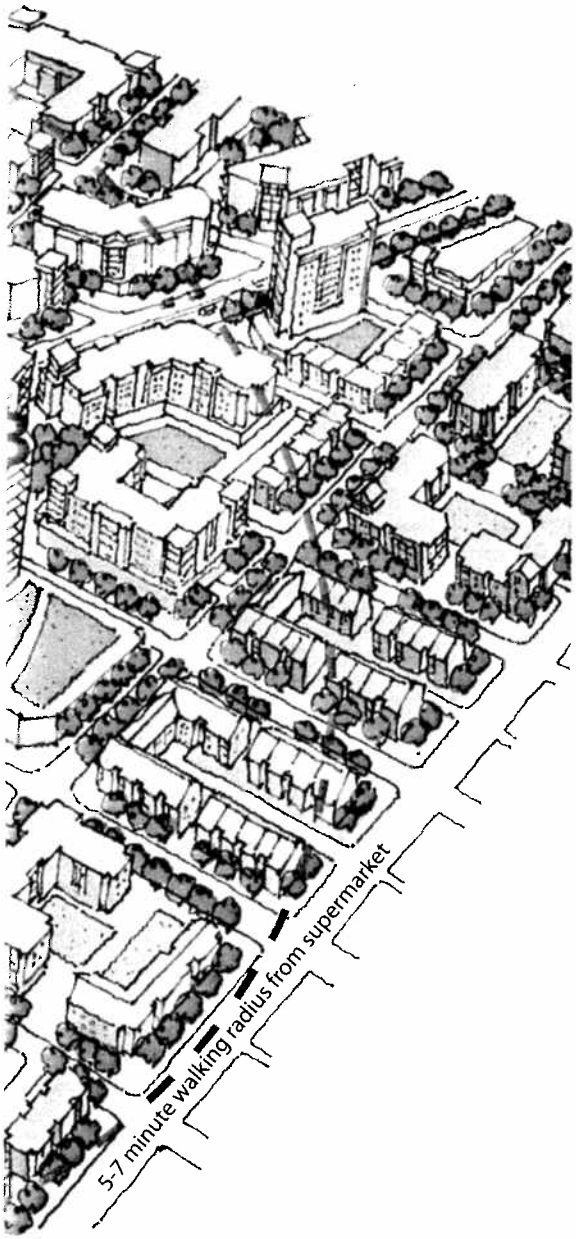
**A** Supermarket
**B** Office
**C** Library
**D** Community Medical Center
**E** Transit Station Plaza
**F** Community Center
**G** School
**H** Community College




# The Supermarket as a Neighborhood Building Block

By Mark Hinshaw, FAICP, and Brian Vanneman

What the nostalgia buffs don't take into account is that the classic pattern was meant to accommodate families with four or five children. With families like that, communities might logically locate an elementary school, playgrounds, and a community center within walking distance of homes.

Unfortunately, this construct all but mandated automobile use for shopping and other tasks, offered no recognition of transit, relegated people living in high-density housing to noisy streets, and created isolated enclaves separated by wide arterials. Nonetheless, the idea was so compelling that many neighborhoods in the U.S. today have those precise traits. However, both the nation and family composition have changed tremendously in the past several decades.

### What demographics tells us

Today, while the number of households in the U.S. has vastly increased, household size has declined dramatically—to around two people per unit. Our population is aging rapidly, with as many people older than 65 as under 18. And that shift will become even more pronounced in the next several decades as millions of older citizens live longer lives than ever before. Extensive research by Arthur C. Nelson, FAICP, at the University of Utah, among others, has called attention to these transformations in our culture.

At the same time, we are seeing tremendous shifts in attitudes and behavior. High levels of consumption are winding down because of the recession, but even before that many people were looking for other ways to live.

Now many people are looking for the small and beautiful. According to the U. S. Census Bureau, the average size of new homes has decreased for the first time in decades. Richard Florida has noted, too, that the "creative class" is eschewing the scattered suburban pattern in favor of denser urban living.

This past year, the first wave of the baby boom reached retirement age—a major milestone. Think what will happen when boomers begin to lose their driver's licenses. Many of them will simply have to find new places to live where walking is possible and transit is available.

### Environment and human health

President Barack Obama recently announced a national goal of a 17 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2020. To get there, we will have to make major changes in living patterns over time. But even without that goal, people have been seeking ways to reduce their own carbon

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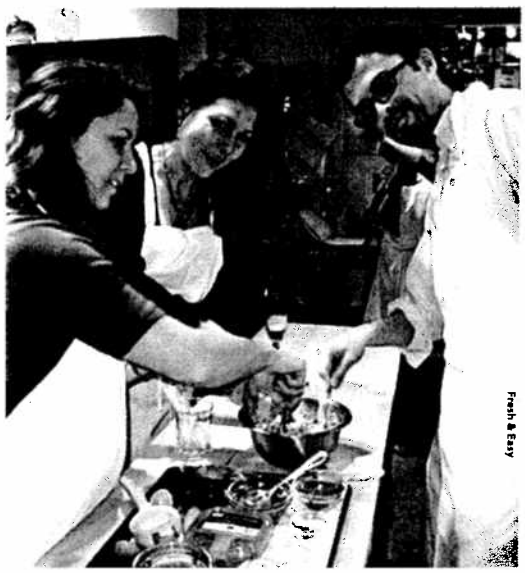
## Alternatives

Several other urban food-selling formats are emerging besides the full-service grocery, each suited to different aims and local contexts: farmers markets, food co-ops, healthy corner stores, and a new crop of small urban grocers, with about half the size of the traditional footprints.

Fresh and Easy markets, introduced in the U.S. in 2007 by British retail giant Tesco, has made an impression in some cities. The stores are much smaller (10,000 to 13,000 square feet), and emphasize high-quality prepared foods, quick in-and-out trips, and daily purchases such as produce, flowers, cheese, and wine. Many shoppers find the size—with 5,000 different products rather than 40,000—more manageable. Safeway, Whole Foods, Giant Eagle, and even Wal-Mart are looking to imitate the Fresh and Easy model, which now operates about 100 stores in California, Arizona, and Nevada.

Food co-ops and healthy corner stores are proliferating as well. While these local business and nonprofits may be desirable neighborhood anchors, they also require an entrepreneurial spirit, time, and determined community organizing. As a rule, larger stores tend to be owned and operated by national or regional chains, while smaller stores are locally owned. And, just as store sizes differ, so do the metrics related to them, such as the supporting population, the number of parking spaces, and the area of the required site.

Want to cook with a local chef? You can do that at some local grocery stores.



Fresh & Easy

footprint, often by walking, bicycling, or taking transit.

Researchers at the University of British Columbia have found that residents who live in denser, mixed use neighborhoods drive up to 30 percent less than people living in outlying areas. The Oregon-based Climate Trust suggests that households can cut their carbon footprint in half by sticking with a single car and living in denser housing. They can halve their footprint again by having no car. A recent study published by CEOs for Cities found that homes within denser, mixed use, and more walkable neighborhoods have generally maintained significantly higher values compared with outlying locations—despite the recession.

Combine all that with the slow food movement, restaurants featuring local products, farmers markets, and rooftop and community gardens. Community plans are beginning to recognize the interdependence of land use, energy use, affordable housing, public health, social equity, and the supply of food. Some cities are working to get grocery stores into lower income neighborhoods that have little access to fresh food at reasonable prices.

With all these new trends, perhaps it's time to look at a new neighborhood model, one that allows people to live complete lives without depending on cars. Such a neighborhood might not be carbon-neutral, but at least it would be carbon-reduced.

### A new neighborhood building block

One idea is for the grocery store and its siblings to reemerge as cornerstones of great places to live. Americans already are seeking grocery stores for wholesome food and personal connections.

One of the nation's most successful greenfield new urbanist developments, Orenco Station outside of Portland, Oregon, was based on this principle: "the ability to walk to get a quart of milk," as developer Rudy Kadlub put it. The neighborhood features a grocery store close to housing, offices, and other retailers.

A study completed there last year found that half of the Orenco residents surveyed "report walking to a local store to shop five or more times a week, compared to only five percent of respondents in the typical suburb who report that level of walking."

In downtown Houston, a 2004 survey found that "residents and workers consider a grocery store to be the missing element of downtown," and that for Houston residents over 40, grocery shopping was ranked as the second most popular *leisure* activity. Last December, following years of planning and sweat equity, the long-anticipated Byrd's Market & Cafe opened in downtown Houston. "Nothing says downtown like a neighborhood grocer," says Angie Bertinot, director of marketing for the Houston Downtown Management District.

Houston and Portland are not unique: One of the amenities urban residents most desire is a grocery store.

### Hanging out

Supermarkets have become social spaces. Some include espresso bars and seating so shoppers can eat a meal on the spot. People hang out, read, and meet friends—even when buying groceries isn't part of the trip. The New Seasons markets in Portland, Oregon, host special nights for wellness classes, Scrabble, yoga, and crafts. Clearly, they're not your mother's supermarkets.

Meanwhile, many grocery corporations are rethinking their business model, giving up the long-standing template of a single-story box surrounded by acres of asphalt. Increasingly, these markets are going into mixed use developments with little or no parking.

The December 2009 issue of *New Urban News* reported on a couple of supermarkets being built as part of mixed use developments in Washington, D.C., as if that were a major innovation. But in some cities, such as Portland, Chicago, Seattle, and Vancouver, where public investments and growth policies have emphasized urban infill for some time, this trend has been prevalent for years—in the latter two cities for more than a decade. The Seattle area alone has more than a dozen mixed use developments that incorporate full-service supermarkets.

In the past, the lack of parking was often cited as a factor that kept markets out of urban neighborhoods. This is because for decades markets assumed that every customer would arrive by car. But this view seems to be changing rapidly as well. Some recent markets have provided only a few dozen stalls, far fewer than the

standard rule of thumb. Some provide no parking at all. And these stores are doing quite well. The recently opened IGA market in downtown Seattle has not a single parking stall; customers tote their purchases home in cloth sacks.

It's one of a growing number of urban markets that cater to shoppers who carry two bags of groceries out by hand every few days, rather than transporting 10 bags by car twice a month. Buying fresh also means buying more frequently. Some chains now deliver right to your door, with purchases made on the Internet. In San Francisco, Mollie Stone's Market provides a free shuttle bus to the store on demand—a service that is especially popular with seniors.

### Carbon-reduced, market-centric

Let's conceive of a neighborhood with enough customers to support a contemporary supermarket with a relatively typical 45,000 square feet of floor space. Shoppers get there by foot.

While we're at it, let's reconsider a quarter-mile as the ideal walking distance between home and the store. Recent studies by the University of California, Berkeley, have shown that many people will walk much farther for daily needs. Many years ago, researcher William H. Whyte concluded that people will walk farther if the walk is interesting. So let's make the walk more interesting, even if somewhat longer. No parking lots, no blank walls; parks, gardens, and public spaces instead. And let's provide a true Main Street.

The neighborhood would also have convenient schools, but they would not be central. There might be a compact branch of a community college catering to adults—a format we are beginning to see in many places. And there would be a range of other civic buildings and spaces, such as a library, community center, a village green or square, and perhaps a community health clinic.

A supermarket would be at or near the center of the neighborhood. Interestingly, achieving enough density to support a full-service market, with most of its customers arriving on foot, is also enough to support other services. A contemporary market requires the support of 8,000 to 10,000 people (or around 4,000 households). According to economic rules of thumb, that number of people is sufficient to support at least another 50,000 to 80,000 square feet of shops and services.

This would translate into a two-sided street three or four blocks long—a quite walkable "main street" (equivalent to the principal streets in both classic small towns and mature neighborhoods.) In this model, the neighborhood is contained within a radius of four or five blocks (1,500 to 1,700 feet) from the main street. Each end of the main street would be anchored by community uses.

This is our catchment area. It resembles one suggested by Christopher Alexander and his coauthors in the seminal 1977 book about architecture, *A Pattern Language*. But in contrast to old neighborhood models, the main street is at the center, rather than a school. Further, traffic is brought right into the center, rather than kept to the edges, to provide access and activity. And while the model does not depend on transit, accommodation could be made for buses, commuter rail, streetcars, light rail, or a combination.

This model is distinct from the new urbanist "transect" in that a wide range of medium- and high-density urban housing, as well as low-, mid-, and high-rise development, could coexist within one relatively small geographic area. This pattern reflects the messy vitality of many different types of uses, building types and sizes, and human activities within a condensed area.

### Visualizing the model

The model we are describing allows residents to use automobiles very little or not at all, and it offers a range of housing choices—the two critical factors in reducing household carbon emissions. Housing would range from town houses around the edge to high-rise apartments near the center. Some buildings would have live/work units on the ground floor. Office buildings would provide incubator space for both mature and start-up businesses.

We imagine all residents living within walking distance of the main street, which is anchored by a supermarket. Various types of public space—parks, public squares, greens, and community gardens—would be located throughout the neighborhood. Public uses are clustered at one end of the main street: schools for both children and adults, a community center, and a park shared by all these institutions. Office buildings, a library, a civic square large enough for a regular public market, and health services are located at the other end of the main street. Dedicated bicycle lanes or shared lanes are found on many streets. Transit could offer access to jobs elsewhere in the region.

For those who need to drive, one parking stall would be provided for each dwelling and some on-street parking stalls would be set aside for shared electric vehicles and charging posts. Rooftops would house photovoltaic arrays and wind turbines, green roof systems for water absorption, and space to cultivate crops and raise chickens.

Although the neighborhood recognizes the needs of various household types, there is a particular accommodation for an aging population. Finally, below-market-rate housing units, many built by nonprofit organizations, would be distributed throughout the 100-block area.

Clearly, a new model for neighborhoods is in order. And it shouldn't hark back to nostalgic notions of life in the 19th century but instead should address, head-on, the challenges of this century. The neighborhood suggested here attempts to combine principles of environmental, social, and economic sustainability with concepts of density, diversity, and demographic change.

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IN PRINT

*A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein, was published in 1977. "The Next 100 Million," by Arthur C. Nelson, FAICP, and Robert Lang (*Planning*, January 2007).

ONLINE

Climate Trust: www.climatetrust.org. Healthy corner stores: www.healthycornerstores.org. Walk Score interactive website: www.walkscore.com.