

The Washington Post

Georgetown's 'Social Safeway' is a monument to changing supermarket architecture

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By Roger K. Lewis
Saturday, June 19, 2010; E03

The recently rebuilt "Social Safeway" on Wisconsin Avenue NW, at the northern edge of Georgetown, is not just another remodeled supermarket. It represents a positive evolution in thinking about merchandising strategy and about being a good citizen through pedestrian-friendly architecture and urban design.

This new supermarket follows a completely different set of rules than its predecessor. Safeway and other supermarket chains traditionally have adhered dogmatically to rules about selection of sites for stores and, in particular, rules about how such sites should be developed. And one of the primary rules was: Cars rule.

For decades, supermarket thinking was driven by one dominant premise. Motorists approaching a shopping destination absolutely had to see -- and expected to see -- a parking lot with plenty of spaces directly in front of the supermarket. Otherwise, it was assumed, they would drive elsewhere to shop. Further, part of the gospel was the belief that setting back a supermarket from the road gives drivers more time to see the store and read its signage.

Most supermarket patrons are weekly shoppers who purchase multiple bags of groceries. Those bags must be transported back home in an automobile. Thus, successful supermarket design means ensuring that shoppers can conveniently push a grocery cart from the checkout register to their cars.

Not surprisingly, this formulaic approach yielded thousands of very similar supermarkets. Whether free-standing or anchoring one end of a neighborhood shopping center, most supermarkets are set back from public streets with the requisite parking lot directly in front and sometimes extending around one or more sides of the store.

Another formulaic premise was that a supermarket could and should be housed as cheaply as possible, typically in a one-story, horizontally proportioned box. Stores didn't need windows, and they didn't need to win architectural awards.

A notable exception to the formula is the typical downtown grocery store occupying the ground floor of large commercial or residential buildings. Some customers patronizing downtown stores walk and thus shop more frequently than suburban customers.

But even a center-city supermarket depends on access to an adjacent parking garage for many of its patrons. The Georgetown Safeway property is not downtown, nor is it out in the suburbs. Rather, it is in a low-density, mixed-use urban setting.

Yet the former store had been a free-standing building consistent with formulaic thinking, as if it were in suburbia. The conventionally configured store sat near the rear of the site, set well back from Wisconsin Avenue and separated from the avenue by a large parking lot.

Now, in its place is a two-story building directly abutting the Wisconsin Avenue right of way and sidewalk. Parking within and behind the new building is not visible from the street.

[Opened last month](#), this unique Safeway was designed by Silver Spring-based architects Torti Gallas and Partners to be green and eligible for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification. At just more than 71,000 square feet and open 24 hours a day, it is the District's largest supermarket. Amazingly, the project was completed only 376 days after the old store was closed.

Along the avenue at sidewalk level are retail shop spaces for lease, with the Safeway supermarket level a story above. And unlike nearly any other supermarket you have seen, the building's facades are far from plain. Clearly, Safeway's architects thought a lot about creating architecture and not just a box.

Brick-clad columns and spandrel beams frame large, recessed storefront windows whose glazing is subdivided with elaborate mullion patterns. Projecting out above each recessed window bay are louvered metal sunshades supported by metal brackets, which add another layer of facade detail.

Shoppers can drive into the parking garage, situated behind the street-front shops, on either side of the building. Stairs, escalators and very large elevators ferry shoppers and grocery carts between the garage and supermarket level. And some spaces in the lofty, well lighted garage are reserved for fuel-efficient cars.

The supermarket interior is capacious but more conventionally designed with the usual suspended panel ceiling and many wide, parallel aisles. However, Safeway's planners wisely situated the deli, Starbucks and cafe seating at the front of the supermarket, adjacent to the array of high windows overlooking the avenue below and flooding the area with daylight.

Making a visually porous, animated street-front building has made the Georgetown Social Safeway even more social. This new building may not win design awards, but it deserves recognition for what it has aspired to achieve urbanistically and architecturally.

Roger K. Lewis is a practicing architect and a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland.

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