

OPINION

West Side fresh market asks, 'What would it look like if we actually got our 40 acres?'



Edward Keegan

The Forty Acres Fresh Market on Chicago Avenue in the Austin neighborhood, the only Black-owned grocery store in the city, succeeds at every level.

Its metal-clad exterior is bold — with corrugated panels set at a 45-degree angle and punctuated by distinctive trapezoidal windows. But its inviting interior is more muted in its expression. And its adaptive reuse of two old and architecturally undistinguished structures demonstrates a better way to build a city than Chicago's oft-prevailing demolition ways.

The renovation, completed in September, was designed by Latent Design under the direction of founding principal Katherine Darnstadt and principal Nicolas Anderson. "When people walk in here, the design immediately says something to them," owner Liz Abunaw said of her 12,000-square-foot store. "And even from the outside, it looks completely different."

The smart use of simple but varied metal panels on the exterior facades recalls Latent's earlier Rusu-McCartin Boys & Girls Club that's about a mile and a half east on Chicago Avenue. The diagonal of the corrugated metal panels reflects the 40 acres of the business's name, a reference to the broken promise of the post-Civil War era that was supposed to provide 40 acres and a mule to formerly enslaved people.

The small parking lot at the corner of Chicago and Waller avenues can accommodate just a handful of cars, which encourages walking or the use of public transportation. Latent accomplished some slick sleight of hand by maintaining the existing parking lot footprint while accommodating delivery truck access without impinging on adjacent streets. The "business model doesn't work unless you get a big delivery," Anderson said. "It's a tight margin business, and that changes the design."

The Chicago Department of Transportation was involved with the project on several fronts. Upgraded streetscaping along Chicago Avenue for Austin's Soul City Corridor was completed simultaneously, which allowed for coordination of the revised curb cut for the parking lot with the new bike lane and bus stop. "It was fortunate we were able to



The Forty Acres Fresh Market is at 5713 W. Chicago Ave. in Chicago's Austin neighborhood, as shown Sept. 29. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

connect with them and they were willing to accommodate the store design," Darnstadt said.

The large sign on the corner sports a trapezoidal metal frame sitting on a concrete base that reflects the geometric inclination of the new facades. Even the custom fencing around the parking lot sports the angled theme.

There's a certain order that's essential to a supermarket. The refrigerated and prepared foods sections and the staffed stations such as the butcher counter are arranged along the perimeter to facilitate efficient stocking. Customers enter from the front door into the produce department and circulate in a counterclockwise direction. Forty Acres Fresh Market follows this standardized pattern within the confines of the roughly L-shaped interior space that was available after carving out the northwest corner of the building for a PNC Bank.

Pieces of the older buildings that most recently housed a Salvation Army thrift shop are on view throughout the store. On entering, you're within a 1970s-era structure with a flat metal roof deck sitting atop open web steel joists. Toward the rear of the store, wood bow trusses come into view above the butcher and

prepared foods sections. Latent has given the old parts a good scrub, and these elements provide a quiet backdrop to the new interventions. The architects removed a concrete block demising wall between the two original structures and added bright orange-painted columns and beams to celebrate the joining of the two parts.

Inside, Abunaw wanted something that could project a turn of the century general store vibe. "What would it look like if we actually got our 40 acres?" Abunaw said. Wood was essential to achieving this vision.

"This farmhouse aesthetic uses a lot of local reclaimed wood, staining them in different ways to bring a brand that felt like it had depth," Darnstadt said. The wood is juxtaposed against the existing steel roof structure and new mechanical systems.

"Wood and metal together are just like peanut butter and jelly," Abunaw said.

The juxtaposition of modern on the outside and more homey on the inside was intentional and speaks to the richness possible when combining old and new construction. The thoughtful finishes recede in the produce section, where the colors of the produce become an essential part

of the decor.

"Good grocery stores are not just transactional," Abunaw said. "(You're) creating an environment that makes people feel supported in what can sometimes be an annoying chore."

And there is something aesthetically appealing about a carefully stocked grocery store. It's a mini-city of foodstuffs with constantly evolving characters.

Chicago development has long been dominated by a demolition mentality that is destructive toward communal memory. It represents erasure.

In 1973, architect Harry Weese noted that older buildings give cities character, continuity and a sense of stability. Today, there's a lot of new development underway along Chicago Avenue on the West Side. But there are many vacant and underused properties as well. Forty Acres Fresh Market demonstrates how transformational projects can be achieved through the thoughtful reuse of the more modest structures that can be found here and in every Chicago neighborhood.

Everything about Forty Acres Fresh Market is appealing. It demonstrates how even the most pedestrian of existing buildings can be successfully repurposed with the right amount of thought

and investment. It brings a genuinely thoughtful architectural contemporary expression to this stretch of Chicago Avenue. It provides a well-scaled grocery store that serves the Austin neighborhood while providing an alternative model to the much larger big-box supermarkets.

And it's instantly memorable: The eccentrically angled panels catch the sunlight differently, which highlights the varied colors across the building's new facades.

This is a scale that encourages community and facilitates personal interaction while shopping. Every neighborhood can benefit from such places.

Forty Acres Fresh Market is not extraordinary architecture; it's just good, thoughtful design that hits all the right notes. It doesn't pander; it has aspirations for itself and its users.

We should expect nothing less.

Edward Keegan writes, broadcasts and teaches on architectural subjects. Keegan's biweekly architecture column is supported by a grant from former Tribune critic Blair Kamin, as administered by the not-for-profit Journalism Funding Partners. The Tribune maintains editorial control over assignments and content.