Harnessing some monsters in historic townships: supermarket developments on Main Street

Introduction

It seems reasonable to suggest that any small country town would give its eyeteeth to secure a major supermarket development. The analogy is perhaps particularly poignant or pertinent in a historic township where we might easily be counting the number of extractions from the main street needed to accommodate the development or, alternatively, the extent of the rot likely to set in if the supermarket is located elsewhere.

On discovering that there were three current proposals to develop supermarkets in historic Victorian goldfields towns, I thought that something might be learned from describing and comparing the developments on the grounds that:

• The incidence suggests that these are unlikely to be the only examples in Australia. There could be some useful pointers on how to deal with others that may be on their way.

• The three towns are each recognised for their historic character and have a long history of conservation policy and practice. Possibly these developments have been handled with a greater sensitivity than would have been the case elsewhere.

• The towns each had access to the services of a Heritage Adviser, the support of local heritage advisory committees, and each had local heritage lobby groups.

The alien invasion

It is hard to think of anything more alien to the nature of the commercial centre of a small goldfield town than a supermarket. One only has to think of the essential characteristics of such a place, the things that make the place historically significant, to immediately appreciate the problem. Typically these commercial centres:

• are of an intimate scale
• are comprised of small shops contained within one, or at most two, main shopping streets
• have a largely intact 19th-century fabric expressed in one and two-storey, often single-fronted buildings
• have facades generally rich in detail or decoration with a strong vertical emphasis
• have buildings built to the boundary creating continuous ‘walls’ to the streetscape.

The typical supermarket, on the other hand:

• is large and monolithic
• is generally constructed of the most efficient modern materials to create the maximum clear span with a minimum of articulation
• has a strong horizontal emphasis
• requires large surrounding space for access loading and car parking. This
miss-fit is of course widely recognised today; it would be very unusual to
find a carpark with supermarket behind being blatantly inserted into a 19th-
century streetscape, as occurred in Clarendon Street, South Melbourne.

The simplest approach to avoid this conflict is to locate the supermarket on the
outskirts, where it is often accompanied by a small mall of speciality shops, but
of course the impact of such a solution on the viability of the traditional centre
of a small country town can be dramatic.

A more sophisticated approach, also frequently adopted in modern shopping
centres, is to provide the supermarket with a minimum frontage to the shopping
strip and to develop the main structure and car park to the rear. This has been
applied in traditional strip shopping centres in cities and was the approach
adopted at Daylesford and Beechworth. Some elements of this approach were
also used at Castlemaine, but in a rather different situation.

A word about the towns

Daylesford, Castlemaine and Beechworth are not stereotypical decaying country
towns. However, they are not without their economic problems. The knitting
mill at Castlemaine has closed and Beechworth also suffered major loss of
employment with the closure of the Mayday Hills mental hospital, but
compared with their prospects thirty years ago they have all the appearance of a
certain quiet prosperity. This conference would not find it hard to accept that
this is due, in no small part, to the retention of their historic character. There is
also some empirical evidence to support this view.

Both Daylesford and Castlemaine are within easy reach of Melbourne’s
 burgeoning ‘weekend-away’ market. Daylesford and neighbouring Hepburn
Springs have benefited from the revival of the spa country-guesthouse while
Castlemaine has run a State Arts Festival for over twenty years.

Beechworth’s survival and revival is less easily explained. It appears to have
developed a regional tourism base. The now well-known Beechworth Bakery
attracts regular day trips from around the region and the town probably lies on
the outer edge of the metropolitan ‘weekend-away’ market.

Each of the towns has their heritage interest groups (historical societies or
National Trust branches). The Councils have heritage advisory committees and
employ heritage advisers. In these circumstances one could reasonably expect a
sophisticated debate about economic imperatives, urban conservation and urban
character. In reality, this was not always the case.
Dealing in Daylesford

The 1500 square metre supermarket in Daylesford has just been completed and is accessed from the main shopping strip, Vincent Street, by a 7.5 m wide covered-walkway. The main building and car park are located behind the Vincent Street commercial buildings, on land that fronts Bridport Street and Albert Street. Albert Street is also the Midland Highway and therefore an important approach to the town. The impact of the car park and supermarket itself is heightened by its corner block location.

The application was referred to the Heritage Adviser for comment and his report was adverse, primarily based on the impact of the development as seen from Bridport Street and Albert Street. He believed the site was not appropriate and considered it preferable that retail frontages be developed along Albert Street. This form of development would 'anchor' the corner of Albert and Bridport and, if the supermarket development were to proceed, would provide a suitable screen.

The developers sought a second opinion from a heritage architect whose report also supported the concept of anchoring the corner and screening the car park with buildings. The proposal was subsequently approved – with its original layout and without an appeal from third parties. The Heritage Adviser, who was on a year to year contract at the time, did not apply for a renewal of his contract.

The development could certainly be said to have a minimal impact on Vincent
Street, while providing an essential link to the traditional main street. The design of portal fronting Vincent Street is, however, perhaps less than comfortable. A conscious attempt has been made to break the elements of the supermarket building itself into separate elements, thereby avoiding an extensive and monolithic presentation. Again one would have to ask whether these elements are appropriately designed for their setting.

The idea of encouraging development along the frontage of Albert Street is an attractive partial solution. On the other hand, the current Heritage Adviser is of the view that this concept would be contrary to the historic structure of the town. The commercial strip has always been confined to one street, with an almost immediate change to a suburban form of development as soon as one leaves the main street.

Looked at this way, a soft landscape approach can be seen as an appropriate response rather than the cheapest palliative. The neat brick-wall and hedge at the perimeter and strong planting throughout the carpark may heal the sore. However, the loading bay onto ‘suburban’ Bridport Street seems unfortunate. If there is an argument that the landscaping should be in tune with a suburban environment, then surely anything less than a fully enclosed loading bay is not acceptable.
Battle in Beechworth

This was the least controversial of the three developments, but in the end was the only one to go to appeal.

Smaller than the other proposals at only 1200 square metres, the proposal has a minimal effect on the historic retail street, Ford Street, as an existing laneway is used to access the supermarket that is to be built at the rear, on a block fronting Loch Street. Carparking was not an issue as a council carpark already existed on an adjacent block. Although the proposed materials include an unexciting tilt slab, the form has been broken down into three ridge and gable roofs, which is sympathetic to its context. Verandahs are used extensively along the side facing the carpark, the end approached from Ford Street and along the specialty shops which will front the laneway approach. The loading bay was formed by an enclosed projection of the central gable at the Loch Street end.

Even the notionally reconstructed grocery store fronting Ford Street is to be retained with the specialty shops being inserted, so to speak, in the existing store.

With such careful concessions to its historic context achieved, the Heritage
Adviser reported favourably and there was no objection from local heritage groups. At least not until an objection was lodged by the owner of the former Oddfellows Hall, which faced the loading bay across Loch Street. Having just completed a very thorough restoration of the hall, he was incensed to realise that the loading bay was far too small to accommodate the truck and that he had been left facing an open loading dock. The council was reluctant to bend and the matter went to appeal. The Tribunal found in favour of the Appellant and the proponent was required to provide a fully enclosed truck bay and further setback and landscaping. In the final plans the proponent has elected to provide loading at the front of the supermarket from an adjacent service lane.

Site works had just commenced at the time of writing this paper.

The relationship with the main street (Ford Street) seems to have been handled very well and the breaking-down of the building into three gable roof elements is exemplary. A greater effort might have been made on the external finishes although the verandahs will be the most evident features along the north and south elevations. The real issue here has been the ‘back end’ where the historic character and, indeed, the simple amenity of Loch Street has been ignored. Loch Street is an attractive wide tree-lined street of villas and public buildings, most dating from around the 1870s. Not the ideal place for a supermarket loading bay.
Controversy in Castlemaine

The largest of the three proposals at 3750 square metres, this proposal was the most difficult to integrate because of its location.

The commercial centre is quite different from most 19th-century country town centres. Instead of a main street, Castlemaine’s centre is built around three sides of what was originally a market square. In 1916 the Eastern market was removed to make way for a school and a year later the western market removed for a public park. The main market building remained between the two. The effect of an open square surrounded by the town’s commercial buildings remained until recently. A few years ago the school was sold for the development of a much-desired supermarket.

The proposal involved retention of the original school buildings fronting Mostyn Street with the supermarket behind and a carpark (partially underground) along the Hargraves Street frontage.

Thus a typical ‘build it behind the frontage buildings’ solution was proposed, but this could not work as the supermarket itself would be exposed on three of its four sides.

The negotiated solution was to adopt an element of the form of the market buildings that had once occupied the site, namely a roof lantern. This would have been a major concession, as this type of operation does not easily accommodate uncontrolled daylight, with its unpredictable heat losses and gains.

Viewed in reality, the effect from the side elevation works surprisingly well. However, the rear of the building reveals the deception. This is nothing like a 19th-century roof form, but the typical wide portal frame of a contemporary industrial building. How much better if the roof could have been broken down into two or three ridges and gables as was achieved at Beechworth. External finishes were also important, and it must be said that the brick...
finish and the detailing is a creditable attempt to achieve a building with some substance. These concessions were sufficient to gain the support of the Heritage Adviser and the issue of a permit against which no appeals were lodged.

Unfortuately it is an attempt that ultimately fails through the treatment of the 'back end'. The loading bay at the south end of the building was reconfigured to be more acceptable to the objectors (see figure 9). Nevertheless its location at what is considered the main gateway to the centre of Castlemaine is most unfortunate. It is ironic that at the time the supermarket plans were being considered the council was engaged in a protracted urban design exercise. The intersection adjacent to the loading bay had been identified as a significant gateway, which ultimately resulted in a rather ponderous sculpture being erected in the centre of a new roundabout. This exercise, however, did nothing to prevent the arriving visitor from being confronted by stacks of brightly coloured plastic pallets, scraps of cardboard boxes and all the other detritus usually associated with a supermarket loading bay.

Doing it better in the Big Smoke

There have been a number of earlier attempts in the inner suburbs of Melbourne to fit supermarkets into historic strip centres. Examples of successful maintenance of street character occur at Port Melbourne (figure 10) and Fitzroy (figure 11) although these involve a level of facadism that would not be considered acceptable today. It is interesting to note that in both these cases the loading bay

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Figure 8 Harrods Street elevation, Castlemaine, Victoria.

Figure 9 View of loading bay on entering Castlemaine, Victoria.
Figure 10 Supermarket behind retained facade. Port Melbourne. Carpark is on the roof.

is fully enclosed and the potential void created by the carpark was avoided by placing the cars on the roof. If we could be sensitive to these issues in the early eighties, why can we not be equally sensitive in country towns today?

**Some reflections**

It is not my intention to draw definitive conclusions from these cases but I have posited a few reflections.

**Pressures and tensions**

All three developments should probably be marked 'could have done better'. It is worth acknowledging the considerable pressure that existed in each case to ensure that the development was secured. The pressure was probably greater as, in each case, it was the local supermarket operation that was being expanded. It might have been easier to tell an anonymous Coles, Safeway or Woolworths what was required than dictate to a local business person with a major stake in the community.

The semi-independent state-assisted Heritage Adviser may be in a less pressured situation than the council officers, but the adviser tends to be viewed with the deepest suspicion in these cases. The council fears they may cause difficulties for the project, while the local heritage groups will fear that too many concessions will be made. Anxious councils tend to treat the proposals with greater secrecy than normal, which further raises suspicions and tensions.

**Why it is harder in the country**

The commercial areas of country towns are little more than skin deep. The
commercial lots will often back directly onto suburban-style residential lots. This means that the ‘stick it out the back’ approach results in the development being located in a residential street. This demands a particular level of sensitivity.

Understanding the context

The history, significance, structure and texture of the town needs to be understood to achieve a reasonable resolution. For example, in Daylesford the urban/suburban debate has involved issues of urban character, history and viewlines.

Heritage Advisors unite!

At present these issues present a one-off single major issue that has to be tackled by the adviser from scratch. If we can build on our knowledge of these experiences across the country, advisers could be in a much stronger position.

Common successes

In each case the council was successful in securing a design which related in some degree to the local requirements. In Daylesford and Beechworth their main streets remained intact.

Common failures

The impact of the carparks’ rear access and loading bays was unsatisfactory in each case, although this has been resolved in Beechworth by the Tribunal.