least can be modified by smaller buildings of complementary use (but not purely as camouflage).

Reducing car parking is another significant move. A study of one operator's car parks found some 200,000 spaces – enough to stretch from Dover to Aberdeen – but rarely fully used. Incentives such as reward cards can help flatten car use over the week, home delivery of heavy goods cuts car journeys, and online retailing makes a significant contribution to reducing carbon, building bulk and local traffic.

Lastly, supermarket buildings should be able to accommodate future shopping trends or change of use. They should be loose-fit structures that can be altered or cut open to create day-lit offices or, perhaps one day, covered markets.

'No'



Piers Taylor, Director, Mitchell Taylor Workshop

Can a mass murderer ever be beautiful? Discuss. A building can't be disassociated from what it houses, from its intent, from the fundamental premise that defines it. Supermarkets create monop-olies, destroy communities, city centres and villages.

Their design is baseline propaganda purely to generate sales. Irrespective of how it's dressed up, there's a formula, repeated ad infinitum. Externally, it's building as hoarding and a building has to give more than a sales message. Internally, the only material used to design is product – anything else is a waste of space, and space is money.

Cities such as Detroit and Havana have shown us that urban agriculture schemes can promote thriving local food systems, and that there is a radical alternative to the ubiquitous air-conditioned windowless shed selling Kenyan sugar snap peas in December. An alternative that promotes independence, diversity, community and locality. It's basically called growing your own – or at least buying via democratic organisations that value seasonality, sustainability, and the producers. The tried-and-tested model here is the market – with no "super" prefix.

The legacy of the supermarket is a mire of big, brown-roofed concentration camps in seas of tarmac around the country that are gassing us to death with their toxic imports and cynical ambition.

If they were to reinvent themselves, and change the formula, they'd stop being supermarkets.

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