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**Defending Regional Identity:
Strategies for Reshaping Franchise Architecture**

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Abstract

The architectural design of retail franchises contributes to the on-going homogenization of the American cultural landscape. Regional differences in architectural styles and materials are giving way to standardization and uniformity. In contrast, some European cities and towns have been more effective in getting corporations to adapt their buildings to suit local conditions and preferences.

This paper looks at the following questions:

- Why are variations in regional architecture important? What economic impacts and quality of life issues occur as a result of increased architectural standardization?
- What tools and strategies enable communities to achieve better, more context-sensitive design?
- Are traditional planning tools, such as zoning, design review, and historic district designation effective, or are there more innovative ways to encourage corporations to adapt standardized designs to suit local conditions?
- To what extent do market forces impact the ability and willingness of franchises to deviate from a corporate prototype?
- How do European and U.S. planning and design review processes differ, and can successful strategies translate between countries and continents?



Prototypical BP Station in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

Introduction

Architecture has traditionally reflected the unique culture, climate, and topography of different regions, as well as the aesthetic preferences of local inhabitants. Over the last fifty years, these regional differences have been steadily disappearing, as national and global franchises develop standardized architectural prototypes and replicate these buildings everywhere, with little regard for local variations. The impact of franchises on the character of the built environment should not be underestimated, as the market share of corporate chains continues to expand around the world at a rapid pace. In the U.S. alone, there are more than 550,000 franchise businesses, and they absorb one-third of all retail sales and half of all restaurant sales.¹ Globally, fast food is the most rapidly growing sector of the food service industry² and McDonald's is the world's largest retail property owner.³

Architectural variety enriches communities and celebrates the distinctions between different people and places. The quality of the built environment influences the ability to attract and retain businesses, residents, and tourists. Increased architectural standardization leads to barren cityscapes and communities devoid of authenticity and charm.

Franchises, by their very nature, thrive on standardization. Offering a uniform range of products through a standardized operation is an efficient way of delivering goods and services to an ever-expanding base of consumers. The origins of contemporary franchise design and the development of standardized places for consumption can be traced to the rise of patented trademarks in the U.S., beginning after the Civil War. In this era, corporations began to establish a consistent identity for their retail outlets in order to build regional and national markets.⁴ After the turn of the century, petroleum companies were especially aggressive in adopting trademarks and brand names, and began to construct chains of identical gas stations. Through this early

branding effort, petroleum companies sought to stake out clear trade territories and to establish brand loyalty among consumers. Replicating the same building is a key aspect of what architectural theorists refer to as a “place-product-packaging” strategy, which provides a visual reassurance that the products and services offered are exactly what potential customers need and expect. In the late 1930s, the motel industry in the U.S. adopted this strategy and the fast food industry followed suit in the mid-1950s.⁵



Bob Evans restaurant in Columbus, Ohio attracts customers with a familiar appearance of exaggerated Americana.

A familiar building form, often loaded with subtle and not-so subtle cultural signifiers, creates a comfortable and predictable environment for consumption. Rather than be bored with the sameness of franchise architecture, many consumers have learned to rely on it. The place-product-packaging strategy continues to be a viable marketing approach today. Franchise outlets are designed to send a clear and unmistakable message to consumers that a business is part of a specific corporate chain. A corporate image may be updated to keep customers interested and loyal in an increasingly saturated retail environment, but updates are usually incremental and design consistency throughout a chain of stores remains a high priority.

But despite claims to the contrary from corporations and franchise business owners, all buildings in a franchise do not have to look alike. Corporations will sometimes modify a prototype store in response to community conditions, concerns, and preferences. To combat the prevailing trend toward architectural homogenization, many communities have developed strategies for working with corporations to develop more site-specific buildings. This paper provides an overview of these strategies and considers differences between efforts in U.S. cities and some of their European counterparts.



Low-key, context-sensitive McDonalds in Brussels, Belgium.

For many Americans, a first exposure to context-sensitive franchise design occurs during European travels. While these businesses may seem intrusive to some local



McDonald's in Redditch, England, designed as a prototype for future European expansion.⁶



Less architecturally appealing, perhaps, but more context-sensitive is this McDonald's in Independence, Ohio.



Sainsbury Supermarket, Greenwich, London.⁸

inhabitants, franchise architecture in European cities tends to be much more respectful of context and existing architectural character than in the U.S., where thousands of nearly identical franchise outlets dot the landscape from coast to coast.

Context-sensitive design

There are numerous examples of well-designed, aesthetically pleasing franchise prototypes. But even a beautiful building can have a negative impact on a community if it is replicated in a widespread manner without concern for local conditions and preferences. Conversely, an innovative, site-specific building might appear strange or ungainly in locations other than the one for which it was designed, as its architectural appeal is based solely on its response to a given setting. This paper is not intended to be a critique of the aesthetics of franchise architecture, but rather an investigation into how franchise architecture can be more original and non-formulaic buildings, with respect for the unique character of individual places.

Sustainability

Sustainability is a subtext for efforts to achieve more context-sensitive franchise design. Sustainable buildings are designed to respond appropriately to specific conditions of climate, topography, and locally available materials. A Sainsbury Supermarket constructed in Greenwich, London in 1999 demonstrates how the principles of sustainable design transcend a one-size-fits-all approach to franchise architecture. Lighting requirements consume the second largest amount of energy in a supermarket, second only to refrigeration. The Sainsbury Supermarket was designed to maximize the influx of natural light, based on the unique and specific conditions of the building's site.⁷ The resulting building achieves a level of energy efficiency and architectural appeal that would not have been possible if the company had decided instead to force a standard building design onto the site.



Mixed-use Safeway Supermarket in Portland, Oregon.¹⁰



A former CVS drugstore in Cleveland Heights, Ohio was constructed as a traditional storefront and has been recycled for a new user.



A daycare center reflects the corporate aesthetic of its original occupant, an Arthur Treacher's restaurant.

In Oregon, another supermarket, part of the international Safeway chain, addressed the issue of sustainability by building its first mixed-use facility. The 47,000 square foot store in downtown Portland has loft apartments above it and a parking structure below. The store is part of a larger development which is seeking Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.⁹ The new Safeway replaced a traditional, one-story outlet located across the street, with a multi-story building that is well-suited to its urban context.

A related aspect of sustainability is the potential for a building to be reused if it is vacated by the original occupant. Franchise prototypes are an architectural form of branding. A branded building is difficult to reuse since its physical character tends to be strongly linked to the corporate identity of the original occupant.¹¹ Franchise outlets are often constructed with flimsy, short-term materials, so recycling these buildings is often less feasible than demolishing them and starting from scratch. In rare cases where a franchise building is adapted for a new user, the results can be confusing at best.

Context-sensitive design is most easily achieved when franchises re-use existing buildings, particularly in historic areas. When a business requires a new building, it can be constructed of durable materials and designed for maximum flexibility, making it adaptable for a variety of future uses. Hardy, indigenous plant materials can link a franchise building to its physical setting while helping to mitigate some of the adverse environmental impacts of retail construction.

European and U.S. differences

The concept for this paper sprung from an empirical observation that franchise architecture in European cities is more innovative and more context-specific than that in the United States, even when the same corporations are involved. Two broad, overriding factors—location and

cultural expectations—influence the character of franchise architecture and may explain some of the differences between buildings in the U.S. and in Europe.

Location: In the U.S., fast food franchises typically open their first outlets in the suburbs, where automobile access is convenient and real estate is relatively inexpensive. Later, once a brand has been established and suburban markets are saturated, these franchises expand to high profile sites in downtown areas and at tourist destinations. In Europe, this pattern is reversed. The first outlets for a franchise are located in central cities because they are the highest traffic retail locations, unlike in many U.S. cities where retailers have all but abandoned downtown for the suburbs. Also, most foreign markets do not allow the unlimited access to television advertising that is available in the U.S., so franchises need to establish highly visible “billboard” locations in downtown areas, such as the Piazza di Spagna in Rome or the Champs d’Elyseé in Paris.¹² Franchise outlets in these high-profile settings must adhere to a high standard of design because these locations are rigorously regulated by local, regional, and sometimes national governments. They also serve as a marketing tool for a franchise, an opportunity to make a good first impression. This impression will likely determine whether the franchise is successful so extra attention to design, materials, and setting is a natural result for franchises in these prime locations.



McDonalds in suburban Waterloo, Belgium adheres closely to the corporate prototype design.¹³



McDonalds at Broadway and 42nd Street in New York City adopts the aesthetics of the theatre district.¹⁴

The perception that Europe has higher quality franchise architecture may, in part come from a “tourist’s eye view.” As franchises expand beyond the historic core areas of European cities into more suburban locations, building designs tend to be more standardized and less responsive to context and local preferences. Conversely, as franchise outlets move into prime urban locations in the U.S., they display a heightened degree of site-specific design and respect for architectural context.

Cultural Expectations: Europeans may expect or even demand that local officials exert control over the architectural design of franchise buildings. Many of the franchises spreading throughout Europe are based in the U.S. These corporations are motivated to adapt to local customs and preferences because, if an American franchise is viewed by local inhabitants as an invasive, alien presence, it is unlikely to succeed. McDonald's, for example, strives to create the perception of locally-based operation when entering a foreign market. McDonald's has a "vice-president for individuality" whose stated job function is to make this global corporation "feel small."¹⁵ Many of the websites for European divisions of McDonald's feature images of the unique McDonald's outlets found in each country. Some critics have noted that these local variations amount to little more than cultural hegemony on the part of McDonald's, motivated by a desire to increase market penetration rather than by a sincere interest in preserving local cultures.¹⁶ Regardless of the motivations of McDonald's and other American franchises abroad, it is apparent that the heightened expectations and demands of European citizens have resulted in a stronger architectural response to local context.

U.S. citizens tend to expect or demand less in terms of development controls to regulate the design of franchise architecture and are more likely to support the rights of property owners to have free reign over the land and buildings they control. However, in recent years, there has been a marked increase in grassroots opposition throughout the U.S. to cookie-cutter retail development. This trend has manifested itself most clearly in the form of organized resistance to Wal-Mart stores. In the case of Wal-Mart, the growing public outrage may have as much to do with the corporation's effects on local economies as it does with its impact on the character of local architecture.¹⁷ But there have been numerous other situations where opposition by the general public has begun to impact the design of franchise

buildings. Some recent examples include a Walgreens drugstore in Berea, Ohio that is being clad in sandstone in response to community pressure. The material reflects the architectural character of the city and its long history as a center for quarry operations.¹⁸ In Bristol, Rhode Island, a group of residents is actively fighting a proposed Dunkin' Donuts outlet, which they perceive as a threat to the town's historic character. These residents are spearheading an effort to ban franchises from the town entirely.¹⁹

While location and cultural expectations account for some of the differences between franchise architecture in Europe and the U.S, they do not necessarily lead to specific actions that public officials on either side of the Atlantic could pursue in an effort to improve the quality of franchise design. But there are other factors to consider, including regulation, local influence, and profitability.

Regulation

What regulatory tools and strategies do European cities use to achieve context-sensitive design for franchise outlets? In exploring this question, I looked primarily at design regulation in Great Britain and found that the regulatory framework for design review is similar to that in the U.S. One significant difference is that in the U.K., officials tend to have more discretionary authority. Their decisions are generally made based on the relative merits of a specific proposal in the context of a master plan that has been adopted for the community in which the project is situated. A master plan will set out principles that can be applied, with considerable flexibility, based on an understanding of the characteristics of a site, its history and geography, and its relationship to surrounding areas.²⁰ Officials in U.S. cities tend to have less discretionary authority; their decisions are based on local zoning statutes, design review ordinances, and design guidelines, which may or may not have been enacted as part of a master plan.

Another difference is that some European countries, including Great Britain and France, have national and regional design review authorities, in addition to local review. Design review in the U.S. is almost completely administered at a local level; federal involvement is limited to historic landmarks being restored with federal funds.

In European cities, design review is well-established and widespread. For example, Town and Country Planning Acts throughout the U.K. have contained provisions enabling the local planning authority to control “the size, height, design, and appearance of buildings” since the 1930s.²¹ In contrast, design review in the U.S. is more localized and, in large part, more recent. Many U.S. cities continue to lack the authority to restrict or alter the appearance of retail development. Although most municipalities have some form of zoning, zoning codes typically permit retail development in commercial areas as a right, with little opportunity for government officials or citizens to review or modify development proposals. However, U.S. cities are increasingly adopting design review legislation to gain a level of control over the exterior appearance of buildings, especially in commercial areas and historic districts. Today, there are more than 4,000 design review districts across the U.S., a dramatic increase from twenty years ago where design review was limited to several hundred (mostly historic) districts nationwide.²²



7-Eleven franchise in Beacon Hill, Boston, is designed to fit into its historic context.



Teal green replaces the golden arches for a Sedona McDonalds; stucco cladding reflects the colors of the Sonoran desert.

Zoning codes or other forms of appearance review used to address the design of franchises fall into several general categories:

Design Review Ordinances/Historic Preservation Ordinances: Landmark districts and conservation overlay zoning are the most common kinds of design review legislation in the U.S. Both types of districts are geared toward protecting existing architectural character or natural features. Examples of these districts include the historic Beacon Hill area in Boston, where exterior building appearance and signage are strictly controlled by the local landmarks



Gas station in a “placeless” commercial corridor in Perry Township, Ohio.



Ice cream shop provides a unique local feature in Perry Township.

commission,²³ and the central business district in Sedona, Arizona, where buildings must reflect the materials and color palette of the city’s distinctive natural environment.²⁴

Effective design review can be more difficult to achieve in places that lack a discernible, cohesive architectural character or a distinctive natural setting. Since World War II, the U.S. has experienced rapid development in suburban and exurban areas. The speed of growth, combined with sparse development controls, has produced communities that lack any sort of defining local identity. Design guidelines that encourage compatibility with existing community character are ineffective in these placeless places. Instead of *respecting* community character, design review must attempt to *create* this character. This is a much more difficult challenge. One common approach involves collaborating with business owners and community residents in a planning process that identifies values and preferences for the built environment and achieves a degree of consensus about priorities for future development. Every place has some distinguishing feature or historical attribute. Inventorying a community’s assets and unique characteristics, whatever they may be, provides a solid basis for establishing or recreating visual character through a design guidelines and an appearance review process. Once a community has articulated its goals for physical development and appearance, it becomes easier to encourage franchises to adapt their buildings to suit the local context.

Design review may be conducted under the authority of a zoning board or by a freestanding landmarks commission or architectural review board. While these bodies have some discretionary authority, design guidelines provide a basis for the board or commission’s decision-making and to lessen the risk that decisions will be arbitrary or capricious, and thereby vulnerable to lawsuits by property owners. The most effective guidelines tread a fine line between being specific enough to provide clear guidance for property owners, while not being so prescriptive as to limit creativity and potential design solutions.

While planning agencies in the U.K. generally have broader discretionary authority than their U.S. counterparts, this is changing. Local and regional planning agencies in the U.K. have begun to develop more detailed and specific design guidance and urban design codes.²⁵ Area master plans are now frequently supplemented with more detailed guidance in the form of smaller and more specific neighborhood plans, design statements for particular areas, and site development briefs. This leads to a decision-making process that is less subjective and idiosyncratic, and increases the ability of planning officials to advocate for development that responds appropriately to its context.²⁶

In communities that lack design guidelines or appearance codes, corporations may refuse to alter a corporate prototype or, as a compromise, they may offer a range of “regional” prototype alternatives. McDonald’s pioneered this approach in the 1970s. In an effort to placate communities that were opposed to the standard prototype, McDonald’s devised a range of stock façade alternatives in styles that included “Country French,” “English Tudor,” “Mediterranean,” and Village Depot.” These alternatives were superficial design treatments applied to McDonald’s standard mansard-roofed building.²⁷ CVS and Walgreens drug stores are among the corporations that employ a similar strategy today.

Design guidelines must be clearly articulated and a community needs to be persistent in order to get a truly distinctive and site-specific building. Effective guidelines discuss building height and setbacks (with minimum and maximum dimensions), roof and building forms, preferred building materials and color palettes, parking and drive-through requirements, and preferred techniques. Referrals to local architects and craftspeople also help corporations develop community-responsive buildings. Landscape guidelines that promote hardy, indigenous plant materials can also help a franchise outlet fit into its setting.



Walgreens standard prototype.



Walgreens “Tudor” variation.

Voluntary compliance/mandatory review. An officially adopted ordinance that includes provisions for architectural regulation is the most effective way to get corporations to respect the design preferences of community residents. However, not every community has the capacity or the desire to adopt such regulations and to establish a design review process. This should not deter those who seek to influence the design of buildings in their communities since design guidelines can be adopted without regulatory enforcement powers. Voluntary guidelines help corporations understand a community's preferences. For voluntary guidelines to be effective, they should be prepared in conjunction with the business community. Many business owners will make an effort to comply with voluntary guidelines if only to maintain good community relations. For communities without a design review board or landmarks commission, a more basic plan review process can be instituted as a requirement for a building permit. In this type of process, a building or planning official reviews plans and provides guidance about making a building's exterior appearance more in keeping with community standards. Franchise owners are required to participate in a discussion about their building's appearance will often be willing to make positive changes, even where there is no established authority to mandate such changes.²⁸



Starbucks in a remodeled historic building in Bexley, Ohio.

Having friendly, non-antagonistic relationships with corporations and franchise owners is key to achieving voluntary cooperation. The National Trust for Historic Preservation assists local governments and community organizations gain this kind of cooperation through its Corporate Good Neighbor Program and Drugstore Initiative. These programs encourage the reuse of historic structures, even if it means modifying prototypical store layouts and parking configurations. Where new construction is planned, the programs encourage compliance with preservation-sensitive design standards. In almost all cases, the Trust has no regulatory authority to influence franchise design, but the organization works with franchise owners

and local communities to develop specific strategies for context-sensitive design on a case-by-case basis.²⁹

Size limits: Some communities have enacted size limits to restrict the development of franchise businesses. This technique has been used most frequently in an effort to restrict the development of “big box” franchises. Examples include Roswell, Georgia, which altered its zoning code in 1997 to prohibit retail stores larger than 100,000 square feet, and Wilton, Connecticut, which set its cap at 30,000 square feet. In Europe, France and Ireland have adopted similar caps on a national level.³⁰ In the Brookside neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri, retail uses are capped at 10,000 square feet, except for grocery stores which may be 30,000 square feet. Instead of minimum standards for parking, Brookside set parking maximums to prevent the enormous parking lots found elsewhere in the city and suburbs.³¹

Rather than prohibiting stores above a certain square footage, some communities have adopted regulations that trigger a heightened level of scrutiny for businesses above a maximum size. Plymouth, Massachusetts requires a special permit for retail businesses larger than 6,000 square feet. Mill Valley, California, authorizes a higher level of scrutiny for stores larger than 1,500 square feet. Since zoning codes can only regulate land use, not business ownership, these regulations would apply to locally-owned, independent businesses, as well as franchises. However, most of these regulations are clearly geared toward mitigating the adverse impacts of corporate franchises and protecting community character.

Prohibitions on the use of stock building plans: Banning the use of stock building plans and corporate prototypes is another technique aimed at reducing the adverse impacts of franchises on community character. The City of Hopkins, Minnesota prohibits any building designs that is “trade-marked or identified with a particular chain or corporation

and is generic in nature.”³² Georgetown, Colorado bans “stock building plans or typical corporate or franchise operation designs.” Instead, the town’s guidelines encourage building designs and styles that are “compatible with the character of Georgetown.”³³



What might appear cluttered in another context seems appropriate in Times Square.



Requiring all signs on a multi-tenant building to a common color scheme limits the possibilities for creative signage.

Zoning and use-based restrictions: Modifications to planning and zoning regulations can give a community a stronger role in regulating franchise development and design. Citizens and officials in the U.K., for example, are trying to modify planning laws (known as the “A3 Use Class”) which allow local pubs to become fast food outlets as a matter of right, since this is not currently deemed to be a change of use. This effort to reform existing planning laws began with residents of Hinchley Wood in Surrey who objected to efforts by McDonald’s to convert a popular local pub into a fast-food outlet.³⁴ In the U.S., this issue is typically addressed by requiring special use permits for drive-throughs, triggering a heightened level of scrutiny for fast food outlets, as well as many banks and pharmacies. The City of Chicago, for example, amended its zoning regulations in 1999 to require a special use permit for all drive-through businesses. These businesses must now meet or exceed established landscaping standards and install pedestrian-scaled lighting. Drive-through buildings must have brick exteriors and clear glass windows, as well as at least one side of the building that abuts the public sidewalk.³⁵

Zoning codes typically limit the size and number of signs for a give property. Some zoning codes even limit the colors that can be used for signage, although this issue have been tied to trademark protection laws in the U.S. and is being contested in the courts by several corporations.³⁶ Sign restrictions can have a significant impact on franchise architecture, as signage is an integral element of prototypical building designs. Effective sign regulations aim to reduce the visual clutter of excessive signage without unduly limiting the potential for creativity in sign design.

Franchise restrictions or bans At the most extreme end of the regulatory spectrum, a few communities in the U.S. prohibit the development of standardized franchise businesses entirely. Communities with franchise bans tend to have tourism-based economies, which can be devastated by an influx of homogeneous franchise businesses. Tourism is often inextricably linked to unique retail businesses and restaurants. Franchises lower the drawing power of tourist communities and weaken their economies. To combat this problem, the Carmel, California became the first city in the U.S. (in the 1980s) to drastically restrict franchise restaurants, defined in the city's zoning code as:

...a food service business that adopts a name, appearance or food presentation format which causes it to be substantially identical to another restaurant, regardless of ownership or location.³⁷

Other communities have followed suit, including St. Helena in California's Napa Valley which also bans "formula restaurants" in its central business district.

San Francisco, California may go a step further and ban or heavily restrict franchise businesses of any kind from certain parts of the city. A new ordinance, not yet adopted, bans chains (defined as businesses with more than eleven outlets) from opening in a four-block area of the trendy Hayes Valley neighborhood. The ordinance also places tight restrictions on chain businesses in the Cole Valley neighborhood several miles away. Franchises can circumvent the ordinance if they are willing to open an outlet with a different name, a distinct look, and different product offerings.³⁸ The ordinance is based more on economics than architectural variety. Corporate franchises often pay higher rents and undercut independent stores on pricing, driving out local enterprises. San Francisco's ordinance is controversial because it is perceived by some as elitist and hostile to business interests. Since franchise bans are a relatively new phenomenon, it will take some

time to see if this type of regulation will withstand legal challenges and become a more widespread means of regulating commercial development.



Kentucky Fried Chicken, Los Angeles, California, a locally-owned franchise that was designed to be a community landmark.³⁹

Local influence

Businesses need the good will of community residents to be successful. For this reason, franchise owners are likely to respond to requests for architectural modifications, even if a community does not have regulations in place to govern exterior design. Affluent areas tend to get more interesting, site-specific franchise architecture, in part because businesses try to develop facilities that appeal to what they perceive as a more discerning consumer. Businesses will often go to greater lengths to customize their buildings in upscale areas because the initial costs are offset by the increased revenues that come from locating in areas with a stronger market. In contrast, franchise owners are less likely to alter a corporate prototype in distressed or marginal urban areas because there is little political will or community pressure to force them to do so. Local officials in these areas tend to make fewer demands of business owners, in part because their neighborhoods urgently need the retail development, tax revenues, and jobs that new businesses provide. So even where local design review boards exist, they may be less likely to make demands for fear of losing new businesses. In wealthier areas with stronger local economies, officials have fewer reservations about making demands since, if one franchise leaves, another will certainly follow.

An early example where local influence and community opinion had a demonstrable effect on franchise design was in Ann Arbor Michigan in 1973. 5,000 people signed petitions opposing McDonald's plan to replace a historic house with a standard restaurant prototype. The house was demolished but McDonald's eventually hired a local architecture firm to produce a custom-designed building for the site. The building is brick with a front courtyard that was built around existing trees. Signage includes a stained glass window with



Customized McDonald's design, Ann Arbor, Michigan.⁴¹

the McDonald's logo. The building was considerably more expensive than the standard prototype, but the additional costs were quickly recovered through higher sales volumes, generated by the appeal of the building as well as its proximity to an affluent residential neighborhood and the main campus of the University of Michigan.⁴⁰

More recently, the affluent community of Mequon, Wisconsin was able to influence the replacement for an existing, non-descript Mobil gas station. The new station, not yet constructed, will look like a picturesque cottage with large windows, fabric awnings, a gabled roof, and a cupola. The signage will be subdued and the site will have ample landscaping. According to Mequon Mayor Christine Nuernberg,

You don't have to accept yellow arches if you don't want them. We tell people: If you want to build here, here's what you have to do. We're going to insist on good design.⁴²

Regardless of economic conditions or political influence, any community can be encouraged to aspire for better design. Economically and socially disadvantaged areas have as much to gain from high-quality, context-sensitive buildings as more affluent neighborhoods. Raising the awareness of residents and local officials by showing them what franchise buildings look like in other areas empowers them to demand more for their own neighborhoods.

Profitability

Closely related to the issue of local influence is profitability. Some businesses, particularly coffee shops and restaurants, may be very willing to develop buildings which vary from a corporate prototype because unique buildings can produce more revenue than their standardized counterparts. The image-conscious Starbucks Corporation has long recognized the competitive advantage of architectural variety. While each Starbucks outlet



Starbucks in Edwards, Colorado.



Starbucks in Cleveland, Ohio; lighthouse design is a visual reference to nearby Lake Erie.



McDonald's in London.



Late 1980s-era McDonald's in suburban Beachwood, Ohio.

is virtually identical in terms of interior configuration and graphic identity, the corporation does not have a prototypical design for building exteriors. Each Starbucks outlet is designed specifically for its site, and many are located in refurbished historic buildings. In the case of Starbucks, uniformity would undermine coffee sales as many patrons visit a coffee shop as much for the experience as for the coffee.

Fast-food franchises can also enhance profits with innovative, context-sensitive design. McDonald's has demonstrated that designing customized buildings, at least in some locations, is a worthwhile investment. The key to increased profits is to ensure that the resulting building still looks like a McDonald's and maintains the brand's identity. Early McDonald's outlets in Holland and Germany were retrofitted into existing pubs, with much of the original building character kept in tact. These franchises were unprofitable because they did not establish a bold enough presence for what was, at the time, a relatively unknown commodity. Also, existing pub buildings were dark and did not attract McDonald's core customers—families with children. Later, more successful franchises in the U.K. were especially large and extravagant, but they were clearly designed to look like McDonald's, even though their travertine façades and flowering planter boxes distinguished them from their American counterparts.⁴³ Entering foreign markets with an emphasis on architectural quality dramatically increased McDonald's European revenues in the 1980s and paved the way for the corporation's rapid overseas expansion in the 1990s that continues today. There were also some innovative, site-specific McDonald's restaurants designed in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, primarily in downtown locations and affluent suburbs. However, the majority of McDonald's outlets, as well as those of other fast-food restaurants, adhere closely to standard corporate designs.

In contrast to designs for coffee shops and restaurants, it is rare to find variations to standard prototypes for gas station franchises. Drivers seek convenience rather than any sort of “automotive experience” when filling their tanks, so gas station owners have little motivation to waiver from the franchise prototype. In fact, architectural variety may actually reduce the profitability of a gas station.

A “golden age” of gas station design occurred in the U.S. between approximately 1920 and the beginning of World War II. In this period, gas stations were often individually designed by prominent architects and some were actually promoted for their attractiveness and unique features.⁴⁴ Over the long term, however, gas stations designed to be deliberately unique have not fared well financially.⁴⁵ The drive toward standardization and uniformity has reduced the number of unique, context-sensitive gas stations, although some do exist.

For example, a Marathon gas station in Lakewood, Ohio, modified its standard configuration in an effort to fit into a residential setting (and in direct response to the protests of homeowners who did not want a gas station on their street). The station was built on a sloping site where a landscaped berm and a Marathon sign is all that is visible from the street. The pumps and station building are located downhill at the back of the site and are cannot be seen from neighboring properties or the street. The resulting station is attractive, respectful of its setting, and significantly less profitable than comparable stations with a more typical configuration. Marathon officials attribute the reduced revenue to the fact that the pumps are not visible from the street, creating a degree of unpredictability which results in fewer customers.

Similarly, a BP station in a local historic district in Shaker Heights, Ohio varies from the standard gas station design. The 1920s-era gas station lacks BP’s contemporary, illuminated canopy structure. As a result, the gas station’s revenues decline significantly on rainy or snowy days, since many potential customers keep driving until they find a



1920s era Shell Station in Hamilton, New York (ceased operation as a gas station in 1979).⁴⁶



Marathon Gas Station in Lakewood, Ohio responds to its residential setting.



BP Station in Shaker Heights, Ohio historic district.

covered station to protect them from the weather. So while communities may be eager to require architecturally distinctive buildings for all businesses, it is more difficult to gain cooperation and compliance from certain kinds of franchises depending on the financial advantages to the corporation of varying from established prototypes. This is especially true in communities that rely on voluntary design guidelines rather than regulations and a review authority.



Gulf Station in Bilthoven, the Netherlands, fits into its natural setting.⁴⁸

This does not mean, however, that efforts to achieve more context-sensitive design in gas stations are a lost cause. The previously cited Mobil station in Mequon, Wisconsin demonstrates that petroleum corporations and gas station operators can be encouraged to alter their prototypical designs. Numerous innovative gas stations have been designed and constructed in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands where local review boards have pushed gas stations to new levels of innovation and community responsive design.⁴⁷

Although the standard configuration of the modern gas station is pervasive in the U.S., some communities are exploring new ways to make these buildings fit in better with local conditions. The urban character of Charleston, South Carolina, for example, has been undermined over the years by the placement and configuration of gas stations. It was the rapid development of gas stations in Charleston the nineteen-teens and twenties that gave rise to the city's influential and well-entrenched historic preservation movement. In the late 1920s, Standard Oil demolished three historic houses in downtown Charleston to construct a gas station. The public outrage over this act led to the adoption of a planning and zoning ordinance in 1931 that established the first historic district and architectural board of review in the U.S. To appease the angry public, Standard Oil hired a prominent Charleston architect to design a gas station in the colonial revival style on the site of the demolished historic buildings. At the time, this did little to quell public outrage, but the gas station has since developed a historic character

of its own. It was retired from automotive use in the 1980s and converted into the Frances R. Edmunds Center for Historic Preservation.⁴⁹

Charleston has numerous early 20th century gas stations in its historic core that no longer function effectively for their original use. Newer gas stations have been built in the city to correspond to current traffic patterns and contemporary architectural prototypes. While many of the older gas stations have been demolished to make way for other development, some of the more architecturally distinctive stations have been adapted for new uses, including an antique store and a restaurant. Moreover, Charleston uses local regulations to overcome the profitability factor in requiring the design of new gas stations to correspond to local conditions and preferences. Several new gas stations have been constructed in Charleston that have a convenience store right at the sidewalk, in keeping with the traditional commercial character of the city. These stations have the pumps relegated to the rear of the site. This modified prototype may be applicable to other places as well. Planners from the City of Chicago are hoping to incorporate the store in front/pumps behind layout into the city's updated zoning code and this gas station configuration recently appeared in an issue of *New Urban News*, a publication widely read by architects, planners, developers in the U.S.⁵⁰



*A new Walgreens meets with resistance in Seattle, Washington.*⁵³

Drugstore franchises fall somewhere between coffee shops and gas stations, in terms of willingness and financial motivation to vary a corporate prototype design. While a drugstore's architectural appeal may not be a prime factor in determining where convenience-driven consumers choose to shop, drugstore franchises are motivated by the desire to fit in. This is due, at least in part, to the preference of drugstore chains to have freestanding stores at corner locations in traditional commercial districts.⁵¹ Attempts to force a standard prototype building into a traditional commercial area will frequently be met with community resistance. While this resistance may not translate directly

into reduced profits, drugstores need good community relations to be financially successful. As such, most drugstore franchises are willing to make an effort to be a good neighbor, especially if zoning and design review provisions are in place to reinforce this neighborliness.

A combination of factors: *Oak Brook, Illinois*

When regulations, local influence, and the profit motive come together, the result can be a high level of architectural responsiveness, as that which occurred for a McDonald's restaurant in the Village of Oak Brook, Illinois. McDonald's has demonstrated some willingness to vary the architecture of its corporate prototypes but, out of 16,000 McDonald's restaurants worldwide, only a small percentage are special adaptations.

So how did Oak Brook, a small, affluent suburb of Chicago, get singled out for special treatment? The village has a tagline that reflects its character and aspirations: "Tranquil, Beautiful, Stylish and Prestigious." The McDonald's site is within the Oak Brook's historic Graue Mill Gateway Area, where design restrictions are in place. Oak Brook's design guidelines do not contain specific provisions to restrict or modify the design of franchise architecture. Instead, property owners and prospective developers are urged to "consider the compatibility of the design, arrangement, texture, and materials of the proposed buildings or structures with the intent and purpose of the area."⁵³

Despite the general nature of its design guidelines, Oak Brook was successful in getting McDonald's (as well as other franchises) to understand and comply with community standards, in part because the village's design review process is legally enforceable. In addition, franchise businesses have a compelling desire to locate in Oak Brook, where a high-income consumer base and substantial retail traffic results in solid profits. Affluent consumers have higher expectations as far as franchise design. Compounding the power of popular opinion in this case is the fact that Oak



McDonald's restaurant in Oak Brook, Illinois.



Historic Graue Mill, Oak Brook, Illinois.⁵⁴

Brook is home to McDonald's corporate headquarters, so the appearance of the restaurant is especially important as a point of pride for corporate officials. The design is not especially dramatic or innovative, but it picks up on the style of historic buildings in the village while displaying the understated refinement and high quality materials that make it very much at home in its context.

Conclusion

Regional variations in architectural styles and building materials enrich the fabric of communities, enhance local economies and promote an ethic of sustainability. While attempts to adapt prototypical building designs to suit local conditions may sometimes result in visual clichés and architectural pastiche, franchise architecture at its best can genuinely enhance local distinctiveness.

Businesses prefer to be a valued part of the community—to fit in and respond to local needs. But brand identification is inextricably linked to revenues and franchises communicate their brands through signage and architecture. The most effective way of getting well-designed, context-sensitive buildings is through regulated approval process. The best results are achieved, though, when it is in a corporation's own best interest to make innovative, community-responsive design choices. Regulations can mandate certain design concessions, but token compliance by a corporation will invariably produce an unsatisfying result. Understanding a corporation's motivations and appealing to its need for positive community relations will go a long way toward achieving a higher design standard for franchise architecture. Regulatory tools (which are continually being refined in the U.S. and abroad) are still needed, especially when dealing with recalcitrant corporations. In the absence of a regulations, a clear expression of a community's preferences and a well-informed negotiation process can also help to preserve regional variety and achieve better franchise architecture.

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