

Supermarket expansion is a-mezzanine!

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Tesco Extra, Kingston Park, Newcastle replaced a more conventional superstore in 2001
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What on earth is a mezzanine and what is it doing in a hypermarket?

The Oxford Dictionary defines a mezzanine level as 'a low storey, usually found between ground level and first floor.' Sometimes installed in Victorian properties and converted warehouses by home-owners who need more room, the mezzanine is a 'floating' floor hung below the ceiling in any building with sufficient head-room to allow the new platform to be habitable. Recent reports suggest that an increasing number of supermarkets in the UK are now using a loophole in planning laws to install a mezzanine level in order to double their floor-space without having to seek permission. The 'warehouse' design of many out-of-town retail developments favours such modifications as high

vaulted ceilings are commonplace.

In recent years, local authorities have become more reluctant to grant permission for the new development or further expansion of hypermarkets (very large branches of a retail chain, usually found at the edge of a city in 'retail parks') or retail shopping centres such as Bluewater (large structures, purpose-built to house many retailers, often located beyond the city's edge). This is one reason why large chains such as Sainsbury's and Tesco have begun to redevelop **Brownfield** inner city sites with new 'Metro', 'Central' and 'Local' style stores. Rapid **re-urbanisation** in British cities has in any case led to a growing number of affluent middle class people living in newly gentrified inner city enclaves which the supermarkets are able to serve.

However, there are still plenty of reasons why the major chains are keen to expand their out-of-town operations further. Major food retailers have recently begun to expand into other areas such as clothing, medicine or electrical goods, requiring more floor-space if they are to make an effective entry into the market. The mezzanine level provides an ideal opportunity to install these new product ranges on platforms suspended high *above* the traditional food aisles!

Recent examples include the Asda at Clayton Green, near Chorley. A 1,858 sq m mezzanine floor has doubled the floor space without any actual physical expansion of the store itself. In North Lincolnshire, Scunthorpe CBD's clothing stores are now threatened by the extra floor recently installed in the out-of-town division of Next. Homebase stores near Worcester in the Elgar Retail Park have also installed mezzanine floors (*The Guardian*, 05 February 2004).

Will this push existing CBDs to their 'tipping point'?

Critics have long pointed to the expansion of out-of-town development as a causal factor accelerating the decline of traditional Central Business Districts (CBDs) in smaller towns. 13,000 high-order (specialist) shops closed in the UK between 1997 and 2002 (*The Guardian*, 05 February 2004). However, the survival of chemists, electrical goods and clothing stores has hitherto prevented some smaller CBDs from reaching their tipping point. This is the point at which so many key services have been removed that a critical number of people decide to withdraw their custom from that retail centre altogether. Trade is then lowered well below threshold levels for the remaining services resulting in widespread further closures. New mezzanine developments may thus jeopardise the future of many smaller CBDs that are already perilously close to their tipping-points.

What are the origins of out-of-town retailing?

Prior to the 1970s, incomes were not high enough to generate the high levels of demand which exist today for consumer goods. *The rise of an affluent population generated demand* which could not be met in existing CBDs because the shortage of land limited the scale and size of operation of retailers. Sainsbury's, Safeway, Tesco, and Ikea, along with others, have developed stores that recognise the new logic of the marketplace:

- High levels of demand exist for consumer goods, with customers also demanding a wide range of choice
- Land prices are too high in the CBD to stock a wide range of goods at a low price
- Cheap suburban land allows stores to establish a large scale of operation, bulk-buying a wide range of goods and passing on the benefits of this **economy of scale** to the consumer
- The majority of the public have access to a car, while radial and trunk routes have been improved in most towns and cities over the last twenty years making certain key sites at the **rural-urban fringe** highly accessible

There are now over 1000 superstores, **hypermarkets** and retail shopping centres in the UK (with a hypermarket defined as having a minimum area of 2500 square metres). Ikea, for instance, only has three stores in the south-east but hopes to cater for all London homes with these, suggesting that all Londoners are within the **sphere of influence** of one of its branches. Huge warehouses at each site allow a diverse range of goods to be stocked in bulk. For a furniture store in the CBD, the option is either to mass stock a limited range or offer a wide range but at a high price as bulk-buying cannot be achieved. The advantages (for both consumer and retailer) therefore include:

- A greater range of products are available at cheaper prices
- City centre congestion is relieved
- Shopping is set in a more pleasant, less polluted and relaxed environment; stores can offer services such as crèches, on-site parking and restaurants

However, there are many well-known disadvantages associated with the rise of out-of-town retailing also. Critics claim that *marginalized sections of society may not enjoy the benefits*: a car and deep freezer are pre-requisites for the hypermarket model of food shopping. *The closure of neighbourhood stores* within the hypermarket's sphere of influence may further disadvantage the elderly, unemployed and disabled who may rely on easy local access or shopping on credit. Meanwhile, many **negative externalities** generated by CBD retailing such as *congestion and pollution* are simply being transferred elsewhere. The size of tranquil rural areas in southeast England has dramatically reduced in the last twenty years, with *urban sprawl* continuing, despite green belt legislation.