

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN STRIP MALLS:  
EVALUATING AND PRESERVING A UNIQUE CULTURAL RESOURCE

by

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(Under the Direction of Wayde Brown)

ABSTRACT

The 'strip mall' first became recognizable as a distinct typology in the years following the Second World War. Since that time, it has been a subject of considerable debate, as public opinion has ranged from appreciation to antipathy. Much has been written concerning its role in American culture, but the strip mall has never been seriously considered in the context of historic preservation.

This work examines the origins of the strip mall, its present role, and the adequacy of existing methods for its evaluation and preservation. In the process, issues commonly facing resources of the 'recent past' are addressed, and the current treatment of the strip mall and other such resources is further investigated. Recommendations for the appropriate management of the strip mall are made based on an analysis of the preservation tools available and the consideration of conservation challenges unique to the typology.

INDEX WORDS: Historic preservation, Historic significance, National Register of Historic Places, Recent past, Strip mall, Shopping center, Retail space, Commercial history

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## INTRODUCTION

Along highways across America, there exists an often neglected, frequently maligned, resource type: the ‘strip mall.’ The strip mall is unique in form and singular in purpose; it is designed to sell. It is known by nearly anyone who has driven an automobile, and it is recognizable everywhere. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the validity of the strip mall as a unique cultural resource type and to evaluate the possibilities for its preservation.

The name of the first person to use the term ‘strip mall,’ may never be known, but it is not difficult to imagine how the term originated. Since the advent of the automobile, commercial buildings have been associated with the road. The ‘Sunset Strip’ in Los Angeles and ‘The Strip’ in Las Vegas both refer to roads bordered by commercial activity. The word itself might originally have referred to the long ribbon of highway, but the meaning of the strip has come to include the buildings, signs, and other elements that make up the visual landscape of the road. The strip mall is essentially a ‘mall along the strip.’

Since the 1950s, the strip mall has been a constant backdrop to the daily activities of people across the United States. There is no more ubiquitous representation of American consumerism and automobile dependence. But as a cultural resource, the strip mall has been ignored by preservationists. As the earliest examples near sixty years of age, it is well past time for the strip mall to be taken seriously. Ignorance must be replaced by understanding. In the next decade, hundreds of strip malls will reach the threshold for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The National Register has grown to encompass the roadside vernacular architecture of Route 66, 1950s ‘boomerang’ modern coffee shops, and even McDonald’s fast-food restaurants.

Preservation of the strip mall is not far removed from the preservation of these other elements of the commercial highway. The historic strip mall is an issue that preservationists cannot avoid for much longer. The strip mall represents not only a unique building type, but also a new pattern of development that had a significant impact on the postwar commercial highway and American cities in general.

The following chapters describe the origins of the strip mall and address questions that arise when the strip mall is considered for preservation, including:

- How is the strip mall a unique and significant cultural resource?
- Is the National Register of Historic Places an adequate tool for evaluating this resource?
- Are other existing tools for evaluation and preservation adequate and/or applicable to the strip mall?
- How have similar ‘recent past’ resources been preserved or reused?
- Are there challenges unique to the preservation of the strip mall?
- How can preservationists overcome these challenges?

The exploration of these questions gives new perspective to the preservation of the strip mall and presents possibilities for its future role in communities across America.

### *Methodology:*

The principal methodology for the thesis was archival research of primary and secondary sources. Trade journals and other sources outlining recommended shopping center designs and practices were essential to defining the strip mall as a typology. Historic American Building Survey (HABS) documentation and National Register nominations were sources of history, original photographs, and architectural drawings. Internet research, including the use of the



Google Maps satellite and ‘Street View’ features, was invaluable in discovering the present condition of resources too distant both spatially and monetarily. Conference proceedings on the recent past and highway beautification gave insight to opinions regarding the image of the highway. Local government ordinances in Seattle, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Los Angeles provided examples of character areas and new preservation tools. Finally, examples of recent past preservation suggested opportunities for the preservation of the strip mall.

It is hoped that this thesis will demonstrate not only the cultural value of the strip mall but will also inspire broader historical understanding of all publicly disparaged forms of architecture. Preservationists must learn to look beyond appearances and opinions to discover true history and significance. Preservation can be a valuable tool for conserving a physical record of the built environment, or it can be marginalized by a dependence upon style and taste. Advocating the preservation of places like the strip mall is an important step towards continued relevance.

## CHAPTER I

### RETAIL EVOLUTION IN THE SUBURBS

Early suburban living in American cities was nothing like suburban life today. In the 1850s, the area between the countryside and cities, such as Boston and New York, housed industrial facilities that required more space than could be found in the city. These included tanneries, soap and glue factories, and slaughterhouses.<sup>1</sup> The suburbs were generally the location of those people and places literally and figuratively on the outskirts of society. Poor roads and time-consuming travel left little connection between the suburbs and the city; however, there were exceptions. Brooklyn, New York, provided a bucolic setting for residents commuting by ferry to work in Manhattan.<sup>2</sup> Wealthy families seeking a pastoral location away from the congestion of the city often kept two homes, one in the city and one outside. A few middle class families chose to make their home on the outskirts, struggling with transportation issues but enjoying a life removed from the city. Still, the majority of people remained in the cities, close to the amenities only an urban environment could provide.<sup>3</sup>

As the nineteenth century came to a close, new technologies forever changed the relationship between urban and rural spheres. First, the electric streetcar, then the automobile, inspired the development of new retail forms outside the city, culminating in the formation of the planned shopping center. American cities were never the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 22.

<sup>2</sup> John J. Palen, The Suburbs, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 21-23.

<sup>3</sup> Hayden, 23.

### **Streetcar Suburbs and the Taxpayer Strip:**

Until the twentieth century, the scale of suburban living was limited by cost and practicality. Technological advances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries significantly reduced costs and distances, making suburban living an option for a greater percentage of the population. The increased mobility of the American public would have a profound impact on the landscape, altering patterns of development across the nation.

Prior to 1840, most urban residents traveled about the city on foot. Early modes of public transportation, including the omnibus, essentially an urban stagecoach, were crowded and uncomfortable, with ten-cent fares too high for workers making a dollar a day.<sup>4</sup> From the mid-nineteenth century onward, rapid innovation in public transport led to the development of the track-based horsecar, the cable car, and ultimately the electric streetcar. The first electric streetcar was placed into service in 1888 in Richmond, Virginia. By 1902, the electric streetcar was the primary mode of public transport in cities across the nation, accounting for ninety-seven percent of all streetcar mileage.

The electric streetcar was a significant step forward in city transportation. To a public conditioned to horse-drawn lines, limited in speed and power and a chronic health concern, the streetcar was an astounding improvement. The electric streetcar offered three times the capacity of the horsecar, and at fifteen miles per hour, operated at two to three times the speed. Not only was it faster and more efficient, but rates were cheaper as well. A five-cent fare made riding the streetcar economically expedient for new classes of city-dwellers.<sup>5</sup> More affordable transportation meant more people could travel outside traditional city boundaries. The streetcar pushed the periphery of the city farther than ever before.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark S. Foster, From Streetcar to Superhighway, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 11.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Palen, The Suburbs, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 34-37.

Often, a streetcar company's primary objective was not transportation, but real estate development. As lines were built, the value of land alongside went up. Streetcar owners throughout the country operated their lines at a loss while making fortunes developing new communities through land speculation. The Shaker Heights community in Cleveland was formed by the extension of streetcar lines to an existing tract of land. In Los Angeles, Henry E. Huntington purchased 50,000 acres of land in the San Fernando Valley, developing thirteen new towns between 1902 and 1917.<sup>6</sup> Flat fares allowed people to easily ride the entire length of a route, ensuring more distant property was not devalued. Amusement parks and other attractions placed at the end of lines encouraged city dwellers to venture outward, increasing exposure to available property along the way.<sup>7</sup>

Initially, the streetcar brought more people into downtown, and more money to downtown merchants, than ever before. However, as more people moved outside of the city and settled along the streetcar lines, businesses began to follow suit. The streetcar lines had opened new land to development, but property was still relatively cheap compared to that of downtown. Anticipating future appreciation as the downtown area expanded outward, land speculators purchased many of the available lots. In order to pay the taxes owed on the property, many built small commercial strips as placeholders until the property was ready for more substantial construction investment. As a result, these buildings came to be known as 'taxpayers.'<sup>8</sup> By the

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<sup>6</sup> Foster, 17.

<sup>7</sup> James Howard Kunstler, The Geography of Nowhere, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Larry R Ford, Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows, and Suburbs, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 232.

1910s, taxpayer buildings formed lengthy strips of commercial activity extending from the downtowns of cities across the country (figure 1).<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1:** Taxpayer strip. Belvedere, California. 1924.

With lower rents, less congestion, and an increasing suburban population, the ‘taxpayer strip’ became an appealing alternative for new businesses as well as those with existing downtown locations. Initially, the businesses locating at streetcar stops were those that could not afford the high rents of the central business district. These pioneers targeted suburban residents who did not want to travel downtown for essentials such as groceries and haircuts. It was not long however, before businesses large and small were locating along the taxpayer strip.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Trade journals from the 1930s indicate that the ‘taxpayer’ had become a common term and a well-known commercial building type by that time. See "Retail Store," *Architectural Record* Feb 1935: 86, and "Florida: Bachelor's Garage Apartment Applies 'Taxpayer' Idea," *Architectural Record* Oct 1939: 46.

<sup>10</sup> Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985) 12-14.

The new taxpayer strip was distinct from the densely clustered downtown buildings that preceded it (figure 2). Taxpayer buildings were intended to quickly generate income and then be replaced. When the value of the property suitably increased, money saved could be spent on a more permanent structure or the property could be sold. The style and form of the taxpayer strip were greatly influenced by this condition. The concept is illustrated by a Michigan shopping center “designed and built for temporary use, as a source of income until such time – estimated by the owner at 10 years – as more stable conditions in the neighborhood may justify a more permanent building.” The building in Michigan was constructed with replacement in mind, utilizing simple construction and materials to ensure a “high salvage ratio.”<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2:** Typical taxpayer building. Los Angeles. Late 1920s.

To generate the greatest amount of income, it was necessary to keep construction costs to a minimum. Taxpayer buildings had to be built quickly, and they had to be built cheaply. With

<sup>11</sup> "Michigan: Short-Lived Shopping Center for Unstable Land," *Architectural Record* July 1938: 44

more appealing suburban housing readily available away from the noise and congestion of the street, residential upper stories were typically eliminated, forsaking the mixed-use philosophy of the traditional downtown. Inside, buildings were optimized for the greatest range of potential tenants. Taxpayers were often built before tenants were secured, and turnover was frequent. Flexibility was therefore essential to ensure usable space for would-be tenants. Rarely was there interior customization or features unique to a specific business.

Conceived as placeholders, taxpayers were not designed with the same sense of permanence and stateliness as the buildings along Main Street. With a typical life expectancy of only ten years, durable construction and architectural embellishment were undertaken only in an effort to increase visibility. In the end, style proved of little importance, as bolder and more effective signage soon obscured whatever architectural ornament had been applied. The overall effect was a long, low strip of unremarkable businesses extending from the core of the city into the countryside. As Richard Longstreth noted, “taxpayers had a useful purpose but almost never contributed to a sense of singular identity for the places they served.”<sup>12</sup>

The taxpayer strip represented a new philosophy in the design and construction of commercial architecture. For many businesses, it was clear that a location in the high-rent, upscale buildings of downtown was no longer necessary. As long as land was cheap and readily available, substantial profits could be generated without the cachet of downtown shopping. The taxpayer strip was clear evidence that quality in construction had become less important than quality in location. In the end, taxpayers still held more in common with the buildings along Main Street than with the buildings associated with contemporary highways and interstates.

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Longstreth, City Center to Regional Mall, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 63-65.

However, the design philosophy associated with the taxpayer strip continues to have an influence on contemporary commercial building practices.

Despite the temporary nature of the taxpayer strip, many such places remain in existence today. The city did not expand outward in the manner early speculators had anticipated. The dense, compact downtowns never reached the streetcar suburbs. Instead, growth proceeded outward, beyond the buildings of the taxpayer strip, at even lower densities than before. The taxpayer strip was left behind by the instrument of a new and unforeseen pattern of growth: the automobile.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Arrival of the Automobile:**

The invention of the automobile did not immediately change the appearance of American cities. In fact, the electric streetcar and auto were developed concurrently, from 1890-1915. Due to the high cost of ownership, the automobile was slow to be adopted. Furthermore, roads were poor in both the country and the city. In such conditions, the streetcar was the most effective means of travel through the city, but circumstances would soon change.

The price of Henry Ford's Model T in 1908 was \$825. By 1927, the price had fallen to \$290. Widespread adoption of the automobile increased demand for an improved road system. The United States government implemented a \$75 million Federal Road Act in 1916 and a second Act in 1921. Soon, it became possible for middle class families to enjoy the automobile and the freedom that came with it.<sup>14</sup> As the automobile spread, so did the city. With the auto, growth progressed rapidly, eventually leapfrogging the taxpayer strip and extending farther than

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<sup>13</sup> Liebs, Main Street to Miracle Mile, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Bruegmann, Sprawl: A Compact History, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 88-90.



ever before. Unlike any technology before it, the automobile truly changed the way American cities were built.

The most immediate impact of the automobile was the crowding of downtown streets. The crowding was felt earliest and most intensely in Los Angeles, despite being “a city built around the automobile.”<sup>15</sup> First raised as an issue in the early 1920s, downtown parking became an acute problem by 1930. The automobile took up much more space than the streetcar, and parking areas were scarce. Making matters worse, if parking could not be found along a curb, drivers were forced to find a lot and pay to park. Cars searching for a free parking spot further crowded city streets.<sup>16</sup>

Other large cities faced similar issues. A survey conducted in New York in 1926 described the difficulty in alleviating the downtown parking problem: “The attempt to overcome congestion while at the same time retaining the present concentrated form of city development is quite similar to the proverbial attempt to lift oneself up by his bootstraps.”<sup>17</sup> According to the report, congested downtowns were making outlying shopping areas more attractive to suburban dwellers. The availability of free and convenient parking was changing customers’ shopping habits. Suburban dwellers were spending less time shopping downtown and were instead making more trips to nearby stores. The report recognized an increasing propensity for downtown merchants to establish satellite stores in suburban areas and recommended the provision of off-street parking at all future suburban stores. Finally, it noted, “Ample parking

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<sup>15</sup> Douglas Haskell, “Architecture on Routes U.S. 40 and 66,” Architectural Record 81.5(May 1937): 19.

<sup>16</sup> Longstreth, City Center to Regional Mall, 99.

<sup>17</sup> “New Type of Suburban Shopping Area Proposed,” The American City Magazine 35.2(Aug 1926): 214.

space on the store's own grounds, where customers' cars could be left in safety, is so unusual and so desirable in this day that it offers a convincing advertising feature."<sup>18</sup>

The taxpayer strip was the first area outside of downtown to feel the effect of the automobile. The freedom of mobility offered by personal transportation expanded commercial opportunities beyond the stops dictated by the streetcar. New buildings filled the empty spaces along the strip. More went up beyond its edges. Parking became a critical issue at many locations. But while growth was fast, change progressed slowly.<sup>19</sup>

Initial attempts at accommodating the automobile took a simple approach, setting the taxpayer block back from the street and using the setback as a parking area. The earliest involved only a frontage strip with room for cars to parallel park, creating more an extension of the public space of the street than a distinct parking lot. By 1932, the visual and vehicular congestion caused by on-street parking was a recognized problem, and design journals began to recommend increased setbacks, allowing space for cars to park diagonally or perpendicularly along the face of the building, off the street (figure 3).<sup>20</sup>

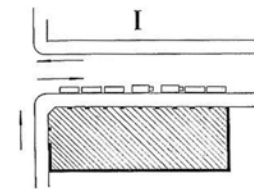
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<sup>18</sup> "New Type of Suburban Shopping Area Proposed," 214-16.

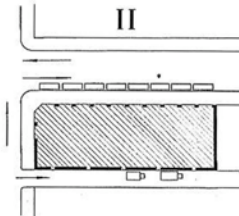
<sup>19</sup> Liebs, Main Street to Miracle Mile, 29

<sup>20</sup> "Drafting and Design Problems: Neighborhood Shopping Centers," Architectural Record May 1932: 326; and Clarence S. Stein and Catherine Bauer, "Store Buildings and Neighborhood Shopping Centers," Architectural Record Feb 1934: 179.

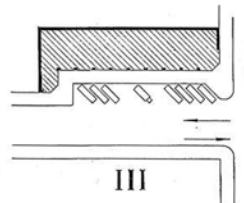
THE PLANNING OF NEIGHBORHOOD SHOPPING CENTERS  
AS AFFECTED BY THE USE OF THE AUTOMOBILE



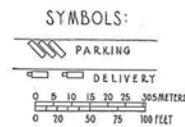
(I) Normal type of parking obstructs roads and makes approach to stores difficult.



(II) Deliveries in rear of store on alley somewhat decrease street congestion.



(III) Building set back so as to secure diagonal parking.



**Figure 3:** Parking layouts. *Architectural Record*. February 1934.

In another method, the parking lot was hidden completely, surrounded by buildings fronting the street. Such plans, in which an open parking area was flanked by storefronts, were based on the staging areas used by trucks at wholesale markets; the layout was easily adapted for cars. This arrangement ensured adequate parking but also preserved the traditional relationship among street, sidewalk, and building façade.

These early designs indicate reluctance to incorporate the automobile into the fabric of the city. Traditional forms continued to dominate development patterns. Buildings fronted the

street, forming a visible delineation between public and private space. Gaps in the street façade were considered unsightly, an indicator of urban decay. Space for cars was an afterthought. Early solutions for accommodating the automobile typically adapted space for the car to fit the building, but such a strategy was ultimately inefficient.<sup>21</sup>

The automobile required an entirely new way of thinking about architecture. Commercial space in cities had revolved around the pedestrian for generations, and the influence of the architectural forms originated downtown was not easily cast aside. Architects and developers did not yet realize the impact the car was beginning to have on the consumer and the use of commercial space. Moving forward, entirely new forms would have to be invented to accommodate the needs and opportunities created by the automobile.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Shopping Center:**

The chaos of the taxpayer strip, combined with the proliferating use of the automobile, led retailers, developers, and architects to reevaluate the form and function of the traditional retail store. Rapid growth had driven profits along the taxpayer strip since the early 1900s. The stock market crash of 1929 exposed the weaknesses in the taxpayer approach, resulting in empty storefronts, blighted streets, and decreased property values. According to census reports, in 1929, there were 1.5 million stores in the United States. Half of those stores did not make enough in annual sales to earn the proprietor a living wage. Even before 1929, retail was a risky venture. Between 1921 and 1928 in Louisville, Kentucky, forty-five percent of all new grocery

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Longstreth, The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 137-148.

<sup>22</sup> Larry Ford, 332.

stores failed within the first year.<sup>23</sup> The economic climate called for a new approach: carefully selected tenants in a carefully organized space under single ownership. Developers created the planned shopping center.

Designs for the new shopping center suggest the influence of mass production principles as well as the downturn in the economic environment. Design journals focused on efficiency and maximizing profit, calling for flexibility and minimum construction, operation, and maintenance costs. Interiors emphasized the rapid movement of goods into and out of stores. Even signs were to be streamlined with an emphasis on legibility over visibility.<sup>24</sup>

The appropriate design and layout of a new neighborhood shopping center was outlined in *Architectural Record* in 1932. It called for exclusively commercial one-story buildings, and ample parking for those arriving by car. Parking was to be in front of the stores for the sake of convenience, but most important was that parking be “free of through traffic.”<sup>25</sup> Separate access for delivery vehicles was another important aspect. Finally, the article addressed the appearance of the shopping center, suggesting that, “A single feature, such as a clock tower, flagpole, or well-designed electric sign tower, identifying the entire group of shops, [was] more effective than the usual attempts at giving individual shops separate ‘architectural’ treatment.”<sup>26</sup>

A unified façade was an important aspect of the new shopping center, and was a direct response to the “‘tax-payers,’ strung out in miserable rows, unrelated to the needs or the form of the community which they pretend to serve.”<sup>27</sup> A de-emphasis on architectural ornament cleaned up the shopping center, further unifying its appearance. “A store sells merchandise, not

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<sup>23</sup> Stein and Bauer, 176.

<sup>24</sup> K. Lönberg-Holm, "Planning the Retail Store," *Architectural Record* June 1931: 497-501.

<sup>25</sup> "Drafting and Design Problems: Neighborhood Shopping Centers," 329.

<sup>26</sup> "Drafting and Design Problems: Neighborhood Shopping Centers," 329.

<sup>27</sup> Stein and Bauer, 176.

architecture and equipment. The design of the store... should be subordinated entirely to the purpose of displaying merchandise to its best advantage. Self-expression, monumental and picturesque efforts are out of place.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the first commercial designs to truly embody the new shopping center concept was the drive-in market.<sup>29</sup> A step forward in the evolution of shopping along the commercial strip, the drive-in was the first significant break from the traditional urban pattern. Unlike the taxpayer strip, the buildings of the drive-in market were placed at the rear of the property, typically the least desirable portion of the lot. Visual prominence was given over to the parking lot, which encompassed the space between storefront and street. The drive-in’s long front and distance from the street made it appear larger and helped it stand apart from other buildings (figure 4).



**Figure 4:** “Ye Market Place” drive-in market. Los Angeles. 1924.

<sup>28</sup> Lönberg-Holm, 503.

<sup>29</sup> Stein and Bauer, 185.

Generally, the buildings themselves were similar to those along a taxpayer block, but were often bent at the middle, typically forming an “L.” The L-shaped plan was most effective at attracting attention from motorists as well as drawing customers into multiple shops once they had parked their cars. While there was little other than signage to distinguish the different elements of the taxpayer block, the drive-in utilized form to create a hierarchy, emphasizing the two ends and the center where the two arms came together. In this way, the building served as a ‘living billboard,’ advertising its location to motorists along the street.

The typical 1920s commercial street appeared to the motorist as a wide, swiftly flowing boulevard walled by solid storefronts, each with a different sign proclaiming its unique identity. Between the road and the buildings was a blockade of parked automobiles separating the consumer from the merchant. In this environment, shopping at a particular retailer, and finding a parking space nearby, became a daunting task. The drive-in’s unique layout not only distinguished it from the other shops, but it presented to the consumer a refuge from the intensity of the street.<sup>30</sup> Once a gouge, the parking lot had become the salve.

The acceptance of the drive-in form was assured by the success of one hybridized example in Washington, DC. The Park and Shop, developed by the real estate firm Shannon and Luchs and designed by architect Arthur B. Heaton, opened in 1930 on Connecticut Avenue in the Cleveland Park neighborhood (figure 5).<sup>31</sup> Designed with a Colonial Revival influence, the Park and Shop nevertheless exemplifies an emphasis on unity and a decreased importance of architectural ornament. A uniform awning projects across the entire façade, and ornament is concentrated at the junction of the L-shaped building.

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<sup>30</sup> Longstreth, *The Drive-In*, 42-46.

<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Sinclair Wood, “Cleveland Park Historic District,” National Register Nomination, Listed 27 Apr 1987, (Washington, DC: Cleveland Park Historical Society, 1987), 8-37



**Figure 5:** “Park and Shop.” Cleveland Park, Washington, DC. 1930.

Like the traditional drive-in, the building’s L-shape was oriented to oncoming traffic in an effort to draw the attention of passing motorists. But the complex also featured a mix of stores more typical of a neighborhood shopping center. Intended to complement one another and draw more customers to the location, these included a food outlet, bakery, restaurant, hardware store, laundry station, beauty salon, and barbershop. The careful selection of tenants was a major factor in the Park and Shop’s success. Combined with a clearly visible off-street parking area, the Park and Shop became a model for new shopping centers across the country.<sup>32</sup>

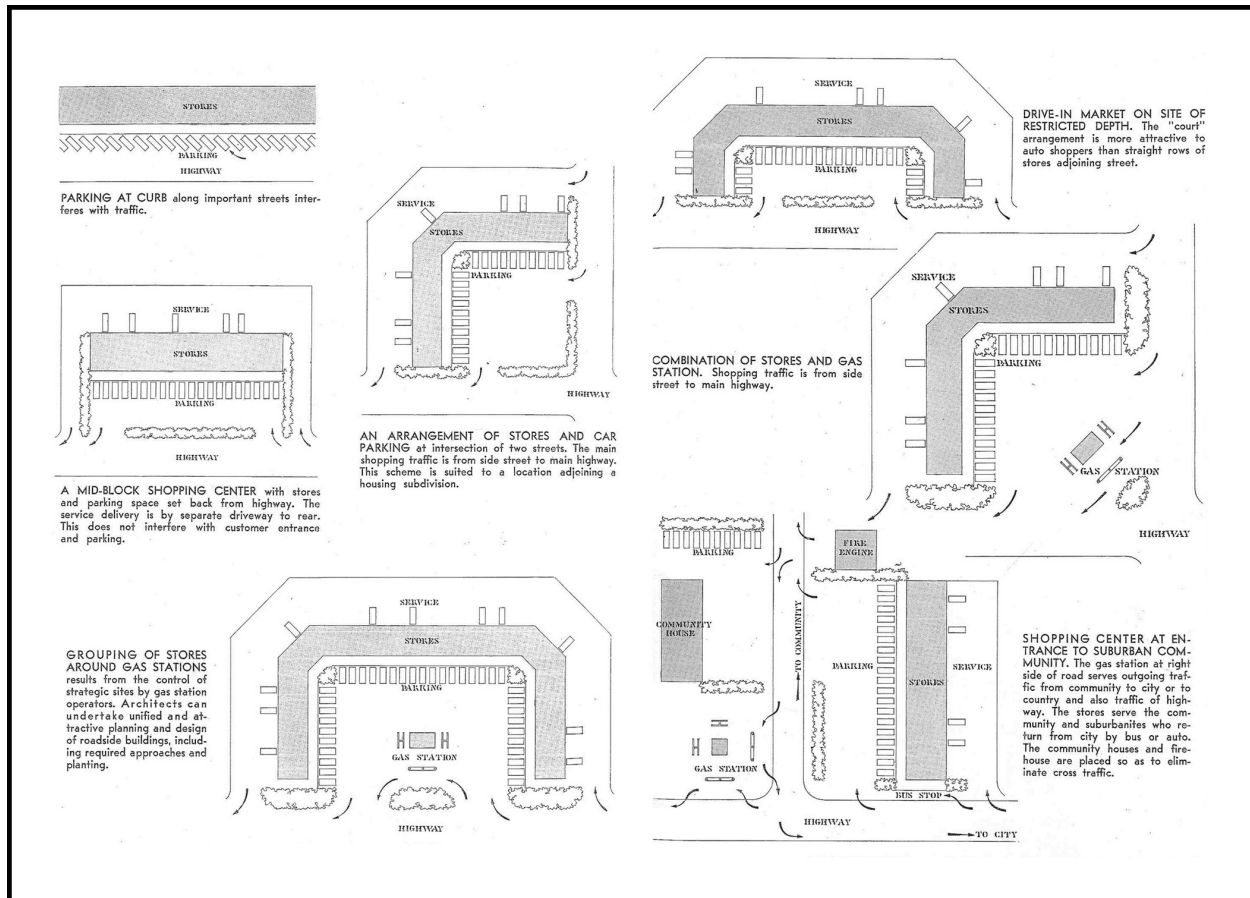
The Park and Shop made clear the importance of the parking area to the success of outlying commercial projects. *Architectural Record*, the leading architectural publication of the time, featured the Park and Shop in an article on new trends in store design, the only U.S.

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<sup>32</sup> Longstreth, *The Drive-In*, 149-52.



example to be included.<sup>33</sup> The Park and Shop was included in a later article accompanied by a series of diagrams suggesting different layouts for a drive-in shopping complex, all prominently featuring a parking area for the auto (figure 6).<sup>34</sup> The influence of the *Record*, the leading architectural journal at the time, combined with strong evidence of financial success, made the drive-in a prevalent concept by the end of the decade.



**Figure 6:** Shopping center parking layouts. *Architectural Record*, May 1932.

<sup>33</sup> Lönberg-Holm, 499.

<sup>34</sup> "Drafting and Design Problems: Neighborhood Shopping Centers," 326-27.

### A New Typology:

For all its success, the drive-in market concept remained popular only at a small scale. Supermarkets, department stores, and other large-scale commercial developments continued to place faith in street frontage and the pedestrian as the most effective means of making sales. A survey sent to leading merchants by one developer revealed an industry clinging to traditional forms. Almost unanimously, the sellers preferred storefronts at the property line along both sides of a street, analogous to the layout of a typical Main Street.<sup>35</sup> Conventional thinking was that front parking would have an adverse impact on the visibility of window displays, buildings facing the street would be too far apart from one another, and that “pedestrian traffic, the most valuable and important to any volume merchant,” would be non-existent in such an arrangement.<sup>36</sup>

Starting in 1947, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) began publishing *The Community Builders' Handbook*, a set of guidelines for developers in the construction of new suburban projects. The ULI was formed in 1939 with the purpose of undertaking research and promoting education in the urban planning and land development fields. It was one of few resources for developers just starting out as well as more experienced builders. Among the members was noted developer J.C. Nichols, whose Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri, was one of the earliest planned shopping centers.<sup>37</sup> The ULI advocated a method in which parking was equally divided between the front and rear of the buildings. Setting buildings back too far from the street was seen to give an overall unattractive impression.<sup>38</sup> But the space of the commercial

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<sup>35</sup> *The Community Builders' Handbook*, Prepared by the Community Builders' Council of the Urban Land Institute, (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 1948), 126.

<sup>36</sup> Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, 243.

<sup>37</sup> *The Community Builders' Handbook*, vii.

<sup>38</sup> *The Community Builders' Handbook*, 126.

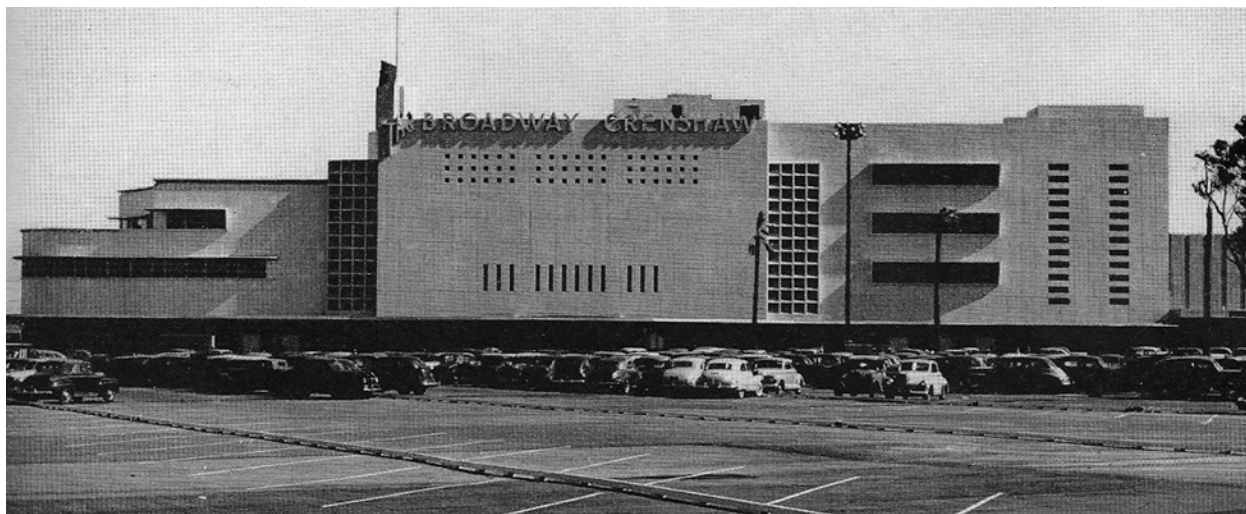
highway was rapidly changing. In the decades following World War II, it became clear that commercial architecture would need to evolve to keep up with consumers and their automotive love affair.

One of the first large-scale commercial endeavors to attempt to resolve the front parking issue was the Broadway-Crenshaw Center in Los Angeles, designed by Albert B. Gardner (figures 7 & 8). Opened in 1947, the 550,000 square foot center featured several retail innovations. The Broadway department store acted as an anchor tenant and developer, a relatively new concept.<sup>39</sup> Traditionally, department stores, like supermarkets, operated as stand-alone entities. Furthermore, the tenant mix was targeted at the middle class as opposed to more upscale clientele. The most apparent innovation was the unique design.



**Figure 7:** Broadway-Crenshaw shopping center. Los Angeles. 1948.

<sup>39</sup> "Store Heads Dedicate Broadway-Crenshaw," Los Angeles Times 27 Feb 1946: I-8.



**Figure 8:** Broadway-Crenshaw department store. Parking lot façade.

The layout of Broadway-Crenshaw was designed to accommodate both the car and the pedestrian. The Broadway-Crenshaw Center was conceived with two facades: one fronted the street, while the opposite fronted a vast ten-acre parking lot, designed to accommodate 7000 cars per day. A service tunnel ran beneath the complex, separating consumer and delivery traffic.<sup>40</sup> Each retailer had two storefronts, effectively doubling exterior display space. The hope was to draw both the pedestrian and the motorist to the center by presenting an equally inviting storefront to each. In reality, pedestrian shoppers were few and far between, and the great majority of business came from customers arriving by car.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the absence of pedestrian traffic, the Broadway-Crenshaw Center was a great success. Three years after opening, the center had combined sales of over \$40 million per year, breaking sales and growth records in the process. The Center's achievements drew new shopping complexes to the surrounding area, each hoping for similar results.<sup>42</sup> This fact alone

<sup>40</sup> "Broadway-Crenshaw Visited by Thousands," Los Angeles Times 22 Nov 1947: II-1.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Baker and Bruno Funaro, Shopping Centers: Design and Operation, (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1951), 175-76.

<sup>42</sup> "Crenshaw Center Expands," Los Angeles Times 21 May 1950: V-7.







**Figure 10:** Sears department store at Valley Plaza.

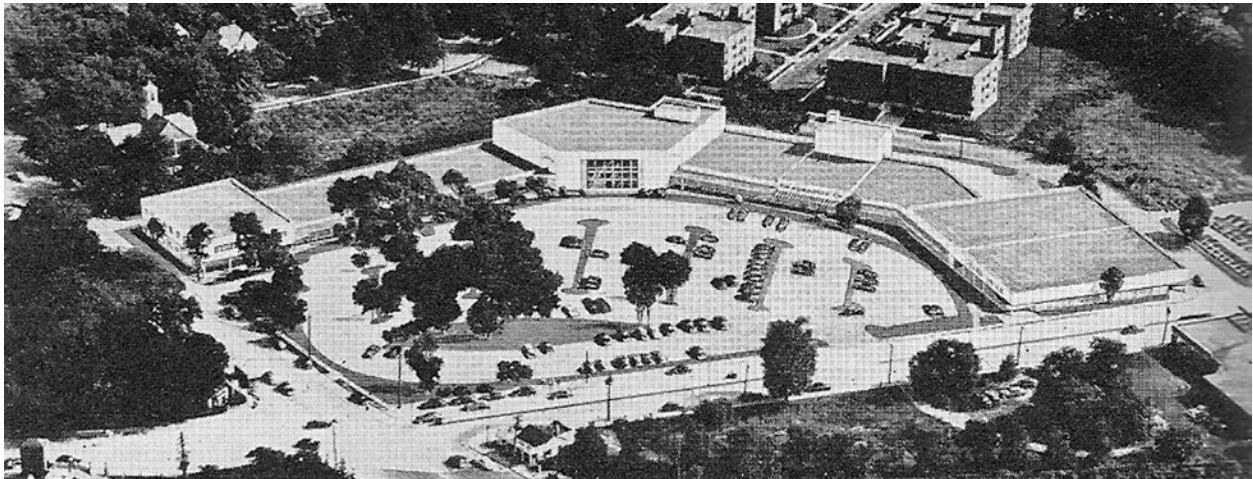
Valley Plaza did not simply follow the example of Broadway-Crenshaw, but pioneered new concepts. The location of Valley Plaza was unique to centers of the time. Based on a regional transportation plan, the site selected for the project was located along the path of a planned limited-access freeway and in close proximity to two others. The project was the first to recognize the importance of easy access from these high-speed routes. The architecture reflected the influence of the parking lot as well as the auto. The façade of the Sears department store was conceived as a giant billboard, designed not only to attract attention from the road, but also to serve as a solid backdrop to the expanse of parking between the store and the street. The other Valley Plaza storefronts took a similar approach.<sup>43</sup>

Across the country, dozens of other projects planned or constructed by the early 1950s demonstrated a similar philosophy toward the parking lot. Some developers went to great lengths to incorporate front parking on sites that ten years previously would have been

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<sup>43</sup> Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, 256-66.

considered too small or better suited for smaller buildings fronting the roadway. North Shore Mart, in Long Island, New York, was constructed on the former site of a seven-acre private estate adjacent to a downtown area (figure 11). Designed by architect Lathrop Douglass, the shopping center featured a branch department store, variety store, supermarket, shoe store, drug store, and other tenants oriented around a large corner parking lot.<sup>44</sup> Evergreen Park Shopping Plaza, designed by Howard T. Fisher & Associates in Chicago, similarly occupied a site in an already heavily developed area. The building site sloped steeply, and the resulting design incorporated split-level parking, with pedestrian ramps conveying customers between shopping plazas (figure 12).<sup>45</sup>



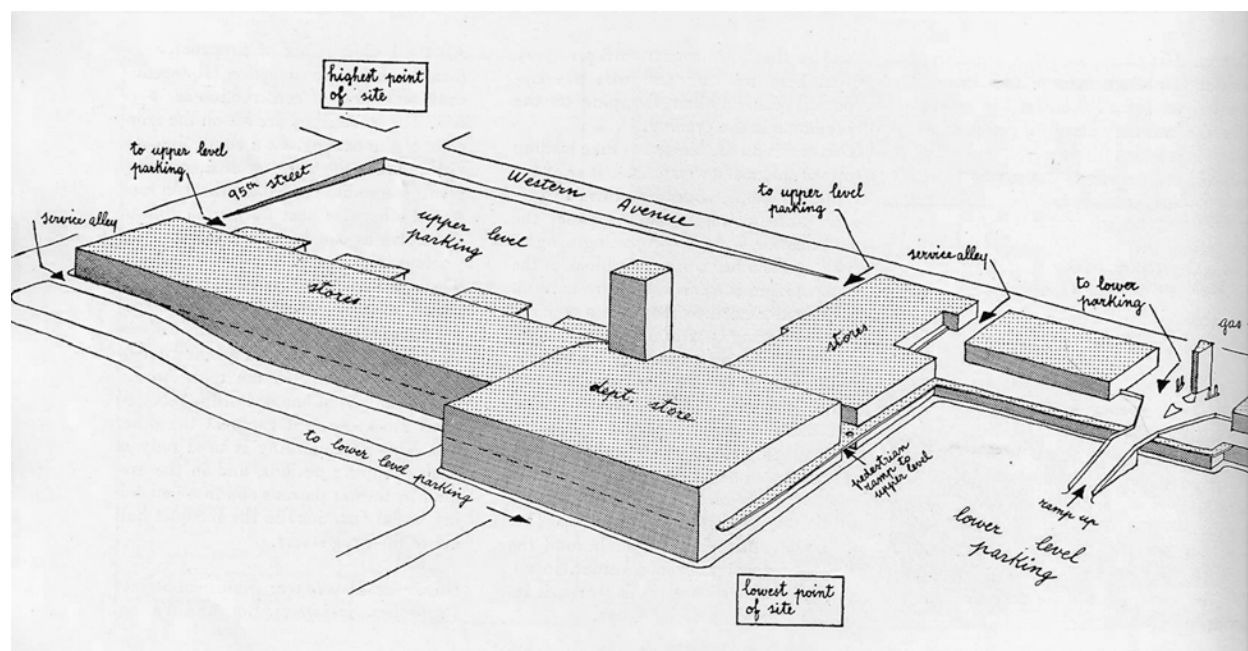
**Figure 11:** North Shore Mart. Long Island, New York.

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<sup>44</sup> “Lathrop Douglass...,” Architectural Record Sep. 1951: 13.

<sup>45</sup> Baker and Funaro, 118-19.





**Figure 12:** Evergreen Park Shopping Plaza. Chicago.

Typically, shopping center development strategy involved the acquisition of large tracts of land in undeveloped outlying areas. Such land was more easily acquired and more affordable than similar-sized properties closer to city centers.<sup>46</sup> The Community Builder's Council of the ULI even recommended that shopping center developers purchase more land than initially necessary to provide adequate space for expansion as well as to prevent the establishment of competing centers.<sup>47</sup> With ample open space, provisions for parking and appropriate store layout were relatively simple tasks. That North Shore Mart and Evergreen Park utilized a front parking orientation in more heavily developed areas was a telling indication of the widespread acceptance of such a layout and the positive economic impact that an ample front parking area could provide. Both projects employed engineers, W. Lee Moore at North Shore Mart, and

<sup>46</sup> Baker and Funaro, 10.

<sup>47</sup> The Community Builders' Handbook, 111.



Holabird & Root & Burgee at Evergreen Park. The additional expense of engineering emphasizes the growing importance of site planning to the shopping center's success.

Planning no longer began with the buildings, but with space for cars instead. Experiment after experiment had proven that even the best arrangement of buildings would fail to attract customers without well-planned space to serve them. By 1950, parking areas easily consumed more space than any other feature. The size, location, and appropriate provision of parking had become an integral, often overriding, component of shopping center design.<sup>48</sup> With the widespread acceptance of the front parking area, a new shopping center typology was formed: the 'strip center,' or 'strip mall.'

The strip mall may have come to full fruition by the mid-1950s, but the progression of retail space was far from over. The strip typology was just one branch of the shopping center evolutionary tree. The strip form became problematic when a shopping center grew larger. A longer strip discouraged shoppers from walking from one end of the building to another, but bending the buildings and setting them farther from the road cut into parking area and increased the distance between storefronts and parking spots. The general consensus in the retail industry was that the maximum distance between storefronts and the parking edge should be kept less than 300 feet. For larger centers, the preferred method of organization involved facing two strips together to form a pedestrian mall, with parking surrounding the shopping center on four sides.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the largest and most prominent shopping centers took the form of a mall. Pedestrian malls soon overshadowed the strip mall, in size, visibility, and the public psyche.

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<sup>48</sup> The Community Builders' Handbook, 117.

<sup>49</sup> Baker and Funaro, 38-39.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STRIP MALL

“The Egyptians have pyramids, the Chinese have a great wall, the British have immaculate lawns, the Germans have castles, the Dutch have canals, the Italians have grand churches. And Americans have shopping centers.”<sup>50</sup>

The strip mall has been called “the culmination of vehicular shopping,”<sup>51</sup> and for good reason. Shopping centers based around a courtyard or mall returned to an engagement with the pedestrian, who was encouraged to shop at multiple stores once out of the car. Only the strip mall was designed exclusively around the automobile. Its appearance and function was the product of decades of retail development. Though the pedestrian shopping mall may have been favored by design journals, the strip mall’s smaller size and relative ease of construction made it by far the more ubiquitous typology. Highly influenced by postwar culture, its form had a strong impact on American life and the commercial landscape. It remains an important form of retail space today, and is used by all levels of society.

#### **Appearance:**

The ULI first distinguished the ‘strip’ in the 1954 edition of the *Community Builders’ Handbook*. There, the strip was included among four basic shopping center patterns: Strip, Mall, “U” Type, and Group or Cluster.<sup>52</sup> By 1968, these typologies had expanded to include the “L” (figure 13). The “L” and “U” types were considered variations of the Strip, a long rectangular form. The strip was defined as “a straight line of stores tied together by a canopy over the

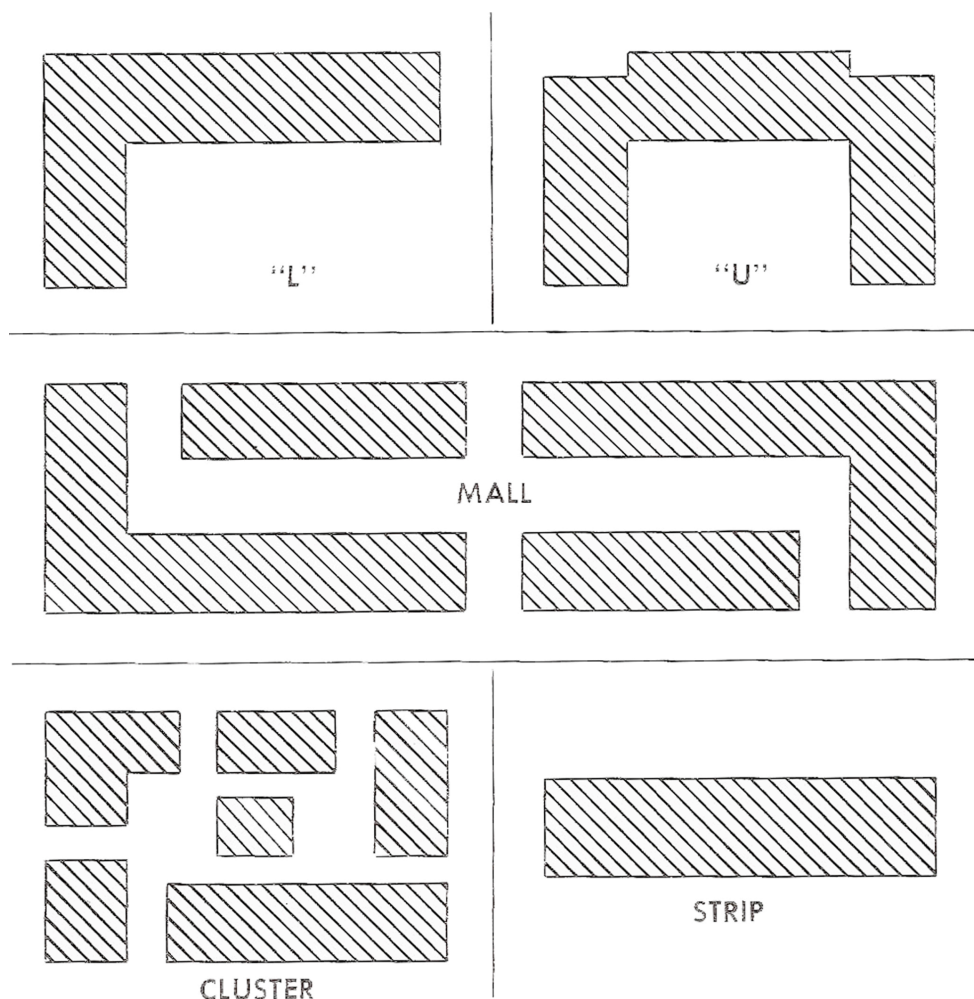
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<sup>50</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, "All the World's a Mall," *The American Historical Review* 101.4(Oct. 1996), 1111.

<sup>51</sup> “Big Shopping Center with No ‘Mr. Big,’” *Architectural Forum* 100.6(June 1954), 120.

<sup>52</sup> *The Community Builders’ Handbook*, Prepared by the Community Builder's Council of the Urban Land Institute, Members Edition, (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 1954), 158.

pedestrian walk extending along the entrance fronts to the stores... It is set back from the access street with most of the parking placed between the street and the building.” The strip form was considered the cheapest to build and the easiest to adapt to various site conditions.<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 13:** Typical shopping center patterns described in *The Community Builders' Handbook*.

The newly established strip mall was a continuation of the philosophies that had driven the development of the drive-in market and the Park and Shop. By the 1950s, the design principles advocated in *Architectural Record* two decades prior had fully taken root. In 1934,

<sup>53</sup> *The Community Builders Handbook*, Ed. J. Ross McKeever and prepared by the Community Builder's Council of the Urban Land Institute, Anniversary Edition, (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 1968), 320-21.

Clarence Stein and Catherine Bauer stated that for any successful shopping center, “form must follow function.”<sup>54</sup> First made famous by the architect Louis Sullivan, that dictum came to define shopping center design in the decades following the Second World War. More than any commercial type before it, the strip mall was truly a “machine for selling”<sup>55</sup>

The automobile influenced the design of shopping centers to the point that it became possible for some developers to undertake “mass production”<sup>56</sup> of large-scale strip malls. In 1954, *Architectural Forum* profiled owner-developer Don Casto, operating out of Columbus, Ohio, who at that time had constructed or had in the planning stages a total of twenty shopping centers. Each center was characterized by a straight, curved, or L-shaped strip of stores fronted by a continuous sidewalk canopy and a large parking area. Service alleys at the rear of the buildings separated consumer and delivery traffic. The car was further accommodated by the presence of a cruising lane for window-shopping between the storefronts and the parking lot (figures 14 & 15).



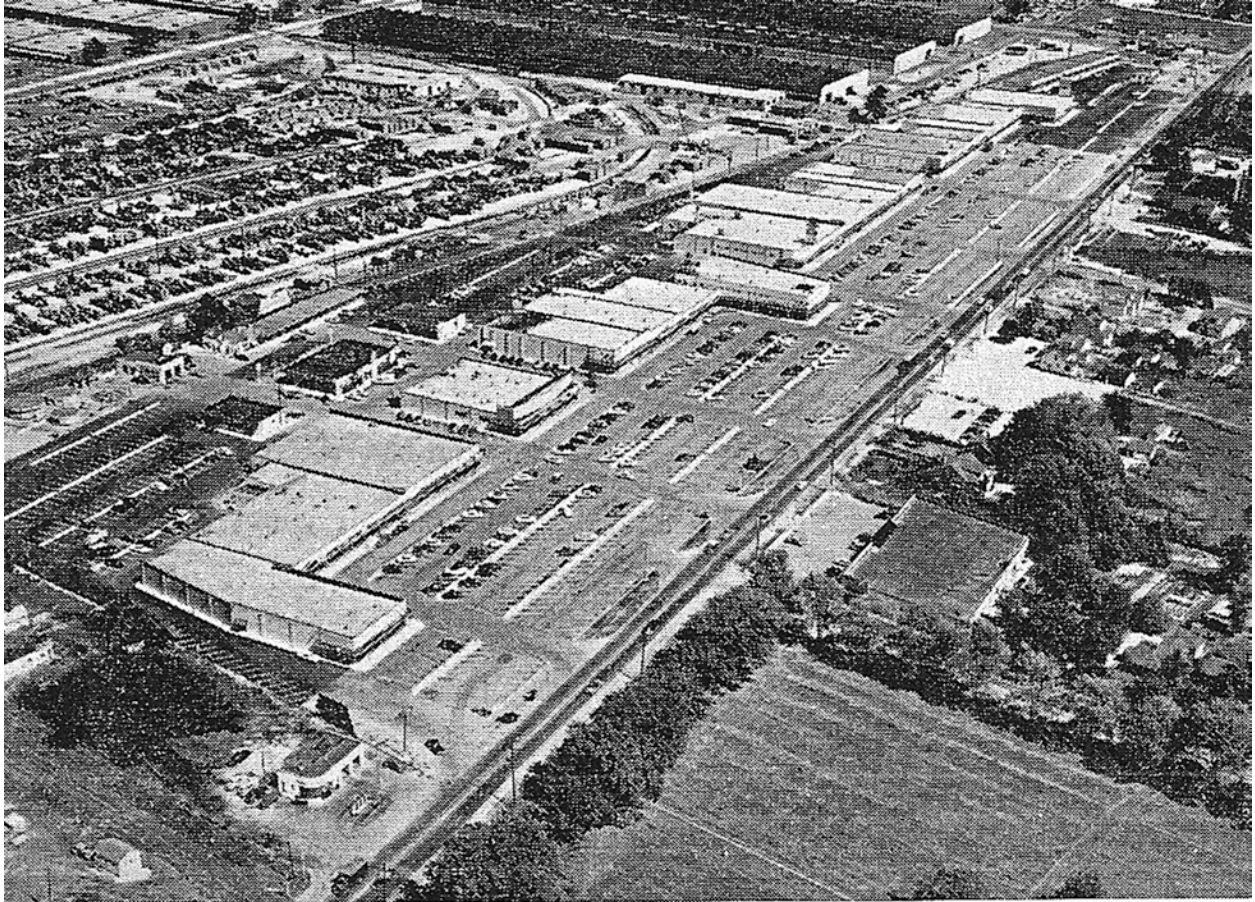
**Figure 14:** Typical design of a Don Casto strip shopping center.

<sup>54</sup> Stein and Bauer, 175.

<sup>55</sup> Frank Emery Cox, "What Makes a Shopping Center Successful," *Architect and Engineer* July 1954: 13.

<sup>56</sup> "Big Shopping Center with No 'Mr. Big,'" 120.





**Figure 15:** Aerial view depicting a Don Casto strip shopping center layout.

Architect C. Melvin Frank designed every Casto center. Both Casto and Frank were adherents of the same design philosophy, and each center was a model of economy and efficiency. Rentable space was maximized through the elimination of traditional public amenities like restrooms, gardens, and merchandise pick-up stations. Even the style was straightforward. Referred to as “plain-modern” by Casto, no imitation materials were used, and the appearance was purposely kept restrained in an effort to appeal to the broadest possible audience. In Casto’s words, “if you Williamsburg it up, you scare off a lot of plain folks.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> “Big Shopping Center with No ‘Mr. Big,’” 122-23.

Similar stylistic principles influenced the designs of strip malls and other shopping centers across the country. The 1948 edition of *The Community Builders' Handbook* provides a synopsis of the theory driving commercial architectural styling at the time:

“...the trend toward simple design along modern lines has the advantage of less cost and greater flexibility for present use and future adaptation to changing conditions. Greater reliance is put on proportion and form rather than embellishment. Extreme ‘modernistic’ designs should be avoided however, as they may be quickly outdated and less acceptable [to the public].”

It further recommends that distinctive details like towers, balconies, or other heavy ornamentation popular in the past be abandoned in the interest of unity, simplicity, and economy.<sup>58</sup>

As *The Community Builders' Handbook* suggests, modern design was taking hold in America in the years following World War II. Its adoption in commercial architecture, many high art modernists hoped, would ultimately expose the masses to a vision of the future based on rationality and equality. But the pure simplicity and understated designs of Modernism did not fully translate to a commercial form. Automobile age retail success was reliant upon visibility and exposure to passing motorists. The cleanliness of pure Modernism could fail to grab attention, an unacceptable prospect for any business. At the same time, the low construction cost of a design that eliminated ornament was highly desirable. Commercial architects had to find a way to combine the benefits of Modern design with the needs of the marketplace. On a small scale, the attempt translated to the bold yet clean lines of so-called ‘boomerang’ modern and ‘googie’ coffee shops (figure 16).<sup>59</sup> At the larger scale of the strip mall, exaggerated shapes were more difficult to incorporate. The trapezoidal forms, soaring rooflines, startling angles, neon

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<sup>58</sup> *The Community Builders' Handbook*, 157.

<sup>59</sup> Alan Hess, *Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985), 37.

lights, arrows, and sparkling stars were more readily integrated through the addition of bold and varied signage.<sup>60</sup>



**Figure 16:** Typical “googie” design. Falcon Coffee Shop. Los Angeles. 1956.

While many developers advocated muted signage respectful of surrounding neighborhoods,<sup>61</sup> other developers successfully encouraged the use of loud and varied signs. Bold signage helped attract attention across large parking lots and rows of cars, with the added benefit that they were typically paid for by the tenant. At Don Casto’s centers, the signs were the “liveliest” element of the design, creating a carnival tone. Set along the edge of the sidewalk canopy, the signs consisted of brightly colored block letters that were lighted at night. While

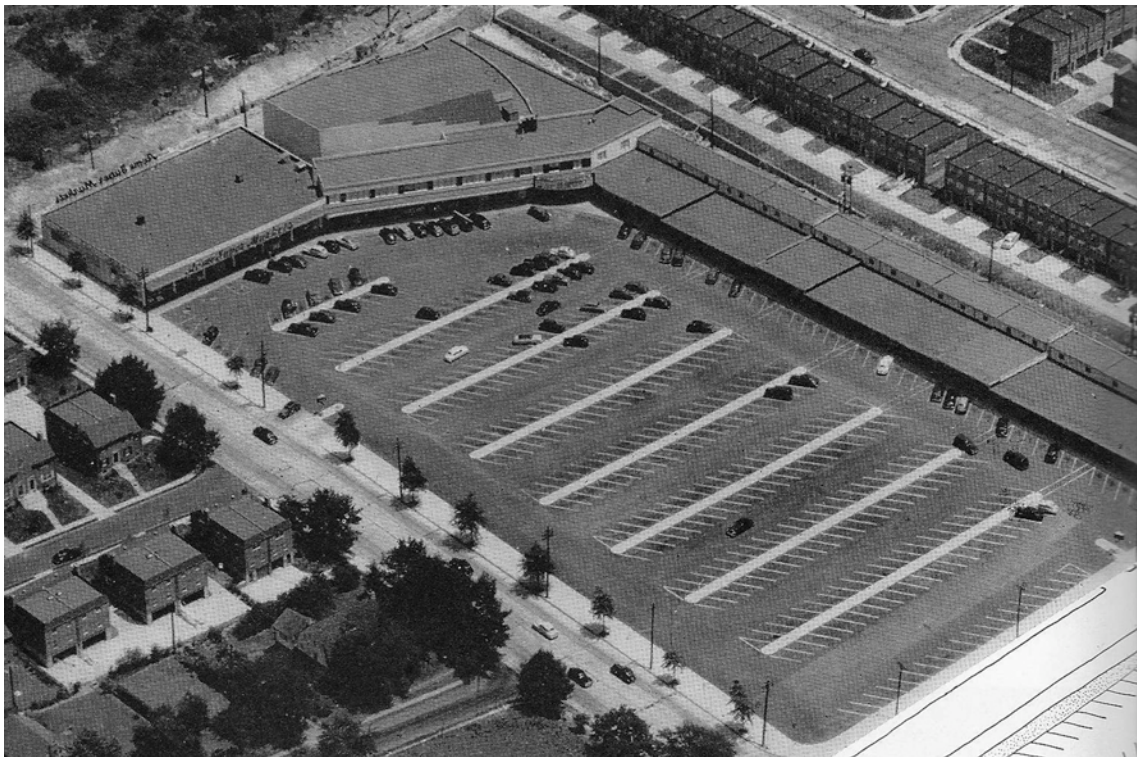
<sup>60</sup> Larry Ford, 242-43.

<sup>61</sup> The Community Builders’ Handbook, 158.



“not architecturally handsome,” the signs “convey[ed] exuberance and punch, more so from the road and parking lot than from close by.”<sup>62</sup>

Other strip malls built before 1951 demonstrated the trend toward modernism and the importance of the sign. City Line Center in Philadelphia was constructed as an L-shaped neighborhood center (figure 17). Designed by Frederick W. Dreher & Son, along with W.H. Lee, the buildings were sited behind a large front parking area. The majority of tenant spaces were single story, though some included rear mezzanines for additional storage and equipment. A sidewalk canopy extended from the flat roof along the length of the storefronts. Ornament was non-existent other than a large sign for the Acme Super Market, which projected from the canopy above the line of the roof.<sup>63</sup>



**Figure 17:** City Line Center. Philadelphia

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<sup>62</sup> “Big Shopping Center with No ‘Mr. Big,’” 124.

<sup>63</sup> Baker and Funaro, 134.



The buildings at Foster Village, in Bergenfield, New Jersey, featured a similar lack of ornament (figures 18-21). As designed by Alan Wood Fraser, Foster Village was a flat-roofed curved line of stores fronted by a five-acre parking lot. Like City Line Center, Foster Village included a service area at the rear of the buildings. The center was anchored by a Grand Union supermarket and included a service station at the edge of the parking lot along the road. The curve of the center was accentuated by a sidewalk canopy from which tenant signage extended both above and below. Signage served as the only ornament discernible from the highway, the name of the supermarket evident above the storefront and on three sides of a rectangular tower extending from the market's roof.<sup>64</sup>



**Figure 18:** Foster Village. Bergenfield, New Jersey.

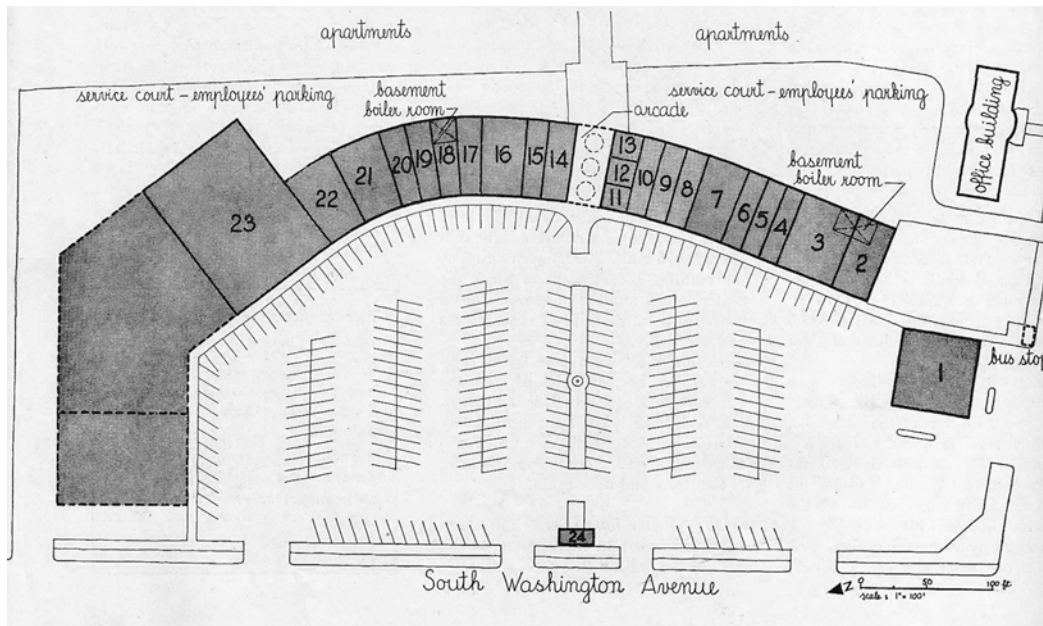


**Figure 19:**  
Foster Village arcade connecting to neighboring apartment complex.



**Figure 20:**  
Foster Village façade showing simplified aesthetic with pedestrian canopy and an emphasis on signage.

<sup>64</sup> Baker and Funaro, 270-71.



**Figure 21:** Foster Village site plan

*Learning From Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenhour's 1968 survey of Las Vegas, provides an analysis of the strip phenomenon and offers a unique window to the architectural forms that dominated American highways post-1950. The architecture of Las Vegas may have been on a grander scale, but the principles that formed the Las Vegas strip were the same as those driving the design of strip malls across the country. A clear understanding of Las Vegas provides insights into the origins and significance of the shapes and forms commonly found in strip malls. Venturi and Scott Brown offer a description of the commercial strip:

"On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no merchandise. There may be signs announcing the day's bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrians approaching from the parking lot. The building itself is set back from the highway and half hidden, as is most of the urban environment, by parked cars. The vast parking lot is in front, not at the rear, since it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building itself is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road. Both merchandise and architecture are disconnected from the road. The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergents

are advertised by their national manufacturers on enormous billboards inflected towards the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape.”<sup>65</sup>

Such a description makes readily apparent the importance of the sign and the parking lot to the identity of the strip mall. The building itself may have become less important, but space between the building and the road was more significant than ever. Parking lots, with their patterned rows of lines and lampposts, were the new monumental landscapes. The sign, not the building, had become the dominant figure on the commercial strip (figure 22).<sup>66</sup>



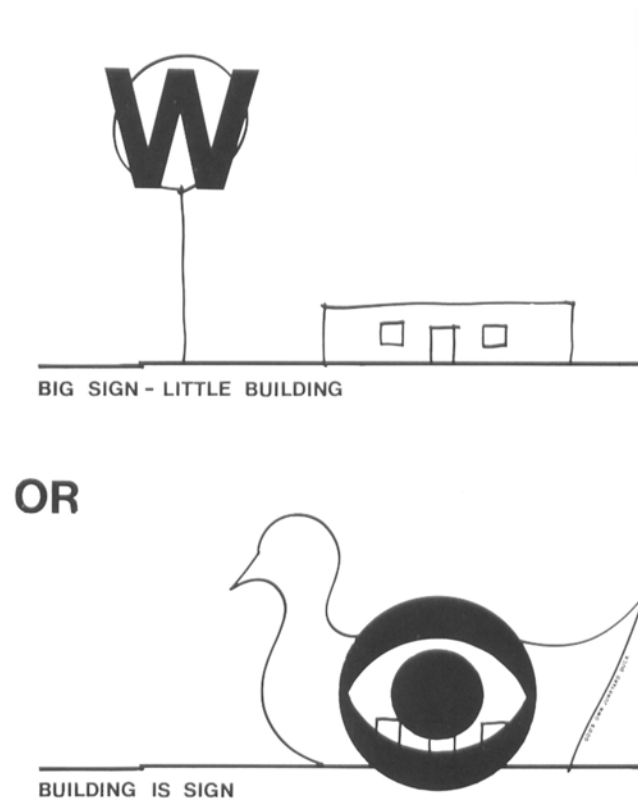
**Figure 22:** Las Vegas Strip c.1968

In their analysis, Venturi and Scott Brown make a distinction between what they term the “duck” and the “decorated shed” (figure 23). In architectural terms, a building that is a duck has a form symbolic of its purpose. The Long Island, New York, store from which the term originated initially sold duck products and was in the shape of a duck. The decorated shed,

<sup>65</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenhour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972), 9.

<sup>66</sup> Venturi, et al., 10.

meanwhile, is designed around a programmatic function, and ornament is then applied. The buildings of the 1968 Las Vegas strip were primarily decorated sheds. The strip mall is a decorated shed.



**Figure 23:** Robert Venturi's “decorated shed” (above) and “duck” (below).

The reason for the focus on applied ornament was simple. Signs were easy to change or replace, granting the ability to quickly update an image at low cost. Venturi and Scott Brown note that change was not a result of obsolescence, but rather of competition. The Las Vegas hotel had to continually remake its image to keep up with competitors new and old.<sup>67</sup> On the commercial strip, more so than in Las Vegas, investment in signage versus architecture meant that chains could easily replicate an image without replicating a building.<sup>68</sup> With the building

<sup>67</sup> Venturi, et al., 32.

<sup>68</sup> Philip Langdon, *Orange Roofs, Golden Arches*, (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1986), 149.

nothing more than a backdrop for signage, ensuring consumer recognition became a simple matter of sign installation. Ultimately, strip mall style was less a product of architecture than a result of graphic design.

By the end of the 1950s, the strip mall was a uniquely recognizable and ubiquitous form of commercial development. The defining characteristics of the typical strip mall lay not just in the building alone, but also in the collection of parts that comprised the space between building and highway. Certain patterns and forms were present in the strip mall that distinguished it from other commercial typologies:

- Single Ownership or Control
- Designed and Built as a Planned Unit
- Linear Arrangement of Building(s) (straight, curved, or angled)
- Single Story
- Building(s) Set Back from Public Road or Right-of-Way
- Primary Parking between Building(s) and Road
- Minimum 3:1 Ratio of Parking Area to Building Area
- Single Front Facade Facing Parking
- Separate Rear Service Access
- Storefront Entrances Directly Accessible from Parking Area
- Covered Sidewalk along Storefronts (canopy, awning, arcade, etc.)
- Spaces for Multiple Tenants with Partition Walls between Stores
- Flexible Interior Space Customizable by Tenants
- Individual Exterior Signage for Each Storefront
- Signage Visible from Passing Vehicles<sup>69</sup>

This list does not comprise a rigid definition, but is instead a guideline for identifying the elements that constitute a typical strip mall. The typology has changed so little since its development that these same characteristics are evident in most strip malls constructed today.

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<sup>69</sup> Criteria derived from guidelines and built or proposed examples gathered from: *The Community Builders' Handbook*, 1948, 1954, and 1968; Baker and Funaro; and journals including *Architectural Record*, *Architectural Forum*, and *Architect and Engineer*.

## Function:

In the years following the Second World War, the suburban population in the United States swelled. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) backed mortgages for millions of new homes for soldiers returning from war and other families looking for new homes in the suburbs.<sup>70</sup> Census figures from 1950 demonstrate the scale of suburban growth in relation to that of city centers. Since 1940, the population of the metropolitan areas of New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC, had grown 4.7 percent, 6.2 percent, and 20.3 percent, respectively. The suburban population increase for those same cities was 22.6 percent, 30.8 percent, and 116.4 percent. The numbers were similar across the country.<sup>71</sup> Homes in the suburbs were generally too far from traditional town centers for convenient shopping. New shopping centers were designed to serve suburban neighborhoods, and many were planned as integral parts of communities.

The typical shopping center of the 1950s provided essential services for nearby residents. These included a drug store, grocery, dry cleaner, laundry, shoe repair, bakery, barber, and beauty shop, among others.<sup>72</sup> Often, restaurants, post offices, and other community services traditionally provided downtown were located within a center.<sup>73</sup> In fact, architects and developers viewed the community shopping center as a civic, cultural, and social center with the potential to provide amenities equivalent to those downtown. The shopping center, with its carefully controlled layout, tenant mix, and appearance, was seen as a remedy for previous unplanned and unsightly development along the commercial strip. One contemporary account proclaimed, "A new generation of department store men and women ... are showing the same

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<sup>70</sup> Hayden, 132.

<sup>71</sup> Baker and Funaro, 6.

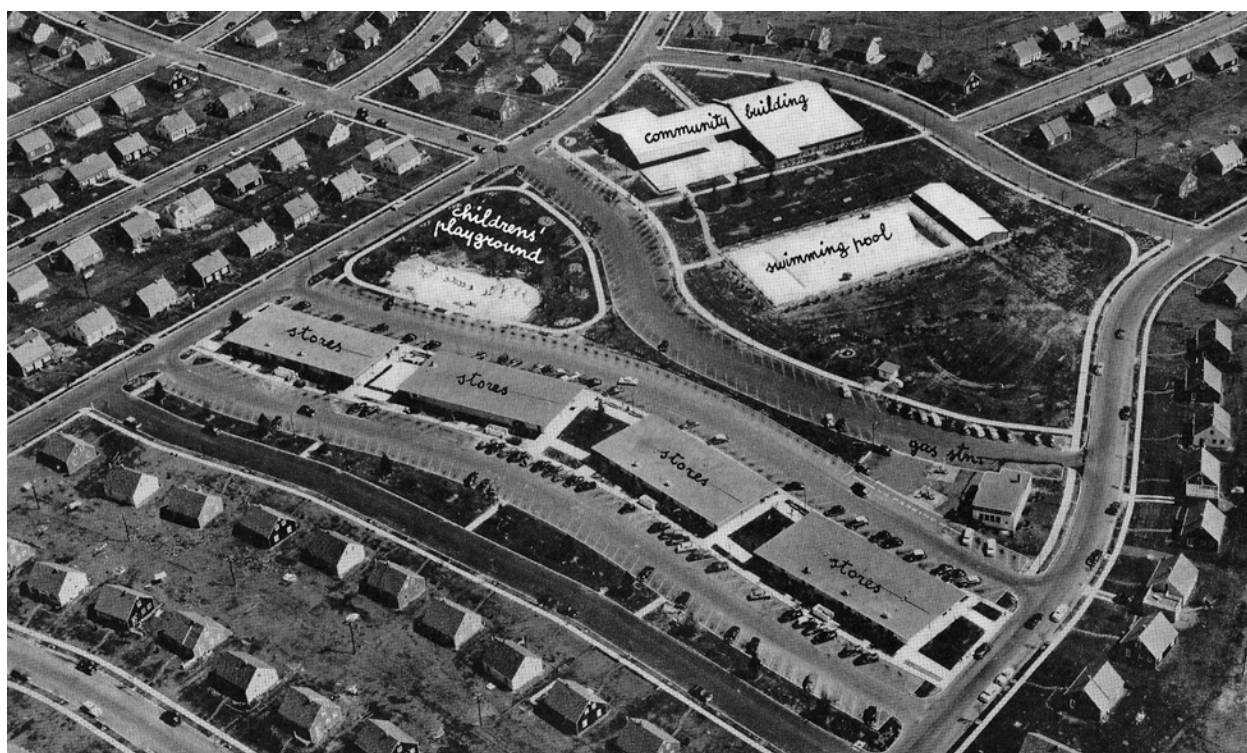
<sup>72</sup> The Community Builders' Handbook, 135.

<sup>73</sup> "Drafting and Design Problems: Neighborhood Shopping Centers," 327-28.



high responsibility to the communities that their grandfathers showed when they helped to create the great downtowns which we know today.”<sup>74</sup>

Often, strip malls and other shopping centers were integrated into the fabric of the surrounding neighborhood. Early conceptualizations from the 1930s turn the center away from the street to face parks and the housing of pedestrian shoppers beyond.<sup>75</sup> By the 1950s, the strip mall was firmly devoted to vehicular traffic, but many retained physical ties to nearby housing. Foster Village in New Jersey included a central arcade linking the shops with an apartment complex in the rear.<sup>76</sup> Store blocks in Levittown, on Long Island, New York, went a step further to include adjacent community buildings, swimming pools, and playgrounds (figure 24).<sup>77</sup>



**Figure 24:** Shopping center as community center. Levittown, New York.

<sup>74</sup> Howard Gillette Jr., "The Evolution of the Planned Shopping Center in Suburb and City," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 51.4 (Autumn 1985), 450.

<sup>75</sup> Stein and Bauer, 183-85.

<sup>76</sup> Baker and Funaro, 271.

<sup>77</sup> Baker and Funaro, 259-61.

New suburban families were frequently far removed from their previous homes. Many were experiencing suburban living for the first time. With old friends and family at a distance, a sense of isolation and loneliness could easily set in. Shopping center architect Victor Gruen saw the shopping center as the solution, hoping to create a social and cultural center for new suburban residents. Gruen looked to marketplaces of the past for inspiration, including the Greek agora, medieval market, and more familiar town squares. He suggested that the most successful shopping centers would be those that mixed retailing with social activities.<sup>78</sup>

The strip mall was an ideal location for socialization. Because of the amenities it provided and the general lack of public gathering places elsewhere in the suburbs, strip malls often became centers of community activity merely by default. The parking lots of many became locations for numerous community events. These included sales by civic organizations such as churches and fire departments, square dances, wrestling matches, circus shows, or car raffles. For Don Casto, the shopping center was equivalent to the amusement parks at the end of early streetcar lines, a destination for families throughout the community.<sup>79</sup>

The strip mall as a family destination was part of a new shift in shopping practices and habits as retail expanded into the suburbs. While shoppers previously required the services of a clerk to request an item behind a counter, self-service was increasingly becoming the norm. Comparative shopping enabled customers to choose among different stores and different items.<sup>80</sup> The process of shopping became less of a task and more of an activity or event. Combined with the atmosphere cultivated by shopping center promoters, family shopping trips became weekly rituals for many suburban dwellers. In an effort to draw more families, strip centers began

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<sup>78</sup> Gillette Jr., 452.

<sup>79</sup> “Big Shopping Center with No ‘Mr. Big,’” 122.

<sup>80</sup> Baker and Funaro, 5.



keeping later hours. At the Casto centers, stores were required to keep hours of noon to nine in the evening six days a week, hours that gave greater opportunity for every member of the family to experience the strip mall.<sup>81</sup>

### **Meaning:**

The strip mall matured at a time when the country was rapidly expanding outside of cities following World War II. The Federal Housing Administration and no-down-payment mortgages for veterans brought a continuous flow of people to the new suburban frontier. With the passage of the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, the stage was set for the massive dispersal of the strip mall.<sup>82</sup> The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw the strip mall spread to highways and interchanges across the country.

The presence of a strip mall in a community was often an indication that the community had officially ‘arrived’. The strip mall was a status symbol. It signaled the importance of a community to all who passed by. Aside from being a source of new jobs and revenue, the strip mall was a source of pride.<sup>83</sup> How did a simple commercial building come to mean so much?

The history of the typical American city can be perceived as a transect. At the center lies Main Street, the central business district. Driving out from downtown, one reaches the streetcar extension, the taxpayer strip. As one travels farther away from the center, buildings move farther from the street, parking lots become larger, and corporate signage dominates. The postwar suburb is by far the largest and farthest-reaching component of the urban transect, and it is here

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<sup>81</sup> “Big Shopping Center with No ‘Mr. Big,’” 122.

<sup>82</sup> Bruegmann, 104-106.

<sup>83</sup> John Fraser Hart, “The Bypass Strip as an Ideal Landscape,” *Geographical Review* 72.2(Apr. 1982), 220.

that the strip mall is the dominant feature of the landscape.<sup>84</sup> For many people, the strip mall is the first impression they receive of a city. If they have no reason to go downtown, it may be the only impression they receive. The image of the strip, with its long, low buildings stretching along the highway and an abundance of signs clamoring for attention, has come to symbolize the postwar American city more than any other.

The strip mall is a very visible part of much larger trends that shaped the nation after World War II. The commercial strip is not tucked away like so many suburban housing divisions, but is located along the most traveled routes in American cities. It has not been limited to one city or region of the country, but has been influential in the development of innumerable urban and suburban areas.

The strip mall represents better than any building type the reverberating effects of the postwar economy and the widespread use of the automobile. After World War II, the American economy boomed. There was a sense that Americans should be rewarded after enduring the Great Depression and winning a victory overseas.<sup>85</sup> New houses were built, new cars were sold, and new products were manufactured. New places were needed to sell all the new things, and the strip mall came to embody all that the new materialistic society had to offer. But it was not just the economy that shaped the strip mall and gave it meaning.

History has shown the importance of the relationship between the strip mall and the automobile. The strip accommodates the automobile in a way that no other building type had previously done. The strip mall and the car are symbiotic in their relationship, each benefiting from the other's presence. The automobile changed the way American cities were built, and it

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<sup>84</sup> Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, Retrofitting Suburbia, (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 62-63.

<sup>85</sup> Kunstler, 104.

changed the way they were perceived. Decentralization became the new pattern of American development. In this environment, new building types arose. The form and focus of the strip mall represent a dramatic departure from traditional design methods and models of business.

Multiple buildings came to provide the same services that single structures formerly provided. The strip mall and its contemporaries replaced downtown and its department stores with an equal amount of goods and amenities, albeit in buildings of a smaller scale and lower cost. The buildings of the strip can thus be seen less as individual structures and more as part of a greater network of interrelated parts working in concert.<sup>86</sup>

This dispersed network of buildings is a mirror image of the social networks that developed with widespread use of the automobile. With the newfound freedom of private transportation, people experienced something of which few before them could take advantage: choice. The automobile enabled people to look beyond their immediate neighbors for social interaction. They were free to branch out, to find people who shared the same interests and activities.<sup>87</sup> As traditional communities began to fracture, people found connections outside the home at their jobs or at nearby shopping centers. The strip mall offered a place to congregate, often filling the role of community center. They routinely included post offices, banks, churches, and other social amenities that traditionally had been found downtown.<sup>88</sup>

Choice also affected urban constructs and conceptions. With people no longer bound by distance to a particular neighborhood or community, competition among shopping areas increased. The car made it easy to drive just a bit farther to a preferable retail destination.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Alan Hess, "Hidden History, Revealed Landmarks," Preserving the Recent Past, eds. Deborah Slaton and Rebecca A. Shifler, (Washington, DC: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 1995), 82.

<sup>87</sup> Hart, 221.

<sup>88</sup> Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 63.

<sup>89</sup> Longstreth, City Center to Regional Mall, 67.

Good advertising became essential, as was an ability to adapt quickly to consumers' changes in taste.

From the first taxpayer buildings, the strip mall evolved to become the ultimate physical expression of this phenomenon. The lessons learned at the strip mall revolutionized commercial architecture along the highway. The strip mall is so suitable to its purpose that its design continues to be effective nearly sixty years after it was standardized.

For many in America, the strip mall is a symbol of community accomplishment, modernity, progress and prosperity. It represents where the country has come from and where it is going. It has been described as representing "the highest and best contemporary achievement of the American way of life for many ordinary Americans."<sup>90</sup> If the house with a picket fence and a yard in the suburbs is symbolic of the American Dream, then the strip mall with a shopping bag and a parking spot in the front is its commercial counterpart.

### **The Strip Mall Today:**

From 1900 to the 1950s, the architecture of the commercial highway changed dramatically. In the fifty years since, it has changed very little. Buildings have been added or replaced, new roads paved and old ones widened, but the patterns and forms that define the space of the strip remain. The strip mall is the same as it was at Valley Plaza in 1951. The Park and Shop of 1930 would not be out of place on any suburban highway today, and it is in fact still operating in its original role. But that is not to imply that the strip has remained frozen in time. It is not the shape of the strip itself that has changed, but the images along it.

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<sup>90</sup> Hart, 218.

As the strip mall took its place among the roadside elite, the unbridled exuberance of the 1950s was in full swing. Diners, drive-ins, gas stations, and coffee shops regaled in the neon and exaggerated shapes of the so-called ‘boomerang’ modern. Never before had an architectural style captured the mood of the public so completely. However, public mood soon shifted. The optimism of the postwar era began to wane, and disillusionment set in. Largely a product of fifties excess, the commercial strip became the primary target of criticism.

In 1961, Jane Jacobs warned of the real consequences of slum clearing and urban renewal in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* a year later cautioned against the contamination and pollution of the natural environment.<sup>91</sup> Peter Blake wrote *God’s Own Junkyard* in 1964, deriding the appearance of American commercial highways, a book, in Blake’s words, “not written in anger” but “in fury.”<sup>92</sup> Within a year, the environmental issue was officially recognized by the United States government. Lady Bird Johnson, then First Lady, organized the White House Conference on Natural Beauty. Among the issues it addressed were scenic roadways, automobile junkyards, and suburban landscapes. Throughout the conference, the appearance of American roadsides was the main target, as conference chairman Laurence S. Rockefeller described the buildings, billboards, and neon of the “ruined landscape.”<sup>93</sup> Developer James Rouse spoke out against “commercial sprawl” and described the benefits of carefully planned communities.<sup>94</sup> The conference further raised awareness of the negative consequences of technological progress.

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<sup>91</sup> Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 64.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 7.

<sup>93</sup> Beauty for America: Proceedings of the White House Conference on Natural Beauty, Washington, DC, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), 22.

<sup>94</sup> Beauty for America: Proceedings of the White House Conference on Natural Beauty, 442.

By 1968, *The Community Builders' Handbook* no longer advocated Modernism in shopping center design. Instead, its authors suggested retail architecture that complemented the character of the surrounding neighborhood with a style and materials based on regional climatic conditions. The example given for “attractive” design was a “warm shake-shingle style.”<sup>95</sup> The machine was no longer an acceptable model for roadside architecture (figures 25 & 26).



**Figure 25:** Environmental aesthetic applied to downtown storefront.

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<sup>95</sup> *The Community Builders Handbook*, Anniversary Edition, 356.



**Figure 26:** Burger King’s “neighborhood-friendly” image, complete with mansard roof.

The roadside was quick to adapt, toning down its look to better blend with local neighborhoods and reflect public sentiment. The exaggerated modern was soon replaced on the roadside by a more environmentally friendly appearance. Earth tones, brick, and wood paneling replaced the bold colors and slick plastics of the previous era. Neon and glass were removed or covered up, typically replaced by a simple shingled mansard roof along the facade. The mansard roof was easily applied to all building types, and the strip mall was no exception.

The preservation movement played a large role in changing the appearance of the strip mall. By popularizing history and condemning the visual cacophony along the strip, preservationists had helped to significantly change it, if not make it disappear. But because the strip mall had rarely been utilized as a proving ground for avant-garde design, little alteration was ultimately necessary. More than other typologies, the strip mall had been designed with such changes in mind. The decorated shed proved its worth, as strip malls across the nation



readily adapted to a new aesthetic, a pattern that would be repeated as the commercial highway continued to evolve.<sup>96</sup>

The evolution of the commercial strip involved more than appearance. As strip malls were overshadowed by the larger and more comfortable pedestrian mall, new interstates bypassed traditional approach strips, and established businesses followed consumer traffic to newer retail locations. Retiring business owners had difficulty finding retailers willing to reinvest in outmoded buildings and locations. One vacancy often led to another.<sup>97</sup>

Colfax Avenue in Denver is representative of the development of commercial approach strips in cities across the nation. The heart of Colfax Avenue stretches west and east from Denver's central business district, encompassing about 27 miles of roadway. Started in 1874 as a six-block street extending east from the planned site of the Capitol building,<sup>98</sup> Colfax became a vital link between Denver and its suburbs in the twentieth century. The development of Aurora to the east and Lakewood to the west was spurred by easy access along streetcar lines at the end of the 1800s. By the 1930s, automobile traffic brought more development along Colfax, including markets, restaurants, gas stations, and small motels.

Colfax Avenue soon became the primary location for Denver's tourist accommodations. By 1958, there were no fewer than ninety-three motels along the length of the commercial strip. Most motels catered to families vacationing by automobile. One motel even advertised the free use of baby cribs. With so many families along Colfax, other businesses on the highway chose

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<sup>96</sup> Liebs, Main Street to Miracle Mile, 66-67.

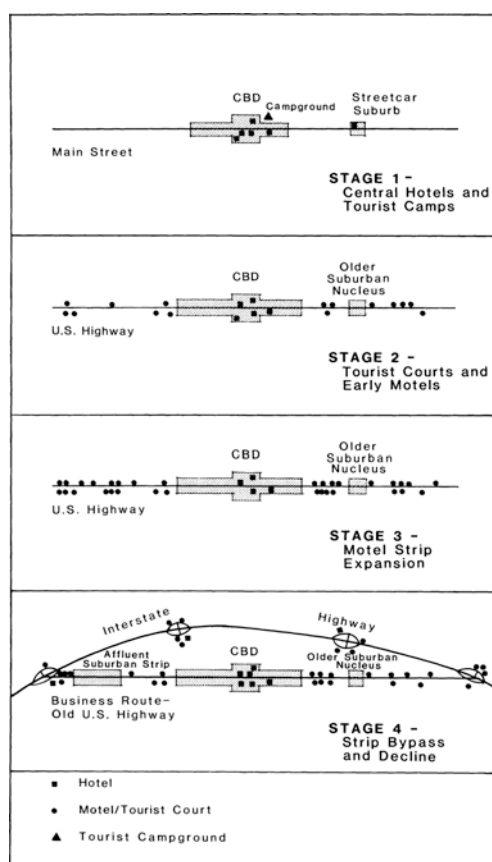
<sup>97</sup> Timothy Davis, "The Miracle Mile Revisited: Recycling, Renovation, and Simulation along the Commercial Strip," Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture 7(1997), 97.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Sanchez, "The Colfax Story," Denver Post 05/21/2006, <[http://www.denverpost.com/search/ci\\_3850661](http://www.denverpost.com/search/ci_3850661)>, Accessed 11 May 2009.



to take advantage as family-oriented attractions. The motel boom resulted in widened roads and additional commercial development, including strip malls and other shopping plazas.<sup>99</sup>

With the completion of Interstate 70 in 1966, the tourism trade on Colfax Avenue went into decline. Combined with an economic collapse and the outward expansion of population, the strip lost a large percentage of its existing business (figure 27). Vacancies and signs of urban decay kept similar businesses from moving into the empty spaces. By the late 1970s, drug use and prostitution proliferated along Colfax after being forced out of the central business district. Bars and strip-clubs replaced family restaurants.<sup>100</sup> Motels began to cater to the vice trade, refurbished with mirrors and adult videos.



**Figure 27:** Development stages of the motel industry along Colfax Avenue in Denver.

<sup>99</sup> William Wyckoff, "Denver's Aging Commercial Strip," *Geographical Review* 82.3(Jul. 1992), 282-86.

<sup>100</sup> Sanchez.

Although functional change on Colfax Avenue has been extensive, formal change has been more limited. Many buildings remain in their original state, with alterations either too expensive or unnecessary for new uses.<sup>101</sup> While Colfax Avenue may be an extreme example, other inner-suburban approach roads have experienced a similar fate.

In other places, the declining stature of the commercial strip has been used to the advantage of less-affluent Americans. By 1997, underused motels and strip malls had become locations for Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing, soup kitchens, and storefront churches. Businesses evolved to serve a new population. Thrift stores, pawn shops, laundromats, check-cashing services, and liquor stores located along the strip. In many ways, the commercial strip has become a present day skid row (figures 28 & 29).



**Figure 28:** Derelict strip mall. Lexington Park, Maryland.

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<sup>101</sup> Wyckoff, 290-92.



**Figure 29:** Church and thrift store. Lexington Park, Maryland.

But the inner-suburban strip mall is also an opportunity for new business ventures. At the strip mall, affordable rent gives people from all walks of life a place to locate a fledgling business. Increasingly, the strip mall is a place of last resort for some, and a first place of refuge for others. Ethnic immigrants have bypassed central cities for the cheap rents and opportunities found in outlying suburban areas. In many places, strip malls house a growing ethnic population.<sup>102</sup>

“The Vietnamese strip mall is a growing phenomenon in Silicon Valley, which makes sense. According to the Census Bureau, the number of Asian Americans grew to 11 percent of California’s population in 2001, largely due to high rates of immigration, and these immigrants have brought with them their own ready-made culture.

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<sup>102</sup> Davis, 100-102.

All they need is someplace to house it. Many blocks of strip malls appear to be their own Asian islands. Spend an afternoon at the East Side's Asian Plaza, for example, and you may go hours without hearing a word of English.

From the parking lot, the Asian Plaza looks like a giant child's-block model of classical architecture: massive columns flank the entryways; a fountain with frolicking dolphins tinkles. But the place is bustling with businesses: TK Noodle, First Choice Family Dental, a tea shop, a laundry, a hair and nails place, a supermarket, a baker, a Pho restaurant, a low-income clinic, insurance and travel stores.

The waves of immigration that Silicon Valley has embraced are reflected in the changeable nature of the strip mall's architecture. Oftentimes, the strip mall functions like a picture frame, ready to feature whatever face slips into its glass auspices next. For this reason, the low-rent strip mall is really the architecture of efficiency, of the free market defined. These are monuments to urgency, and they were never meant to last forever. This transience is the real face of Silicon Valley."<sup>103</sup>

The adaptation of buildings to new uses along the commercial highway suggests a more promising future for the strip mall. At the same time, the malleability of the strip form presents challenges to its preservation. Combined with redevelopment and a process of dilapidation and decay, the strip mall is at risk of losing the character that makes it unique.

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<sup>103</sup> Traci Vogel, "It's a Mall World After All," Metro (Jan 24-30 2002)  
<<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/01.24.02/cover/stripmalls-0204.html>>, Accessed 19 Mar 2009.

### CHAPTER III

#### TOOLS FOR EVALUATION & PRESERVATION

“To a man with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.”<sup>104</sup>

A thorough understanding of the tools available to preservationists is essential when evaluating and protecting the strip mall as a historic resource. The National Register of Historic Places and the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties provide guidelines for the evaluation and conservation of historic resources. However, the unique qualities of the strip mall present challenges to the application of both sets of guidelines. Other traditional tools for preservation present both possibilities and challenges for the strip mall. Adaptive reuse, character areas, and design guidelines have all been used successfully to further preservation efforts, yet preservationists using these same methods with the strip mall must be careful that the significant character of the typology is not lost as a consequence. As each case is unique, each strip mall may require a combination of strategies for both evaluation and preservation.

#### **The National Register of Historic Places:**

Despite its role in American history, the strip mall has been largely overlooked in the realms of social and architectural scholarship. Early on, it was overshadowed by the larger and more visible enclosed mall. Motels, service stations, and fast-food restaurants have all received more attention. But the strip mall does not have the ‘flashy kitsch’ that inspires nostalgia for so many artifacts of the commercial highway.

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<sup>104</sup> Donovan D. Rypkema, “Saving the Recent Past: A Philosophical and Practical Dissent,” *Forum Journal* 20.1(Fall 2005), <[http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib\\_ID=887](http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib_ID=887)>, Accessed 08 Dec 2008.

Nostalgia has long been a precursor to historic recognition. But because the strip mall has undergone so many cycles of change, little remains for people to grow nostalgic about. Although it is designed to grab attention, the strip mall ultimately fails to leave a lasting impression. By trying to be everything to everyone, it has failed to be anything to anyone. The buildings of the strip mall have become a backdrop to more exciting developments along the commercial highway. It is because of this background role that the strip mall has largely been ignored as an American cultural icon. But the meaning of the strip mall goes beyond simple forms and appearances. American identity is closely tied to the image of the strip. It evokes strong associations both positive and negative in the public psyche. This is just one reason that the idea of strip mall preservation can be highly controversial.

Whatever its popularity, preservationists will soon be facing the issue of the historic strip mall. Already, Valley Plaza and the Broadway-Crenshaw Center are old enough to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Understanding the history of the strip mall and the reasons for its appearance offers perspective to the idea of strip mall preservation. The strip mall is as deserving of recognition on the National Register of Historic Places as any other roadside typology.

### *Eligibility:*

Inclusion on the National Register has become the standard for determining the value of a historic structure. Eligibility can open eyes to historic significance and turn what had been an old building into a priceless resource. Should the strip mall qualify, it would be the first step towards achieving recognition from the public and preservationists alike. As part of the process

for placement on the National Register, the strip mall must be placed into a resource category. This requires a thorough understanding of what makes a building a strip mall in the first place.

The strip mall can generally be described by the criteria provided in Chapter II. Although it is made up of many individual parts, as well as landscaping, light poles, and other such street furniture, the strip mall should typically be classified as a single resource. As its principle purpose is to shelter human activity, the strip mall, parking lot included, will generally fall under the category of Building.<sup>105</sup> Ultimately, without the building, the strip mall is no longer recognizable. When describing the function of the strip mall, it is best placed under the category of Commerce/Trade.<sup>106</sup>

The National Register Criteria for Evaluation establish the range of resources the National Register of Historic Places encompasses. With the Criteria, it is possible to evaluate a resource within multiple contexts to understand its broader relationship to history.<sup>107</sup> They are the most objective tool for determining the significance of a historic property and its eligibility for listing on the National Register.

Though the Department of the Interior currently offers no guidelines for the evaluation and documentation of suburban commercial properties, it does provide a bulletin outlining the procedures for historic residential suburbs. In the absence of a more closely applicable resource, the document serves as a guide for the evaluation of the strip mall, as both commercial and residential typologies were influenced by many of the same factors. The National Register Bulletin, “Historic Residential Suburbs,” is a useful model for outlining the significance of shopping centers in general, and the strip mall in particular. Using the planned shopping center

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<sup>105</sup> “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation,” National Register Bulletin, (U.S Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1997), 4-6.

<sup>106</sup> How to Complete the National Register Registration Form,” National Register Bulletin, (U.S Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1997), 18-21.

<sup>107</sup> “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation,” 1-3.

as a commercial counterpart to the residential suburb, the application of the National Register Criteria reveals a broad range of possible areas of significance for the strip mall.

- Criteria A and B: Association with Important Events and Persons
  - Shopping center is a physical representation of historic growth and development trends in an area.
  - Shopping center represents an important event or association, such as increased consumerism post-World War II, postwar fascination with technology and the automobile, or interstate highway construction in the 1950s.
  - Shopping center introduced new conventions in retail management or experience, such as nighttime shopping, a unique or model combination of tenants, or promotional or social events.
  - Shopping center is associated with the heritage of social, economic, racial, or ethnic groups important to the history of an area, such as suburban women, transients, or Asian immigrants in Silicon Valley.
  - Shopping center is directly associated with the life and career of an individual who made an important contribution to the history of an area, such as a particular retailer, merchant, or developer.
- Criterion C: Distinctive Characteristics of Design
  - Shopping center is an important example of distinctive type, period, or method of construction, such as a drive-in market, strip mall, or pedestrian mall.
  - Shopping center reflects principles of design important to the history of commercial development, such as vehicular access, building form, or use of signage.
  - Shopping center is the work of a master architect, landscape architect, engineer, or site planner.
  - Shopping center embodies high artistic values through its overall style or individual elements, such as signage, lighting, or canopies.<sup>108</sup>

As for Criterion D, it is unlikely that a shopping center site would have much potential to reveal important information unless the site has undergone extensive and undocumented change that

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<sup>108</sup> David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, "Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places," National Register Bulletin, (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2002), 93-96.



might leave evidence suggesting earlier features, layout, or orientation. While not likely to be significant under Criterion D, such change has been a frequent occurrence at strip malls.

Together with the criteria, the strip mall's significance can be further understood by placing it into an area of significance. An area of significance aids in constructing a historic context by organizing properties into important historic patterns and themes. It describes how a resource relates to the "broader patterns of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture."<sup>109</sup> Common areas of significance for shopping centers and the strip mall might include:

- *Government*: association with government financing or zoning laws that influenced the size, form, or location of a shopping center
- *Transportation*: association with new roadways and provision of parking areas for automobiles
- *Commerce*: association with increased buying power and changes in consumer shopping habits
- *Entertainment / Recreation*: role of shopping center as a community destination; 'the amusement park at the end of the streetcar line'
- *Social History*: role of the shopping center as the "new downtown" with civic functions
- *Ethnic Heritage*: association with a particular ethnic or racial group
- *Community Planning and Development*: association with suburban development patterns
- *Architecture*: presence of unique or typical architectural style or features<sup>110</sup>

Application of the National Register Criteria reveals the potential historical significance of the strip mall. Although a postwar strip mall has not yet been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, predecessors to the typology have been listed. These provide a model for future strip mall nominations.

In August of 2001, the Cary Street Park and Shop Center in Richmond, Virginia was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Cary Street Park and Shop was constructed in 1938 as a flat-roofed, one-story horizontal structure. Two additions were

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<sup>109</sup> How to Complete the National Register Registration Form," 39.

<sup>110</sup> Ames and McClelland 97-99.

completed in 1949 and 1951, respectively, resulting in an elongated U- shape open to the street. The construction of the last addition closes the period of significance, from 1938-1951. The nomination lists two contributing resources: the building itself and the parking lot, categorized separately as a site. The inclusion of the parking lot as a separate site is suggestive of its importance as a resource.<sup>111</sup> Original International and Art Deco styling was covered by modifications in 1960 and 1977, but was not destroyed. According to the Statement of Significance, the building is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the area of Commerce, and under Criterion C in the area of Architecture. The building's Art Deco design and role as a model for future retail space make it significant to the commercial history of the city of Richmond.<sup>112</sup>

Another precursor to the strip mall, the original Park and Shop described in Chapter I, is included as a contributing resource in the Cleveland Park historic district in Washington, D.C. In the National Register nomination, it is described as “among the most architecturally significant commercial properties in the National Capital.”<sup>113</sup> In this case, the parking lot is not classified separately, but is considered an integral component of the building itself. The Cleveland Park district was added to the National Register in 1987, with a period of significance from 1880-1941. The date of construction of the Park and Shop, 1930, is listed in the nomination as a significant date. The district is considered significant at the national as well as statewide levels under Criterion C for Community Planning and Development and for Architecture.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> “How to Complete the National Register Registration Form,” 17.

<sup>112</sup> Nancy S. Kraus and Robert S. Mills, “Cary Street Park and Shop Center,” National Register Nomination, Listed 05 Aug 2001, (Richmond, VA, 2000), 1-5.

<sup>113</sup> Wood, 8-5.

<sup>114</sup> Wood, 3.

The fact that an earlier form of commercial strip development was eligible for listing in the National Register bodes well for the recognition of the strip mall as a historic resource. The differences between the strip mall and the park and shop lie primarily in the form and architectural treatment of the buildings, the size of the parking lot, and the reliance upon signage. In terms of historic relevance, there is little difference between the two. Application of the National Register Criteria for Evaluation demonstrates that there is little reason the preservation of the strip mall should be a subject of debate. But the requirements for listing on the National Register present additional challenges to the preservation of the strip mall and other buildings of the recent past. The very design and nature of the strip mall has put its National Register eligibility in doubt.

### *Challenges to Listing:*

Although it can be established that the strip mall is a culturally significant building type, it may be difficult to find a representative building that satisfies the requirements for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Two elements are essential for a resource to qualify for inclusion on the National Register:

- Association with an important historic context and
- Retention of the historic integrity of those features necessary to convey its significance.<sup>115</sup>

Determining the integrity of the strip mall presents an interesting challenge to preservationists. Traditionally, style has played an important role in the significance of historic commercial structures. Integrity could be determined by how much of the original fabric of the resource remained, and to what degree the historic style was still evident. But the strip mall presents a

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<sup>115</sup> “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation,” 3.

two-fold problem to this line of reasoning. First, rapid change along the strip has resulted in the loss of much original fabric, and second, style generally has little to do with the strip mall's overall significance.

By its nature, the strip is in a continual state of flux. As the strip mall responds to consumer tastes, its style changes repeatedly. Very rare is the strip mall that has remained unaltered since its construction. For this reason, it is difficult to determine if style is the most or least important aspect of the strip.

From the construction of the first modern strip mall, the cycle of change along the strip has been an important phenomenon. For fifty years, the strip mall and its surroundings have served as a barometer of public opinion. It responds quickly to the shifting moods of the American public, and it has undergone numerous transformations over the last half-century. The strip mall is unique in its ability to provide a visible cross-section of American life at a given point in time. Its layers reveal changes in fads and trends as various phenomena have shaped the mood of the public.

The architecture of the strip was uniquely positioned to adjust to new public sentiment. In the spirit of the taxpayer block, the buildings of the strip mall were never intended to last for eternity. They were explicitly designed to accommodate change, from shifting tenants, to updated signs and decoration, to new buildings altogether. There was little need for architects and designers to consider the long-term impact of their stylistic decisions with the knowledge that everything would be redone within a few years.<sup>116</sup>

Design on the commercial strip was influenced by the same factor that sparked a crush of competing advertising along the early highway: the freedom of choice made possible by the

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<sup>116</sup> Langdon, 165.

automobile. The strip mall did not just have to reflect public opinion; it also had to anticipate it. If an image was too modern, or too staid, or too upscale, customers could be scared away. If an image was not updated, customers could grow bored and move on to another location down the road. Style was deliberately minimized in a building's design or was later applied through signage. Changes in style and appearance were directly affected by the way business was done along the highway.<sup>117</sup>

Although change is an inherent part of the character of the strip mall, when it comes to preservation, change is antithetical to the entire concept. Change is what often prevents a resource from being listed on the National Register. When physical features of a building are continually being changed, replaced, or renewed, historic integrity is nearly impossible to maintain. A strip mall more than fifteen years old that remains completely unaltered is rare.

The preservation of Lever House in New York presents an interesting parallel to the dilemma regarding the strip mall. Designed by Gordon Bunshaft, architect for Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM), Lever House was completed in 1952 (figure 30). It was the first New York City skyscraper to ignore the traditional 'wedding-cake' skyscraper form and introduce a building fronted by a plaza, a strategy that would be repeated in Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building and countless others across the city. Lever House was a pure slab of steel and glass, raised on pilotis and floating above the ground. It was the definition of Modern design. In 1983, Lever House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and was designated as a historic landmark by the New York City Landmark Preservation Commission, one of the first Modernist buildings to be legally protected.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Langdon, 184.

<sup>118</sup> Suzanne Stephens, "Analysis: The Restoration of New York City's Lever House is Not so Same-Old, Same-Old, as Architects SOM and William T. Georgis Demonstrate," *Architectural Record* Mar 2003: 122-23.



**Figure 30:** Lever House. New York. 1952.

Like many buildings of the Modern era, the appeal of the Lever House soon faded. Over time, Modernism fell out of favor with the public. At the same time, those things that made the Lever House modern, its design and materials, began to fail. The untested carbon steel that held the window spandrels in place began to oxidize and expand, cracking the glass panes. Replacement windows were painted instead of transparent, and different hues gave the building a patchwork appearance.

When it came time to restore the building to its original appearance, preservationists were faced with a difficult decision: try to preserve what remained, or replace the entire original curtain wall. Ultimately, everything was replaced. It was determined that piecemeal replacement would damage the intact glass that still remained. Rather than recreating the curtain wall with the same materials, all new materials were selected for strength and longevity. The

shade of the new glass panels was carefully selected to precisely match that of the 1952 glass. The restored Lever House retains its original exterior appearance with none of the original materials.<sup>119</sup>

The treatment of Lever House has raised questions regarding the preservation philosophy behind its restoration. Theo Prudon, president of the U.S. chapter of DoCoMoMo, suggests that the element of craftsmanship so important to the material integrity of traditional buildings is not present in modern structures. While artisans once crafted the details of older buildings, modern buildings feature parts manufactured elsewhere and assembled on-site. Prudon asserts, “In contemporary architecture, craftsmanship is in the design itself.”<sup>120</sup>

Sharon Park, chief of preservation services at the U.S. Department of the Interior, suggests that physical materials may not be as important in buildings of the recent past. “I would say that twentieth-century buildings are probably less tied to the retention of material and craftsmanship than the load-bearing masonry buildings. If for some reason the original material did not hold up, we would really ask ourselves if [the replacement matched] sightlines and profiles and color and sharpness of detail.”<sup>121</sup>

The buildings of the commercial strip may not compare to the singular architectural significance of Lever House, but the principles applied to the modern-era icon can also apply to the strip mall. Unlike Lever House, the strip mall rarely retains both original materials *and* style. But what it does retain is form. If changing style is an aspect of the strip mall’s character, and retention of materials is not so important, then what remains is form.

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<sup>119</sup> Wayne Curtis, “No Clear Solution,” Preservation Sept/Oct 2002: 49-50.

<sup>120</sup> Curtis, 50.

<sup>121</sup> Curtis, 51.



It is not style that is most important to the integrity of the strip mall, but the forms and spaces that characterize the relationship between building and road. This relationship is defined by the progressive approach of the motorist. First is the roadside sign, calling for the attention of passersby. Next is the parking lot, signaling comfort and convenience and drawing the eye to the center itself. The buildings are last. Low and set far back from the road, the building is background, the bold signs along the unadorned fascia proclaiming the location of various tenants.

What made the strip mall revolutionary was the new form of engagement between the consumer on the highway and the merchandise inside. The relationship of customer to product was defined by signs, parking, and building. Such is the strip mall in its most elemental form. Building, parking, and signage are the essence of the strip. Without these, the strip mall loses its identity. When it comes to integrity, these are the elements that are most important to the strip mall.

A common litmus test in determining whether change has undermined the historic integrity of a resource is to consider if the original designer could recognize his or her work. Another way to consider this is whether or not the resource retains its designer's intent in regard to design and setting.<sup>122</sup> When considering the strip mall, a building in which the design and intent are based around the visibility of tenants and the sale of merchandise, does a change in material or appearance undermine the original intent?

As defined in the National Register Bulletin, "integrity is the ability of a property to convey its significance." There are seven aspects of integrity:

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<sup>122</sup> Julie H. Ernstein, "Setting the Bar: The Pros and Cons of Holding the Recent Past to a Higher Standard," Forum Journal 20.1 (Fall 2005), <[http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib\\_ID=887](http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib_ID=887)>, Accessed 08 Dec 2008.

- Location
- Design
- Setting
- Materials
- Workmanship
- Feeling
- Association<sup>123</sup>

If the strip mall's significance is considered primarily in terms of form, space, and relationship to the highway, the issue of integrity is not as problematic as it might seem. It is not necessary that a resource possess all the aspects of integrity, only some. In this perspective, it is not essential that a strip mall retain its original materials because the materials themselves may not be significant features. Likewise, workmanship will rarely be a factor in typical strip mall construction and is not essential to the elements that give the strip mall its significance.

The historic significance of the strip mall is tied more closely to other aspects of integrity. Naturally, to retain its spatial relationships between buildings, service areas, and the parking lot, a strip mall must remain in its original location. Design is important not in terms of style or ornament, but in the consideration of massing and arrangement of spaces. It is not the appearance of the façade, but the utilization of the decorated shed and the concepts that fueled its evolution. Although the setting of the strip mall is often in flux, much like the strip mall itself, there is constancy in the general character of the surroundings. Setting is critical to an understanding of the strip mall's relationship to the highway and the role signage played along the competitive commercial corridor. If the strip mall retains these aspects of integrity, it most likely will continue to provide the feelings and associations long connected to the idea and experience of the strip mall: the importance of the highway, the car, and commercialism.

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<sup>123</sup> "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation," 44.

Renovations may add to or subtract from the fabric of the strip mall, but if such changes are made in the spirit of the strip and do not significantly alter the form and space of the original construction, they should not be considered detrimental to the historic integrity of the strip mall. The cases of the Broadway-Crenshaw Center and of Valley Plaza in Los Angeles offer a compelling example of the way alterations can affect the strip mall's integrity. Both centers were important prototypes for the developing strip mall typology, and both have experienced change since they were constructed in 1947 and 1951, respectively.

The Broadway-Crenshaw Center of today is barely recognizable from the Broadway-Crenshaw Center of 1947 (figures 31-34). Now called Crenshaw Plaza, the center has become an enclosed mall anchored by a Sears, Macy's and Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart occupies the former location of the Broadway Department Store, the only remaining building original to the 1947 design. The main portion of the mall and two large parking garages have engulfed the vast asphalt parking area.<sup>124</sup> Those features that were significant to the development of the strip mall have disappeared. Though the styling of the Broadway store remains intact, the center itself no longer retains the integrity of those features necessary to its significance.

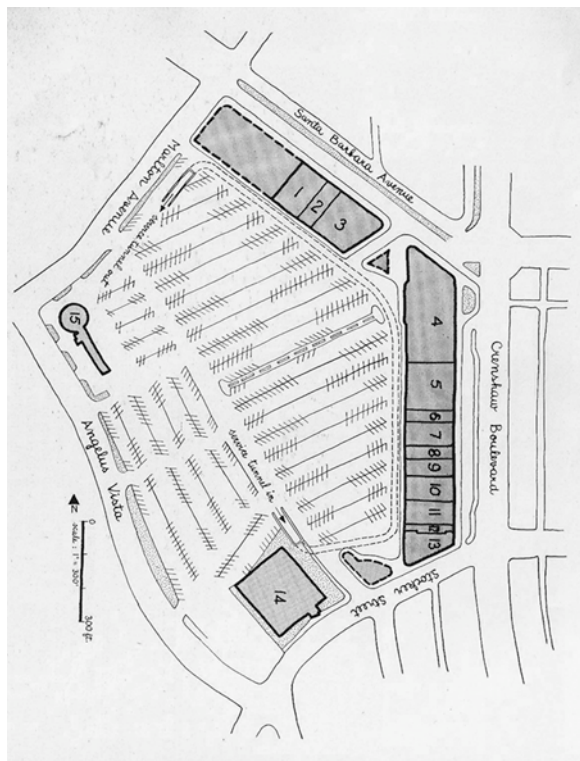


**Figure 31:** Broadway-Crenshaw, 1948.

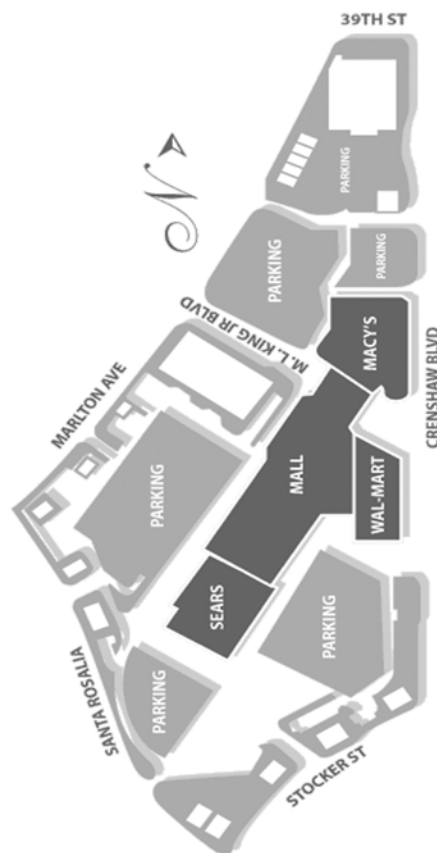


**Figure 32:** Crenshaw Plaza, 2008.

<sup>124</sup> "Directory," Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza, <<http://www.crenshawplaza.com/main.php?pg=directory>>. Accessed 25 Mar 2009.



**Figure 33:**  
Broadway-Crenshaw Center. Original plan.  
Broadway department store (4) corresponds  
to the location of Wal-Mart in Figure 34.



**Figure 34:**  
Crenshaw Plaza, 2008.

Valley Plaza, on the other hand, underwent comparatively little change in its first forty years. As of 1992, it still maintained its original layout; two long horizontal buildings set back from the main thoroughfare. Though one building had been altered, the Sears anchor store still exhibited its original stylistic features.<sup>125</sup> Despite changes to the appearance of the structures, the physical integrity essential to the significance of Valley Plaza as a precursor to the strip mall remained intact. Valley Plaza was a good example of the ability of the strip mall to absorb change and still retain the features that are essential to its historic integrity. However, during the

<sup>125</sup> Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, 260-62.

last fifteen years, one building has been demolished, leaving only the Sears anchor. The Sears storefront has undergone a stylistic update, replacing the original sign with one more befitting the company's present image, and modifying the general appearance of the façade.<sup>126</sup> With only the anchor now remaining, the demolition of the partner building has stripped the center of its historic integrity.

The alterations at Broadway-Crenshaw and Valley Plaza underscore the difficulties involved when trying to preserve a building typology that is continually reinventing itself. National and international meetings and councils concerning the preservation of the recent past have stressed the importance of a flexible interpretation of integrity, one that takes into account the socio-economic, ecological, cultural, and historical contexts of a particular resource. Such an interpretation can ensure that the factors affecting integrity are not overlooked or dismissed before they have a chance to be understood.<sup>127</sup>

Even when superficial changes in appearance are not enough to undermine integrity, major change occurs often enough to seriously impact National Register eligibility, complicating preservation efforts. When considering the impact of change along the strip, it is important to recognize the effect of the fifty-year rule. When it was still remarkably intact, Valley Plaza had not yet reached the appropriate age to be considered eligible for listing in the National Register. Fifteen years later, the historic integrity of the center had been irrevocably compromised.

Because of rapid change along the strip, many resources do not last long enough to become eligible for the National Register. Thousands of places that might have been worthy of preservation have been seriously altered or demolished before they reach the age of fifty. The

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<sup>126</sup> Google Maps, <<http://maps.google.com/maps>>, Accessed 25 Mar 2009.

<sup>127</sup> Susan D. Bronson and Thomas C. Jester, "Conserving the Built Heritage of the Modern Era: Recent Developments and Ongoing Challenges," *APT Bulletin* 28.4 (1997), 10.

Town and Country Shopping Center in Columbus, Ohio was the first to include multiple major stores as anchors and the first to stay open in the evening with uniform hours of operation. The center was remodeled in 1974, and many original buildings were torn down in 1987. As a result of the alterations, the center was left with insufficient historic integrity to qualify for the National Register.<sup>128</sup> It could be said that such a high rate of turnover ensures that preservationists will not try to designate every building along the highway. But if every building is irreparably or significantly altered before it comes of age, there will be no physical record of the commercial strip's past.

Criteria Consideration "G" makes it possible for buildings of exceptional significance to be listed, but too often the fifty-year rule is understood as just that.<sup>129</sup> Many people do not realize that buildings younger than fifty years can be listed, and such places are often regarded as unworthy of consideration. Some municipalities require, without exception, that a building be fifty years of age before it qualifies for protection.<sup>130</sup> Because of the fifty-year rule, the cycle of change along the commercial highway has the potential to compromise the integrity of the strip mall before it is even old enough to merit consideration for preservation. Many buildings were not even designed to last to the point where they could be impartially judged against the backdrop of history. The fifty-year rule is not necessarily a problem that needs to be fixed, but a challenge that the strip mall must overcome.

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<sup>128</sup> W. Ray Luce, "Kent State, White Castles, and Subdivisions: Evaluating the Recent Past," Forum Journal 10.1(Fall 1995), <[http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib\\_ID=129](http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib_ID=129)>, Accessed 8 Dec 2008.

<sup>129</sup> "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation," 41.

<sup>130</sup> Jeanne Lambin and Adrian Scott Fine, "Rallying Support for Resources from the Recent Past," Forum Journal 18.4(Summer 2004), <[http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib\\_ID=835](http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib_ID=835)>, Accessed 08 Dec 2008.

### **The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Treatment:**

Quality materials, enduring design, and elevated standards of construction have never been high on the list of priorities for the strip mall. From the very first taxpayer blocks, buildings along the commercial highway have been built to be replaced. The decorated shed is a building that can be built cheaply and reinvented easily. Among the public and preservation practitioners alike, there is a persistent belief that buildings at one time were built to endure, while the buildings of the postwar era have failed to achieve the same durability. The 1972 Pompidou Center in Paris, by Rogers and Piano, was undergoing a \$120 million renovation twenty-five years later. Norman Foster's 1988 Sainsbury Center for the Visual Arts underwent wholesale replacement of its aluminum cladding system, just ten years after its completion. While the typical strip mall does not feature the same degree of technical experimentation, methods and materials were often similar, and it suffers from mere association with the architecture of the recent past. But the reality is that buildings have always suffered from deterioration and decay. The Venice Campanile was reconstructed in 1910, and the Vienna Opera was rebuilt following World War II. Inigo Jones's 1622 Banqueting House was completely refaced in 1829, and every member of the Eiffel Tower has been replaced at least once.<sup>131</sup>

The strip mall can be preserved, just as other buildings have been for centuries. The challenge lies in understanding the materials and methods of construction that characterize postwar designs. The incorporation of recently developed materials and innovative methods of assembly means preservationists must expand their knowledge of building systems beyond simple post and beam and load-bearing masonry construction. Untested materials may

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<sup>131</sup> Edward Ford, "The Theory and Practice of Impermanence," *Harvard Design Magazine* No. 3(Fall 1997), <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/3ford.pdf>>, Accessed 08 Dec 2008.



deteriorate faster than anticipated and require frequent upkeep. Sometimes, original materials have already gone out of production and can be expensive to recreate.<sup>132</sup> As preservation moves into the twenty-first century, it is more important than ever that the standards and guidelines currently in place have the ability to evolve with new construction techniques and with preservation itself.

Just as the National Register provides guidelines for determining the significance of a historic property, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties provide guidelines for determining how a significant property should be conserved. There may be some cases where 'Preservation' or 'Restoration' might be warranted, but the majority of work conducted on the strip mall will fall under the umbrella of 'Rehabilitation.' Rehabilitation offers greater latitude in design and material replacement, and allows alterations and additions for efficient conversion to new uses.<sup>133</sup> Although they are often perceived as a potential roadblock to preserving buildings of the recent past, the Standards are in fact highly flexible. They may not speak directly to the recent past, but the underlying principles and guidelines are applicable to buildings of any type, including the strip mall.

A common concern regarding the materials used for recent past construction is that they are difficult to repair or are no longer available for replacement, meaning a building cannot be rehabilitated to meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. However, such concerns are generally unfounded. In each section of the guidelines for Rehabilitation, including exterior, interior, and site work, provisions are made for replacement of original fabric. According to the Standards, while it is preferable that a material used to repair or replace part of the building is the

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<sup>132</sup> Carl Elefante, "Renewing Modernism," *Places* 20.1(Spring 2008), 44.

<sup>133</sup> Kay D. Weeks and Anne E. Grimmer, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring & Reconstructing Historic Buildings*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1995), 63.

same as the original, substitute materials are allowed as long as the character and appearance of the original is maintained.<sup>134</sup> Thus it is possible for a building to be rehabilitated in compliance with the Standards when original materials are no longer in production or are prohibitively difficult to obtain.

One potential problem posed by the Standards is a focus on more traditional building technologies. Treatment recommendations are provided for masonry, wood, and architectural metals, but not for newer materials such as engineered wood, fiberglass, plastics, and EIFS (Exterior Insulation and Finishing System), common components of strip mall construction.<sup>135</sup> This is a rational inclination, as only about three percent of buildings on the National Register are less than fifty years old.<sup>136</sup> But as the fifty year cutoff approaches the 1960s and beyond, more preservation efforts will be focused on buildings that require an understanding of newer materials and technologies. The Standards may need to be updated to reflect the large volume of postwar buildings that will require appropriate treatment strategies.

Another consequence of new technology is the issue of energy consumption. Many strip malls and other contemporary buildings were constructed with little regard for energy use and material durability. Abundant availability of oil and low electricity costs were defining characteristics of the postwar commercial highway. This is reflected in the designs of the strip mall and other buildings of the era. Materials and construction methods are indicative of a time when energy conservation was largely unnecessary.<sup>137</sup> The lack of energy efficiency in the building envelope was primarily due to the use of large-scale mechanical equipment for heating, cooling, and lighting.

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<sup>134</sup> Weeks and Grimmer, 63-64.

<sup>135</sup> H. Ward Jandl, "Preserving the Recent Past: An Introduction," CRM No. 9(1995), 5.

<sup>136</sup> Lambin and Fine.

<sup>137</sup> Elefante, 48.

The preservation of mechanical systems is incorporated in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, but its focus is limited to the decorative aspects of such systems: ornamental grilles, switch plates, lighting fixtures, and other elements. The Standards even suggest that the actual systems may need upgrading or replacement to conform to modern requirements.<sup>138</sup> In many strip malls, mechanical systems are a major factor in the appearance of the interior space. Decorative or not, lighting, ductwork, and other pipelines are often exposed and highly visible, becoming a character defining aspect of the building. In other cases, mechanical systems may be significant as an important representation of the postwar reliance on electricity for regulation of interior environments.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards also address energy efficiency. Like the guidelines for material treatment, the energy efficiency guidelines pertain primarily to buildings of more traditional construction.<sup>139</sup> Proper care of windows is an important aspect of energy efficiency for traditional buildings, but strip malls rarely have windows other than those of the storefront. Natural light can be difficult to introduce without potentially harming the historic character of an interior space.

By its nature, the strip mall is not an inherently energy efficient structure. This quality can be part of its significance, and it underscores a larger issue facing preservationists. As the environment becomes a greater focus of preservation efforts, the need to retrofit buildings with newer, more energy efficient mechanical systems has the potential to clash with the need to preserve historic representations of past technologies. Preservationists will be faced with difficult decisions regarding the priorities of the profession as a whole.

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<sup>138</sup> Weeks and Grimmer, 12.

<sup>139</sup> Weeks and Grimmer, 110-11.

### **Adaptive Reuse:**

Amid the turmoil of the commercial highway, there is an increasing opportunity for new uses to find a foothold in the vast retail landscape. The adaptive reuse of aging or abandoned strip malls has presented new possibilities for preservation. As strip malls age, successful tenants often outgrow their original spaces. This is not an issue when similar tenants can easily be added to replace those that are lost, but problems can arise when the location is undesirable or when a retailer vacates a building that it owns. Wal-Mart, for example, often will not lease its empty buildings to competitors or similar businesses.<sup>140</sup> Creativity has been essential in finding new tenants and new uses for such spaces.

Churches have been popular uses for former strip malls. Calvary Chapel in Pinellas Park, Florida, occupies a former Wal-Mart. Its associate pastor cited the appearance of the building as a positive factor, suggesting that a traditional church had the potential to intimidate a new generation of worshippers. Leaving the strip mall appearance intact ultimately made the church a more democratic place, making it accessible to more members of the community.

The Denton Public Library North Branch in Denton, Texas, occupies a former Food Lion supermarket (figures 35 & 36). A glass curtain wall along the façade, together with new windows in the rear and light monitors in the roof, bring additional light into the interior. Despite the redesigned façade, the building retains its original form. The space of the parking area in front has been preserved, but its capacity has been reduced by the introduction of additional green space.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Eve M Kahn, "Thinking Inside the Big Box," The New York Times (12 May 2005), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/12/garden/12box.html?scp=1&sq=kahn,%20eve%20big%20box&st=cse>, Accessed 27 Aug 2008.

<sup>141</sup> Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 68-69.



**Figure 35:** Former Food Lion supermarket. Denton, Texas.



**Figure 36:** Food Lion reinvented as the Denton Public Library, North Branch.

In addition to churches and libraries, theaters, government offices, schools, museums, and even hospitals have found the spaces of the strip mall to be viable locations. Hormel Foods has turned an Austin, Minnesota Kmart into the highly successful Spam Museum.<sup>142</sup> Visibility,

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<sup>142</sup> Kahn.

ample parking, low cost, and familiarity have all been cited as reasons for locating in the abandoned spaces of the strip mall.

Other reuse projects have involved entire strip malls. La Grande Orange is a neighborhood center created out of an abandoned strip mall in Phoenix (figure 37). The project began in 2001 when Bob Lynn and Craig and Kris Demarco turned a former Post Office location into a café and wine store. They later added a grocery and pizzeria along with a bakery and home furnishings store. By 2007, other entrepreneurs had been inspired to open a cocktail bar and another eatery in the same strip. The renovation retained the parking lot and general appearance of the buildings while adding outdoor seating areas and fresh coats of paint. The center has proven successful financially and has been a valuable addition to the social fabric of the neighborhood.<sup>143</sup>



**Figure 37:** La Grande Orange strip mall in Phoenix.

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<sup>143</sup> Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 70.

Adaptive reuse and renovation offer great hope for preserving the strip mall. The spatial relationships among elements of the commercial highway are usually maintained, as are many of the original building features. At La Grande Orange, retention of the original building and its parking lot has preserved the original character of the space. Despite necessary alterations at the Spam Museum, original architectural features remain, including the exposed steel beams in the ceiling. Many other renovations typically retain or reuse the original signage along both the roadside and the building façade.<sup>144</sup>

### **Character Areas:**

As part of a civic improvement scheme in 1964, Pike Place Market in Seattle was scheduled for demolition. Unlike many urban renewal efforts, the Seattle plan was ultimately stopped by preservation minded citizens. Urban renewal funds even ended up contributing to the market's renovation. As it grew in popularity, a new threat to the market arose: change. Concern grew that Pike Place would lose its unique character as an unkempt market run by local farmers. A new ordinance was passed to protect the market and save it from gentrification. The ordinance makes several stipulations in an effort to preserve visual character, requiring any structural material replaced at the market to be of the same quality as the original. Replacement is allowed only if repair is not possible. Furthermore, all vendors must make or grow their own products, preserving the original use of the market. Historically, and when the ordinance was passed, the area surrounding Pike Place was largely single room occupancy housing. The ordinance calls for the retention of this function in the neighboring buildings. The end result has

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<sup>144</sup> Kahn.



been that Pike Place Market has retained the original character that first inspired its preservation.<sup>145</sup>

In retrospect, Pike Place Market might be considered one of the first designated character areas in the country. Character areas have become useful tools in long-range community planning. They serve as guides for future growth, acting as a reference for decisions regarding appropriate land-use, street design, development intensity, and building forms, types, and appearance.<sup>146</sup> They are designed to ensure an area retains or obtains a particular feeling or association in part through the consideration of the above qualities.

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) defines a character area as:

“A specific geographic area within the community that:

- Has unique or special characteristics to be preserved or enhanced (such as a downtown, a historic district, a neighborhood, or a transportation corridor);
- Has potential to evolve into a unique area with more intentional guidance of future development through adequate planning and implementation (such as a strip commercial corridor that could be revitalized into more attractive village development patterns); or
- Requires special attention due to unique development issues (rapid change of development patterns, economic decline, etc.)”

Each character area is a planning sub-area within the community where more detailed, small-area planning and implementation of certain policies, investments, incentives, or regulations may be applied in order to preserve, improve, or otherwise influence its future development patterns in a manner consistent with the community vision.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Norman Tyler, Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles, and Practice, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000.) 23-24.

<sup>146</sup> V. Gail Easley and Glenn Coyne, Georgia, Department of Community Affairs, Discovering and Planning Your Community Character: Guidebook for Citizens and Local Planners, (Atlanta: State of Georgia, 27 Jun 2005,) Archived at: <<http://www.dca.state.ga.us/development/PlanningQualityGrowth/programs/downloads/guidebooks/CharacterAreaGuide.pdf>>, 6-7.

<sup>147</sup> Jerry Weitz and Associates, Georgia, Office of Planning and Quality Growth, Techniques and Guidance for Delineating and Implementing Character Areas, (Alpharetta, GA: April 2005 Draft), Archived at: <<http://www.dca.state.ga.us/development/PlanningQualityGrowth/programs/downloads/ImplementCharctrAreas.pdf>>, 3.

Character areas are also referred to as Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCDs). In a study identifying the differences between traditional historic districts and NCDs, the town of Brookline, Massachusetts derived the following:

- NCDs allow the public to determine what characteristics of a neighborhood should be preserved (and how strictly), instead of relying on the framework of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards or the language of a local landmark ordinance.
- NCDs emphasize collective neighborhood attributes rather than the details of individual buildings.
- Buildings in NCDs are less often the subjects of thorough architectural design reviews. Instead they are evaluated by their size and orientation relative to the rest of the neighborhood.
- NCD reviews are typically left to local planning staff instead of formal, volunteer-staffed historic preservation commissions.

Compliance with such districts is typically based on the use of incentives including tax benefits and reduced zoning restrictions.<sup>148</sup>

Character areas can be used to protect the historic character of an area without actually creating protected local districts. They impose no review process for demolition, but limit the character of any new construction. A character area could even outline a district that has the potential to become a protected historic district in the future, ensuring that new development does not negatively impact the existing historic character of the area.

In 2008, the Phoenix, Arizona, city council adopted a new downtown plan using character areas as a guide. Included in the plan are several character areas encompassing protected and unprotected historic properties and districts, each embodying a unique character and requiring a unique vision for future development. One of the most interesting cases involves the integration of character areas with historic districts.

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<sup>148</sup> Historic Preservation Strategy Report, City of Chicago, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, (Chicago: November 2008) <<http://www.goto2040.org/uploadedFiles/RCP/Forum/HistoricPreservation.pdf>>, Accessed 2 Apr 2009, 17.

The Roosevelt Character Area is an original downtown Phoenix neighborhood. It features a variety of coexisting housing styles, from Neoclassical to Modern. The character area plan calls for the southern part of the Roosevelt neighborhood to serve as a transition area between the historically designated northern part of Roosevelt and the adjacent high density, high rise area of downtown. While the area is to remain residential in form and appearance, the neighborhood will feature a mix of uses. Because sixty-five percent of the Roosevelt South area is historically designated, extensive adaptive reuse will be necessary, turning many homes into shopping and dining locations. New multi-family housing, offices, and retail space will be mixed in among the original single-family homes, but the overall character is to remain that of a residential tree-lined street. When new development does occur, the document recommends maintaining the existing front yard setbacks and developing height transition and design standards, ensuring that new construction is compatible with the scale and character of the existing neighborhood.<sup>149</sup>

With a defined ‘character area,’ it is possible to plan for and incorporate change even into designated historic districts. When it comes to the strip mall, character areas can be useful tools. The strip mall is closely connected to the other buildings along the highway. As Venturi noted, the elongated spaces of the strip cannot be conceived from one place, but must be viewed as a moving sequence.<sup>150</sup> The strip mall is designed to be approached by car. It depends upon surrounding buildings to give it scale while mingling roadside signs provide depth along the road and across parking lots. Preserving the character of the strip requires maintaining these relationships among highway, signage, parking and building. If only a single building is saved,

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<sup>149</sup> City of Phoenix., Downtown Phoenix Plan, Phoenix, AZ: 2008, Archived at <<http://phoenix.gov/urbanformproject/dtplan.html>>. Accessed 23 Mar 2009, 3-15 – 3-17.

<sup>150</sup> Venturi, et al., 36.

the surrounding context of the strip mall is lost, and with it a significant part of its integrity. A character area ensures the preservation of the experience of the strip mall, if not the strip mall itself. Character areas would offer some assurance in an environment that is marked by rapid and frequent change. Buildings could be replaced and new uses mixed in, but such changes and additions would still invoke the disorder and commotion of the commercial strip; its significant spatial relationships would remain.

### **Design Guidelines and the Wildwoods:**

When architect Morris Lapidus began designing hotels in the 1950s for the famous resort area of Miami Beach, he rejected the notion that a hotel had to resemble a home away from home.

“I was convinced that just as a store had to be designed to make people want to buy what the merchant had to sell, so a hotel had something to sell also... We were coming out of the war and the postwar period. People wanted fun, excitement, and all of it against a background that was colorful, unexpected; in short, visual excitement that made people want to buy...”<sup>151</sup>

Lapidus’s designs and other examples of elaborate Miami Modernism would serve as the primary inspiration for the resort motels of a New Jersey shoreline destination collectively known as The Wildwoods. His description of the architecture of the postwar period emphasizes the similarities between the motel and the strip mall. The preservation of Wildwood motels currently offers one of the closest parallels for the preservation of the strip mall.

In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, a building boom took place along the New Jersey shoreline. The towns of Wildwood Crest, Wildwood, North Wildwood, and West Wildwood experienced explosive growth in auto-based tourism that resulted in the rapid

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<sup>151</sup> Michael Lorin Hirsch, et al, How to Doo Wop: Wildwoods by-the-Sea Handbook of Design Guidelines, (The Doo Wop Preservation League), 29.

construction of imaginatively designed tourist motels. The new motels were part of the buoyant new car culture, and their design was every bit as exuberant.<sup>152</sup>

The Caribbean Motel, a quintessential Wildwood motel, was designed and built by Lou Morey in 1958 (figures 38 & 39).<sup>153</sup> As originally envisioned, the Caribbean was a twenty-eight unit, U-shaped, two-story building opening to the street. A flat roof and linear form emphasized the horizontality of the motel, giving it a low profile along the street. The plaza between the building and the street featured a horseshoe-shaped pool. Parking was provided on two sides of the pool, both in a lot along the street and underneath a carport formed by the eastern wing of the motel. All rooms were accessed from the exterior and were connected by balconies along the street façade. The carport wing housed a lounge and game room and was the focal point of the Caribbean. Glass walls angled inward from the floor and ceiling, mirroring the motel's roofline fascia. An outdoor sundeck showcased the motel's signature feature, a floating, circular concrete ramp that curved around the second floor deck and down into the pool area. Just as important to the motel as its architecture, a giant neon sign mounted over the sundeck roof spelled out the name of the motel in huge cursive letters. Multicolored lights in the roof fascia contributed to a carnival-like nighttime atmosphere.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Kirk Hastings, Doo Wop Motels: Architectural Treasures of The Wildwoods, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2007), 1-6.

<sup>153</sup> Alison Isenberg, "Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS): Caribbean Motel, Wildwood Crest, NJ," 15 data pages, (Call Number: HABS NJ, 5-WILDWC, 1, Survey Number: HABS-NJ-1186, Card Number: NJ1486, University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 1.

<sup>154</sup> Isenberg, 5-8; Timothy Wagner, et al, "Historic American Building Survey (HABS): Caribbean Motel. Wildwood Crest, NJ," 9 blueprint drawings, (Call Number: HABS NJ, 5-WILDWC, 1, Survey Number: HABS-NJ-1186, Card Number: NJ1486, Kent State University, 1997).



**Figure 38:** Caribbean Motel. Wildwood Crest, New Jersey. 1958.



**Figure 39:** Caribbean Motel courtyard.



Dozens of hotels much like the Caribbean were built throughout The Wildwoods. Between 1956 and 1958 alone, 113 new motels went up along the beachfront. By the end of the 1960s, The Wildwoods boasted 317 motels in a style that would come to be known as ‘Doo Wop’ (figures 40-42).<sup>155</sup> The ocean side motels remained largely unaltered until the turn of the century, when renewed interest in the unique architecture of the area’s motels sparked a rash of new development. Many motels were threatened with demolition. Preservation efforts picked up speed after studies by *Learning from Las Vegas* co-author Steve Izenour convinced residents of the historic and economic value of the motels. As a result, many buildings were saved, but dozens were lost. A National Register nomination initiated in 2001 to create a Doo Wop motel district was ultimately abandoned five years later after extensive demolition had left too few remaining mid-century motels to create a cohesive historic district.<sup>156</sup>



**Figure 40:** Satellite Motel. Wildwood Crest, New Jersey. 1958.

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<sup>155</sup> Hastings, 25 & 54.

<sup>156</sup> Hastings, 75 & 90.





**Figure 41:** Casa Bahama Motel. Wildwood Crest, New Jersey. 1959.



**Figure 42:** Kona Kai Motel. Wildwood Crest, New Jersey. 1968.

Preservation efforts in The Wildwoods have focused on the unique character of the mid-century motel architecture and its broadening popular appeal. Tourism has always been essential to the survival of the area, and the playful designs of the Doo Wop motels combined with a beachfront location make for an ideal opportunity to create a one-of-a-kind tourist attraction. With that in mind, the Doo Wop Preservation League has emphasized retaining the character embodied by the existing mid-century lodging. To accomplish its goal, the League has created a set of design guidelines to direct future growth and development.

The design guidelines of The Wildwoods focus closely on specific architectural features and characteristics that are considered desirable or important to the personality of the area. In the proposed guidelines, new construction is required to adhere to specific constraints to mimic the historic appearance of the original Doo Wop motels. Through a series of “Doo-Be-Dos” and “Doo-Be-Don’ts,” the guidelines illustrate the type of construction and visual enhancements that best contribute to the perpetuation of the Doo Wop theme. In this way, the exuberant character of the motel district is to be maintained and enhanced.

The Doo Wop design guidelines dictate everything from site layout to the placement of mechanical systems. For the most part, the guidelines respect the historic setting of the Wildwood motels. Like the strip mall, the Doo Wop motel is set back from the road, providing both visibility and space for parking. The design guidelines encourage this setback, requiring new building massing to be shifted to the rear of the site. The guidelines also identify basic historic motel forms, including rectangular, L-shaped, and high-rise, that are appropriate for new construction. The guidelines require the integration of signage into the architecture of the building, windows and doors to be of characteristic awning or casement designs, and call for the use of themed and embellished façades. Furthermore, retention of original historic fabric is

encouraged wherever possible, even for non-contributing buildings, respecting the historic character of the entire area.<sup>157</sup> Overall, the impact is quite different from that of a traditional historic downtown.

Too often, however, the Doo Wop guidelines represent a tool built around an enhanced vision of the future rather than a complete understanding of the past. Historical accuracy is sacrificed for aesthetic appeal. The automobile, so essential to the concept of the motel, is required to be screened from view, and historic parking patterns are impossible to replicate, as they are no longer allowed under city building codes.<sup>158</sup> Mechanical equipment is required to be covered by a fence or other structure in an effort to make the area more attractive for pedestrians.<sup>159</sup> The guidelines allow the construction of twelve-story buildings provided they maintain the traditional setback.<sup>160</sup> Two currently proposed hotels, the Wild Beach Hotel and Resort and the Way Point Beach Club, are high-rise constructions easily two to three times the suggested appropriate heights (figures 43 & 44).<sup>161</sup> At such scales, and even at twelve stories Doo Wop style becomes little more than an applied theme. The historic character of the original two- to three-story motels is lost. The stylistic (as opposed to historic) focus of the Doo Wop guidelines is apparent in the lack of distinction between new construction and rehabilitation or restoration. The same guidelines apply to both new construction and old, leaving the public with little ability to distinguish between designs that are truly historic and designs that are simply historicized.

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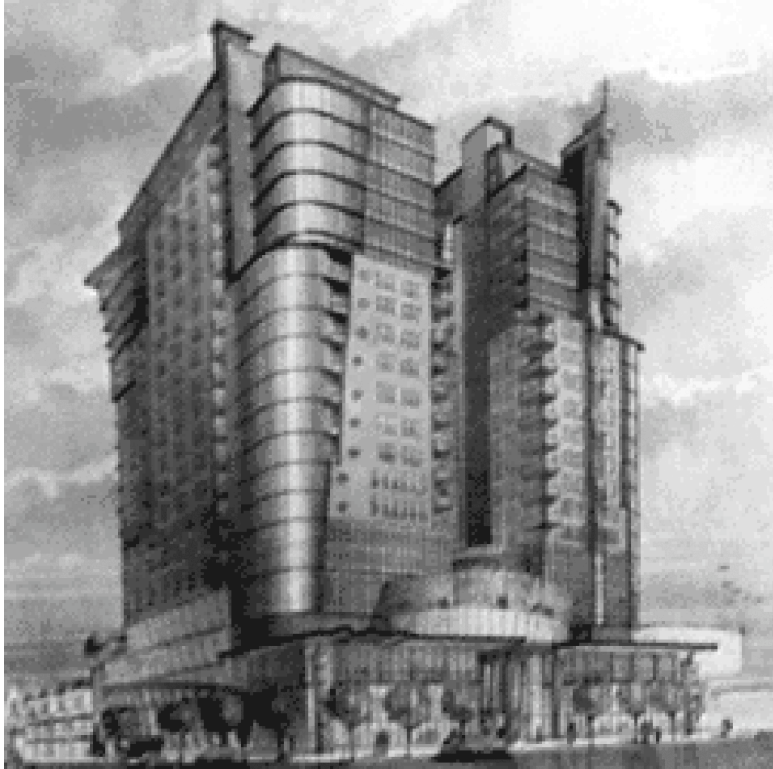
<sup>157</sup> Hirsch, 44-45.

<sup>158</sup> Hirsch, 37-40.

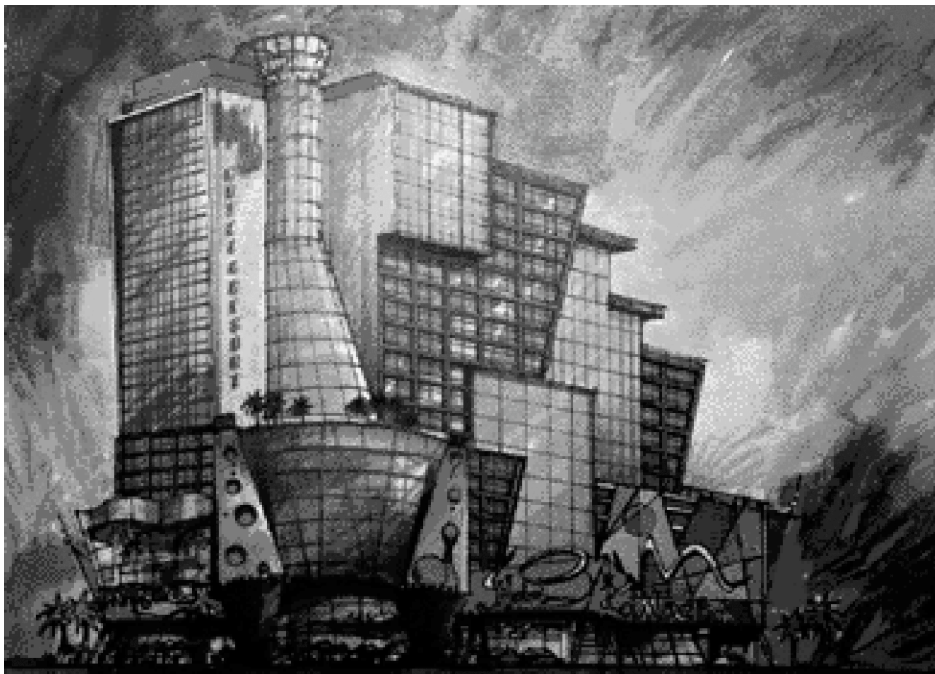
<sup>159</sup> Hirsch, 47.

<sup>160</sup> Hirsch, 67.

<sup>161</sup> "Doo Wop Renovation and Restoration Projects," [DooWopUSA.org](http://www.doowopusa.org), The Doo Wop Preservation League, <<http://www.doowopusa.org/pop-projects.html>> Accessed 4 Apr 2009.



**Figure 43:** Proposed Waypoint Beach Club hotel and condominiums.



**Figure 44:** Proposed Wildwood Beach Hotel and Resort.

The problems of the Doo Wop design guidelines illustrate the difficulty of preserving a pattern of development that has fallen out of favor. The visual impact of cars, mechanical equipment, and other utilitarian functions has long been a defining part of the experience of the strip mall. As a tool for preservation, design guidelines try to respect the influence of such elements of the built environment, but as an urban planning tool, they attempt to generate a more appealing place to live. When history conflicts with planning goals, design guidelines can lose their intended impact.

## CHAPTER IV

### CHALLENGES TO PRESERVATION

“Historicity is what distinguishes preservation from all other pursuits in shaping the environment. Without it, preservationists have little save their wits...and taste.”<sup>162</sup>

Awareness of the strip mall’s history and origins is essential to understanding its importance in American life. It is a fallacy to separate appearance from history. When viewed in the context of the past, the significance of the strip mall to the development and identity of the United States becomes obvious. Its role in shaping the environment has been considerable. Its cultural impact is impossible to ignore. As a symbol of America’s consumerist economy, it is without equal. Yet it is still difficult to advocate that the strip mall is worthy of preservation.

As the strip mall spread across the nation, it became a greater presence in the everyday lives of American citizens. While it multiplied, its appearance changed little from one place to another. Unlike regional architecture that preceded it, location was rarely a factor in strip mall design. The strip mall’s ubiquity and sameness have made it at once instantly recognizable and universally derided.

Perhaps more than any other building type in history, the strip mall has been the target of scornful attacks on its appearance, form, and purpose. James Kunstler has been a leading critic of the strip mall and other architectural products of the postwar highway. His description of the strip is not a flattering one.

“The road now is like television, violent and tawdry. The landscape it runs through is littered with cartoon buildings and commercial messages. We whiz by them at fifty-five miles an hour and forget them, because one convenience store looks like the next. They do not celebrate anything beyond their mechanistic ability to sell merchandise. We don’t

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<sup>162</sup> Richard Longstreth, "Taste Versus History," *Forum Journal* 8.3(May/June 1994), <[http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib\\_ID=547](http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib_ID=547)>, Accessed 8 Dec 2008.

want to remember them. We did not savor the approach and we were not rewarded upon reaching the destination, and it will be the same next time, and every time. There is little sense of having arrived anywhere, because everyplace looks like no place in particular.”<sup>163</sup>

Kunstler’s sentiments have been echoed across the country by citizens of all statures. The architecture of the strip has been a subject of criticism since the first taxpayer buildings stretched from America’s downtowns. As early as the mid-1920s, developer J.C. Nichols lamented the appearance of outlying commercial areas as “the ugliest, most unsightly, and disorderly spots of the entire city,” and how “perfectly square, unadorned buildings of poor design ... are bringing about disorder, unsightliness, and unattractiveness that threatens to mar the beauty and good appearance of residential regions in American cities.”<sup>164</sup>

The objection to the strip mall, and most other forms of so-called ‘sprawl’ along the commercial highway, has almost always been an aesthetic one. The strip mall has come to epitomize sprawl and every negative characterization the term engenders. The use of the term makes it easy to dismiss or ignore the underlying reasons for the appearance of such a landscape. No one likes ‘sprawl,’ and no one puts much effort into understanding it. Its associations are not historical, but emotional.

When the issue of preserving the strip mall is raised, reactions typically range from incredulity to anger. An internet search for the phrase “strip mall preservation” currently yields two results, neither of which advocate saving strip malls for posterity. The matter of preservation is hardly controversial when the strip mall itself seems to be a subject of widespread disdain. That the strip mall has come to represent so much that is wrong with America is a clear indication that it is one of the most important typologies to which the country has given birth.

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<sup>163</sup> Kunstler, 131.

<sup>164</sup> Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, 107.



When it comes to the strip mall, everyone has an opinion. But opinion has no place when it comes to historic significance.

The strip mall faces challenges stemming not only from taste, but from preservation itself. As it has aligned with other causes and organizations, including sustainability and New Urbanism, preservation has broadened its influence. By doing so, the field has complicated efforts to preserve the strip mall. Sprawl is another issue. Like taste, sprawl is a challenge of public opinion, but it is also grounded in physical reality. As components of sprawl, strip malls face environmental and transportation challenges as well as negative opinion. Finally, in virtually all preservation efforts, gentrification is a problem, and the strip mall is no exception. Any improvements made to the strip mall have the potential to force out existing merchants and their customers. Fully understanding these issues and their underlying causes can lead to faster and more complete resolutions.

### **Taste:**

Even preservationists have a difficult time when it comes to separating taste from history. Donovan Rypkema, one of the leading voices of the preservation field, is well known for his work championing the positive economic effects of historic preservation. But Rypkema also writes about other aspects of preservation, one of them being the issue of preserving the recent past. He voices the opinion of much of the public, and many preservationists as well, when he states, “The vast majority of what has been built in America in the last fifty years is crap.”<sup>165</sup>

When Rypkema makes references to the ‘recent past,’ what he is really targeting is the landscape of sprawl and the commercial highway corridor in particular. He acknowledges that

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<sup>165</sup> Rypkema, “Saving the Recent Past.”



there are buildings from the last fifty years worth preserving, and includes 2 Columbus Circle, Edward Durell Stone's 1964 'lollipop building,' as an example worthy of 'legitimate' debate. He is appalled, however, by the notion that a McDonald's or Wal-Mart might be considered of historic importance in the same manner as Mount Vernon. He makes the case that there is a distinction between the fads of pop culture and truly historic places that should be saved.

Rypkema claims that the architecture of the recent past is not a continuation of historic forms, but an aberration.<sup>166</sup> But if the buildings of the last fifty years are a historic aberration, that fact alone should make them worthy of preservation. Rypkema states that some buildings are worth preserving simply for portraying the negative side of history. At the very least, if the strip mall represents some of the worst architecture of the last fifty years, preserving it is one method of ensuring that past mistakes are not repeated, and future generations may learn from the shortcomings of commercial design in the auto age.

According to Rypkema, many buildings of the recent past are neither good nor bad, but are in fact meaningless. They are meaningless simply because they fail to make a lasting visual impression. Due to changes in the nature of construction and urban design, many places of the recent past are not visually arresting. The typical building no longer crowns a hill or terminates a street, but sits back inconspicuously from the road. Like many places of the recent past, people may not remember the specific look of a strip mall, but they remember its forms and spaces and the thoughts and feelings associated with the experience of being there. The symbolic role of the strip mall holds a great deal of meaning to many Americans. To exclude such places is to

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<sup>166</sup> Rypkema, "Saving the Recent Past."

exclude the very structures that give meaning to the everyday environment and context to those that are truly unique.<sup>167</sup>

“The very idea of protecting a gas station or shopping center sends some preservationists into mild convulsions because such types are assumed to be detrimental to the landscape – the sort of thing preservation should oppose. Never mind the individual distinction some examples may possess. Never mind the impact they have had on patterns locally. Never mind the profound changes to commerce, human activity, and urban structure they represent. Never mind, in short, the historical significance they possess. They are simply in bad taste.”<sup>168</sup>

There is a tendency among the public and preservationists alike to separate those aspects of a resource that are significant architecturally from those that are significant historically. But history and architecture are not separate and distinct. Each is an integral part of the other. The architecture of the strip mall cannot be understood without a complete understanding of its history. It is the broader pattern of past events, commercial innovation, and new attitudes toward the use of retail space that has guided the development of the strip mall’s appearance. Once this becomes clear, the elements of recognized ‘style’ should no longer dictate the historic import of the strip mall or any other building type.<sup>169</sup>

Rypkema’s dissent is based on the concepts of value, meaning, quality, and significance as tenets central to preservation philosophy.<sup>170</sup> But his argument remains grounded in taste. It is through the National Register evaluation process that value, meaning, quality, and significance are determined. The nomination process ensures that all cultural resources, regardless of appearance or public opinion, are given the same opportunity for recognition on the National Register. It is pointless to assert that one building is more significant than another. Value,

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<sup>167</sup> Richard Longstreth, "I Can't See It; I Don't Understand It; And It Doesn't Look Old to Me," Forum Journal 10.1(Fall 1995), <[http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib\\_ID=128](http://forum.nationaltrust.org/subNTHP/displayNews.asp?lib_ID=128)>, Accessed 8 Dec 2008.

<sup>168</sup> Longstreth, "I Can't See It; I Don't Understand It; And It Doesn't Look Old to Me."

<sup>169</sup> Luce.

<sup>170</sup> Rypkema, "Saving the Recent Past."

meaning, quality, and significance are largely intangible. They cannot be used to measure one resource against another. Significance can only be determined in the context of history.

Preservationists who attempt to preclude certain resource types from the National Register ignore the impact those resources have had on American culture. When taste is removed from the preservation equation, the strip mall is as worthy of protection as any other resource.

### **Preservation Policy:**

In his handbook, *The Economics of Historic Preservation*, Donovan Rypkema ties historic preservation closely to economics. To make his point, he crafts a definition of preservation using the same language found in the definitions of ‘economics,’ ‘economy,’ and ‘economize.’

“Historic Preservation: The careful management of a community’s resources; avoidance of wasted resources by careful planning and use; the thrifty use of those resources. To use or manage those historic resources with thrift or prudence; to avoid their waste or needless expenditure; to reduce expenses through the use of these historic resources.”<sup>171</sup>

Rypkema emphasizes the connection between preservation and economics in an effort to broaden the appeal of historic preservation and sway those who consider it just a ‘luxury.’ Rypkema has shown that he believes preservation to be much more than the simple protection of historic resources. He has written not just about its economic impact, but of its role in environmental stewardship and urban planning as well.<sup>172</sup> Rypkema’s stance on preservation underscores a view that is shared by many in the preservation field. It has become so integrated with other disciplines that it is sometimes difficult to determine just what the purpose of preservation is. It

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<sup>171</sup> Donovan D. Rypkema, *The Economics of Historic Preservation: A Community Leader’s Guide*, (Washington, DC: The National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2005), 7.

<sup>172</sup> Donovan D. Rypkema, “Economics, Sustainability, and Historic Preservation,” National Trust Annual Conference, Portland OR, October 1, 2005.

seems that conserving a physical record of the built environment is frequently secondary to other goals.

As the country's leading preservation organization, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has a substantial role in guiding preservation policy in the United States. Over the years, many of the Trust's policies and initiatives have focused on issues stemming from the post-World War II building environment. The National Trust was formed in 1949 in an effort to link federal and private preservation efforts. As the nation experienced rapid expansion in the 1950s and 60s, concern about the resulting loss of historic resources grew. Urban renewal and the interstate highway system spurred massive redevelopment and new construction projects that had the potential to erase much of the nation's historic fabric. The Trust published *With Heritage So Rich* in 1966 to draw attention to what had been lost, calling upon the federal government to institute new policies to protect fragile historic resources. The result was the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966.<sup>173</sup> The NHPA was a call for greater responsibility from the federal government, but it was also a reaction to the new growth along the commercial highway. Since that time, preservation policy at the National Trust has continued to focus on counteracting the effects of sprawl and advocating a return to historic patterns of living.

The president of the National Trust, Richard Moe, has stated that the "preservation movement has moved beyond the meticulous restoration of landmarks and the creation of museums. We're also now involved in trying to make America's communities more livable."<sup>174</sup> Clearly, the Trust has grown beyond its original role as mediator between public and private

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<sup>173</sup> Tyler, 42-45.

<sup>174</sup> Richard Moe, "Growing Wiser: Finding Alternatives to Sprawl," *Design Quarterly* 164(Spring 1995), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091348>>, Accessed 18 Sep 2008, 4.

preservation efforts. The policies of the Trust reflect a predisposition not toward historic buildings, as might be expected, but toward traditional urban patterns and modes of development. As a leader in the national preservation movement, these broader inclinations have had a strong influence on the direction of preservation in both public policy and public opinion. The National Trust's publications and preservation strategies illustrate the growing penchant for preservation efforts to encompass more than just the protection of historic resources.

In 2008, the National Trust for Historic Preservation presented president-elect Barack Obama and his advisors with a policy platform outlining the importance of historic preservation to the nation and its goals in the coming years. That platform indicates the degree to which the field of preservation has expanded its influence and advocacy strategies beyond simple building conservation and documentation. Along with federal stewardship and public land management, the platform includes policy recommendations for sustainability, economic development, and transportation.<sup>175</sup> While a successful promotion strategy, such associations run the risk of compromising important principles, and in the case of the strip mall, undermining future preservation efforts. The policy recommendations set forth by the National Trust underscore several preservation initiatives that may make preserving the strip mall and other buildings of the recent past a more difficult undertaking: sustainability initiatives, the Main Street Program, and ties to New Urbanism.

#### *Sustainability Initiatives:*

One of the policy recommendations presented to the Obama administration by the National Trust calls for a review of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards in an effort to

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<sup>175</sup> "A Vision for the Obama Administration," [PreservationNation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org), (Nov 2008), National Trust for Historic Preservation, <[http://www.preservationnation.org/take-action/advocacy-center/additional-resources/nthp\\_obama\\_platform.pdf](http://www.preservationnation.org/take-action/advocacy-center/additional-resources/nthp_obama_platform.pdf)>, Accessed 09 Dec 2008.

increase flexibility for projects that incorporate energy efficient or sustainable elements.<sup>176</sup> Since the passage of the NHPA in 1966 and the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) in 1969,<sup>177</sup> the preservation movement has been closely associated with the environmental movement. Both have roots in the reaction to American excess in the decades following World War II. One preserves the natural, while the other preserves the man-made. In 1980, the National Trust for Historic Preservation created a poster publicizing the energy saving benefits of preserving old buildings. The poster featured a historic downtown building in the shape of a gas can. One year later, the National Trust published *New Energy from Old Buildings*, documenting the correlation between preservation and energy conservation.<sup>178</sup> Ever since, the ties between historic preservation and the environmental movement have been steadily increasing.

In March of 2000, the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) launched an evaluation tool known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, in an attempt to quantify the potential energy savings inherent in the construction of 'green' buildings using a point system to calculate a variety of environmental and energy-saving features.<sup>179</sup> Since that time, sustainability efforts in preservation have focused both on the ways the LEED standards can be made more compatible with historic buildings, and the ways historic buildings can be made more compatible with LEED.

Historically, buildings embodied many of the same concepts that drive green building and the LEED system today. Porous surfaces, cisterns to collect water, working shutters and

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<sup>176</sup> "A Vision for the Obama Administration," 5.

<sup>177</sup> Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 65.

<sup>178</sup> Diane Maddex, ed., *New Energy from Old Buildings*, (Washington, D.C: Preservation Press, 1981)

<sup>179</sup> Christine Palmer, "Historic Preservation and Sustainability," *Preservation Seattle*, (September 2006), <<http://www.historicseattle.org/preservationseattle/preservationenv/defaultSEPT06.htm>> Accessed 17 Mar. 2009.

operable windows, awnings and overhangs, high ceilings, walls with significant thermal mass, courtyards, natural ventilation, and daylighting are all common in pre-WWII design. Without the benefit of modern electricity and HVAC systems, site, environment, and climate were important considerations for building designs. Stratford Hall (c.1725), the Virginia birthplace of Robert E. Lee, was organized such that a ground floor with low-ceilinged bedrooms and other utilitarian rooms were located beneath a high-ceilinged upper floor of gathering spaces. The cooler ground floor was well utilized in the summer, while the first floor took advantage of rising heat. The house was also sited to take full advantage of breezes off the Potomac River. The Richard Jackson House (1665), in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, had a central chimney to radiate heat to the surrounding rooms. The rooms were sheathed and pitched such that they retained as much heat as possible during the cold New England winters. At Dunleith (c.1855) in Natchez, Mississippi, a two-story porch entirely surrounded the interior living spaces, providing shelter from the summer heat.<sup>180</sup>

LEED brought the issue of sustainable design to the forefront of the preservation discussion. As historic buildings were threatened with demolition to accommodate newer, more energy efficient designs, preservationists proclaimed the energy-saving benefits not just of historic designs, but also of recycling entire buildings. The popularity of LEED and sustainable design has been a major factor driving new preservation strategies. The National Trust recently formed the Sustainable Preservation Coalition with several private organizations and government agencies. Working with the USGBC, the Coalition helped frame the 2009 edition of the LEED rating system to better reflect the sustainable benefits of preservation. The National Trust has

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<sup>180</sup> Theodore Anton Sande, "Inherent Energy-Saving Features of Old Buildings," New Energy from Old Buildings, Ed. Diane Maddex, (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1981), 56-61.

also developed the Preservation Green Lab to provide demonstrations of the compatibility between historic buildings and sustainable building practices.<sup>181</sup>

These green initiatives can be instrumental in prolonging the lifespan of older buildings; the site-specific regional construction of the past is environmental design at its best. But the buildings of the recent past do not possess such intrinsic sustainable traits. It is much more difficult to promote the preservation of the strip mall as an environmentally friendly endeavor when it has long been criticized as ecologically unsound. The strip mall has few, if any, of the redeeming ecological design features of prewar construction. Its dependence upon the automobile, high energy requirements, quality of construction materials, impermeable surfaces, and consumption of open space represent the very energy-consuming design that green standards were developed to rectify. Recent changes to LEED will help to make the preservation of the strip mall more feasible. More credits for embodied energy and life-cycle assessment tools are essential for buildings of the commercial highway to meet many LEED requirements.<sup>182</sup> Reuse of the strip mall retains the energy used to create the building and all of its components, from start to finish. This energy cannot be regained once a building has been demolished. Furthermore, transporting and storing construction debris at a landfill requires the expenditure of even greater amounts of energy.<sup>183</sup> For better or for worse, green standards have become an important part of preservation as its influence and impact on urban form continues to expand.

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<sup>181</sup> Richard Moe, "Historic Preservation & Green Building: Finding Common Ground," [PreservationNation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org), (20 Nov 2008, National Trust for Historic Preservation) <<http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/sustainability/sustainability-preservation-1.html>>, Accessed 18 Mar. 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Moe, "Historic Preservation & Green Building: Finding Common Ground."

<sup>183</sup> Nancy Solomon, "Tapping the Synergies of Green Buildings and Historic Preservation," [Architectural Record](#) 191.7(July 2003), 157.



*The Main Street Program:*

In an effort to help America's downtowns compete against "homogenized, sprawling, strip development,"<sup>184</sup> the National Trust created the Main Street Center in 1980. The program operates in stark contrast to the "big fix" mentality that dominated renewal efforts of the time, instead focusing on small and incremental change adapted to local needs. Local officials and business leaders receive training and assistance to change the economic structure of downtown to respond to consumers and develop niche markets. Many downtown buildings are adapted for new commercial purposes and other elements of the physical environment are improved. The goal is ultimately to stimulate reinvestment in downtown by remaking its public image.<sup>185</sup>

The Main Street program continues to be the primary emphasis of the National Trust's preservation efforts with hundreds of participating communities across the nation. It has been hugely successful in causing the public to recognize the problems of sprawl and unchecked suburban development. The program's success is well documented, though its major selling points are ultimately based in economics. Its primary goal is for economic revival, with the hope that restoration will follow. Unfortunately, the focus on business often marginalizes the history of Main Street. The program encourages the preservation of downtown primarily as a 'history approved' pattern of living, but often fails to interpret local history or encourage a broader understanding of downtowns in general.<sup>186</sup> Commonly, Main Streets are historicized rather than restored, as features are added or removed to 'improve' appearances. Brick sidewalks are added where there were none historically, lights and street furniture are enhanced, awnings and signs

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<sup>184</sup> Richard Moe and Carter Wilkie, *Changing Places*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 75.

<sup>185</sup> Moe and Wilkie, 150.

<sup>186</sup> Tyler, 176-77.

are coordinated, and non-conforming storefronts from the more recent past are removed.<sup>187</sup>

These treatments create a false sense of history by emphasizing image over reality.

As the Main Street Program has expanded, the promotion of one pattern of development has come at the expense of another. Initiatives involving Main Street have distanced preservation from the suburban commercial highway. The positive qualities ascribed to Main Street starkly contrast characteristic strip mall development. Main Street appeals to a sense of nostalgia in part by highlighting the differences between downtown and the strip. Ironically, the focus on Main Street as an economic generator has led to the transformation of some downtowns into little more than thematic malls, different from their suburban counterparts only in the image they cultivate.

#### *New Urbanism:*

The growing influence of preservation has inspired new concepts in urban planning that further contribute to the difficulty of saving the strip mall. As preservationists have advocated Main Street, the front porch, tree lined avenues, and walkable cities, more people have come to recognize the value of such things. From the exposed brick chic of downtown warehouse lofts to the quiet charm of Craftsman bungalows, the popularity of the past is greater than ever before. Preservation has caused many to reconsider the way America's urban spaces operate.

One outgrowth of the newfound interest in the past has been a desire to recreate the image, function, and feeling of historic neighborhoods. New "lifestyle centers" function as traditional downtowns, offering a mixed use of residential, retail, and office space in one convenient, walkable location. Streets are narrow, buildings come up to the sidewalk, and

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<sup>187</sup> Longstreth, "Taste Versus History," 3.

parking is carefully hidden.<sup>188</sup> The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) has been a leader in so-called ‘neotraditional’ design. Drafted in 1996, the charter of the CNU lays out guidelines for urban form from the regional level to the level of individual buildings. The general principles of the CNU can be explained in a single statement:

“Neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as for the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban spaces should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.”<sup>189</sup>

Projects by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, founding members of the CNU and the foremost practitioners of New Urbanism, carry out this dictum. Mashpee Commons, in Mashpee, Massachusetts, began as the New Seabury Shopping Center, a 1968 strip mall anchored by a small grocery store (figure 45). In 1986, the decision was made to remake the center into a traditional village-type walkable shopping center. The plan considerably altered the original character of the site, though the shells of many original buildings were reused. A new street grid was extended through the shopping area, creating small blocks and more connections with the surrounding infrastructure. A 1988 charrette by Duany and Plater-Zyberk coordinated the development of a new master plan. Civic functions were carefully integrated, and housing was added along extensions of the street grid. The charrette introduced a style influenced by a mix of vernacular Cape Cod and colonial ornament. Mixed-use buildings, in the tradition of historic downtowns, gradually replaced the original spaces of the New Seabury center. Only the

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<sup>188</sup> Christopher B. Leinberger, "The Next Slum?" *The Atlantic* (Mar 2008), <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200803/subprime>>, Accessed 14 Jul. 2008.

<sup>189</sup> Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, (New York: North Point Press, 2000), 256-57.

supermarket remains in its original building (figure 46), but it too is to be replaced with a new multiple-story mixed-use structure.<sup>190</sup>



**Figure 45:** New Seabury Shopping Center. Mashpee, Massachusetts. 1968.



**Figure 46:** Mashpee Commons redevelopment with remaining Seabury supermarket building.

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<sup>190</sup> Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 97-99.

The original space of the New Seabury Shopping Center is no longer perceptible at Mashpee Commons. At no point in the planning process was the potential historic importance of New Seabury considered. Its fate is typical of aging strip malls across the nation. The preservation ethic in New Urbanism regards one aspect of commercial history as superior to and more valuable than another. The CNU's charter specifically calls for "the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts" along with "the preservation of our built legacy."<sup>191</sup> But too often, preservation is only important when existing buildings exhibit desirable traits. Typically, the buildings of the recent past do not represent the right kind of history to New Urbanism. Where conflicts arise between true preservation efforts and the principles of New Urbanism, New Urbanism generally wins out. Such cases demonstrate a growing tendency to cast aside the landscape of the strip and dismiss it as irrelevant or outmoded. Little effort is made to understand the strip mall or the opportunities it may present. The beneficial attributes of old building stock are lost in an effort to recreate an environment that never existed.

Derived from historical precedent, the planning principles of New Urbanism are largely a product of preservation advocacy. For New Urbanism practitioners, that is often where the connection between planning and preservation ends. But preservationists cannot afford to stand by while the new planning initiatives repeatedly use sprawl as an example of bad architecture and poor planning. Unfortunately, too many in the field are content to continue to paint the landscape of the recent past in such broad strokes.

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<sup>191</sup> Duany et al, Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream, (New York: North Point Press, 2000), 256.

## **Sprawl:**

The National Trust's policy platform presented to the new presidential administration is evidence of another challenge facing strip mall preservation: public sentiment against sprawl. Throughout the document, "sprawl" is the term used to describe places where public money should *not* be spent. The use of funds on "sprawl-type development" is discouraged; instead, it is suggested that money be directed to denser urban areas and older rural communities. Repeatedly, sprawl is mentioned as a condition to avoid, and the term is used in contrast to high-density urban areas, small downtowns, and picturesque landscapes.<sup>192</sup> The policies do not preclude the use of funds on buildings like the strip mall, but the language used makes it more difficult to earn public support. Though the reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure is encouraged, the implication is that investment should be limited to traditional patterns of development, rather than patterns of the postwar era.

The National Trust has used the landscape of the commercial highway together with the concept of sprawl as a foil for historic design and an obstacle to preservation efforts. National Trust president Richard Moe has long been a vocal opponent of sprawl. Moe has written widely about sprawl as a threat to American communities, downtowns, and to preservation in general. He describes sprawl as "poorly planned, land-consumptive, automobile-oriented, designed without regard to its surroundings," "usually ugly," and "enormously destructive." He specifically targets commercial highways, criticizing them as "sellscapes" and condemning the business practices of discounters such as Wal-Mart and Kmart.<sup>193</sup>

This view is echoed by Donovan Rypkema, who serves as the voice of many preservationists when he describes the positive impact preservation has had on cities. He praises

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<sup>192</sup> "A Vision for the Obama Administration."

<sup>193</sup> Moe, "Growing Wiser: Finding Alternatives to Sprawl," 4.

preservation for its influence on the reestablishment of traditional urban principles, in particular for inspiring the tenets of New Urbanism. Rypkema emphasizes the role that preservation plays in shaping the built environment and the responsibility that preservationists have to ensure that buildings that are protected do not undermine the positive effect preservation has had on urban form. Thus, in the interest of “good” cities, neighborhoods, and buildings, most recent past structures should not be designated historic.<sup>194</sup>

This approach has enabled preservationists to use the negativity surrounding the strip mall to emphasize the benefits of preserving traditional neighborhoods and historic downtowns. In 1993 for example, the entire state of Vermont was added to the National Trust’s list of “America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places” as a direct result of the “threat” sprawl posed to its small towns and countryside.<sup>195</sup> But such a strategy is ultimately shortsighted, as it places buildings of the recent past at risk. The very buildings that the public and preservationists alike have long denigrated as ‘the wrong way to build’ are now becoming eligible for preservation.

In the near future, the preservation field will have to reevaluate its priorities. The buildings commonly associated with sprawl make up more than fifty-five percent of nonresidential building stock in the United States.<sup>196</sup> This number will only grow as suburban boundaries continue to expand. As these buildings become age-eligible for listing on the National Register, the strategies traditionally employed by preservationists will no longer be applicable.

By demonizing the postwar commercial landscape and reducing it to a symbolic image, the National Trust risks losing support for future preservation efforts. Richard Moe, Donovan

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<sup>194</sup> Rypkema, “Saving the Recent Past.”

<sup>195</sup> Moe, “Growing Wiser: Finding Alternatives to Sprawl.”

<sup>196</sup> Elefante, 44.



Rypkema, and others need to be aware of the consequences such positions can have on future preservation efforts. To characterize sprawl as at odds with preservation is to deny the significant impact the strip mall and other such buildings have had on the formation of the American landscape, not to mention their role as a barometer for public sentiment.

Preservationists cannot afford to lose focus on the true purpose of preserving the past. A time will come when it will be necessary to decide if preservation is based in urban planning, sustainability, or history.

Few people would try to argue that sprawl is a favorable phenomenon. The factors driving the rapid growth of the suburbs may have been an indication of economic prosperity for much of the United States, but the effect of strip mall development on the functioning of cities has been less than positive. The strip mall may be perceived as ugly or monotonous, but in the end it is an essential part of American history and American identity. As Richard Longstreth wrote, “All those derisive comments about sprawl, about tacky-tacky, about inhumane boxes extending to the horizon refer to an absolutely remarkable phenomenon that affected millions of people and may never be duplicated.”<sup>197</sup> If preservation decisions continue to be based on factors other than history, there is a real danger that the strip mall and other buildings of the commercial highway will be lost forever.

Once, the buildings of historic downtowns were considered outdated, decrepit, and beyond redemption. The inner suburb today bares a striking resemblance to the urban centers of the 1960s and ‘70s. Once hailed as the new downtowns, its strip malls and shopping centers have faced a similar decline. When Richard Moe compares the challenges posed by sprawl to

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<sup>197</sup> Longstreth, “I Can't See It; I Don't Understand It; And It Doesn't Look Old to Me,” 4.

the challenges of urban renewal, he refers to the destructive nature each has possessed.<sup>198</sup> Moe's words have the potential to inspire a rebuilding of suburbia in the image of Main Street. But just as the buildings of inner cities were a functioning part of the urban system, the strip mall is a viable component of the suburban landscape. History has shown that such places are worth saving.

### **Gentrification:**

“Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them. By old buildings I mean not museum-piece old buildings, not old buildings in an excellent and expensive state of rehabilitation – although these make fine ingredients – but also a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value old buildings, including some rundown old buildings.”<sup>199</sup>

Jane Jacobs was referring to the downtown buildings of America's cities. But at that time, a new downtown was taking shape along the commercial highways leading out of the city center. The strip mall was posited as a modernized replacement: a safe, clean, sterile environment that harbored none of the ills of the city.<sup>200</sup> It was part of the same urban philosophy that resulted in the massive slum clearance projects that inspired Jacobs' words. Today, Jacobs could be describing the buildings of the commercial highway, as aging strip malls of the new downtown have become the most recent incubators of vitality and diversity. Many postwar strip malls today read much like the inner-city areas cleared as slums in the 1960s.

Tulagi Place in Lexington Park, Maryland, was in the 1940s and '50s a bustling neighborhood shopping center bordered by small duplexes. As the surrounding area grew and new retail options became available, the strip mall slowly fell out of favor and slumped into

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<sup>198</sup> Moe, "Growing Wiser: Finding Alternatives to Sprawl."

<sup>199</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1993), 244.

<sup>200</sup> Hart, 220.

decline. By the mid-1990s, there were only eight remaining tenants: a barbershop, two churches, a soup kitchen, a laundry, a thrift store, a café, and the original supermarket. The center was characterized by open storefronts, dark corridors, and fire-gutted buildings. Local officials, referring to the center as a “fire-ridden, rodent infested slum,” made plans to raze the entire complex and replace it with a new “town center” development of retail and office space.<sup>201</sup>

Such actions are no different from the urban renewal projects that destroyed large swaths of the historic fabric of American cities. Like those earlier inner-city areas, the strip mall has been condemned for both its appearance and the population it serves. But also like those old, ugly, ordinary buildings of the inner city, the aging strip mall provides opportunity where none might otherwise exist. The cheap rents along deteriorating commercial strips offer numerous upstart businesses a chance to achieve success. Similarly, strip malls have come to house ethnic enclaves analogous to the international districts of many large cities.<sup>202</sup>

As the strip mall garners more attention from preservationists, places that provide opportunity for marginalized members of society may be in danger of disappearing. Gentrification has been a problem facing preservation for decades. By calling attention to the importance of places that have been neglected by the rest of society, preservationists have both willingly and unwittingly stimulated revitalization efforts that have resulted in the exodus of many long-time residents.

Preservation is often blamed for the displacement of lower-income residents and marginal businesses, but gentrification occurs whether preservation is involved or not.

Whenever an area is redeveloped, population shifts follow. Delwood Plaza has been called the first modern strip mall in Austin, Texas. Built in the years following World War II, by the 1980s

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<sup>201</sup> Davis, 108.

<sup>202</sup> Davis, 96-97.

the center was largely run-down and housed a series of low-rent establishments. Located on prime land next to a major highway, it was soon purchased and subsequently razed for the construction of a newer and much larger shopping center. The original form of the center was lost, but its metal and neon sign was recreated in more acceptable red brick. The existing tenants were evicted, and a unique part of Austin's history had disappeared, but few people seemed to notice.<sup>203</sup>

Good or bad, gentrification is a natural cycle of urban development. Decline and regeneration are an important part of every city. But that does not mean that steps cannot be taken to mitigate the impact of change on existing residents. Just as they have for declining downtowns, preservationists will have to find ways to join the old and new of the strip mall into positives that benefit the entire community. Though the strip mall embodies some of the same negative aspects of the 1960s inner city, it also embodies many of the same opportunities. As cities have grown and developed, the processes of gentrification have been spurred by new advancements in building technology and new ideas about the way cities should be built. As change comes to the strip mall, it is uniquely adapted to incorporate and encourage new uses, forms, and patterns. The decorated shed is ready-made for reuse and reinvention. Its open plan provides functional versatility, its flexibility little different from that of a nineteenth-century cast-iron storefront.<sup>204</sup>

Donovan Rypkema has described the last fifty years of urban development as an "aberration" from the whole of urban history.<sup>205</sup> The strip mall and the commercial highway represent a unique form of development that presents new challenges to traditional modes of

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<sup>203</sup> Davis, 106.

<sup>204</sup> Davis, 98.

<sup>205</sup> Rypkema, "Saving the Recent Past."

preservation. But it also represents new possibilities. When Jane Jacobs described the effects of time on a city's buildings, she recognized the positives where others saw none: "One century's building commonplace is another's useful aberration."<sup>206</sup> The "aberration" of the strip mall can be a valuable component of the city. Saving it will require looking beyond traditional preservation methods to find more creative solutions.

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<sup>206</sup> Jacobs, 247.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **THE STRIP MALL PRESERVED**

Like all buildings of the past, not every strip mall is worthy of preservation. There will be examples that have undergone too much change, others that are too recently constructed, while many may simply lack historic significance. But among these there will be strip malls that have had a profound impact on a community, a state, or even the nation. They are places that are worth keeping. The strip mall is too important a typology to be allowed to disappear from history. But saving those that are eligible for listing on the National Register will require creativity on the part of preservation advocates.

Preserving the strip mall will not be an easy task. It is a controversial subject for preservation precisely because it should be. There is much wrong with the landscape of the commercial highway; environmentally, aesthetically, and organizationally. The strip mall does not come with the same advantages as traditional historic buildings. Experimental materials are quick to deteriorate. Building life is shorter. Energy costs are higher. There is little public support. Its buildings are unlike any that preservationists have attempted to protect. The strip mall cannot be preserved in the same manner as prewar environments.

The bonds that preservation has formed with urban planning and sustainability are not going to disappear. They are becoming an integral part of building conservation practice. But as the concept of preservation is broadened, it is essential that its purpose is not lost. Evolution is necessary in order to remain relevant, but the profession cannot afford to cast aside history in the name of aesthetics or an artificial concept of ‘good’ design. The influence of other disciplines cannot be allowed to turn historic preservation into little more than a community planning tool.

To do so would sacrifice fifty years of American building history, a history that reveals a great deal about American life.

Although it may not embody the same qualities of construction and enduring design, the strip mall does have advantages over traditional historic buildings. As a recent past resource, the strip has the benefit of past discoveries and mistakes in the preservation field. New methods of preservation are available that were unheard of in 1966. Lessons have been learned regarding the appropriate treatment of historic structures both physically and culturally. Stimulating strip mall preservation may simply be a matter of integrating the lessons of time with new ideas and initiatives. Increasing public awareness, conducting surveys and inventories, completing National Register nominations, addressing sustainability, incorporating urban planning, and using the Main Street Center as a model for strip mall revitalization are all based in past successes. Once these practices are put in place, the strip mall and other recent past resources have an excellent chance of achieving recognition as important historical resources.

**Public Awareness Initiatives:**

As a typology, the strip mall has become synonymous with sprawl, traffic jams, and unappealing streetscapes. Before the public will accept it as a historic resource, their perception of the strip mall must change. Preservationists and the National Trust must stop portraying the landscape of sprawl as antithetical to historic preservation. An attack on a particular typology is counterproductive considering that all components of the built environment will eventually be eligible for the National Register. In doing so, preservationists risk sounding hypocritical as the focus of preservation efforts in the future begins to shift.

Advocacy efforts should reconnect style and aesthetics to history and memory. It is only through history that architectural style can be fully understood. Appearance still plays too large a role in the preservation of the built environment. Rather than playing to public sentiment, preservationists should explain the reasons behind the appearance of the strip mall and other buildings of the recent past. By making the discussion about history and not appearance, preservationists can avoid endangering other forms of architecture in the future. Once preconceptions of image and aesthetic are set aside, the path is made clear for preservation.

Furthermore, preservationists must redirect the public's understanding of the reasons behind preservation. In recent years, cultural value has become a significant factor in decisions about what resources should be preserved and in what manner. This same approach needs to be expressed to and accepted by the public. The idea that preservation exists to save beautiful old buildings paints an incomplete picture. Preservation must be recognized as a tool for documenting history. Preserved buildings provide a tangible record of the American past and offer a powerful connection to history. It does not matter that a building is awe-inspiring or beautiful, only that it was important to those who came before. John Ruskin wrote of old buildings, "men will say as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, 'See! this our fathers did for us.'"<sup>207</sup> Someday, such words might refer not to the construction of a building, but to its preservation.

To encourage a better understanding of the purpose of preservation while reinforcing the importance of all aspects of history, anti-sprawl initiatives need to be redirected to focus on the reuse of existing spaces. Such a stance demonstrates the desirability of preservation over replacement or new development elsewhere. It suggests new possibilities rather than lost

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<sup>207</sup> John Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 177.



opportunity, and automatically encompasses new buildings once they are constructed.

Promoting reuse of all building types emphasizes the distinctions between preservation and urban planning initiatives such as New Urbanism that favor older building patterns over those of the recent past. Advocating reuse ensures no particular building typology gains a reputation as ‘unworthy’ of preservation. Furthermore, because reuse does not require that a building be historic, it provides an increased chance of saving those that will be eligible for listing on the National Register. By becoming pro-reuse instead of anti-sprawl, preservationists can encourage a broader representation of America’s past.

### **Survey and Inventory:**

The first step towards physical preservation of the strip mall is the proper documentation of all existing resources along the commercial highway. Surveys should take special note of not only buildings, but also the spaces in between: parking lots, roadways, and otherwise negative space. Signage should be thoroughly documented as well as any obvious alterations or additions. During the inventory process, it is important to note the population served as well as the mix of tenants and the services they provide to the community. This information can be useful in undertaking appropriate treatments later on. At the same time, the public must be apprised of the survey and the reasoning behind it, increasing awareness before actual preservation initiatives are carried out.

When conducting a survey of the strip mall, there are several characteristics that make it immediately recognizable. It is a single-story structure with a horizontal emphasis, and it is set back from the road far enough to allow for multiple parking aisles in front of the building. There is typically a covered sidewalk along the façade connecting the different storefronts, and

customer and service areas are separated. Generally, its style will be simplified but bold, with a design that highlights tenant signage rather than the building itself. Many early strip malls can be identified by a simple modern design with modern materials and color used in place of architectural ornament.

Such early strip malls are not always easy to recognize. For example, the presence of a mansard roof often indicates an older strip mall that was remodeled to conform to new stylistic trends. Though not apparent, original material may still be present beneath the updated façade. When a building typology is defined in part by change and impermanence, traditional methods of identification can be ineffectual. Strip malls undergo frequent physical alteration, including changes to style, materials, tenant signage, and new additions. They have been designed to accept and incorporate change, making alterations more difficult to distinguish. As such, appearance alone is not a reliable indicator of age.

Location often reveals as much about a strip mall as its appearance. Much like the layers of an archaeological site, the oldest layers of a city can be found closest to its center. Although the first strip malls were constructed on the edges of cities, sustained growth has continued to push the boundaries of the city outward. As a general rule, older strip malls will be found closer to the city center, located along approach roads historically used to access downtown.

Sometimes, surrounding buildings can provide clues about the true age of a strip mall. Historically, residential areas were frequently adjacent to retail spaces, and older strip malls are often closely connected to nearby apartment housing and neighborhoods. The form and style of nearby housing is another indicator of the age of a strip mall. Such an approach is especially useful when older strip malls have undergone recent stylistic updates. A survey methodology

based on both location and appearance can be an effective tool for developing an accurate inventory of the strip mall.

### **National Register Nominations:**

When strip malls are found to be of significance to a community, official recognition is an important first course of action. The creation of a National Register nomination for an individual strip mall can call attention to similar historic resources and their unique value. Listing on the National Register of Historic Places provides important incentives to preservation and retention of historic features. In an environment based on commerce and profits, preservation can be a hard sell when a historic resource rests on valuable property. Rehabilitation investment tax credits are a useful tool in convincing property owners to rehabilitate what may be considered outdated and obsolete strip malls. As income-producing properties, owners of rehabilitated strip malls can claim a twenty percent tax credit on the costs of rehabilitation. Claiming the credit also requires that seventy-five percent of the existing wall surface must be retained, providing some protection where mere National Register listing does not.<sup>208</sup>

Listing on the National Register can also be a precursor to local historic designation. Unlike the National Register, local designation typically includes restrictions or review processes for historic resources. It is by far the most effective tool for protecting the strip mall, especially when combined with additional local incentives. Depending on policy, it may be possible to implement local protection even when a resource does not qualify for the National Register,

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<sup>208</sup> Tyler, 195-97.

whether due to its age, integrity, or simply its significance. Thus, a strip mall that is especially important to the people of a local community may still be protected in some manner.

Like traditional downtowns, the most effective means of strip mall preservation may be the creation of a historic district. Because the typical strip mall is often not uniquely distinct in comparison to others along the highway, the establishment of a district may offer a more feasible and thus more preferable course of action than individual nominations. The buildings of the commercial highway are all linked by physical form and general appearance. They are a product of the same historical events and together provide a more complete understanding of an important period of American history.

According to the National Register of Historic Places, “a district can comprise both features that lack individual distinction and individually distinctive features that serve as focal points. It may even be considered eligible if all the components lack individual distinction, provided that the grouping achieves significance as a whole within its historic context.”<sup>209</sup> The strip mall and its surroundings may not be distinctive individually, but as a whole, they have a profound effect on the landscape and the communities in which they exist. Furthermore, contributing resources located within a historic district are eligible for the same tax credits as those listed individually.

### **Addressing Sustainability:**

The environmental movement has always been an important part of preservation advocacy, and as the field evolves, sustainability will continue to play a major role. The strip mall presents a unique challenge to the idea of sustainability in historic buildings. Future

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<sup>209</sup> “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation,” 5.

advocacy efforts will need to redefine the role that environmental design plays in the preservation of the past. But sustainable historic preservation is a reciprocal condition. As preservationists demonstrate the need for green standards to adapt to historic buildings, they must also consider the possibilities for a greener form of preservation.

As part of a shift to an emphasis on reuse, embodied energy should become an even more important part of the preservationist vocabulary. Regardless of energy use, all buildings consist of embodied energy, from the energy expended in the harvesting and production of raw materials to the energy used during the construction process.<sup>210</sup> Much the same as a policy of reuse, embodied energy advocacy applies to all existing buildings, not just those that feature energy-saving designs. By concentrating on the importance of retaining embodied energy, the focus of strip mall sustainability will be on the energy saved through preservation rather than the energy historically required for such buildings to function.

Preservationists must also take note of the rising popularity of the LEED rating system and its widespread use. LEED requirements can sometimes pose a threat to significant features of historic buildings. Fortunately, the National Trust has already taken steps to ensure that preservation principles play a larger role in the LEED system. In addition to changes in the 2009 edition to place more weight on embodied energy and life-cycle assessment, the Trust is working to incorporate elements such as the importance of cultural and social preservation into future editions of LEED assessment.<sup>211</sup> These efforts are essential to creating greater awareness about the possibilities for even the strip mall to become an important component of a sustainable design program.

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<sup>210</sup> David G. Battle, "Sustainable Conservation in Historic Preservation," CRM 15.6(1992)

<sup>211</sup> Moe, "Historic Preservation & Green Building: Finding Common Ground."

There has been a great degree of energy expended on the ways that environmental standards and practices can be adapted to better accommodate historic preservation. But rarely have preservationists been willing to do more to promote sustainability within the field itself. A focus on the financial cost of preserving historic resources often overshadows the potential cost to the environment. Preserving the strip mall in its current state would be environmentally irresponsible. It may require more substantial alteration than traditional historic buildings to become sustainable. Preservationists must be prepared to relax strict standards while incorporating change on a scale that does not compromise character-defining and historically significant elements. At the same time, the strip mall presents an opportunity to demonstrate both the problems associated with energy-consumptive design and the potential for buildings of the recent past to become a viable part of a sustainable future.

Historic interpretation is an important method of conveying the past to the public. Interpretation will have the greatest impact on the public's understanding of the strip mall as a historic resource. It can serve as a physical reminder of what sprawl used to be and what it might become. The strip mall can provide the opportunity to showcase the importance of embodied energy and the potential for former high-energy-use buildings to be adapted to more sustainable purposes. Eventually, all historic buildings could become outlets for sustainable practices, exposing visitors to the possibilities for incorporating green design into their own lives.

### **Incorporating Urban Planning:**

As architects and urban planners have discovered the positive benefits of historic building patterns, they have increasingly adopted the practices advocated by historic preservationists. Rather than incorporating it as part of planning practice, the preservation aspect has been lost,

and the idea of the traditional neighborhood has become little more than the next urban planning trend. Some preservationists have been content to allow the emulation of historic designs to continue, as it has brought greater exposure and respect to the preservation field. But as the postwar built environment becomes eligible for preservation, the practices that once supported preservation efforts now threaten to undermine them. Urban planning must adopt history as more than an inspiration for new design paradigms. Preservation principles must be asserted such that building reuse, regardless of form or pattern, is made an integral phase of the planning process. It is possible to accomplish contemporary planning goals without resorting to new construction or historicizing design, while at the same time preserving the built environment.

One opportunity to make preservation a more integral part of urban planning is through the implementation of character areas. Unlike traditional zoning, character overlays provide opportunity for neighborhood evolution while encouraging the retention of existing building stock. Areas that have been identified as significant to a local community but not eligible for preservation can continue to contribute while incorporating additional uses. Widespread demolition and subsequent new construction is generally avoided, and the traditional character of the area is not lost.

Mitigation of sprawl has become a top priority for the planning profession. One of the most effective ways to reduce the negative effects of sprawl is to reduce the need for driving. The strip mall has traditionally been reliant upon the automobile to bring people from neighboring residential areas. Incorporating housing and office space into the strip mall and onto the commercial highway can lead to a reduction in cars on the road and more people traveling by foot. Enabling mixed uses decreases the amount of empty commercial space, while the increase in density makes other empty spaces more attractive to business owners. An adaptive reuse

ordinance in Los Angeles has been highly effective at creating new housing while retaining existing building stock. A residential use typically has different zoning requirements than a commercial one. Through the reuse ordinance, zoning requirements are relaxed, and fire and life safety measures are made more flexible. Further flexibility is provided regarding building, electrical, fire, and mechanical codes, as well as ADA compliance. Thus far, the adaptive reuse ordinance has saved an estimated sixty buildings from demolition. Originally targeting downtown Los Angeles, the program has been widely expanded; its principles are readily applicable to strip development where retail is the primary use.<sup>212</sup>

Whether independently or as part of a character area, adaptive reuse has contributed to the arrival of diverse new uses that result in a richer urban environment. Often, there is an increased sense of community and greater social interaction between area residents. The very things that New Urbanism has tried to achieve through new construction and historic building patterns are attainable through small-scale change and intervention among the existing buildings of the strip. As part of the Denton Public Library rehabilitation, seventy-five parking spaces were replaced by a xeriscaped green zone that makes the area much more pedestrian friendly. Other green spaces and walkways provide new connections between the library, an adjacent park, and the surrounding neighborhood. A café and community rooms can be used after hours by area residents. The inclusion of such amenities brings to mind early shopping centers designed as public destinations with close physical ties to the community. Other reuse projects also cite sustainable design improvements such as additional green space, new sidewalks, and considerable reductions in impervious surface area.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> "Model Policy: Los Angeles Adaptive Reuse Ordinance," [PreservationNation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org/take-action/advocacy-center/policies/map-model-la-ordinance.html), (11 Nov 2008, National Trust for Historic Preservation) <<http://www.preservationnation.org/take-action/advocacy-center/policies/map-model-la-ordinance.html>>, Accessed 09 Dec 2008.

<sup>213</sup> Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 69.



The possibilities for neighborhood regeneration are not limited to the imitation of historic patterns and building forms. Preservation can once again pave the way for the emergence of a new type of urban planning, one that places an emphasis on history as much as appearance. Each building that is reused is a physical record of the past and an opportunity to exhibit the history of America through the built environment.

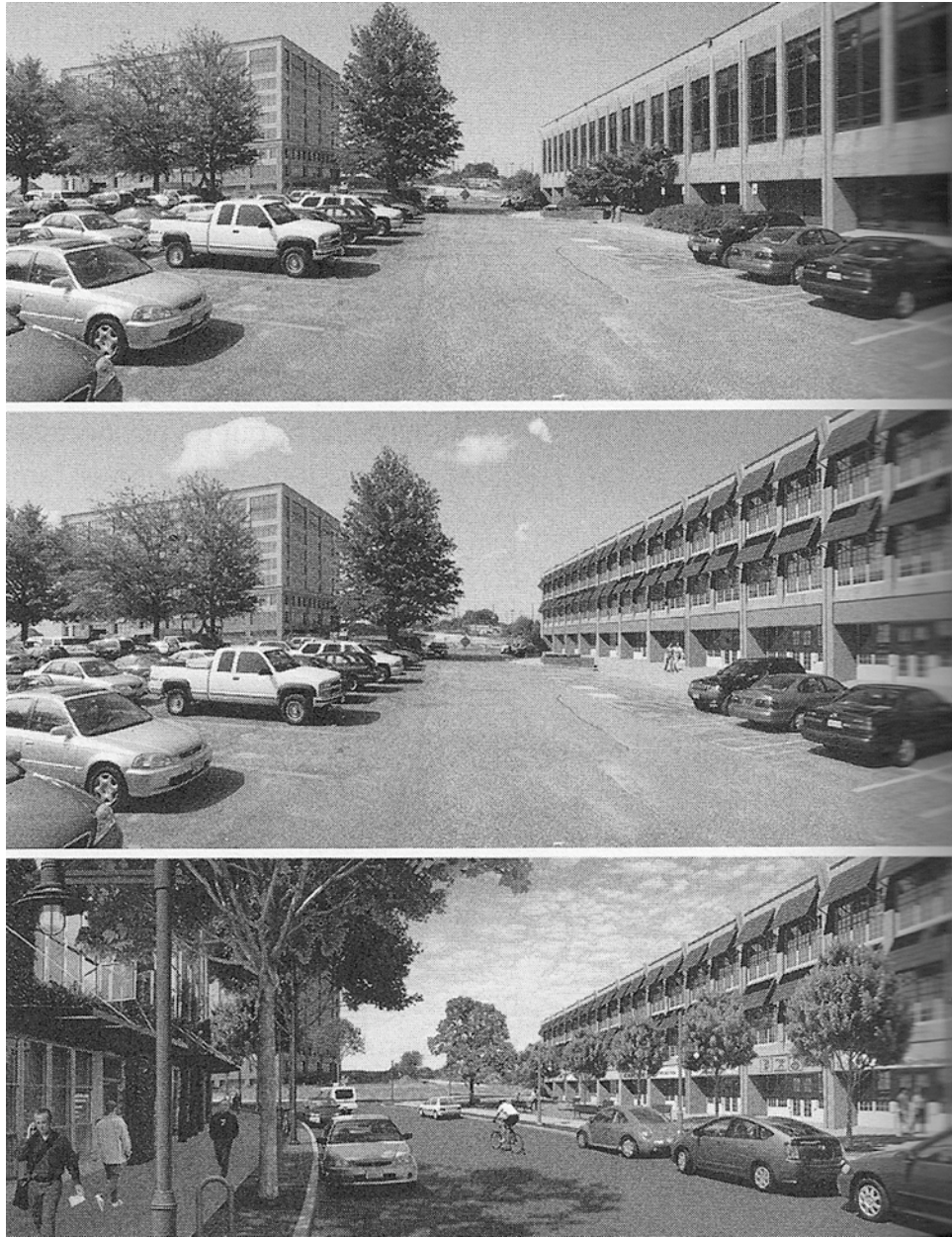
### **Retrofits:**

Rather than trying to reuse every existing building or tearing them down and starting again, there are examples for implementing change that incorporate and respect the existing environment while remaking it into something entirely new. Commonly referred to as ‘retrofitting,’ such a strategy can enable the retention of significant building features while helping to change the landscape of sprawl. Retrofitting an existing suburban location typically involves a combination of New Urbanism and adaptive reuse.

In Rockville, Maryland, the firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ) has developed plans to convert a suburban office park into a mixed-use live-work community called Upper Rock. DPZ’s plans call for the conversion of a single office building to residential lofts with commercial space below (figure 47). Two of the existing buildings have been torn down to be replaced by an eight-story LEED-certified building. Additional infill buildings along a new street pattern fill the space previously occupied by the parking lot. Other features include a solar collector and wind harvester, green roof systems, public courtyards, and mid-priced apartments for seniors.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 214-16.



**Figure 47:** Proposed Upper Rock retrofit. Rockville, Maryland.

With the loss of the parking area and the majority of the original buildings, the Upper Rock plan ultimately fails as a preservation model. However, retrofitting holds promise for strip malls. Increased focus on the conservation and reuse of existing buildings could lead to new possibilities for preservation. New buildings can be added in a way that does not destroy the

original character of the site, yet begins a process of reinvention. Instead of adding more buildings, building heights can be extended to achieve densities similar to those of Main Street without sacrificing the perception of space from the road. Sustainable systems such as green roofs can easily be integrated into existing strip malls without affecting significant features. The parking lot offers space for a myriad of uses other than storing cars. Rather than individual courtyards as at Upper Rock, the entire space of the parking lot could become a grassy park or gathering area. It could become recreation space with basketball courts and swimming pools, or outdoor patio areas for restaurants. As long as the space itself is preserved, there are no limits for its potential use.

### **The New Main Street:**

“Of all the lessons we have learned in the Main Street Center’s first fifteen years, none is more compelling than the urgent need to shift the American community-development paradigm from one of unquestioned growth to one of sustainability and conservation. Our local governments are crumbling under the crippling financial burden of supporting superfluous commercial development, while existing buildings – our historic downtowns – sit vacant and deteriorating.”<sup>215</sup>

America’s downtowns have come a long way since the National Trust launched a Main Street pilot program in 1977 involving three different communities. The revival of Main Street is one of preservation’s greatest success stories. But substitute “strip malls of the inner suburbs” for “historic downtowns,” and the above quote describes the condition of many of America’s 1950s and ‘60s strip malls. Once hailed as the new downtown, the strip mall has fallen victim to the same processes of urban decay that previously afflicted downtowns across the country. The strip mall is ripe for a renewal program similar to that of Main Street. As a commercial property, the strip mall faces many of the same issues as Main Street, and the same methods may be useful

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<sup>215</sup> Moe and Wilkie, 148.

in resolving them. The National Trust's Main Street Program provides a template for the revival of the strip mall and the commercial highway.

The Main Street Program follows a Four-Point Approach encompassing Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Restructuring. The Four-Point Approach works by coordinating the efforts of all interested parties to remake the image of downtown through promotion efforts and physical improvements, targeting specific consumer groups, and attaining financial support from multiple local banks through revolving funds or other programs that minimize lending risk. The Main Street Program focuses on incremental change and self-improvement. It utilizes a strategy of simultaneous initiatives to emphasize existing assets and change public perception within the local community.<sup>216</sup>

The local, often marginal, businesses of a typical declining strip mall are exactly the type of merchants the Main Street Program was created to support. Cooperation is essential for businesses without the benefits that come with association with a national chain, whether for advertising purposes or for financing improvements. The deteriorating landscape of the strip mall is the next logical location for an initiative of the Main Street Program's magnitude.

One important addition to a strip mall revitalization program is the consideration of the process of gentrification. An interesting aspect of the Duany Plater-Zyberk firm's work at both Mashpee Commons and Upper Rock was the inclusion of market buildings housing inexpensive "incubator" local retail.<sup>217</sup> The strip mall has become home to many marginal and shoestring businesses, and gentrification threatens their continued viability. Guaranteeing space for the development of such businesses provides a valuable service to the community and prevents upheaval of the surrounding neighborhood. Just like low-income housing credits, tax benefits

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<sup>216</sup> Tyler, 175-176.

<sup>217</sup> Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 214-16.

should be made available for owners that provide opportunities for local businesses within a historic commercial structure.

Adapting the Main Street Program to the strip mall is not without its challenges. The strip mall exists at a much larger scale, and buildings can be too far apart to create a cohesive and cost-effective revitalization district. Ownership and leasing structures are often different from those downtown and vary widely among different strip malls. But the basic players and principles remain the same. The only real difference lies in appearance and the opinions regarding the buildings themselves.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS

“A building does not have to be an important work of architecture to become a first-rate landmark. Landmarks are not created by architects. They are fashioned by those who encounter them after they are built. The essential feature of a landmark is not its design, but the place it holds in a city’s memory. Compared to the place it occupies in social history, a landmark’s artistic qualities are incidental.”<sup>218</sup>

It is unlikely that the strip mall will be preserved in its current state. Too many environmental and urban design issues stand in the way. For the majority of strip malls, preservation will require sensitive modifications to the building and the site. The most significant character of the strip mall is the different relationships between form and space. The connections between building, parking lot, signs, and road set the landscape of the commercial highway apart. To preserve those relationships responsibly will necessitate a combination of multiple strategies.

Simple adaptive reuse and renovation are well suited to preserving the character of the strip mall. But these approaches offer little opportunity for growth or increases in overall density. If one of the problems of the strip mall is its sprawling nature, then its future preservation depends on the ability to incorporate new infill development and adapt to change.

Preservation in the United States has come to embody much more than the restoration of historic homes and locations important to the founding of America. The strip mall offers the opportunity to demonstrate how far the field has come since its inception. It represents much of what preservationists have fought against, but it also represents new opportunities for preservation in the years ahead. The preservation movement can only remain relevant by

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<sup>218</sup> Herbert Muschamp. "The Secret History of 2 Columbus Circle," *The New York Times* (08 Jan 2006), <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/08/arts/design/08musc.html?scp=7&sq=muschamp&st=cse>>, Accessed 09 Dec 2008.

focusing on what it was created to protect: history. But doing so does not require abandoning relationships with sustainability and urban planning.

Preserving the strip mall will require a creative mix of adaptive reuse, retrofits, character areas, and design guidelines. Using all of these together can result in an entirely new landscape that respects the historic qualities of the original resources. Tarred roofs may turn green, parking lots may become grassy parks, and the road may give way to walking paths, bike lanes, and railways, but the space and form of the strip may still be experienced. Change can occur, but a sense of historic continuity can also be achieved.

Along with opportunities for change, there are opportunities for traditional preservation. It is essential that all preservation treatments focus on what makes the strip mall significant: not just its unique appearance, but also its role in history. Too often, buildings are rehabilitated with no indication and no explanation of their past. In these cases, preservation has only half succeeded. The most powerful effect that preservation can have is the sense of awe that comes with communion with a historic structure. An understanding of history is essential to such an experience. When history is ignored, preservation becomes little more than an aesthetic movement.

Interpretation of the strip mall may someday involve reenactments of shopping transactions and shelves stocked with items long ago out of production, but for the present time, it offers an opportunity to relate the history of the preservation movement itself. Preservation has changed significantly since the era of restoration of historic homes and locations important to the founding of America. The strip mall can offer an interpretation that describes the growing influence of the sustainability and urban planning fields and the role of preservation in each. Preserving the strip mall serves as physical evidence of the importance of and possibilities for

building reuse. Through a program that encourages understanding of the strip mall's past, the focus of preservation can return to history rather than appearance. This can lead to a deeper understanding of the processes of sprawl and the reasons for its development. It may even result in greater appreciation not only for the strip mall, but for all buildings that are maligned by public opinion.

As Donovan Rypkema has written, some buildings are worth preserving simply to portray the negative side of American history. It may seem that the strip mall falls into that category. It has played a part in the consumption of enormous amounts of open space, massive energy expenditures, and the rejection of human scale. But it also represents a period of prosperity and enthusiasm that improved the lives of millions of Americans. It was part of an environment that provided access to new goods and services and contributed to a way of life previously available only to a select few.

Rather than preserving the strip mall as an example of past mistakes or upholding it as a model for saving embattled cultural resources, the strip mall can be preserved for what it is: a strip mall. Ultimately, the positive or negative qualities of the strip mall matter little. Taste and opinion may become a part of a resource's history and interpretation, but they should not dictate preservation. Judgments regarding good and bad more accurately reflect the present than the past. The beauty of preservation lies in the ability of future generations to find their own meaning in the buildings they inherit. Preserving the strip mall ensures that others are given the opportunity to understand a unique and integral component of American history.



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