INTRODUCTION

The emergence of major business centers in multiple locations within metropolitan areas represents one of the most significant changes to the structure of settlement in the United States during the twentieth century. Large concentrations of offices, stores, and other businesses far removed from the traditional urban core, often in places that supported little development before, have profoundly affected both the shape of the land and the routine patterns of social interaction. "Suburb" in any traditional sense of the term carries little meaning in this context, for workplace no less than homeplace is likely to lie some distance from established locales of a generation ago. Moreover, movement from residence to places of employment and shopping is now seldom from outskirts toward the center but rather in multiple directions, crisscrossing the metropolitan area. Much commented on in recent years, the trend has generated reactions ranging from advocacy to derision.[1] *However the results are viewed, there can be no question that the modern metropolis is very different from that of even a half-century ago and that these changes will have a basic impact for decades to come.*

The creation of major retail centers on the urban periphery after World War II lay in the forefront of this business dispersal, pioneering locations as well as locational techniques subsequently used for other, more diverse forms of business development. Large new retail complexes were the first to challenge the hegemony of downtown functions, attracting a sizable share of the public away from the core on a regular basis.[2] *While* *retail decentralization took many forms, the key component was the regional shopping center, which was planned to operate as a unified business entity and provide an alternative to major established marketplaces, including downtown.[3] Without the orchestrated gathering of emporia found at a regional center, it is not clear that many outlying business districts would have gained the critical mass of stores necessary to compete with the quantity and range of outlets in the urban core.*

When the regional shopping center became a primary thrust of commercial development nationwide during the 1950s and 1960s, it seemed an invention of the postwar era that had little precedent. Prior to the war, downtown had been the major destination for all but routine shopping needs in the great majority of American cities. The new regional center, by contrast, lay near the periphery, well removed from established local business areas and often set apart even from new residential tracts. The regional center's siting was defined by acres of space for cars, the polar opposite of the highly restricted confines of the core. At the same time, most regional centers were inward-looking, with stores oriented to a sequestered pedestrian way, a mall, that invited a quiet, leisurely pace. The regional center was clean and neatly maintained; it was new, sporting a cool, nonreferential modernist vocabulary; it lacked vehicular congestion, jostling crowds, street noise, the "wrong" social elements, and crime—all departures from qualities associated with downtown. The regional center was a bastion of middle-class ingenuity, respectability, and order; it was touted as a cure for the purportedly ailing condition and antiquated arrangement of the core.

But neither the regional center nor the tendencies that propelled it into the limelight manifested themselves in the span of just a few years. Shifts in residential development, consumer, and merchandising patterns, and corresponding trends in planning retail enclaves and in creating major destinations far afield from the city center, had begun decades earlier. The origins of the regional shopping center and, with it, of modern metropolitan structure lie not with sudden radical change in a few conspicuous arenas, but rather with numerous changes, some abrupt, many others gradual, that over time established significant new directions. This book examines that process, focusing on three decades of formative development, from 1920 to 1950. Only through scrutiny of these origins can the major shifts of the postwar period be understood.

In analyzing the emergence of the regional center, I have avoided a study of architectural typology in the usual sense, in part because these complexes are defined less by a fixed set of physical attributes than by ones of ownership, management, tenancy, and merchandising. Even more importantly, the broader context of urban retail development is essential to understanding how and why the regional center became such a significant phenomenon during the second half of the twentieth century. The climax and decline of downtown as the dominant shopping district and the rise of myriad subordinate forms in outlying areas figure significantly in this equation, as does the nature of residential growth and consumer mobility.

The emergence of the regional center examined as an integral part of urban growth and change reveals no neat, linear sequence of events. Numerous parties were involved—retailers, real estate developers, architects, and planners among them—for a variety of reasons, some of them conflicting. Locating outside the city center was often seen as a highly risky venture, and was propelled as much by reaction to competing interests as it was by the aim of taking new directions. Views about how a new shopping district should be developed and what its basic character should be differed to a considerable extent. Innovation could be deferred, even subsumed, by a persistent conservatism. Features that might appear vestigial could continue with remarkable tenacity. At the same time, a combination of features that might seem inevitable in retrospect occurred only through unanticipated intermediaries. The emergence of the regional center in a sense describes the process of city building itself.

The complexity of the subject resists a broad study, covering cities in the United States generally. Furthermore, during the formative decades prior to the 1950s, the nature and timing of events differed significantly from one major city to another. Profiles of Chicago, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia are marked as much by singularity as by commonality. To provide the level of detail that does the subject justice and to afford a perspective with more than local implications, I have focused on Los Angeles as a case study.

The choice was not difficult. Los Angeles is unusually fertile ground for inquiry on several counts. No other city came close to doing so much so early and so often to spur the transformation from the downtown core to the regional center. In 1900, Los Angeles's retail structure remained highly centralized. Beginning some two decades later, the upstart metropolis far exceeded others in the range of innovative approaches to outlying retail development, the scale at which many of these trends matured at an early date, and the cumulative effect of these changes on the urban landscape. At the same time, Los Angeles gave ample evidence of resistance to change, such as partiality to traditional streetfront orientation of buildings and disdain of conspicuous parking lots, that shaped practices into the mid-twentieth century. Such attitudes help explain why southern California was not to be the foremost proving ground for the mall as the organizing component of the regional center, even though in preceding developments it often set the pace nationally.

Los Angeles begs attention for another reason. By 1930, this metropolis not only ranked among the largest in the United States but also began to be recognized as a harbinger of the modern American city. In recent years, a growing corpus of scholars has examined Los Angeles's role as a prototype for the American metropolis of the late twentieth century.[4] No better demonstration of this role exists than in the retail sphere, where between the 1920s and 1950s Los Angeles functioned much as Chicago or New York had for the development of the tall commercial building. Correlating the study of place with that of retail development is important if the circumstances under which Los Angeles served as an incubator for new *ideas in the field are to be understood. Furthermore, most historical studies of how the automobile has affected the landscape imply, at least, that the process was un- or even anti-urban, ultimately leading to decline and decay in the city. Such characterizations, however, ignore the inherently urban circumstances affecting change in the commercial sphere. Los Angeles reveals that the automobile was not an isolated cause but one of several factors that contributed to a recasting of metropolitan form rather than to its destruction.*

The extent to which the region functioned as a crucible for innovative approaches to retail development becomes clear only when placed in national perspective. Key innovations and general trends elsewhere in the United States thus form an essential part of my framework, particularly in chapters devoted to the shopping center. I have devoted space to seminal shopping center developments in the Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, Seattle, and Washington areas, among others, because they help clarify how southern California often was, and sometimes was not, on the front line of new conceptual approaches.

The appeal of Los Angeles as a case study is matched by the challenge. The city is among the least researched of major American centers, a situation that is only somewhat less glaring today than it was in 1900 or 1950. No less a challenge is the fact that mythmaking has been endemic to Los Angeles for over a century. Boosters and detractors alike have spun such a rich tapestry of lore that the imagination often has overwhelmed reality in depicting the city's past and in molding its sense of identity.[5] *The city has few solid histories. Journalistic critiques, some of which are as sophisticated as they are engaging, frequently are taken as substitutes, even though they may rely heavily on vignettes and assumptions. An underlying thesis of many such accounts is that Los Angeles is not a real city, that its urbanism is "counterfeit," as Mike Davis has recently reminded us.*[6] *Even admiring chroniclers tend to portray the city as being so different as to be an anomaly. Intellectuals along with purveyors of popular descriptions, novels, and films have long typecast Los Angeles as a curious, eccentric place.*

I have tried to focus on historical realities instead. I do not speculate as to whether the forces that shaped Los Angeles during the first half of the twentieth century were inherently detrimental or otherwise. Likewise, I avoid qualitative debate over the basic attributes of the shopping center, which also has received scant historical study while attracting much commentary and criticism outside the business arena.[7] *My concern lies with taking both city and shopping center as serious subjects of inquiry, so that value judgments may be founded on understanding rather than on presumption and prejudice.*[8] *Just as Los Angeles is one of the major population, business, and cultural centers of the nation, so retail development is a key indicator of urban form and identity. No other single component of the city attracts so many people so frequently and for so many reasons. No other more frankly reveals current attitudes toward public assembly and decorum. No other so clearly reflects change in both market conditions and* *consumer taste. No other embodies more fully the unyielding impact of motor vehicles on the landscape.*

I have concentrated on the physical dimension and the economic factors that directly influenced retail development as a foundation for broader inquiry. Too often, sweeping cultural generalizations are offered without a solid grasp of the actual places that both shape and are shaped by human values. Most of the printed sources on which I have relied possess some kind of business orientation—to architecture, to urban planning and development, to real estate practice, and to retailing. Yet I have attempted to maintain sufficient balance to delineate an accurate historical picture. Fieldwork made an essential contribution to this perspective. During the course of this study, I drove some 5,000 miles within the Los Angeles basin to examine both buildings and the urban fabric that helps give them meaning.

The subject does not lend itself to a strict architectural, urban, or business history in the traditional sense of those terms. Instead, I have sought to integrate these spheres. Social and cultural factors are introduced when possible, though I have exercised caution in this realm, owing to the difficulties of accurately portraying complex and often elusive issues. An account that transcends assumptions and that documents in detail how retail development relates to people's lives, habits, values, and attitudes toward community will require at least as much research as I have undertaken in laying some groundwork here.

To do justice to the complexity of the subject and at the same time achieve an acceptable level of coherence, I have organized the text more or less chronologically, modifying the structure somewhat to give adequate emphasis to type and to district.

Chapter 1 affords an overview of Los Angeles's rise as a major metropolis during the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 analyzes the importance of downtown Los Angeles, in both functional and symbolic terms. After delineating how the city's major department stores helped define the modern city center, the chapter focuses on the building boom of the 1920s, which at once strengthened downtown's importance and led to the growth of outlying centers.

Chapter 3 examines the initial stage of decentralization prior to and just after World War I, when development was small in scale and localized in orientation, supplementing rather than competing with downtown. Chapter 4 addresses what was then often viewed as the next logical step, chronicling the rise of Hollywood during the 1920s as the region's first major outlying business center, one that sought to replicate downtown in its basic form while surpassing it in retail function. Chapter 5 is devoted to the growth of new commercial districts along Wilshire Boulevard during the late 1920s and 1930s, which introduced the idea of building in the center of residential areas while selecting sites easily accessible to the motorist. By this means, the Wilshire precincts challenged Hollywood's bid for supremacy and to a significant degree succeeded within a remarkably short span of time.

Chapter 6 introduces the shopping center as an integrated business development, a place where control was a paramount concern and which eschewed metropolitan allusions. After tracing the type's origins as a component of comprehensively planned elite residential enclaves, the chapter examines how, beginning in the late 1920s, the shopping center became a more independent and consequential factor in urban growth as a compelling alternative to the Hollywood and Wilshire models.

The problem of accommodating large numbers of automobiles in retail districts is discussed in most of the previous chapters but is the focus of the next. On the eve of World War II, Beverly Hills illustrated how the best planned of campaigns to meet motorists' needs in a retail district failed due to the problems inherent in orchestrating change among a multitude of property owners. Concurrently, a more feasible course was charted at modest, locally oriented shopping centers, setting a key precedent for practices in the postwar era.

Chapter 8 discusses the decline of the city center during the 1930s and 1940s, attempts to bolster downtown, and circumstances that made reversing the downward trend so difficult. While competition from outlying districts contributed to the situation, significant problems were posed by the size, arrangement, and density of the core itself.

Chapter 9 turns to the postwar period, examining the factors that spawned a new wave of retail development in outlying areas, unprecedented in its extent, and why the regional shopping center lay at the forefront of this program. Experimental in nature, these complexes seemed wholly new in location, character, and arrangement. Yet they were marked by a strong, persistent conservatism as well, driven perhaps more by habit than by conscious efforts to retain ties to the past.

Chapter 10 backtracks to discuss the origins of an alternative approach that oriented retail complexes to a pedestrian mall. This approach had little appeal during the interwar decades save for specialty stores. The mall was resisted as a component of shopping centers; only through the unusual circumstances of federal sponsorship during the late 1930s and early 1940s were prototypical examples realized.

The last chapter examines the tentative acceptance of the mall in business circles during the late 1940s, thence its meteoric rise as the optimal solution for large-scale undertakings. The prevailing attitude in Los Angeles was cautious at first; what could have been pacesetting designs never materialized. The first to be constructed in the region drew from examples elsewhere. Thereafter, beginning in the mid-1950s, acceptance was rapid and widespread.

Like many studies that focus on neglected subjects, this book cannot begin to be definitive. Its ultimate value may lie in the questions it raises concerning both the seminal period it addresses and how the results have contributed to the sweeping changes in metropolitan growth patterns during the second half of the twentieth century. At a time when "sprawl" is becoming a code word for urban ills, much as "congestion" and "overcrowding" were two generations ago, we need to be careful not to condemn *in wholesale fashion the environment created in recent decades.*[9] *My argument is not to defend all that has been developed in the recent past, nor is it against current strategies for change, but only that we should not repeat the mistake of previous generations who dismissed cities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as wastelands. Only through understanding the modern metropolis can our choices for the future be informed, rational, and productive.*

BLANK PAGE

MAPS