1. The Original Object

Few things enchant me more than physical retail spaces. I consider the place where I grew up, Northeastern Ohio, to be the absolute beacon of American physical retail. Some of my most formative experiences happened in these spaces, mostly because I was surrounded by them constantly growing up in the 2000s. It was all we had; it became all I am. My fashion, my artistic sensibilities… everything aesthetically about me stems from these experiences and the magic that came with them.

Though NYC is a far different retail landscape than the Midwest, there are still glimmers of that magic spread around in special places here. One of these places is “The Market” at Wegmans, a grocery store chain with a particularly profound location at Astor Place. “The Market” is essentially their take on a traditional mall food court, but rather than featuring restaurants from various chains, it encompasses a variety of in-house culinary vendors. These spaces are as follows: “Bakery”, “Asian”, “Deli”, and “Soup” (e.g., the soup bar).

What differentiates Wegmans’s take on food court design from other grocery stores is how it clings on to the same aesthetic magic that I felt walking through grocery stores and food courts alike in the Midwest. The dimly lit overhead lights and walls; the esoteric yet on-the-nose language and symbolism of the individual spaces (see, “Asian”); everything combines to create an experience that is full of the sort of kitschy wonder that is lost in modern retail design.

1. The Translation Process

If there is one thing that enchants me just as, if not more than physical retail spaces of my days growing up, it is how these spaces were imagined via the websites of the companies behind them. The early 2000s brought with it a distinct quality of kitsch in terms of retail website designs. They were full of bizarre quotes, low quality images (both of the physical spaces themselves as well as with clip-art) and an overall approach to presentation that did not pay as much mind to viewer legibility as it did representing the brand in an all-too-kitschy and straightforward manner. All of these aspects, of which I will add more detail to via my own translation, contribute to a design ethos that I absolutely adore: *the marriage of domestic life with retail fantasy, as imagined through the digital*. This ethos is precisely what I attempted to achieve with my translation of The Market. This retail space is as close as we can get to the design ethos of that long gone era, so it absolutely warrants a digital interpretation that would accurately match. My aesthetic and design choices in the translation process reflect this ethos in a variety of ways, all adding up to a simultaneous celebration and critique for the web design strategies of that era.

First, I focused on giving the page a color scheme that, while not necessarily pretty, is accurate to Wegmans company color scheme. Whereas sites today are mostly white and black with colors spread about, sites that reflect this particular design ethos were much more concerned with “showing their true colors”, no matter how bad of a strategy that might be for web design.

I also chose a combination of Futura and Bodoni to reflect the marriage of domestic life and retail wonder. These two fonts combine to create a reserved, yet sophisticated attitude about themselves. These fonts were the vessel for my esoteric quoting style throughout the page. Those quotes truly do not mean much, but they inspire that sense of wonder that was so common back then.

I created all the graphics on the page myself in Photoshop, making sure their quality was reduced to levels that we would have seen on webpages during this era, and adding a great deal of drop shadow, blurring, and gradient overlays to their content. I also added a compass clipart to show where each of the spaces are in relation to entering the food court. Again, this is not meant to enhance the consumer experience from a practical level. I made the compasses hard to see on purpose. This is all done to showcase what these webpages were like back then – aesthetic sensibilities were more important than practicality.

1. Impact of Digital Translation & Analog versus Digital

I feel as though the impact of digital translation is a case of imagination versus reality, at least in this case. The digital realm allowed for these physical spaces to take on new levels of communicating that central ethos. Because retail web pages were only just beginning at this time, their digital essence was far more concerned with communicating brand sentimentality rather than practical purpose such as in their physical manifestations. Digital webpages sacrificed practicality for communicating ideologies through aesthetics, symbols, and the mere wonder of the untapped digital realm at the time. If anything, perhaps these digital iterations of physical retail spaces actually *facilitated* the experience rather than translating it. That idea came up constantly in my translation process; I felt as though these pages acted as companion pieces for the real thing, rather than a direct translation of them.