

Posted on Tue, Sep. 19, 2006

FOOD

You'd never guess it used to be a grocery

David Gwynn's Web site reveals surprising past of some Charlotte buildings

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Food Editor

Try not to think about how much of your life you spend in the aisles of a supermarket.

I don't have anything against supermarkets, mind you. But for most of us, most of the time, the grocery store is just a chore to get through. In excitement, it ranks right up there with folding towels.

Ah, but you need to meet David Gwynn. A freelance Web designer and writer in Winston-Salem, Gwynn has a secret life.

He lurks around grocery stores from California to Charlotte.

"If you had to call me a historian at all, I would call myself an architectural historian," he says.

See, Gwynn has this thing about grocery stores. Not what's inside them. What he really likes is the outside. How they're built, where they're built, how they become a part of the urban landscape.

"I've always been one to drive down the street saying, 'this used to be that.' "

For a long time, it was just a hobby. Eventually, he had so much information, he started a Web site, www.groceteria.com, which tracks the history of stores in certain cities, mostly places he's lived.

Why would a person become obsessed with supermarkets?

"You want the answer that starts when I was 10?" Gwynn jokes. "I liked old buildings, old stores." When he was a kid, his mother used to take him to an old A&P in Greensboro.

" 'Wow, this is interesting,' " young David would think. " 'They don't look like this anymore.' "

Years later, Gwynn lived in California for a while. He got hooked by the distinctive buildings of the Safeway chain.

"They were just amazing. They were scattered around everywhere. It was instantly recognizable."

Later, he ended up in Charlotte. He worked a couple of jobs, but admits he was "underemployed." So he had time to dig through city directories and drive around, looking for things like the little cupolas that mark old A&Ps.

The Charlotte archive on his site is the most extensive section. Click through it and you get a whole new view. That Picasso's at Kenilworth and East Boulevard? Old A&P. So was the American Billiard Company on East Fourth Street.

Gwynn likes the look of stores, but he also studies where stores are located and how that changes.

"In the '30s, every chain wanted to be in Dilworth. And here we are and every chain wants to be in Dilworth again."

Groceteria.com is still a work in progress. Maybe someday, it will be a book, but he can't decide which kind: "A dry academic text no one will read, or a coffee-table picture book no one will read."

"My take on historic preservation is, I'm more inclined to think that everyday buildings, like supermarkets, are in some ways more worthy of preservation than the grand buildings that the average person never walked into in their life."

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