



New Directions in Design

Store sizes, building materials and digital input are all being influenced.

By Bob Ingram

As the nature of food marketing changes, so are the designs of the stores that present the industry's offerings. "There is a move to serve specific neighborhoods with smaller-format markets that have 'basic' offerings," says Deborah Leigh English, founder and president of Los Angeles-based DL English Design Studio, "but some major brands are opening both large and small stores and steering shoppers to their more regionally located large-format stores with enhanced offerings and varied shopper experiences such as full-service restaurants and bars."

For larger stores, English's company breaks down the mass and creates "zones of intimacy" — highly social spaces that lessen shoppers' sense of being overwhelmed by varying lighting effects, fixture types and configurations.

For smaller stores, DL English creates a "hang factor" and the ambiance of a neighborhood market. According to English, a sense of spaciousness can be created by simplified architectural design, lower fixtures, brighter colors, and designing with light to "take an often less-than-optimal space and make it into a highly efficient, effective, compelling place."

She notes that materials are becoming more lightweight and less costly, and that there are many more effective commercial translucent materials available, cautioning, however, that "there are always new products, but not all are advances."

LED lighting, English points out, is the most significant advance in store equipment, and "slowly we are seeing a transition to internet-based in-store messaging and pricing, shopping and marketing solutions. The benefit, from a design point of view, is that the store looks less cluttered, cleaner and more visually consistent."

“Grocers, while still seeking to manage a prototypical store format, are also focused on site adaptation to local, unique market needs and demography.”

—Steven Duffy,
Cuhachi & Peterson
Architects,
Engineers and
Planners

Building an Experience

The folks at Orlando, Fla.-based Cuhachi & Peterson Architects, Engineers and Planners see a shift toward buildings with smaller footprints. “Grocers, while still seeking to manage a prototypical store format, are also focused on site adaptation to local, unique market needs and demography,” says Grocery VP Steven Duffy, who works from the firm’s Boston branch.

The company’s clients, which are driving this change, have reacted to increased urbanization and generational shifts by showing a preference for walkable communities, Duffy says.

“Other corollaries to convenience,” he adds, “are the appropriate deployment of e-commerce and omnichannel options, and the merging of restaurant and grocery formats into the grocerant.”

Duffy and his associates believe that one of the main influences in building materials is the increased focus on more natural and sustainable elements. “For example,” he says, “one of our clients uses a composite architectural wood-panel rain screen system for its front-entry façade. These engineered coated-panel systems allow the façade to present as a natural-wood veneer, an extension of the fresh concept that is trending currently.”

Cuhachi & Peterson is “designing to build an experience,” Duffy explains, focusing on virtual reality and what is called “mixed reality” or “augmented reality” — computer-generated three-dimensional objects that overlaid real-world environments that users can interact with.



LOCAL FOCUS
The prepared food section of a JGA-designed Whole Foods Market in Detroit features local fare.

“We have been using building information modeling (BIM) for 11 years and are leveraging what we’ve learned and building upon that to use it in new and exciting ways,” he observes.

Embedded sensors, together with location-based technology like beacons, will bring a new level of shopping experience, Duffy asserts, and managing all of these sensor data and employing tools like deep learning are keys to removing the current friction from design and improving the shopping experience.

Size Matters

“When it comes to supermarket size, I think a lot of retail is getting bigger and smaller at the same time,” declares Ken Nisch, chairman of JGA, in Southfield, Mich.

Nisch cites Kroger as an example of bigger, noting, “It seems they close a store across the street and open a new store that is two to three times the size of the old store.”

The reason? An expansion in general merchandise, hot category growth and more space for customer navigation, Nisch suggests. He also observes that a “growth in their lease-line business, in terms of seasonal products that are displayed outside of the storefront,” is another prevailing trend.

Another reason he sees for bigger stores is to compete against the big-box retailers that continue to aggressively grow their food space, as well as to take advantage of some of the real estate opportunities created by the closures of other big-box nonfood retailers.

“At the same time, grocery is getting smaller,” Nisch adds. He sees retailers like Trader Joe’s and neighborhood markets being developed, as well as independents that are offering limited, basic grocery but focusing on premium, perishable and prepared foods.

Nisch notes a duality in materials as well, with a move toward simplicity such as polished concrete floors, basic shelving, minimalist décor and environmental treatments, which contrast with artisan-driven, unique and often localized statements that support margin, high value and impulse business primarily in the perishable, value-added or prepared areas of the store.

Citing stores like Plum Market in Michigan, which feature an in-store See’s Candies department, Nisch points out that these “shop-in-shops” seem to present a more eclectic and contrasting approach to design, with simplicity being the driver.

The Human Touch

“There is definitely a lot of internal conversation about supermarkets leaning more towards smaller store concepts, and to some degree, we believe this is a wise approach for retail organizations to consider,” says Kevin Kelley, principal and co-founder of Shook Kelley, which has offices in



Charlotte, N.C., and Los Angeles.

“Many of our clients are surprised to find out that the numbers for smaller stores often perform a whole lot better than their typically larger store-format size,” Kelley notes, “but it is very hard for a typical retail organization to let go of their historical ways of doing business.”

Once retailers evolve a food philosophy or editing process, he believes, “this will most likely mean smaller stores, a total rethink of center store, a narrower SKU rationale and a lot more experi-

mentation on the edges.”

Kelley adds, however, that this doesn’t invalidate the big-box store approach entirely, just that it won’t be as prevalent in larger metropolitan areas.

Trends in building materials, he adds, reflect the same desire for authenticity as seen in the prepared food and grocery aisles, and that exposed concrete, wood, stone and brick are all easily identifiable elements that evoke tangible

moments the consumer can relate to.

The digital layer of experience in today’s supermarkets, according to Kelley, influences design by adding to the idea of “value added” and convenience, or even personalization, as well as introducing a higher level of consumer knowledge and engagement.

He does offer a caveat, however: “Consumers are still going to be looking for the care and love of food that grandmothers put into making their meals, and we have to be careful that technology doesn’t override this level of human-ness.” **PG**



MERGING CONCEPTS

Designed by Cuhachi & Peterson, this Market 32 in Sutton,, Mass, exemplifies the idea of the grocerant.