

COMMUNITY

EVERYDAY ARCHITECTURE: H-E-B MONTROSE MARKET

THE NEW H-E-B MONTROSE MARKET PRESENTS A QUANDARY FOR *CITE*. SHOULD WE CRITIQUE A GROCERY store? How do we even approach a building of a type that is not expected to be exemplary? Innovative museums, towers, and houses—that’s the stuff of architecture reviews. *Cite*, however, has long considered everything that forms our built environment to be fair game. The first issue of *Cite* featured articles on both the high and the low: a review of Renzo Piano’s plans for the Menil Collection and an analysis of Houston’s sewage system. (A manhole graced the cover, not Mr. Piano’s drawings.)

H-E-B’s Montrose Market was completed this year at the intersection of Dunlavy and Alabama on the former site of the Wilshire Village Apartments. The garden apartments, built in 1940 and designed by Daniel Armstrong with Eugene Werlein as architect of record, were the last remaining of three such FHA-sponsored projects in Houston. The buildings had been allowed to deteriorate, supposedly beyond rehabilitation. Vacant units abounded. Many of the remaining tenants were elderly and on fixed incomes. Artists lived there, and apparently a group of “freegans”—people who live off the food and goods others throw out—occupied one building. The complex, in all its spooky weirdness, imbued the neighborhood with a quiet countercultural feel. (My three-year-old daughter detected that vibe and told me that John Tenk, her imaginary friend with rainbow-colored eyes and a rainbow-colored horse with a rainbow mane, lived in Wilshire Village.)

Montrose Market, though, should have a chance to be judged on its own merits. Put the ghosts and spirits of Wilshire Village aside for a moment. The preservationist’s lament and the critic’s eye have little to do with each other. The new H-E-B is far more pleasing than almost any other big box store in Houston. One would expect as much given that the design is by San Antonio-based Lake|Flato Architects, national winner of the 2004 American Institute of Architects Honor Award for Firm of the Year.

Lake|Flato is known for modern houses that make use of vernacular forms and materials that merge with the landscape. Applying those strategies to large commercial buildings, like Montrose Market, is a challenge.

I normally walk to Montrose Market from the north, down Dunlavy Street. My initial shock at the store’s difference in scale from surrounding buildings has worn off. (I suppose that marks me as a Houstonian.) Most big boxes in Houston are set far back and surrounded by a moat of parking, but here the store sits close to the street, which allows the huge mass to define the public realm. This siting, which the Neartown Association rightly celebrates as a victory, required negotiations with H-E-B and a variance from the city. It also saved the maximum number of trees and feels pedestrian-friendly.

The exterior is composed of concrete walls, wood panels, wide expanses of glass shaded by louvers, exposed steel beams, and clerestory windows. The style, both modern and quaint, is certainly more appealing than the clumsy facades of most big-box stores.

And yet Montrose Market is confounding if taken seriously as the design of a leading architecture firm. The two walls facing Dunlavy and Alabama streets are blank. The entrance opens onto a surface parking lot in the “back.” Car culture wins again. Of course. Rarely do architects have the opportunity to orient big commercial buildings appropriately to the sun and the street.

Moreover, the influence of the designers seems to have stopped at the entrance. As soon as you pass through the automatic doors, the logic of H-E-B takes over. Vegetables on the near right.

Dairy in the far left corner. The middle of the store is stacked high with processed goods. Natural light is often in abundance, a nice change from the usual supermarket pallor, but the light is not handled with Lake|Flato’s finesse. Perhaps my criticisms are not fair, but H-E-B has gone so far as to invoke the Menil Collection in its marketing efforts, and Montrose Market inevitably comes up short.

After Wilshire Village was scraped off this earth and before Montrose Market popped up, the sun-dappled site inspired a number of fantasies. David Bucek drew up a plan for a farmer’s market. A group called the Montrose Land Defense Coalition held protests calling on the city to use the land as a park. Fantasies they remained. H-E-B presented three façade treatments by Lake|Flato that neighborhood residents voted on, a surface-level democracy in design that mollified opposition.

Maybe if METRO had built the University light rail line down Richmond by now and the city had passed an urban corridor ordinance with teeth, or maybe if the Montrose area had a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone or a robust management district to pay the funds H-E-B said were needed to put the parking under the store and thereby leave a shady park, then Lake|Flato could have turned out a building more worthy of their talents. Maybe if more people shopped at farmer’s markets and the federal government put the interests of small farmers before “Big Ag,” there would have been the political will to do something different with the property, giving us something other than a big box wrapped in an architect-designed skin.

Montrose Market exposes the inexorable illogic of our booming economy. A Fiesta supermarket was directly across the street from Wilshire Village, and several other supermarkets are within walking distance. Meanwhile, Houston’s many food deserts remain parched. Now the Fiesta with its friendly staff, quality wine selection, and good music is closed, to be replaced by midrise apartments.

The historic apartments were torn down for a grocery store and the grocery store will be torn down for apartments. **c**

- Raj Mankad



Montrose Market at the intersection of Dunlavy and Alabama Streets.