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THIS is Issue 13 of PNYX, in which Marisa Cortright explores through an interview with a fellow student his 'theory of Lidl'. What do the choices of site and range of products of Europe's most ubiquitous discount supermarket chain reveal about the conditions of the city? And what is its function as a projective site of study for architects and architectural historians and theorists?

A THEORY OF LIDL

Marisa Cortright

ISSUE 7 of PNYX posed a question on (of) London: "Even if architects and designers manage to stay here, is this the kind of city for which we want to design?"

I'd rephrase the question to include a wider breadth of students in London architecture schools: "Even if architectural historians and theorists manage to stay here, is this the kind of city for which we want to research?" In short: no. At least not for the traditional historical city, and definitely not for the City. The decision of the kind of city for which we might want to research will hinge upon its status as an alternative.

To posit this other city amidst London I'd like to recount select moments from an interview I conducted of fellow Bartlett MA Architectural History student Simon Gotthard in November 2015. Gotthard set our interview at the discount grocery store Lidl in Hackney Central and rationalised his choice thusly:

[Lidl] tells a story about a London that is something else ... something else that is going on right now with gentrification, housing prices, just living costs in general, where Lidl is still one of the places in this area, in Hackney, where people from the working class, the ones that are left, can still shop ... [my choosing Lidl] was an attempt by me to get a discussion to show that London is a city where people live, and that



Left: the Barbican estate; right: Lidl signage (Photo: Tim O'Hare)

it's not all landmarks or old historical legendary streets and buildings, or an aesthetic ... I can't make a theory out of it but maybe you see what I'm getting at.

Yet, Gotthard started to make a theory out of Lidl, and it's worth extrapolating further upon. He's getting at Lidl as a new, projective object of study, part of a set of relations about this other London whose architectural histories are discounted in favour of storied, canonical histories. He's

getting at an architectural history in which Lidl's significance derives not from its vernacular architectural form but through its vital if quotidian economic role: "the process of Lidl and how it works in Hackney and what it does and what it doesn't do."

There are two levels to Gotthard's theory of Lidl. First, Lidl is valuable for architectural historians and theorists because it is in London, a city chock-a-block with both "traditional objects of historical study" and



Above: Lidl's Deluxe range of pork and chicken pâtés and goose fat

people who can't buy groceries in their own neighbourhoods but for the city's rampant development and its effect on the cost of living. Lidl serves as an unsuspecting foil to oft-studied canonical architecture of the 18th and 19th centuries and more recent skyscrapers. Indeed, Gotthard calls it "an incredibly ugly place." In this sense, it serves as a convenient and self-evident contrast, two sides of one aesthetic coin.

Lidl also acts as a sort of bellwether of gentrification, evidenced in part by the expansions of the company's delicacy food line, including "Icelandic Black Caviar cheaper than a Big Mac" and a selection of fine wines, and in part by the increasing desirability of the neighbourhoods in which its stores are located. Of course, Lidl is not just in London, and its store locations likely align with gentrifying areas in cities across Europe. Its move to roll out more "deluxe" products is not solely a response to a new customer demographic in London, but indicates the growing demand for inexpensive, quality consumer goods amongst European urbanites generally. The difference between London and other European cities, then, is on a gradient where London represents the superlative, and where the impact of Lidl as a provider of affordable food is the greatest.

In this way, Lidl acts as the indicator of a vernacular architecture implicated in the processes of gentrification. A theory of Lidl may question the nature of this implication,

and the nature of the relationship of the architectural historian or theorist to vernacular architectural objects. For Gotthard, "how [Lidl] relates to me as an architect or an architectural historian and how that has any relevance – that's harder," and yet, "it's more about what I want to be able to do in the future – map that importance, to see those kind of connections."

If it's not already clear, Gotthard's not at the Bartlett to study the Barbican. He's keenly aware of the "dangerous temptation" of London's great architects and great buildings, which have been and still very much act as canon fodder for the architectural historian and theorist. Surely there's a romance in the canon – perhaps especially the Brutalist canon – but it can often seem counterproductive: "I think that's a struggle that many of us have: being politically relevant in our own definition of what that is and also just being a nerd and appreciating nice buildings." It's this struggle that the architectural historian or theorist grapples with when answering PNYX's question: is this the kind of city for which we want to work? Is there a way to work for (upon?) London in a politically relevant manner?

Gotthard doubts it. I asked if he'd stay in London following our programme's end: "If I start working here, it's a question of: 'can you work and live in the city and not be a part of the problem?' No. I don't think you can ... If you just get a job, just get a place to

live, then you will become a part of the problem." What's an architectural historian to do, then? Regardless of location, "Instead of being an architect that can learn from politics – I would want to consider myself as coming from another position and using architecture or architectural history to achieve something ... Architecture shouldn't be left behind, or [be] seen only as a problem. It is a problem. But there needs to be a process that starts to develop an architecture, a way of doing architecture, an architectural history and theory which is projective, which is the other, the alternative."

PNYX's original question – a question of volition, and posed of architects specifically, "do architects want to design for London?" for Gotthard is pre-empted by rather a more certain, if disheartening, prognosis: "It's impossible to pretend that I'm going to become a socially responsible architect – combining [my] political awareness with at all working as an architect in any sense of the word as it exists now."

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Below: Lidl's Icelandic Black Capelin Caviar (£1.49)

