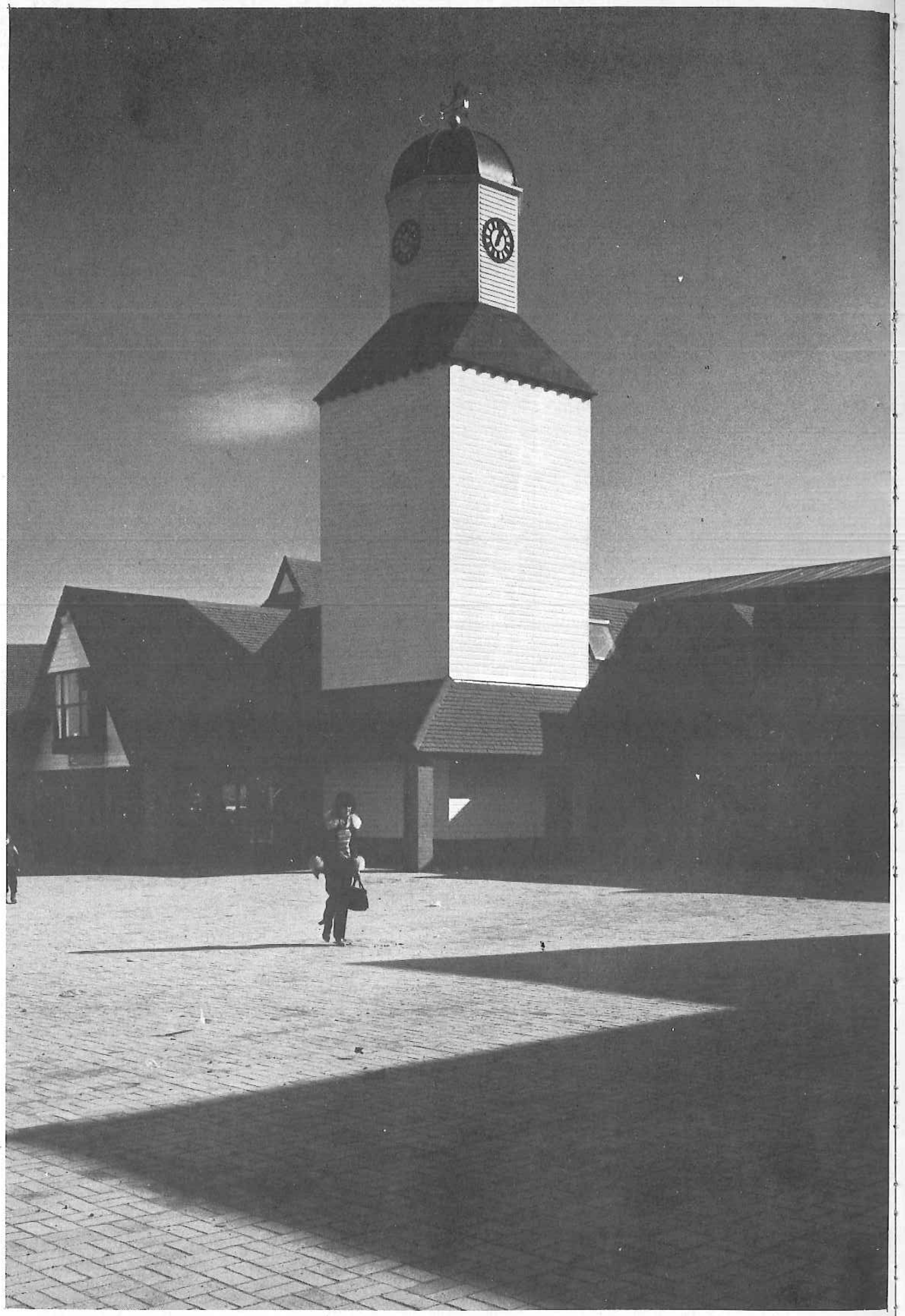

At South Woodham Ferrers *(right)* and Dunstable *(opposite)*, new shopping complexes developed in self-consciously domestic architectural styles

SELF-SERVICE DEVELOPERS

The large food retailers are taking the lead in the development of new forms of shopping facilities. *Martin Spring* looks at their efforts to design complexes that are convenient and pleasant.

The development of large-scale, elaborate, city centre shopping schemes with enclosed malls came to an end with the sudden demise of the property boom in the early seventies. Their creators, the property developers, have also since dropped out of the running of shopping development. Their grand schemes have not on the whole met with success: the excessive costs of city centre land and complex high-rise construction could not easily be recouped in rents from retailers. Moreover, with the general swing away from redevelopment, these shopping monoliths – some of which have been described as enormous toilets – are now frowned on by townspeople and planners. The current trend in town centre shopping is rather to return to the traditional High Street, which is rejuvenated by means of pedestrianisation schemes and shop refurbishment.

But there is one major area where innovative building forms for shopping are still being developed. This is in the field of "convenience" shopping – large self-service units retailing predominantly food and everyday household goods, where it is convenient for families to shop in bulk.

The developers of new forms of convenience shopping are the retailing companies themselves – Asda, Tesco, Mac Fisheries, Safeways, International Stores and Sainsbury. In bypassing the property developer and taking sites direct, the stores are applying the principle they know so well – get directly at the source of supply and eliminate the middle-man. And with their long-established direct contact with their customers, they have built up a fair idea of how to provide shopping facilities that are convenient, comfortable and cheap.

The critical means of convenience shopping in bulk is, of course, the car. So the foremost considerations are to locate facilities for easy access by car and to plan layouts where shoppers can cart their bulk purchases to their cars without hindrance. Favoured locations are at or beyond the fringes of towns on major distribution routes which are easily accessible to a wide catchment population of affluent and car-owning suburban households. The most convenient layout for shopping is on a single level, and cheap edge-of-town sites allow large single-storey structures with extensive open carparking to be developed with minimal construction costs.

The natural economic tendency is towards larger and larger self-service stores, where diminishing overheads result in lower retail prices to lure customers. The out-of-town hypermarket is the logical extension of this tendency. However, hypermarket developments have proved to be too massive and dominant to be readily acceptable in British Green Belts. All hypermarket proposals of over 7500 m² are now required by the DOE to pass through the lengthy procedure of a public inquiry, a decree which effectively stifles commercial interest.

An appreciably less monolithic solution to convenience shopping than the hypermarket is the district shopping centre. A typical district shopping centre is a £3 million development at the edge of a town consisting of a superstore (between a hypermarket and a supermarket in size) linked to a group of smaller retail outlets and other facilities and serviced by surface carparking.

The procedure of developing a district centre usually starts with the local authority, which assembles the site, changes the land-use designation, and draws up a development brief. Tenders are invited from developers, and their bids are compared in terms of ground rent offered (typically £100 000 a year), financial viability of the scheme, and not least, layout and design.

Competition between the handful of retailer/developers for the limited number of shopping centre projects is fierce. Each company deploys its own corps of experts, who have developed sophisticated procedures for formulating bids. This involves a complex balancing act of determining the size and mix of units, assessing how they could be made financially attractive for existing local shops to rent, drawing up an architectural scheme that would be in keeping with the local environment, estimating development costs and rental, and organising the finances.

Surface carparking that is generous in capacity, free and close at hand is essential at district shopping centres. Multi-storey carparking structures may seem to planners a more economic use of land, especially on more central sites, but are navigational nightmares for housewives steering trolleys full of shopping. Likewise the retail units require adequate servicing by means of separate vehicular access routes and suitable loading areas.

As well as the superstore, which is run by the developing company itself and typically has a gross floor area of some 5000 m², a district shopping centre usually has about ten supporting units that are let on a commercial basis. When the balance between the units is correct, the superstore dealing predominantly in food acts as a magnet to attract shoppers without monopolising trade in the centre. In such a milieu, other specialist shops such as chemist, butcher, delicatessen, greengrocer, newsagent, and diy shop can thrive, as would such commercial services as pub, restaurant, snack bar, launderette, bank and post office.

The social success of the scheme can be reinforced if the local authority develops such community facilities as a library, health clinic, community centre or sports centre to integrate with the commercial premises. Such community facilities have the effect of prolonging the vitality of the centre into the evening after the shops shut, thereby making maximum use of the extensive carparking and acting as a useful guard against vandalism. Unfortunately, local authority plans have been prey to cutbacks in public spending in recent years.

In the opinion of Peter Jones, of the Unit for Retail Planning Information, a successful formula for planning district shopping centres has already evolved, the main outstanding problem being the architectural design. It is vital that the layout of the units, their physical relationships to carparking and service areas, and the widths of access routes and pedestrian malls be acceptable to prospective tenants for the supporting shops, otherwise the whole scheme will founder. And although the instinct of commercial developers may be to keep building costs as low and development procedures as fast as possible, recent years have seen a big rise in standards ▶