Detail of ceiling at Wagshal's, showing the tile pattern characteristic of Spanish markets.

To Market, To Market:

Wagshal's and Little Red Fox Update Venerable Retail Spaces

by Steven K. Dickens, AIA, LEED AP

Over the past 15 to 20 years, food and food-related retail spaces have become more sophisticated in tandem with one another. One can still find, of course, the crummy-looking space where delicious foods are created and sold, and also the gorgeous space where the food is so mediocre that one suspects the architecture is a purposeful distraction. But in general, the architectural ambiance and food quality are seen as complementary, necessary parts (along with service) of that elusive Perfect Experience.

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Main retail area of Wagshal's.

Two recently-opened foodie outlets in different parts of Upper Northwest DC are Little Red Fox, designed by **SmithGroupJJR** architects, and Wagshal's New Mexico Avenue, by **Foundry Architects**. Both are market-cafés, offering not only prepared foods that can be consumed in sit-down dining areas, but also a modest selection of groceries. Both, interestingly, took over spaces that were previously occupied by DC's previous generation of food halls: Marvelous Market and Sutton Place Gourmet (later Balducci's), respectively.

The contrast between the current markets and their predecessors speaks to the change that has swept our city. In its heyday, the Marvelous Market was a go-to place for quality food, but the facility, in the words of Little Red Fox chef Anne Alfano, "looked like a cafeteria in an eighties office building." It had a suspended acoustical-tile ceiling with fluorescent lights, its walls were furred out and covered with bland drywall, and the flooring was mundane vinyl tile. The former Sutton Place Gourmet space now occupied by Wagshal's wasn't much better.

Wagshal's owner Bill Fuchs came to architect **Will Couch, AIA**, a partner in Foundry Architects, after being inspired by the *mercados* of Spain, where he travelled to source specialty meats and other foods. In addition to the general feeling of liveliness and authenticity of the *mercados*, he was specifically interested in bringing their characteristic shallow masonry vaults to this, the second Wagshal's location (the original has been on Massachusetts Avenue in Spring Valley since 1925). This seemed especially appropriate since the windows in the new space, which is in a 1960s mixed-use complex, even had shallow arched tops reminiscent of the Spanish vaults.

Project: Wagshal's,
Washington, DC

Architects: **Foundry Architects**
Structural Engineers: **JGK Structural Engineers PC**
Mechanical/Plumbing Engineers: **AJS Consulting Engineers PC**
Electrical Engineers: **Welborn Engineering**
Lighting Designers: **Gilmore Lighting Design**
Construction Manager: **Larry Castle**
General Contractor: **Bill Fuchs**

Wagshal's Market.

Photos © Greg Powers Photography

Salad station.

Photos © Greg Powers Photography

Display cases at Wagshal's.

Photos © Greg Powers Photography

Couch immediately realized that such vaults, if built under the flat concrete slab ceiling, not only would be clearly inauthentic—in Spain, of course, they are structural—but they would also bust the budget and force the ceilings in the large space to be too low. Moreover, modern buildings contain innumerable ceiling elements, such as lighting, ductwork, smoke detectors, security cameras, data wiring, and sound systems, which are not easily accommodated in such vaults. So instead Couch worked out a gridded ceiling that organizes these necessary accoutrements beautifully. Within the grid are raised areas infilled with Italian tile in the herringbone pattern characteristic of the Spanish vaults that Fuchs loved. The compartmentalization also offers the benefit of an excellent balance of acoustic liveliness and control.

Fuchs had already worked out the basic plan of the space before commissioning Foundry, so the architects' role centered on refinement of the plan and precise design of the custom display cases, shelving, and tables. A limited palette of materials was employed: stainless steel, glass, black steel, and roughsawn wood. Perimeter walls are finished in shiny white tile, while the walls in the core area (which surround an appliance-packed central food preparation area) are covered in dark, matte charcoal-colored tile. The intention, says Couch, was "to make the food front and center," and indeed the colors of the food pop alluringly. One notable effort to maintain the centrality of the food was to hang the scales from the ceiling so that they hover about a foot above the display cases, blocking as little of the cases' offerings as possible while adding a whimsical element.

The Wagshal's space, which is below several floors of offices in a relatively new building, was virtually a blank slate for the architects. One exception is the arched windows, which have a dark anodized aluminum grid of mullions with fixed glass panels. Such commercial windows, which are generically known as "storefront" in the architecture and construction industry, are the Achilles heel for the design of many retail spaces. They often end up looking foreign to the rest of the space. Here, however, the window grid has very much the same character as the black-painted steel grids in the market's ceilings. They integrate completely, and this in turn makes the outdoor seating feel like it is part of the overall architectural experience, instead of an add-on.

In contrast, Little Red Fox's Chevy Chase DC space is part of a century-old row of single-story retail spaces. Over the years, it has housed an array of mostly food-related businesses, the Marvelous Market having been preceded by a bakery and restaurant, among other users. Owner Matt Carr and chef Alfano came to **Luis Vélez-Alvarez, Assoc. AIA**, and **Andrew Rollman, FAIA,** of SmithGroupJJR, with the modern version of magazine clippings: a Pinterest website with images that intrigued them. They also came with the modern question of how to properly brand their startup. The fox of the establishment's name was a starting point, with its suggestions of fresh country life, barns, and trees. This has obvious architectural manifestation in the material palette, but the central brand concept to be translated into architecture, says Alvarez, was "the story about authentic, local ingredients and the process of cooking them."

The latter part of the brand translates most literally. An interior window connects the customer area and the kitchen. The *process of cooking* is visible, if not quite on display: Commercial kitchens, with their health code-compliant, glaring fluorescent lighting and utilitarian junkiness, aren't the prettiest of spaces. An abstracted tree pattern etched in the glass judiciously shields such unattractive elements from view. The *local ingredients* part of the brand is supported by the numerous chalkboards, where ever-changing hand-written menus feature seasonal and regionally-sourced ingredients.

At first, the most central part of the brand—*authenticity*—proved more elusive. But the architects sensed that peeling away the layers of sensory-deprivation materials might be a good strategy. The architects, owner, and chef started by standing on a ladder, pushing up a ceiling tile, and looking around the space above the drywall furring and ceiling. They discovered interesting old wall-paper (from a 1950's restaurant, they later learned) on the exposed

Views of Little Red Fox.

Photos © Brian Donovan, courtesy of SmithGroupJJR

walls above the furring. They discovered dark wood roof framing in intricate patterns. Best of all, they discovered not one but two concealed skylights.

From this initial foray, the team decided to seek authenticity via exposing the history of the space. This strategy had risks: they had seen some appealing things, but they didn't know what else they might find until the demolition phase of construction. Nevertheless, the design concept gelled: "We worked with Luis to unify the different lives the space has had," says chef Alfano. Design continued into construction, with modifications as new elements were revealed. New necessities such as electrical conduit and ducts were installed in and over the existing surfaces, and left exposed. But in contrast, the area over the food sales counter is offset by a clean white drywall ceiling with modern track lights, and the back wall is covered in a hygenic white subway tile. The result is a richness of layers and textures that reveals the history of past users and the honestly of the original building and current systems. It adds up to *authenticity*.

The material palette of Little Red Fox is not dissimilar to that of Wagshal's New Mexico Avenue (in fact, both use wood reclaimed from barns in Virginia), and it has the same function of highlighting the foodstuffs in a sophisticated way. But the vibe is completely different. The remnants of previous users, the exposed wood rafters, the daylight coming through the skylights, the slightly (and deliberately) old-fashioned light fixtures, and other elements lend a homey feel. If Wagshal's is a modern riff on a Spanish *mercado*, then Little Red Fox is a new urban take on a country store.

Exterior of Little Red Fox.

Photos © Brian Donovan, courtesy of SmithGroupJJR

Interior of Little Red Fox.

Project: Little Red Fox,
Washington, DC

Architects/MEP Engineers: **SmithGroupJJR**
Kitchen Consultants: **Hopkins Foodservice Specialists, Inc.**
Reclaimed Wood Source: **Wellborn + Wright**
Metal Fabricators: **Square Form**
General Contractor: **Gresinger Construction**

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