

Can Supermarket Design ever be Good? (For BD 'Debate' June 4 2010)

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 monopolies, 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 yes, Bob and Denise, I know, we've learned from Las Vegas... but a building has to give more than a sales message. Internally, the only material used to design its product – anything else is a waste of space, and space is money.

The product at the entrance – the 'fresh' (often air freighted and chemically impregnated) fruit and vegetables – is an obscene kind of window dressing that fronts up a big deception – a deception that they are creating a 'good' environment.

At every other point, the potential for actual contact with food is removed, its presentation is designed to disguise its source, and the layout designed solely to encourage sales. Sure, supermarkets are convenient – but they offer the convenience of a short term fix, and it's time we were weaned off this toxic drug.

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 – but meanwhile, you can't polish a turd.

Piers Taylor

Director, Mitchell Taylor Workshop

Isaac Newton Design fellow, University of Cambridge