

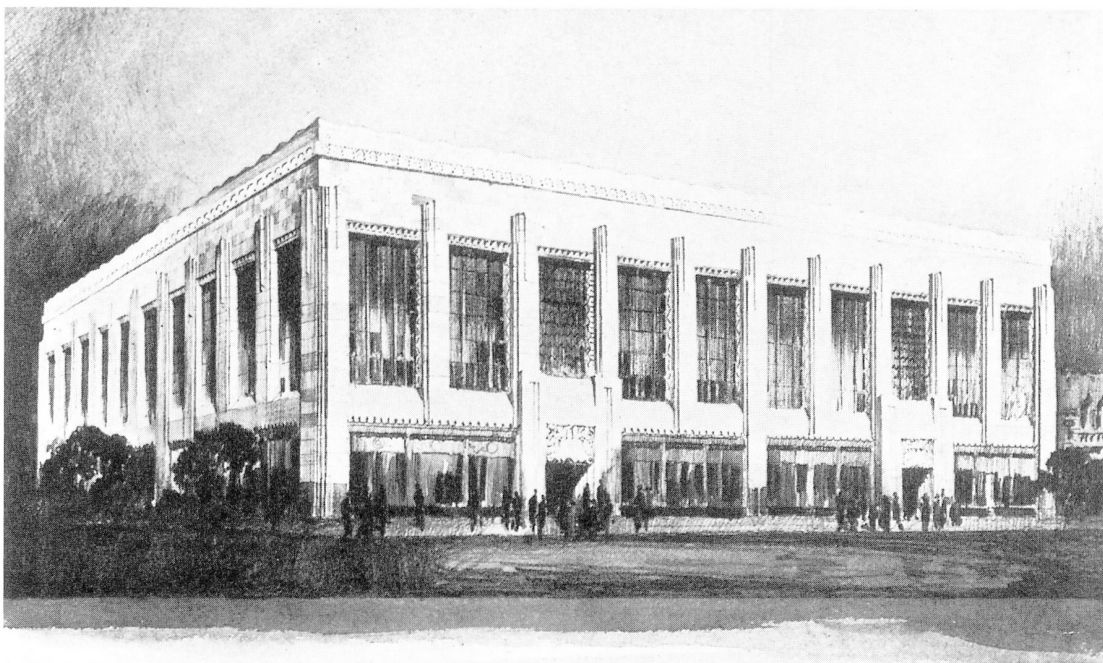
wood by harboring an array of elite services. The precinct's size and dispersed layout, now extending some thirty blocks, combined with its role as a decorous island of fashion, made Wilshire an unusual precinct nationally. A pronounced break with convention likewise characterized the quarter's foremost landmark, the sumptuous pile conceived as southern California's premier department store, Bullock's.

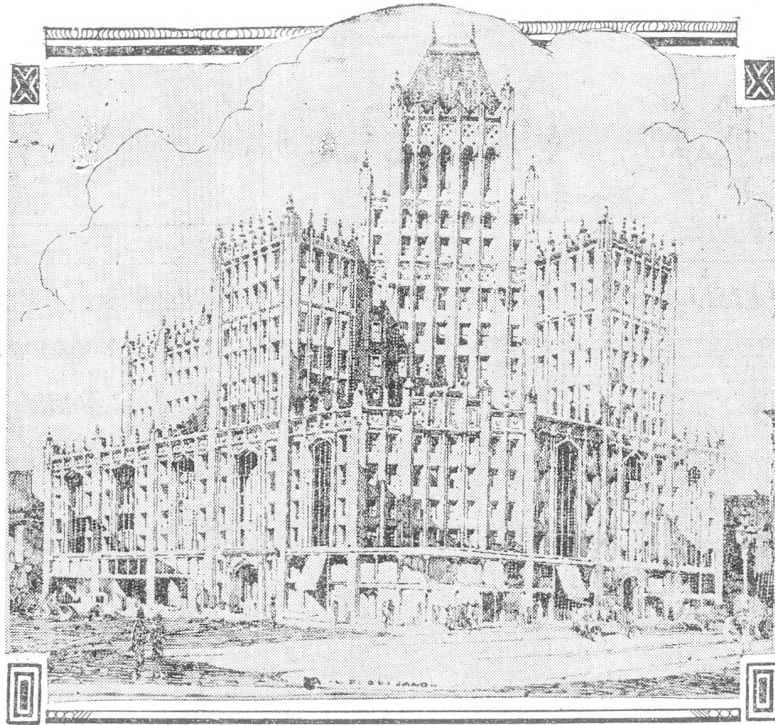
BULLOCK'S

112

BULLOCK'S

In April 1928, ten months after plans for the Dyas Hollywood store were made public, John Bullock announced that his company would soon begin construction of a new outlet at Wilshire Boulevard and Westmorland Avenue (figure 71). Bullock took pains to assure customers that the project would complement rather than undermine the downtown store. While the Dyas branch was larger than its parent, the Wilshire building would be only a small fraction of the nearly 740,000 square feet now contained in Bullock's at Seventh and Broadway.²¹ Bullock had contemplated branch expansion for some time. In 1924, his company purchased land at Wilshire and Vermont, two blocks away, to use for development once the area was rezoned. Bullock was one of several downtown business leaders who at an early date recognized Wilshire's potential as a new focus of commercial activity that might eclipse the city center itself. Archrival Tom May secured property across the street from Bullock's first site; Marshall Field officials were exploring the possibilities of having a store nearby. Bullock, May, and others agreed to develop on a large scale, with height-limit buildings that would rapidly transform the precinct into a major business





71

Bullock's Wilshire department store, 3050 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, preliminary design, 1928, John and Donald B. Parkinson, architects. (R. W. Sexton, *American Commercial Buildings of Today*, 187.)

72

Store and office building for J. J. Haggerty's New York Cloak & Suit House, Wilshire Boulevard and Vermont Avenue, southwest corner, 1928, project. (*Los Angeles Times*, 1 July 1928, II-2.)

center. Within a few months, however, this vision was abandoned as too ambitious. Apparently at that point Bullock and May agreed to refocus their resources downtown and not plan branches at all. Only Dyas's move to Hollywood altered that strategy.²²

By the late summer months of 1928 Bullock changed course a third time, now planning for a facility on the scale of the 1924 project. Hopes for intense development no longer seemed so far-fetched. Indeed, the immediate impetus for enlarging the plan may have come from a scheme just announced by Haggerty's, a major downtown clothing store, for an enormous, height-limit building at Wilshire and Vermont. Though it never materialized, the design was the first serious proposal to build at the scale envisioned by the Wilshire association (figure 72). The program, Haggerty executives proclaimed, was "based upon [our] confidence that the district is bound to become the Fifth avenue high-class shopping district sooner than is generally supposed . . . a great array of premier shops that not only will equal but also perhaps surpass the new shops put up near Fifth avenue and Fifty-seventh street."²³ Bullock's emporium likewise was designed to serve the region, attracting customers from a radius of at least fifteen miles. But other aspects of the scheme, unveiled that November, broke from earlier proposals and indeed from convention generally. The results proved catalytic to Wilshire's emergence as a unique shopping district.²⁴

As realized, Bullock's Wilshire was remarkable on many counts.²⁵ Among major retail facilities in the United States, it represented a sophisticated exposition of Art Deco, combining an array of east coast and European sources with originality and élan (figure 73). The interior scheme

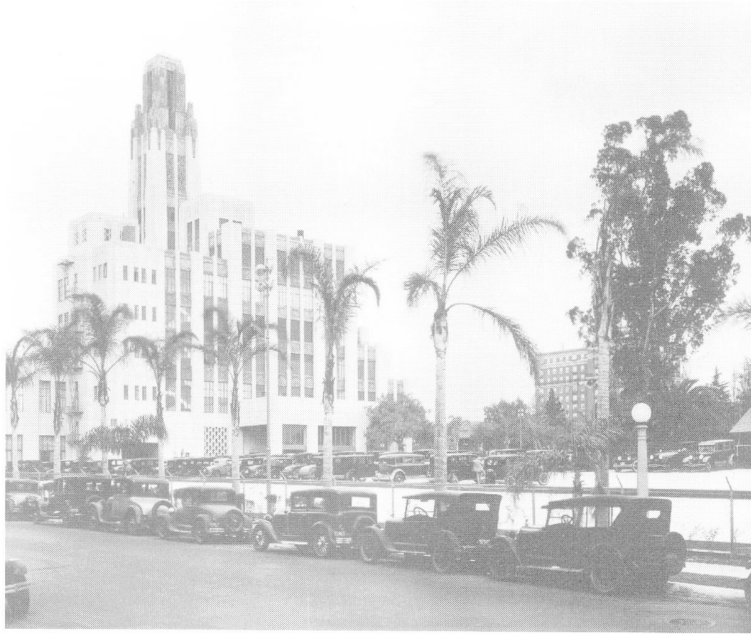
was lavish, with a sequence of spaces suggestive of specialty shops designed as showcases of contemporary decorative art. The ensemble was an arresting contrast to the expansive selling floors of early twentieth-century predecessors.

In its exterior form, too, Bullock's looked unlike any precedent in department store design. Rather than a planar block, it was modeled as three-dimensional sculpture, sheathed in terra cotta and copper, intricately shaped and detailed on all four sides, each massed differently with considerable variation in height. The composition culminated in a 241-foot tower, inspired by Eliel Saarinen's railroad terminal in Helsinki but here made a more integral part of the composition.

BULLOCK'S

114





73

Bullock's Wilshire department store, 3050 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1928–1929, John and Donald B. Parkinson, architects. Photo ca. 1929. (Courtesy Bullock's Wilshire.)

74

Bullock's Wilshire, south elevation and parking lot. Photo ca. 1929. (Courtesy Bullock's Wilshire.)

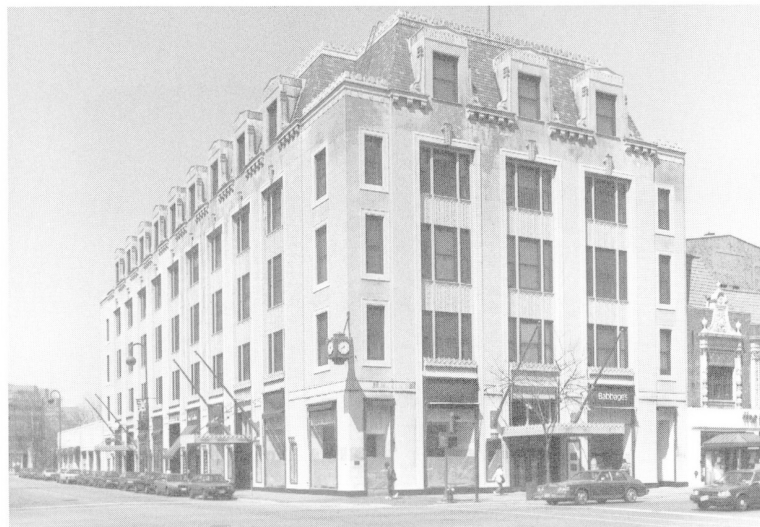
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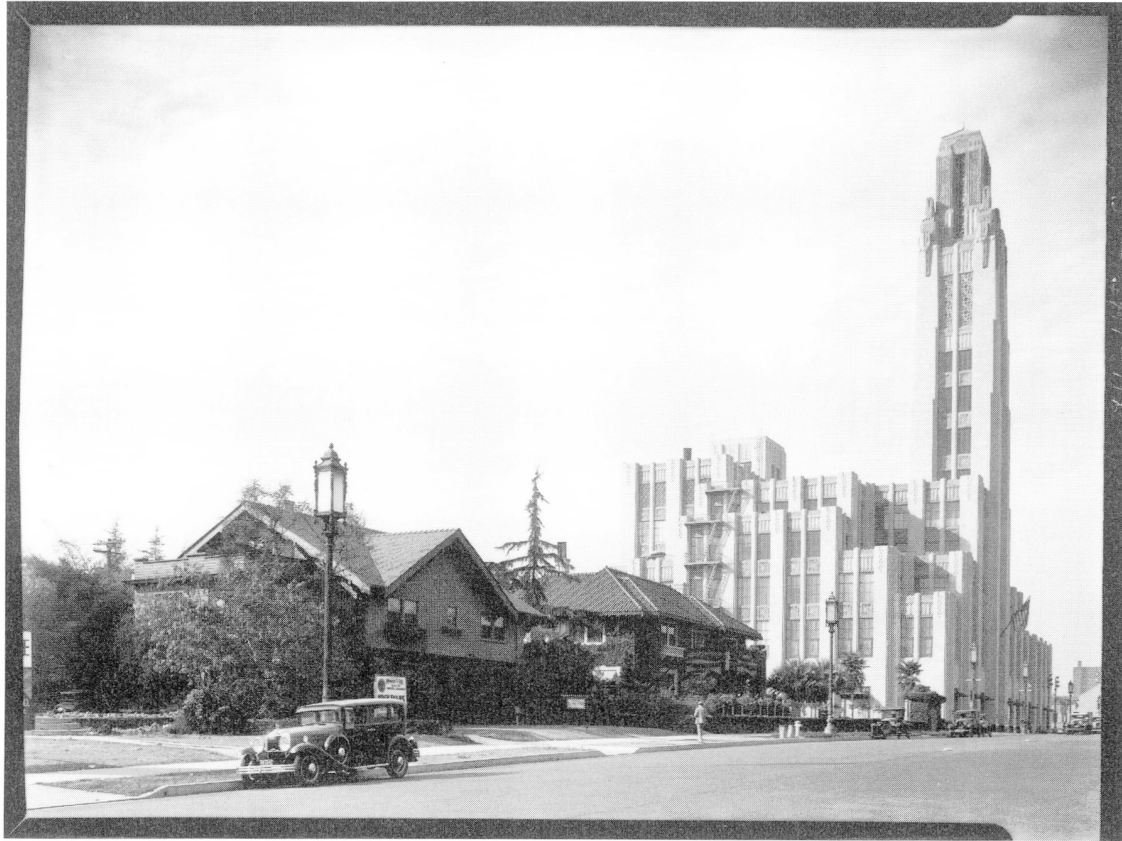
Bullock's Wilshire, porte cochere. Photo Beck Studios, 1929. (Courtesy Bullock's Wilshire.)

The siting of Bullock's Wilshire was no less unusual. Two-thirds of the lot was reserved for a "motor court." Customers could drive to a porte cochere on the south side—nominally the rear of the building, but designed with the same refinements as the north elevation facing Wilshire—and leave their car with an attendant (figures 74, 75). Purchases could be taken directly to the car by the staff and the car in turn brought to meet its owner at either entrance. The car lot itself was enormous by standards of the day, with space for 375 automobiles, its perimeter landscaped in a gesture of compatibility with the environs.²⁶

In certain respects, Bullock's was part of a national trend, for the branch store concept had gained considerable headway as a national phenomenon in the short period since the Dyas Hollywood emporium had been planned. The fast pace stemmed from the sharp increase in growth of residential areas well removed from the city center. The once common fear that branches would diminish the function of the parent store was giving way to the belief that an outlet conveniently located near these new population centers not only enhanced the company's prestige but strengthened ties with customers that ultimately bolstered patronage downtown. Equally important was the competition created by other stores in outlying areas. Chain companies in particular were seen as a threat. By the close of 1930, more than a dozen major downtown department store companies elsewhere in the United States had opened branches, the great majority of them since 1927.²⁷ Yet the trend remained in a nascent stage. Most branches were still located in resort towns or communities outside the parent store's normal trading radius. Of the nearly twenty units situated within outlying areas of the store's home base, only seven besides Bullock's and Dyas Hollywood were of substantial size. Chicago had the largest concentration, with two big neighborhood stores acquired by the Fair Company in 1928 and 1929 and two others built by Marshall Field & Company during those same years.²⁸ Field's stores in Oak Park and Evanston were the largest of their kind outside Los Angeles, encompassing around 80,000 and 85,000 square feet, respectively (figure 76). Two branches built for the Bailey Company in the Cleveland area (1928–1929) enclosed about 40,000 and 60,000 square feet; Strawbridge & Clothier's Ardmore branch (1929–1930) on Philadelphia's Main Line encompassed about 40,000 square feet.²⁹ By contrast, Bullock's contained nearly 200,000 square feet, more than twice the floor area of its biggest counterparts elsewhere in the country.

One reason for Bullock's great size was that, unlike most examples, it was not a branch in the strict sense of the term: a physical exten-





sion of selected goods and services purveyed at the parent store. Branches were generally viewed by their owners as feeder outlets, which by sustaining patronage for a relatively small number of items in satellite locations could entice more customers to make many additional purchases downtown. Instead Bullock's followed the Dyas Hollywood model. Except at the highest executive level, the Wilshire Boulevard store was a separate operation; management and purchasing were conducted independently of the Seventh and Broadway emporium.³⁰ The array of goods and services at Bullock's Wilshire was narrower because the facility was targeted to the affluent. At the same time, it functioned as a full-fledged department store, a status few branches then possessed.

Bullock's further departed from the norm as a paradigm for what would later be known as the "lone-wolf" store. Throughout the interwar decades, major department store branches were almost always sited in the cores of important, well-established outlying business centers. By contrast, Bullock's stood in relative isolation. The scattering of small specialty shops nearby comprised a much less clearly defined retail area than the ones at Evanston, White Plains, or Hollywood. John Bullock may have hoped that the precinct would soon blossom into an equivalent of Fifth Avenue, but few commercial establishments existed in the area when work on the building began. Houses erected less than a generation earlier still abounded in the immediate vicinity when the store opened in September

76

Marshall Field & Company department store, 1700–1704 Sherman Avenue, Evanston, Illinois, 1928–1929, Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, architects. Photo author, 1988.

77

Bullock's Wilshire, general view with neighboring houses. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1929. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)



1929 (figure 77). The site represented a far greater leap than those taken by Hamburger's and Robinson's half a generation earlier.

The site also lay two blocks from the nearest major intersection, Vermont Avenue (figure 78). A location at a key corner lot was an essential characteristic of downtown department stores, and was held to be just as important for outlying areas. Both Bullock and May had adhered to that pattern when securing land at the Wilshire-Vermont intersection in the mid-1920s. But now the company changed its approach, deciding that the extent of automobile traffic at a primary juncture would inhibit the motorists that were the store's target audience. Being somewhat removed from this vehicular confluence enabled motorists to enter and leave the premises apart from congestion.³¹ The essential aspect of the siting was accessibility by car from the Wilshire district itself and from well-to-do areas further afield. As primary commuting routes, Wilshire Boulevard, Vermont Avenue, and Western Avenue facilitated access. The building's tower, illuminated at night, served as a beacon to guide customers and to remind everyone that the store had arrived (figure 79). Bullock's was in essence its own skyline, as if to underscore the point that when a destination was easily reached by car, a concentrated shopping district was not needed.

Such an approach to locating large stores had little precedent at the time Bullock's was planned. Some inspiration may have been derived from the Pasadena Furniture Company, which for a number of years was

the only large store outside downtown Los Angeles to advertise regularly in the area's leading papers. Among the advantages of driving to Pasadena rather than entering the Los Angeles city center, the company stressed as early as 1920, was an abundance of unrestricted parking (figure 80). All that space, however, was curbside, and while the store's location was on the edge of downtown Pasadena, it was nonetheless part of that shopping district.³²

A more profound break from convention was inaugurated in 1925 when the Chicago mail order house Sears, Roebuck & Company entered the retail business. Sears chose outlying areas in which to situate its large, full-fledged department stores ("A" stores was the in-house term) as a direct result of increasing automobile use among its target clientele. General R. E. Wood, the company's new vice-president who conceived and directed the initiative, was explicit on the matter:

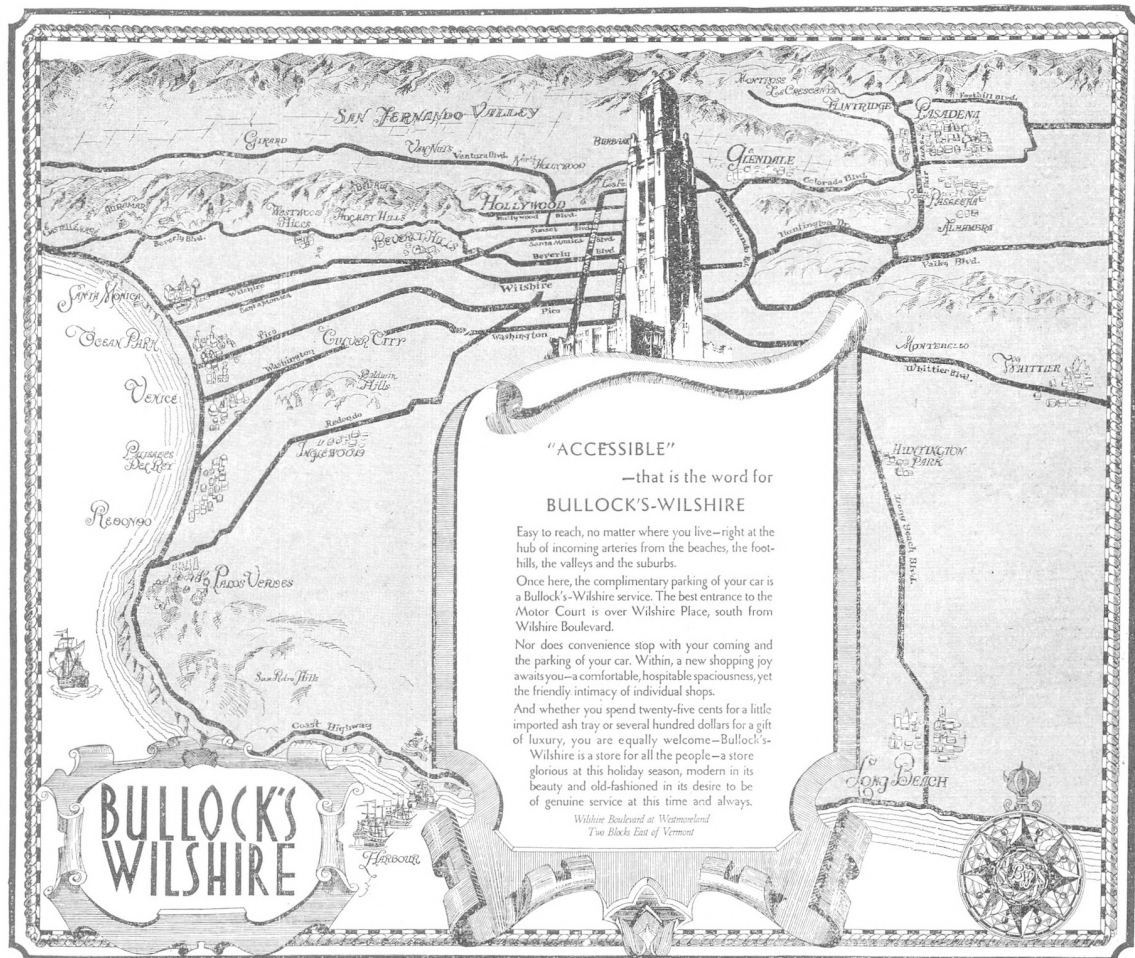
With a larger and larger proportion of the population possessing automobiles, the problem of parking space, traffic congestion and resulting inconvenience to downtown shoppers became more and more serious. The automobile made shopping mobile, and this mobility created an opportunity for the outlying store, which with lower land values, could give parking space; with lower overhead, rent and taxes, could lower operating costs, and could with its enlarged clientele created by the automobile offer effective competition to the downtown store.³³

78

Wilshire Boulevard looking east at Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1934. (Whittington Collection Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

79

Bullock's Wilshire advertisement. (*Los Angeles Times*, 17 December 1929, II-8.)



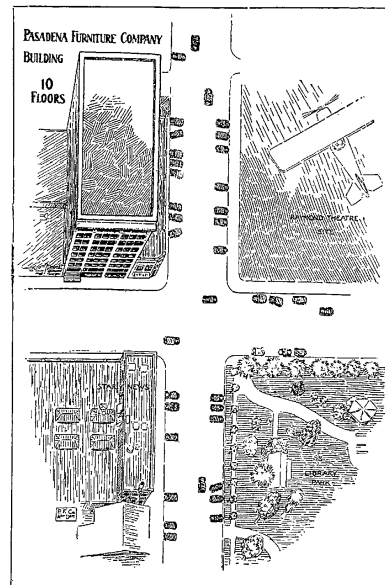
when you are up in the air

This is about the way our location appears from an airplane—notice the broad streets with plenty of room to park your car. People from all over Southern California come here because of the convenience of our location and the completeness of our assortment—they find many things that are not shown elsewhere and they are pleased with our prices—especially during the

Reorganization Sale

now in progress, which offers an opportunity to select from our entire furniture stock at reduced prices for cash. Come and compare values. We can serve you well, no matter where you live.

Pasadena
FURNITURE CO.
83 to 91 N. Raymond, Pasadena.



From the start, Sears's "A" stores were expansive buildings—many contained around 100,000 square feet—with large parking lots to the side or rear.³⁴ Proximity to one, even two, mass transit lines helped determine the location of early stores; the sites that were chosen, however, clearly indicate that convenient access by car was the primary consideration.

The nature of Sears's operation was, of course, entirely different from Bullock's. Sears skillfully adapted chain company methods to bring large quantities of staple goods to people of moderate means. Men initially comprised the target audience more than women. Most downtown department stores placed little or no emphasis on the kinds of merchandise that were Sears's stock in trade. Sears relied heavily on self-service. Many of Sears's first retail stores were somewhat utilitarian in character inside and out, appearing much like the warehouses from which the company's mail order business was conducted.³⁵ Not surprisingly, department store executives snubbed the upstart operation; only after World War II would they publicly acknowledge their debt to Sears's merchandising practices and store development program.³⁶ The Chicago company's performance in the retail field could hardly be judged from a long-term perspective when planning for Bullock's got under way. Yet no major retailer could help taking notice of the constant barrage of news that appeared in *Women's Wear Daily* (the *Wall Street Journal* of the apparel trades) on Sears's building program—sixteen large retail stores by the end of 1927, over fifty two years later—and the enormous profits it was yielding. Department store executives may have pretended to ignore Sears, but at least some were watching the company's meteoric rise closely.³⁷

Anyone in Los Angeles who cared to study the situation could do so firsthand. Two large stores for the city were announced in December 1926 and opened the following summer as part of the first wave of

Sears's aggressive expansion program. One was an immense building east of downtown at Olympic Boulevard and Boyle Avenue; of its 425,000 square feet, 125,000 were for retail purposes, the rest for mail order operations (figure 81). The other outlet, at Vermont and Slauson avenues in the Southwest district, contained some 90,000 square feet and was designed for retail purposes only (figure 82).³⁸

Beyond general similarities of size and location, the Sears and Bullock's stores shared other characteristics. Among the most obvious was the expansive car lot. Sears was the first large-scale retailer in Los Angeles to have this element as an integral part of its site plan, Bullock's the second (figure 83).³⁹ A prominent tower distinguished Sears's mail order buildings and became a ubiquitous feature of its "A" stores as well. These towers served the practical purpose of enclosing a water tank that supplied the building's sprinkler system, but they were also devised as landmarks for motorists, clearly identifying the relatively remote sites on which they rose (figure 84). Equally important was the strong physical presence of the Sears Olympic Boulevard facility. This exposed-concrete pile, strikingly modeled as a varied yet unified mass and resting on high ground above the railroad yards and the Los Angeles River, could be seen for miles around to an extent shared by almost no other individual building in the city.

80

Pasadena Furniture Company, 83-91 N. Raymond Avenue, Pasadena, 1914; altered. Advertisement. (*Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 1920, II-8.)

81

Sears, Roebuck & Company department store and mail order building, 2650 E. Olympic Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1926-1927, George C. Nimmons & Company, architects; altered. Photo late 1920s. (Security Pacific Historical Photograph Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.)





Bullock's Wilshire was of a thoroughly metropolitan cut—a Sears Olympic Boulevard store in formal attire. This adaptation at once placed Bullock's in a league of its own. No matter how much of the concept may have been derived from Sears, the two were never compared. If Sears was the apogee of national chain expansion, Bullock's became a symbol of Los Angeles itself, a mark of the city's coming of age. For the first time, boosters could claim a department store that ranked among the great emporia in the eyes of the nation. Likewise, the building embodied a faith in Los Angeles's future not just as a new city, but as a distinct and preferable kind of city. The building was the sole Los Angeles representative illustrated in a 1930 *Vogue* article on southern California, in which the author observed:

One becomes aware gradually of a new people living in a new country who are building for the future, unhindered by any great conservatism. In Los Angeles exists . . . perhaps the most beautiful shop in the world . . . Bullock's-Wilshire, which stands on the edge of the city a dozen stories higher than any other building. . . . It is accepted as a creation for the future when the city will have grown up to it.⁴⁰

Bullock's further seemed to herald cultural maturation, standing as a benchmark in efforts to synthesize artistic expression with economic development. A local commentator remarked that the building "has come to embody in the public mind something more than merely an extension of an already great business . . . it has come to symbolize, not the seeking after more business, but the inculcation of beauty as an unselfish element in modern commercial enterprise."⁴¹

Had Wilshire Boulevard developed into a skyscraper corridor, Bullock's would have become more conventional. Locationally, it would

have paralleled emporia such as Bergdorf-Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. Visually, it would have ceased to be an isolated monument, instead rising as part of a more or less continuous planar wall. The company anticipated such changes: the building was structured so that its entire mass could extend to the height limit and have additions occupying a portion of the car lot as well.⁴² Yet the effects of the depression and subsequent shifts in development left neighboring blocks of Wilshire as a fragmented composite, unique in appearance and mix of retail functions. These circumstances made Bullock's example all the more significant in later years. The success of the operation demonstrated how a large-scale business in luxury items could be sustained on a profitable basis without an extensive supporting cast. The place could be nowhere but in a metropolis, yet was wholly unlike the standard settings for such activities.

Aside from Sears, Bullock's was an anomaly as a lone-wolf department store when it opened. The closest counterparts prior to the late 1930s were built in New York and Philadelphia. Owing to the diffuse, low-density nature of the New York metropolitan area's elite residential communities, early branches there were modestly sized outlets of stylish departmentalized stores specializing in apparel and accessories.⁴³ Among the first examples was a branch of some 20,000 square feet erected in 1929–1930 for Best & Company at Mamaroneck in Westchester County. Located about a half-mile from the town center along the county's principal thoroughfare, the site was chosen for its easy access from communities as far away as the Hudson River Valley and southwestern Connecticut (figure 85).⁴⁴ Precisely the same criteria determined the site of the area's second lone-wolf branch, built for Franklin Simon in 1931–1932 several blocks removed from the commercial center of Greenwich, Connecticut (figure 86). Containing nearly 40,000 square feet, the store was ranked

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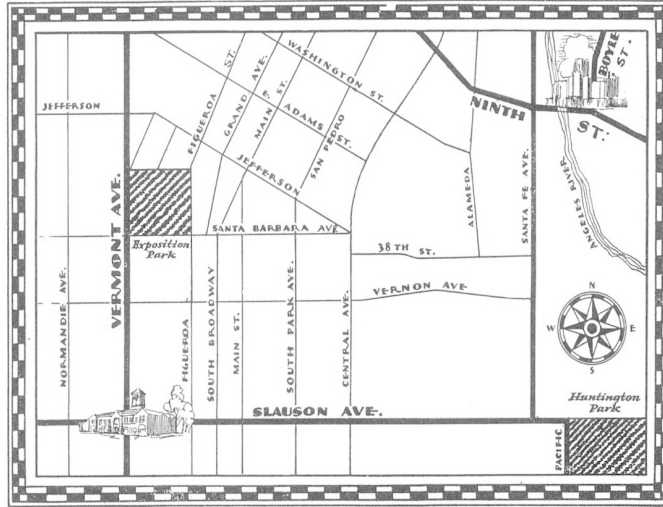
Sears, Roebuck & Company department store, 5836 S. Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, 1926–1927, rear addition (left) 1931, George C. Nimmons & Company, architects; demolished 1970s. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1940. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

83

Sears, Roebuck & Company department store, 5836 S. Vermont Avenue, view of rear from parking lot. Photo before 1931. (Courtesy Sears Merchandise Group.)



To the People of Los Angeles



VERY soon we shall announce the opening of the first of two retail department stores which we are now building.

The first one will be at Vermont and Slauson Avenues. The second one will be at Ninth Street and Boyle Avenue.

Each location is, as you know, easy of access. It centers in a large residential area. It can be reached on convenient thoroughfares and transportation lines.

Escaping the congested traffic sections, each location appeals to the motorist. Appreciating this, we are creating ample free parking space beside each store. You can drive in, park your car as long as you wish, and do your shopping free from worry.

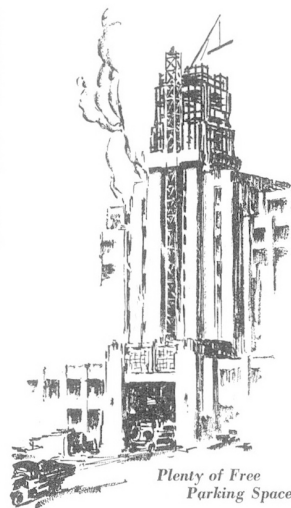
Each of these new stores enjoys the full advantage of our distinctive merchandising policy.

They will stand out in your mind because they will give you merchandise of dependable quality at lowest prices. This means every day in the business year. We go on record now, before the doors of either store are opened. On every article you purchase you will actually see a definite, worth while saving.

On top of that, every transaction with these stores will be covered by our unrestricted guaranty of absolute satisfaction or your money back.

When you are near either location, we invite you to watch their progress and see how we are preparing to make everything most convenient for you.

Knowing that you will appreciate the business policy which has earned for us more than eleven million families as customers, and an annual volume of three hundred million dollars, we feel that our entry into Los Angeles will be welcomed in the spirit of one of the fastest growing cities in the world.



Plenty of Free
Parking Space

Sears, Roebuck and Co.

among the largest New York branches of the period and also had unusually generous provisions for off-street parking: a terraced rear lot accommodating 250 cars.⁴⁵ Despite these early initiatives, the lone-wolf store failed to gain much favor during the extensive branch development program that occurred in the New York area prior to World War II.

The maverick in Philadelphia's branch development was the venerable Strawbridge & Clothier department store. Its first outlying unit was built in 1929–1930 as part of an integrated business development, later called Suburban Square, that lay directly across the Pennsylvania Railroad from the Ardmore town center, then the largest shopping district serving Philadelphia's Main Line communities.⁴⁶ The immediate success of that store prompted Strawbridge's to commission a similar but larger complex—the first major department store branch planned from the start as the anchor unit of an integrated retail complex (figure 87).⁴⁷ The site lay several blocks beyond the shopping district of Jenkintown, which func-



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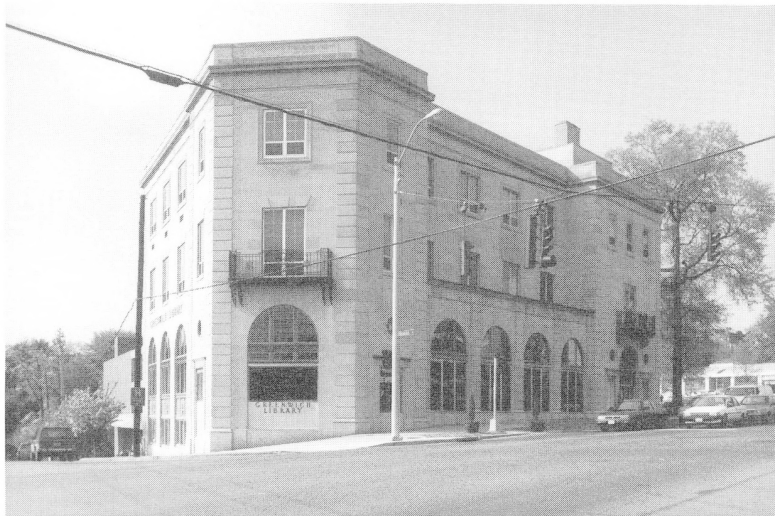
Sears, Roebuck & Company advertisement for Los Angeles stores. (*Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 1927, II-16.)

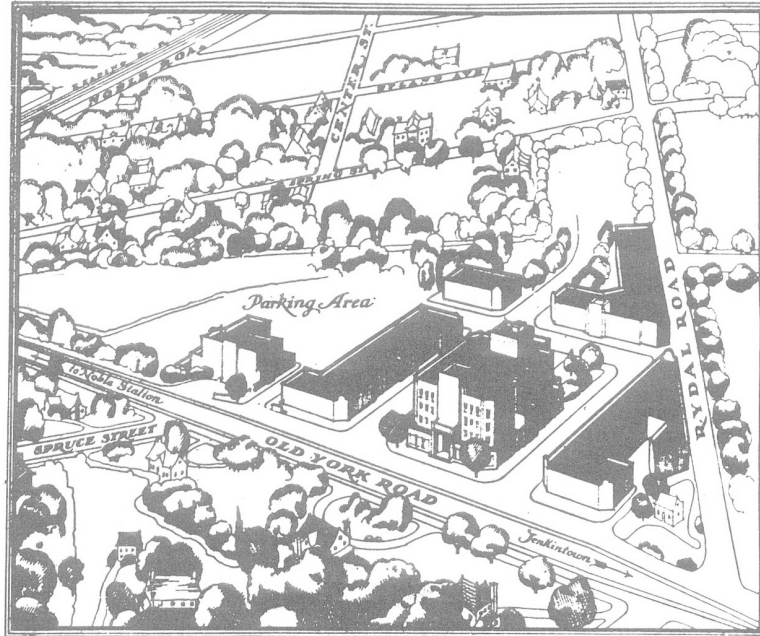
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Best & Company store, 590 E. Boston Post Road, Mamaroneck, New York, 1929–1930, Edward Necarsulmer, architect. Photo author, 1991.

86

Franklin Simon & Company store, 95–101 W. Putnam Avenue, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1931–1932, Edward Necarsulmer, architect. Photo author, 1992.





tioned much like Ardmore as a destination point for routine needs of residents from surrounding communities north of Philadelphia. The deepening depression precluded building the scheme as a whole; however, Strawbridge's went ahead with plans for its own store, containing over 60,000 square feet. When it opened in September 1931, the building stood amid residential blocks much like Bullock's on Wilshire Boulevard.⁴⁸ The venture set an influential precedent for the Philadelphia metropolitan area, where the lone-wolf store was the standard form of branch development until the mid-1950s.⁴⁹

From the start, branch development patterns were localized in nature, making Bullock's influence on practices outside southern California difficult to assess. Moreover, the first lone-wolf projects in the New York and Philadelphia areas were launched soon after construction of the Wilshire Boulevard store began. The initial decisions to adopt this locational approach probably were made independent of one another, based on local conditions and without benefit of a firm model. On the other hand, Bullock's was by far the most ambitious of these endeavors and quickly became the most famous. Both factors, coupled with its operational success, no doubt reinforced the validity of the lone-wolf concept among some major downtown retailers once branch expansion began to resume in the late 1930s.

Locally, Bullock's served as a direct model for the size, siting, generous off-street parking accommodations, and elegant ambience of the new I. Magnin store (1938–1939) sited on Wilshire several blocks to the west.⁵⁰ The outlet provided a second primary destination point for the precinct, whose loosely knit, low-density structure had changed little over the intervening decade. Planned as a greatly expanded replacement of Magnin's Hollywood unit, the building was the company's largest

(162,000 square feet) and underscored the merits of size in lone-wolf branch development.

Bullock's example also strengthened the understanding that conventional wisdom did not always provide the most effective response to changing needs. Well before the late 1930s, the store reinforced the inclinations of others to experiment in addressing new consumer demands. None of these ventures attracted more attention or achieved greater success during the interwar decades than did a second commercial precinct along Wilshire, three miles to the west—a place that many Angelenos embraced as a new downtown and that was universally known as the Miracle Mile.

M I R A C L E M I L E

During its initial years of development, the Miracle Mile appeared much like numerous other nascent low-density arterial business districts of Los Angeles. The “miracle” lay neither in its physical character nor in the complexion of its few, small retail outlets, but rather that it existed at all. Major investors considered the site too remote; municipal law excluded commercial uses. The Miracle Mile was slow to take form at first. Yet when the vision of its creator, a previously little-known real estate agent named A. W. Ross, began to coalesce into a reality, the result was a new kind of retail center, one that had a significant impact on practices in the region and beyond. Even the name, ostensibly suggested to Ross by a client when the precinct's transformation into a major center was beginning to occur, soon became a household term in the region. After World War II, “Miracle Mile” was used as a generic term nationwide to denote a form of commercial development in outlying areas that challenged the hegemony of downtown in a way seldom known before.⁵¹

When Ross started to assemble property along Wilshire Boulevard in 1923, his intent was to create a major business district. The location selected, extending along what became a seventeen-block stretch between La Brea and Fairfax avenues, did not seem promising for such an enterprise, since much of the area remained open land.⁵² What made his venture so unusual, and at first so subject to ridicule, was the planning of a large retail center absent a surrounding community. Ross's acreage was not in a Hollywood or Beverly Hills, nor tangent to an established network of subdivisions such as along the eastern part of Wilshire. Instead the property was a hypothetical center for the western half of the metropolitan area, a position premised on extensive growth of fledgling settlements and on unplatted land. The developer sought a long-term investment, and, since he could purchase large parcels at relatively low cost, that investment would no doubt yield some future return.

Yet the anticipation of intense commercial land use was laden with risks, especially since it depended on decisions made by hundreds of other parties over whom Ross exercised no control. Like many colleagues,

87

Strawbridge & Clothier Jenkintown department store, 600 Old York Road, Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, 1930–1931, Dreher & Churchman, architects; altered. Initial design, showing unexecuted shopping complex around store. ([Jenkintown] *Times-Chronicle*, 1 October 1931, 6.)