

Studio— Grocery Futures

Illinois School of Architecture
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Spring 2026

ARCH 571: Design: Detail and Architectonics | 6.000 Credits
Joseph Altshuler, Assistant Professor
Mondays/Wednesdays 1:00–5:50

**This is a joint
studio—
architecture +
landscape
architecture—with
students working
in collaborative,
multidisciplinary
teams.**

Students: Michael Nicholson,
Noushin Anjum, Owen Degrace
(2024).



The American grocery store is a contemporary designed environment brimming with culture, calories, and collectivity. It hums with thermodynamic and psychodynamic performances, merging technical gymnastics—from food storage micro-climates to complex supply-chain logistics—with the theatrical spectacle of lavish product displays. Because the grocery store provides the one commodity that everyone needs, nearly everyone goes routinely, rendering the grocery store a quasi-public space—an essential third space—where people are more likely to encounter others and otherness than in many other arenas of everyday life.

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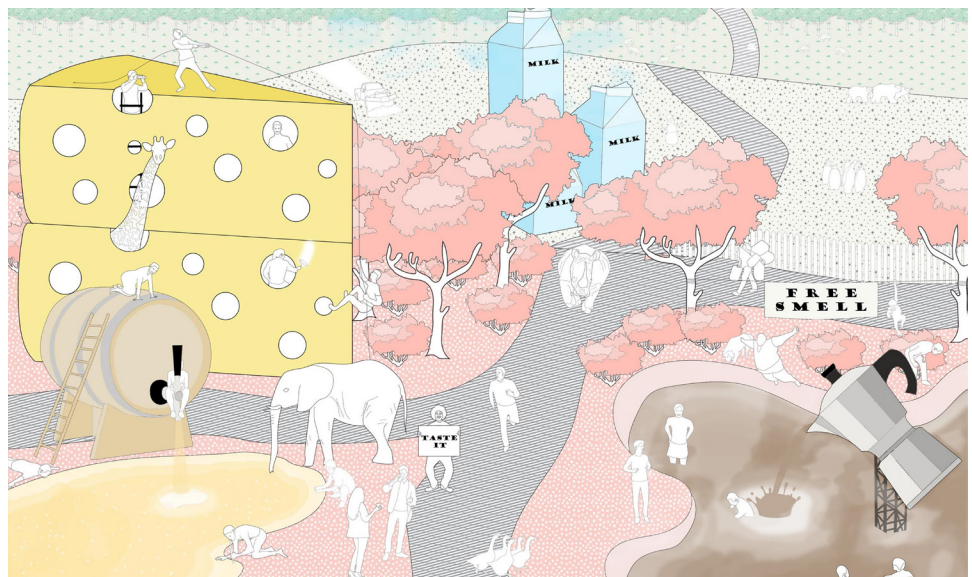
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A funded, overnight research trip to Chicago is provided, where students will meet with community partners.

Middle-market grocery stores, in particular, aim to stock “something for everyone.” Distinct from high-end and discount chains that cater to the economic extremes, middle-market grocery stores operate as spaces of inclusion, peddling expansive arrays of tastes and comprehensive inventories of provisions. This studio unpacks the cultural, ecological, spatial, and aesthetic dimensions of creating such shared spaces—places where different bodies co-occupy while meeting their basic needs around food procurement. The moment when two people who speak different languages reach for the same vegetable in the produce section may offer an unexpected entry point for reconnecting a polarized populace and cultivating a civic commons in an aisle-crossing venue (pun intended).

Yet the middle-market grocery store is increasingly being replaced by high-end and discount grocers in the American supermarket landscape, mirroring the widening income gap between higher- and lower-income households. This studio considers the architectural future of the American grocery store in general—and the fate of the middle-market store in particular—amid shifting cultural expectations: fresher food, sustainable production, local and healthy options that supersede food deserts, richer in-store “experiences,” and expanded delivery or pickup services. Although grocery stores are highly designed environments, optimized by industry specialists to maximize profit, they have largely evaded scrutiny within the broader architectural imagination. As a case study for design speculation and development, the studio will partner with **HeartStrong Grocery**, a local business and future grocery store + edible landscape that is coming to Urbana’s North End, the city’s historically Black community and an area that is definitionally a food desert. What implications for form, program, site, and audience might generate new futures in which grocery stores operate as heightened civic venues for cultural coexistence and social exchange as much as for sustenance?



Student: Chang Pan (2021).