

la strada), o che siano disposte come lucernari a feritoia sulle coperture, o che formino una casa d'inverno dove sorseggiare un the, o che sostituiscano una parete presentandosi come "curtain wall" appeso al tetto, le finestre figurano sempre tra i protagonisti della filosofia MPREIS. All'interno del supermercato la luce naturale, anche se è una sorgente lontana, produce una misura nella quale possiamo riconoscerci; l'interno mantiene così un rapporto vivo e fisico col mondo esterno. Ed è vero pure il contrario, perché le finestre sono vetrine informali attraverso le quali da fuori vedo quel che si vende dentro, ben disposto e ordinato, quasi a ricordarci che il supermercato è nella realtà un centro logistico a scala domestica. Questo ininterrotto scambio di vedute nelle due direzioni – dentro e fuori – riduce quello sgradevole senso di estraniamento e di claustrofobia che a volte ci assale quando entriamo a fare la spesa in un altro supermercato.

Se gli MPREIS segnano il declino ulteriore della base produttiva agricola e del piccolo commercio nelle Alpi, la loro rete di grande distribuzione produce vantaggi per residenti e turisti. Anche in luoghi remoti, come valli che sono cul-de-sac, questi supermercati non danno l'impressione di speculare sulle distanze fisiche. Si presentano come teste di ponte della migliore architettura contemporanea, in luoghi dove altrimenti prevarrebbe un atteggiamento bigottamente pittoresco. Le Alpi tirolesi, intorno alla loro capitale Innsbruck, confermano così la loro vocazione di luogo di scambio commerciale e intellettuale, a cerniera tra Austria, Germania, Italia e Svizzera. Insieme montagne e merci, scontornate dalle finestre degli MPREIS, sono oggetti del desiderio.

MPREIS Supermarkets

MPREIS, a supermarket chain with its headquarters in Tyrol, goes to great lengths for architecture. The company promotes the image of shopping as not only a purely commercial venture but one serving urban, social and cultural purposes. The company's architectural philosophy generates variations on a theme, and it is within this context that the company seeks out architects for MPREIS projects: architects who advocate designing light and airy structures. And, perhaps more important, the results are neither short-lived sensations nor caricatures, but real places with tangible qualities. There are numerous MPREIS supermarkets, like members of a large family, in the main and side valleys in the Tyrol. They have a quiet, reassuring appearance, the sort of place where you can go to meet a friend or spend time with your family. You could protest, saying that is possible and actually occurs in supermarkets all over the world. However, in this case, it is thanks to the architecture, which has been designed with exactly that intention in mind. And that really makes a difference.

The MPREIS architectural principal originates from the carefully selected strategic location for the supermarket. In our day and age of general mobility, supermarkets are also expanding into the inner regions of the Alps, despite the tricky topographical conditions. On the whole, new MPREIS shops are located on main roads,

at the (usually frayed) edges of populated areas, where parking is not a problem. They act as a "gateway" store, showing us that we have arrived at a "Città Amica" or "friendly town"; that we have left the sprawling, shapeless suburbs behind us. MPREIS shops are an intrinsic part of the dignified spirit of Tyrolean villages and small towns, and they will probably survive longer than everything surrounding them.

Typical MPREIS supermarkets consist of a simple building closely linked to the road, a well-positioned exterior car park (a stilt-structure) and a welcoming entrance area with a café. Another aspect is the generous use of glass in the facade, which allows those inside to enjoy the views on the exterior and lets people outside see the range of goods inside. (Transparency is also an important theme). All the interior dimensions are somewhat more generous than we are used to, which is conducive to a positive ambience and better human interaction. The shelving is low, the aisles are wide, one checkout is set at a comfortable distance from the next, the light-coloured ceiling is high and bright, the lighting is sophisticated and sensitive, the building materials are more substantial and somewhat less commonplace than usually associated with supermarket buildings. In short, wherever you look you find a little extravagance, but the architecture capitalises on it, so it is extravagance to an end. A range of products arranged pell-mell in large metal baskets reveal the relationship between supermarket and market. It is surprising how much this influences our attitude towards the act of shopping, and you need to feel it to believe it.

For years, supermarkets, with the odd exception, were equated with boring boxes. The consequence was a badly thought-out equation which fuelled an obsessive drive to optimise volume, customer flow and profits: no concessions were made to the presence of customers or their comfort. There was little choice, products were crammed in on top of each other, there were no windows, no sense that a supermarket is a public space, no sensory experience. Supermarkets have gradually become more like shopping centres over the years. The shopping centre may well be the only type of building whose date of "birth" is known exactly: Victor Gruen, Northland Shopping Center, Detroit, planned in 1951, opened in 1954. These purpose-built retail boxes proved so successful in both economic and geographic terms that, despite similarities with a factory, they went down in the "Who's Who" of contemporary architecture. MPREIS has decided to confront the idea of an anonymous box in a cultivated manner – not by means of logos, symbols, décor and quality materials, but by dealing with the box itself, by paying attention to the classical material themes in architecture: practical suitability, lighting, entrance design, shape, view, circulation space, parking facilities. These themes have once again taken their rightful place in the physical world saved from the abstract. We shop every day and appreciate attractive, convenient, well-planned and well-maintained facilities.

Many MPREIS projects see two issues as particularly important because they enhance the topography and the landscape: the interface between the terrain and the windows. Parking facilities are not always on the same level as the sales floor

in hilly alpine territory. A number of MPREIS premises have sheltered parking areas at a lower level between the pilotis or pillars: a ramp, a lift or an attractive flight of steps, either individually or as a group, link the separate floors, and the path between inside and outside, between checkout and car takes on something ritual. The cars are hidden from view and not cluttering the landscape, and you are free to design the roof, (which is visible in the mountains and, therefore, important). If parking facilities can become an airy portico with a view over the valley, then windows can transform a supermarket into a huge hall. Windows are always protagonists in MPREIS philosophy. They can be set into the walls focussing on a particular object — a mountain, a tree, a bell tower, the street — or they can be roof windows reminiscent of firing slits, they can form a conservatory-like structure where you can enjoy a cup of tea, or they can be a glass curtain suspended from the ceiling instead of a wall. Daylight in the interior of the supermarket, even if it comes from a far off source, creates a space in which we feel at ease; the interior retains a living, physical relationship with the world outside. The opposite is also true: these windows are also informal display windows, so you can see the orderly and attractively presented goods on sale, and we are reminded that a supermarket is, in fact, a logistic centre on a household-scale. Permanent two-way vision, from the outside looking in and vice versa — reduces that unpleasant feeling of alienation and claustrophobia, which sometimes overcomes us when shopping at other supermarkets.

On the one hand, the MPREIS may signal the further decline in farm production and small shops in the Alps, but on the other, its extensive distribution network benefits local inhabitants and tourists. Even in isolated places, such as in dead-end valleys, these supermarkets do not seem to be banking on the remote location. They are like top contemporary architecture bridgeheads in regions where the dominant force would otherwise be staid, picturesque architecture, the result of a bigoted attitude. The Tyrolean Alps around their capital Innsbruck can thus confirm their mandate as a place for commercial and intellectual exchange, as a pivotal point between Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. Both the mountains and the goods, framed by MPREIS supermarket windows, are objects of desire.