

## Tickling the Giant: Restructuring the Hypermarket

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### ABSTRACT

*Big scale consumption culture has overtaken practically all the spheres of our life and territories available. One of the specific typologies incubated during mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century is the hypermarket, specific and complex device of capital accumulation – where collective freedom disappears – defined by a generic and flexible structure in which we can only exist as individual consumers. In the last few years, the hypermarket model, temple of agribusiness and mass production, started to suffer from the changes in consumer's habits: the development of online market and the shift towards customization – or better said, the will to come back to a more human way of consuming – have put in check the overscale offer provided by these retail structures. Architecture has a lot to say within these new frame and conditions.*

*As a form of common strategic knowledge, it can actually contribute in the process of reforming obsolescent and conventional models with a clear agenda. The hypermarket is just one of the models that can be subject to correction and transformation in the context of the necessary commonalization of the world.*

*Big scale consumption culture has overtaken practically all the spheres of our life and territories available. On this process, the most market-oriented professional architecture practices – the ones obliged to build a huge amount of square meters in order to survive on the top the wave – have been a great ally of the retail industry. One of the specific typologies incubated during mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century is the hypermarket, a typology that, like malls – another model of enclosed big-box store appeared in the 50s –, grew and explode in popularity within rise of the automobile culture and the frame of accelerated capitalism in which we are living since the 70's. They are both spatial evidence and celebration of this mutual relationship, all over the world: specific and complex devices of capital accumulation – where collective freedom disappears – defined by a generic and flexible structure in which we can only exist as individual consumers.*

*But nothing lasts forever. On the one hand, the economic fall which followed the subprime crisis of 2008 brought the breaches and contradictions of neoliberal modus operandi to light. As a consequence, massive resistance against what was sold as the only possible way*

*started to rise. On the other hand, in the last few years, the hypermarket model, temple of agribusiness and mass production, started to suffer from the changes in consumer's habits: the development of online market and the shift towards customization – or better said, the will to come back to a more human way of consuming – have put in check the overscale offer provided by these retail structures.*

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### THE CASE: CARREFOUR ST DENIJS WESTREM, THE HYPERMARKET ON THE ROAD

*With the purpose to supply every need in one trip – 'all under one roof' –, a hypermarket is a big-box-store (also called 'superstore', or megamercado) that combines a supermarket and a department store, generally part of a chain of low-cost retail facilities, selling all kinds of food and non-food products (clothing, sports gear, household appliance, hardware, etc.) in a high volume of sales, with a minimum size of 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> – but most often comprised between 4,000 and 15,000 m<sup>2</sup>. The concept was invented by Colombian-born American marketing executive Bernardo*

*Trujillo in the late 50s<sup>(1)</sup>, following a logic of high-volume and low-margin sales.*

*Carrefour was the first retail company to implement hypermarkets in France, but GB (Grand Bazar), an important Belgian retail company, taken over by Carrefour in the 2000s, was actually the first to implement this model in Europe. GB opened three hypermarkets in a short span in 1961, after Belgian law restricting the size of department stores was abolished in January 1961.<sup>(2)</sup>*

*Located along the regional express road connecting Ghent to Kortrijk (Belgium), the Carrefour St Denijs Westrem – built in 1967 as a GB facility, with an area*

*of 15,000 sqm – is an example of this retail model à la française: meant to be accessed by motor vehicle, it takes the form of a large, free-standing, single-floor blind box (steel and concrete structure with metal or masonry siding) sitting in a large paved open-air parking lot and complemented by a constellation of smaller boxes clustering around the big box, related to the automotive sector (gas station, garage, automotive items, etc.) or drive-thru fast food restaurants.*

*While its form is very typical of this retail model, its context is quite unusual. The French hypermarket is generally located at the edge of towns, in a rural or industrial context, among a collection of same scale blind boxes. However, this one is located inside a wealthy suburban fabric composed of big family houses with generous private gardens, and apparently it has always been so, even though the urban sprawl has reached and densified the area.*

*Belgium counted in 2018 a total of almost 15,000 retail facilities of different scales, among which 52 are hypermarkets, 45 owned by Carrefour. However, two of them were about to close in an ongoing restructuration plan, implying the suppression of around 1,200 jobs, following the last plan that resulted in the closure of 10 stores in 2010.*

*This relative decline of the model in Belgium is thought to be due to various cultural and socio-demographic factors: a large amount of general and specialized supermarkets is spread all over this small and dense country, competing with the big-box-stores; the families are smaller – and thus don't need to buy in such quantities so often –, they own less and less cars, and more generally the use of individual transportation mode is decreasing.*

*In parallel, the e-commerce is in expansion and the demand is shifting towards local, natural, organic products and a greater proximity.*

*However, the hypermarket has not yet said its last words. Olivier Dauvers, retail specialist, believes that this model "does not grow anymore as it has grown for years. We are in a form of maturity of this format, but it is still the first" (Hermant, 2018). As good commercial managers, the different firms have more than one trick up their sleeves to 'reinvent' and 'restructure' the model so that it can still match their profit forecasts: bring the local into the temple of large retail and agribusiness, offer affordable, simple, homemade-like gourmet cuisine, transform the big box into a living space – lieu de vie. "Let's leave more room for imagination, insisted Georges Plassat in 2017, former CEO of Carrefour: why not insert sports or educational facilities into these gigantic structures?" (Bouchouchi, 2017), reduce the hypermarket area, turn multi-format, omnichannel.<sup>(3)</sup>*

*More generally, the suburban mall seems to be declining in different parts of the world, as urban planning aberrations from another era – "an invention for the age of cheap fossil fuel" (Al, 2017). And some may say that the suburbia itself is on decline. Then again, some disruptive strategies start to emerge to save the model: more urban malls try "to weave into the street life of a city" (Al, 2017), "inject the 'big box' with a heavy dose of public space" (Al, 2017), build a public library at the center instead of an anchor*

(1) "From 1957 to 1965, as part of NRC's marketing campaign, Trujillo taught executive education to about 11,000 students. In his seminars, he emphasized the need to build supermarkets with large parking lots and cheap products. His classes played a particularly significant role in France. There, his students included Denis Defforey and Marcel Fournier, who went on to found Carrefour, and Gérard Mulliez, who founded Auchan, the two most important retail companies until today. Other students included André Essel, the co-founder of Fnac; Bernard Darty, the founder of Darty; and Paul Dubrule, the founder of AccorHotels" (Wikipedia, 2019).

(2) "Hypermarkets are self-service shops with a surface area of more than 2,500 m<sup>2</sup>, which sell food and non-food products, are located on the outskirts of a city, are easily accessible and have a large car park. They are generally considered to have been invented in France in 1963 (Carrefour in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, close to Paris, 2,500 m<sup>2</sup>). But nearly two years earlier, in 1961, GB had opened three hypermarkets under the name of SuperBazar, in Bruges, Auderghem and Anderlecht, measuring between 3,300 and 9,100 m<sup>2</sup>. (...) If we do not consider the Bruges location of only 3,300 m<sup>2</sup>, which was initially designed as a department store, the point of sale in Auderghem (9,100 m<sup>2</sup> Boulevard du Souverain), based on the American model of the discount department store but associated with an integrated supermarket, must be considered as the first European hypermarket. Even if the association of food and non-food products under the same roof was unusual in the United States, it nevertheless existed. Hypermarkets are therefore an American invention, GB opened the first European hypermarkets in Belgium and Carrefour spread the model of the hypermarket throughout the world, taking over most of the Belgian hypermarkets in 2000" (Grimmeau, 2013, p. 1).

(3) The CEO was replaced by Alexandre Bompard who bets on more 'traditional' and less open methods to reinvigorate the business. He proposes to reduce the hypermarket area – 100,000 m<sup>2</sup> less by 2020 – and sell, create outlets, or use it as dark store to prepare online purchases.

store, use smaller structures, mix uses, etc. In other words, let the giant grab, gut, and swallow every dissident attitude and every possible competition. It's just business as usual.

### TICKLING THE GIANT: BRINGING COMMONS TO THE TEMPLE OF NEOLIBERALISM

Jesko Fezer is probably right in his diagnosis:<sup>(4)</sup> neoliberalism has the tremendous power to integrate all alternatives to the model into the model (Fezer et al., 2016), which is perfectly illustrated by the strategies of Carrefour CEO and his ideas to include sports or educational facilities, local products, etc., which are a priori very distant from the large retail model.

The hypermarket can be understood as a symbolic built form of neoliberalism, almost as an allegory. Meanwhile its original and pompous purpose was to 'democratize consumerism', the reality is they are agents of fragmentation among us: extremely conventional devices of capital accumulation where both multitude and collective freedom disappear completely: in these enclosed environments we can only exist as individual consumers.

Its scale is at the same time an advantage and an inconvenient: on the one hand, thanks to its physical and sales volume, it is able to impose their rules and unbeatable prices to providers,

similar to the lobbies 'influencing' policies and governments; this huge volume is the most flexible possible form, it can adapt to tendencies and demand, even integrate public facilities, in order to keep the consumer around; but on the other hand, the risk of failure is proportional to its size; it has to remain at all costs.

This last point could be the breach in which hypermarkets can find their way to a second life: the openness and other programs needed by them to survive could be subverted to serve other ends, establishing a new profitable relationship between the big-box and its diverse community of visitors. But as the retail industry have taught us, nothing is really for free, this time, at least for both the owners of the plot and business. No real transformation will really happen insisting in commodifying goods. The debate on the available ground, currently private, should be open. This is where the speculative and synthetic capacity of the architecture project arise.

### A MATTER OF TIME: TOWARDS A HYBRID-MARKET<sup>(5)</sup>

The Carrefour Hypermarket located in St Denijs Westrem, along the Kortrijksesteenweg, a regional motorway connecting Gent to Kortrijk, is a 15,000 sqm black-box store – plus satellite buildings – with a parking area of 19,800 sqm in front, with a capacity of 1,000 cars approx. Its structure is defined by an efficient grid of 12 x 8 meters. Taking advantage of its rational

functionality and potential, the big-box's internal order is extended all over the site as the common principle for the interaction between the existing and the new interventions.

Four linear structures of different length and volume of air (see Figures) create new context and relations for the big box, its satellites and surroundings: two of them frame the plot towards the motorway on the north and the neighbors on the south; the other two are integrated to the main building. They can be described as in front of, attached to, within and behind the big box. They should not be read as rigid but as performative devices – commons generators – that could be implemented progressively. As they take space that is currently unused – or should be in the near future – they are indicated areas for the introduction of both commons and a new ecosystem of relations on site: support for vegetation to climb, services and collective spaces for diverse users including pedestrians, cyclists, truck drivers, workers, neighbors, and visitors. The areas in-between programs are covered or semi-covered – offering proper spaces for both rainy and sunny days – and appropriable for communal activity. A drive-in, pit-stop infrastructure next to the street, sports fields, a new thick façade for the box, a micro-cultural center, a day-care and playground in the green limit on the south, just to name some possibilities. All the proposed uses complement each other and significantly transform the existing environment by few and simple means.

Together, they inject 7,000 sqm of potential uses for the community of St Denijs, supposed to be one of the main areas of growth of Ghent agglomeration in the near future. These areas are defined strategically according to the

(4) "Neoliberalism itself is the most powerful instrument of regulation because it includes everything. That's the idea of neoliberalism: to just push things over into the financial sphere, so everything can be economized. What we are witnessing now is that even dissidence – especially the creative one – is incorporated in seconds. To a certain degree, I cannot imagine something more powerful and transformative than neoliberalism as a system" (Fezer et al., 2016).

(5) Strategy developed in a 9-day workshop in the context of Real Estate Summer School 2018 in Ghent, Belgium. Tutors: Kim Courrèges and Felipe De Ferrari. Team: Valentin Calame, Amelie Bimberg, Noemie Resbeut, Michal Starzynskii, Asiya Salimova, Donald Eric van Ruiten, Jelena Perkovic, Jonas Hamberger, and Julia Messerschmidt.

ongoing changes of this retail model. A large part of the plot, occupied by the parking, is not used to its full potential. Additionally, non-food goods – around 20% of the supply – are increasingly bought online and disappearing from the shelves, leaving room for imagination outside, but also inside the box. On the other hand, the shopping fluctuation will decrease and make around 25% of the parking area obsolete (around 3,500 sqm in open-air spaces).

In the end, the project tries to answer two questions: the one by Plassat, inserting public facilities to the private giant; and the one by the people, resisting the commodification of everything: a system where retail and commons co-exist, updating the role of the big-box in the inter-city situation.

This way, architecture could directly contribute in hacking or re-programming big-scale commercial plots, dismantling its privatized character and re-framing our relationship with consumption (a down-to-earth process that will take years). In other words, a step further from models that consume territories in a conventional capitalistic way to alternative ones that promote a hybrid reality defined by reproduction of both multitude and collective life. 

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