

The problem was of epidemic proportions:

Conditions in the Wilshire district are identical with those along and adjacent to every major thoroughfare in the Los Angeles area. . . . We interviewed many business and professional men who left the central business district to escape congestion and . . . they frankly admit that the problems from which they tried to escape are already overtaking them in their new locations.<sup>1</sup>

A. W. Ross, of course, had taken numerous steps to ensure that enough parking would exist on the Miracle Mile, but even there shortcomings soon became noticeable. In 1948 the Los Angeles City Planning Commission estimated that existing spaces were less than half of the desirable number.<sup>2</sup>

As parking became a serious problem along Los Angeles's thoroughfares, adequate land in convenient locations was seldom any longer available. Only at the big downtown store branches and at Sears had significant foresight been exercised in this regard. Even when steps were initiated before the problem became acute, effective measures were almost impossible to implement because of the multitude of interests involved. Nowhere in outlying parts of the metropolitan area were the frustrations of "parklessness" so apparent as at another Wilshire destination, Beverly Hills, which lay to the east of Westwood and was becoming one of the region's most prestigious neighborhoods in the 1920s. At mid-decade, when the commercial center was just a scattering of modest-sized stores, the *Beverly Hills Citizen* fussed over supposed parking inadequacies, declaring how a lack of space posed a significant "Hindrance to Business."<sup>3</sup> A decade later, parking became a preoccupation in Beverly Hills to a degree probably unequaled in southern California, even in downtown Los Angeles. Perhaps more than at Westwood Village, the Miracle Mile, or Hollywood, the parking situation at Beverly Hills underscored the need for a new approach to planning business centers, one just beginning to be visible on a modest scale in a few arterial developments elsewhere in the metropolitan area at the decade's end.

#### BEVERLY HILLS

Conditions in Beverly Hills seemed optimal for the provision of ample parking. Unlike at Westwood Village, the need was identified early on, when the business district was still forming and curbside space remained readily at hand. In contrast to Hollywood, business leaders here were unrelenting in their drive to create a sound, comprehensive parking plan for the community. The matter dominated the activities of the local Chamber of Commerce during the pre-World War II years. Beverly Hills had the further advantage of being a separate municipality whose officials were willing to take action.

Beverly Hills was one of southern California's first communities to employ a comprehensive approach to planning. The initial tract was developed by the Rodeo Land and Water Company, which in 1907 commis-



was incorporated as a city in 1914. Growth remained slow until after World War I. A population of only 674 in 1920 swelled to over 17,000 a decade later. By that point, Beverly Hills was supplanting Hollywood and the Wilshire district as an area of choice for Los Angeles's elite.

Beverly Hills also set a regional precedent by limiting commercial development to a single precinct with prescribed boundaries. The north and south borders were clearly defined by the community's two principal thoroughfares—Santa Monica and Wilshire boulevards—which converged at the western end, and by a connecting street, Crescent Drive, at the eastern end (figure 126). By virtue of its configuration, the area soon became known as the Business Triangle. Beyond containment, however, little oversight was accorded to commercial development. Lots were sold on a piecemeal basis to anyone willing to purchase them. The type and caliber of commercial enterprise as well as the character of the building that housed it were left to the discretion of the owner, perhaps because it was assumed that commercial development would reflect the upper-end market to which it catered. Construction of retail facilities began almost immediately. The first store block opened in 1907 and would not have been out of place at Roland Park or Lake Forest.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent work, however, was often less genteel in character; much of it was of a sort common to arteries throughout the metropolitan area.

Though probably unintentionally, the Business Triangle's layout proved conducive to diffuse development and hence a dispersal of curbside parking—an arrangement consciously planned at Westwood Village. Unlike most outlying commercial districts, it had no central intersection of major arteries, such as Hollywood and Vine, that could form a nucleus for dense building. Nor did the arrangement lend itself to concentrated arterial growth. During Beverly Hills's first major wave of business development, between the mid-1920s and the depression, both Santa Monica and Wilshire boulevards grew as automobile thoroughfares more than as commercial corridors. Wilshire did attract some large-scale projects, including the eight-story Beverly-Wilshire Hotel (1927–1928), the earliest major undertaking in the community that was distinctly urban in character and reflected the metropolitan aspirations of local boosters. Yet the hotel re-





mained in isolation, with only the smaller California Bank (1928–1929) competing for a part of the skyline.<sup>6</sup> Otherwise buildings were of modest size and scattered to a degree even more pronounced than in the area around Bullock’s (figure 127). Retail development congregated along the wide but short streets connecting Wilshire and Santa Monica, especially Canon and Beverly drives.<sup>7</sup> Here, one- and two-story buildings were the norm; many lots remained vacant. Street width enabled angle parking. Space for automobiles abounded to an unusual degree (figure 128).

Yet while Beverly Hills did not appear to have a parking problem, the need for a long-range plan was addressed as early as March 1937 when the Chamber of Commerce proposed a network of municipal parking lots on the interior of Business Triangle blocks. Most of the land was underutilized at that time; access to it would be by existing alleyways. Alteration to buildings and to the choicest land for future development would be minimal. Between 1,000 and 1,500 cars could be accommodated at any given time. The needed acreage would be condemned through the power of eminent domain, but the cost of acquisition and improvement would be equally distributed among Triangle property owners. The chamber asserted that the project would likely bolster patronage and increase land values, justifying the expense.<sup>8</sup>

What prompted the initiative was a concern that the Business Triangle would fail to become a major commercial center. The erosion of Hollywood’s prestige, combined with the rise in its stead of the Miracle Mile and Westwood Village, bracketing Beverly Hills to the east and west, may well have influenced the decision. Convenient access to the precinct was almost entirely by automobile. New development was on the upswing and was likely to accelerate in the immediate future. Ample space existed for new buildings, but not for more curbside parking. Furthermore, acreage in the Business Triangle was finite, and enlarging the area

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Wilshire Boulevard, looking east from Santa Monica Boulevard. Photo 1929. (Hearst Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

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North Canon Drive, Beverly Hills, looking southeast, Warner Theatre (1930–1931) in background. Photo “Dick” Whittington, 1931. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

would undermine the very premise upon which Beverly Hills had gained appeal among the affluent. If significant growth occurred without adequate parking, it was argued, decline was sure to follow.

The chamber's scheme was without precedent in southern California, and few examples existed elsewhere. A municipal car lot was established as early as 1918 in Piqua, Ohio, but fewer than thirty communities nationwide had made similar provisions when the Beverly Hills proposal was launched. Furthermore, many of these places were rural centers that established lots so that country dwellers could leave their cars for extended periods while shopping in town. Only the San Francisco Peninsula community of San Mateo shared Beverly Hills's position as a wealthy residential enclave in a metropolitan area.<sup>9</sup> The concept of appropriating land for cars in the center of business blocks had been suggested for Yonkers, New York, in 1932, but no scheme of this type appears to have been executed by 1937.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the fear of decline due to insufficient parking and the belief that only municipal intervention would solve the problem were becoming widespread. In the half-decade before Pearl Harbor, providing municipal parking lots became a concern among many planners, traffic engineers, and elected officials as well as business owners who felt that their future was at stake.<sup>11</sup>

The chamber's call for action in Beverly Hills prompted the city government to undertake a detailed study to assess existing conditions and plan for future needs. Completed the following year, the report was recast as a series of sixteen articles in the *Beverly Hills Citizen*, providing one of the most detailed accounts of parking published prior to World War II. Among presentations intended for the general public, it is perhaps unique for the period.<sup>12</sup>

The report echoed the basic thrust of the chamber's proposal while making recommendations that were more specific and refined. Space 116 feet wide should be procured in most block interiors for parking "courts," with two rows of diagonally parked cars on either side of the alley spine. Courts in every block where development existed would provide 1,500 spaces. But, the report continued, the courts would only meet the needs of shoppers, not of employees whose cars occupied space throughout the day. To house the latter group, using a minimal amount of land, the report recommended construction of three self-parking garages, each with six tiers and capable of supporting additional levels if needed. The capacity would equal that of the surface lots.<sup>13</sup>

The multistory garage's cost was so high that its use was limited at that time to the densest urban centers. Yet it was implicit in the report that the Business Triangle should remain low-density. Large buildings like those on the Miracle Mile would consume too much ground area to permit the interior courts, and the cars these behemoths attracted would overwhelm the whole system. Thus the mixture that had characterized the precinct from an early date—small, exclusive specialty shops and stores purveying everyday goods—would continue to prevail. That assumption was not borne out, however, by events then taking place.

Beverly Hills had begun to attract sizable, prestigious branch stores during the post-depression years. First and largest among them, at over 150,000 square feet, was W. & J. Sloane (1935–1936), one of the region's most distinguished purveyors of furniture, which, like Coulter's, moved its store from downtown. Soon thereafter came outlets for Chas. Levi & Sons (women's apparel) (1936–1937) and the first Saks Fifth Avenue branch on the Pacific coast (1937–1938).<sup>14</sup> The three lay close to one another on the south side of Wilshire Boulevard, the only place where land parcels were large enough to contain both the buildings and tangent rear parking lots. Unlike most other Wilshire stores, these had relatively narrow and tall fronts, which, coupled with the restrained character of

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W. & J. Sloane store, 9536 Wilshire Boulevard, Beverly Hills, 1935–1936, John and Donald B. Parkinson, architects; altered. (Private collection.)



their designs, made them distinctly suggestive of elegant downtown emporia (figure 129). More than any other part of the fabulous boulevard, this small section seemed like a nascent Fifth or North Michigan Avenue. Both in appearance and function, these branches supported local boosters' hopes that the most fashionable stretch of Wilshire would emerge in Beverly Hills. The stores lay some distance from the heart of the Business Triangle; however, their great success (Saks more than doubled the size of its building in 1938–1939, making it the company's largest branch) indicated that Beverly Hills was indeed becoming an important destination for affluent shoppers in the metropolitan area.<sup>15</sup> The cars brought by these big stores would have an impact on the small-scale business center as well.

The city's parking report was issued in July 1938, soon after the last of the big Wilshire stores opened. Its recommendations were widely applauded among the business community. Yet the leadership within the Chamber of Commerce soon realized that the proposal would take years to implement fully—too long to avoid serious problems. Once again, the chamber took the lead in seeking an interim solution that could swiftly materialize. Unveiled that November and approved by the city council the following January, the new plan entailed a cooperative arrangement: available space, regardless of location, would be leased for temporary use as parking lots; the cost of leases would be borne by the chamber, and those of grading, surfacing, improvement, and maintenance by the municipal government.<sup>16</sup> Parking would be free. The scheme got off to a promising start: twelve lots were secured at once, and by November 1939 the total approached twenty. Yet no sooner had these gains been made than the inherent weakness of the plan became clear: owners could terminate the arrangement on short notice, and some were already doing so to erect buildings on their respective sites. The supply of parking thus was diminishing in the places where the need was greatest. Calls for implementation of a long-term plan again began to swell.<sup>17</sup>

The debate that ensued over a “permanent” parking solution centered on the best means to secure land expeditiously. Some endorsed taking advantage of the temporary plan by either purchasing the lots or securing long-term leases. Opponents of that idea argued that car lots visible from the street were unsightly and consumed space best suited to future building; the inner court plan developed by the city was far preferable. The only point upon which all parties agreed was that parking garages were too costly to contemplate in the foreseeable future. No one appears to have opposed the court scheme on grounds other than the time and difficulty involved in securing so many separate parcels of land. After much further discussion from both contingents, the pro-court group seized the initiative. City attorneys worked with their representative in the state legislature to draft a bill enabling localities to create an assessment district, issue bonds, acquire property (through condemnation proceedings, if necessary), and dedicate the acreage to parking. Introduced in January 1941, the bill drew widespread support from other communities across the state, and was signed into law four months later.<sup>18</sup>

Soon after the bill's passage, the chamber resumed the drive to implement a long-term plan, presenting a somewhat modified version of the city's court scheme in August (figure 130).<sup>19</sup> The principal change was a reduction from four to two ranges of parking spaces, perhaps out of recognition that a wider area would encroach upon the space increasingly needed by many stores. Despite the fact that total capacity was about a third of what the city had proposed in 1938, the scheme was favorably received. Hopes for implementation persisted after the United States entered the war; but, as in Hollywood, the momentum eventually dissipated. After that conflict's end, an even more ambitious proposal was developed, only to remain on paper.<sup>20</sup> All Beverly Hills had to show for its foresight, leadership, cooperation, meticulous study, and statewide initiative to address the parking problem was a diminishing number of temporary lots on vacant parcels of land.

Even if the scheme had been realized, it probably would not have proven as beneficial as its sponsors believed. Each court would have accommodated about sixty cars, less than demand at peak shopping periods. A tight configuration invited bottlenecks as motorists searched for a vacant space. Deliveries would have to be made curbside to avoid blocking customers' cars at the rear. Converting utilitarian rear elevations to suitable store entrances would have been expensive, especially given the small number of patrons served. Finally, it is doubtful whether the well-heeled and often status-conscious clientele that frequented the Business Triangle would be enthusiastic about parking in an expanded alley corridor. Beverly Hills business leaders had a solid grasp of the problem and its implications for their community, but proved incapable of implementing a preventive strategy and were not fully aware of the kind of space needed to provide a viable solution.

The changes needed to ensure a long-term supply of parking came from forces other than legislation, zoning, Chambers of Commerce, reformers, planners, or even major real estate developers. They came rather from merchants and were based on a narrow set of pragmatic concerns. Change came slowly, incrementally, and tentatively at first, not in large-scale projects but in modest ones along boulevards less fabulous than Wilshire. The developments had no names, except sometimes informal ones that identified the intersection—much like speculative boom developments along Western Avenue in the 1920s. Yet they boasted configurations to which Beverly Hills parking advocates pointed as models, to which the planners of Hollywood's grand, stillborn parking scheme likewise looked for inspiration, and to which A. W. Ross may have turned a wistful eye, wishing he had gone so far on the Miracle Mile.

## MAIN STREET

The integration of parking and retail space beyond that found at individual buildings began to occur during the late 1930s as the shopping center