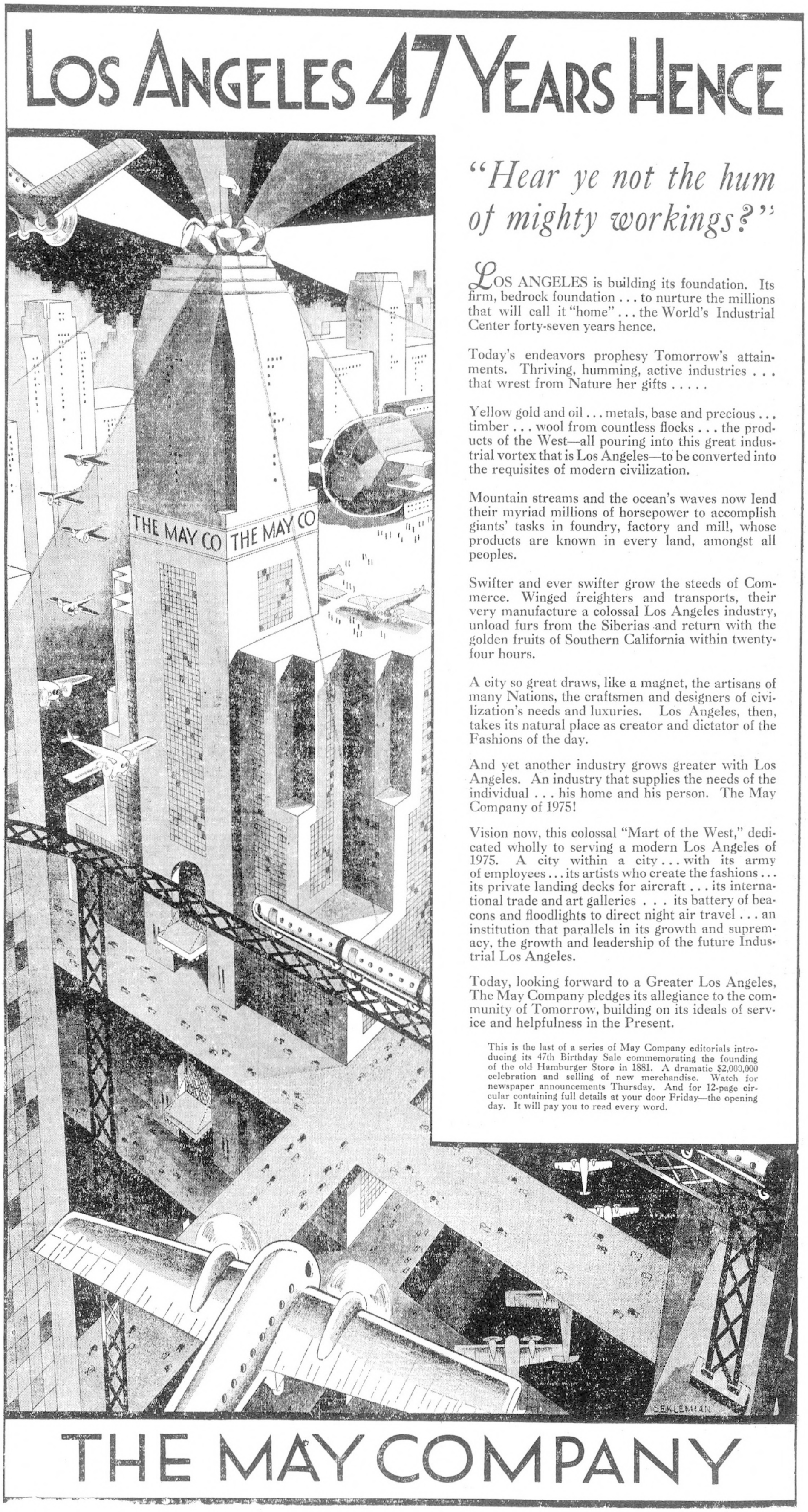
VIII

HOLD ON!

"Hold on! It happened once. It will happen again." Thus did the *Los Angeles Times* editors paraphrase the 1933 New Year's message issued by the presidents of five leading financial institutions to property owners in southern California, especially to those in the city center. Many readers had grown skeptical of what the future might bring. But the *Times* incanted, as it had for decades, that the years ahead were filled with promise: "The history of real estate here through seven depressions is that from every low level it climbs to new high peaks. . . . Just as prices were once absurdly inflated, they are now absurdly deflated. Hold On!"[1]

In 1933 the hope lingered among many of those in business that a new downtown Los Angeles would take the form of a skyscraper city, punctuated with towers many times the height then permitted by law, permeated by high-speed motorways and other transportation lines at multiple levels—a futuristic update of the Bellamyesque images presented for two decades and which enjoyed special favor during the years just passed (figure 140).[2] The future city would be an even more radical departure from that of the present than the present one was from that of the late nineteenth century. If confidence remained strong, extraordinary things would occur.

Within a few years, however, such expansive visions largely were forgotten. Downtown Los Angeles did not recreate itself; indeed, it barely grew at all. Between the early 1930s and early 1950s little new construction of consequence occurred in the district. The depression did not, of



LOS ANGELES 47 YEARS HENCE

"Hear ye not the hum of mighty workings?"

LOS ANGELES is building its foundation. Its firm, bedrock foundation . . . to nurture the millions that will call it "home" . . . the World's Industrial Center forty-seven years hence.

Today's endeavors prophesy Tomorrow's attainments. Thriving, humming, active industries . . . that wrest from Nature her gifts . . . . .

Yellow gold and oil . . . metals, base and precious . . . timber . . . wool from countless flocks . . . the products of the West—all pouring into this great industrial vortex that is Los Angeles—to be converted into the requisites of modern civilization.

Mountain streams and the ocean's waves now lend their myriad millions of horsepower to accomplish giants' tasks in foundry, factory and mill, whose products are known in every land, amongst all peoples.

Swifter and ever swifter grow the steeds of Commerce. Winged freighters and transports, their very manufacture a colossal Los Angeles industry, unload furs from the Siberias and return with the golden fruits of Southern California within twenty-four hours.

A city so great draws, like a magnet, the artisans of many Nations, the craftsmen and designers of civilization's needs and luxuries. Los Angeles, then, takes its natural place as creator and dictator of the Fashions of the day.

And yet another industry grows greater with Los Angeles. An industry that supplies the needs of the individual . . . his home and his person. The May Company of 1975!

Vision now, this colossal "Mart of the West," dedicated wholly to serving a modern Los Angeles of 1975. A city within a city . . . with its army of employees . . . its artists who create the fashions . . . its private landing decks for aircraft . . . its international trade and art galleries . . . its battery of beacons and floodlights to direct night air travel . . . an institution that parallels in its growth and supremacy, the growth and leadership of the future Industrial Los Angeles.

Today, looking forward to a Greater Los Angeles, The May Company pledges its allegiance to the community of Tomorrow, building on its ideals of service and helpfulness in the Present.

This is the last of a series of May Company editorials introducing its 47th Birthday Sale commemorating the founding of the old Hamburger Store in 1881. A dramatic $2,000,000 celebration and selling of new merchandise. Watch for newspaper announcements Thursday. And for 12-page circular containing full details at your door Friday—the opening day. It will pay you to read every word.

THE MAY COMPANY

course, destroy downtown Los Angeles; it only accelerated tendencies set in motion during the previous decade when the city center seemed indomitable.[3] Major property owners "held on," and many put new capital into their buildings. Yet significant growth failed to take place because greater demand existed for business development in outlying areas. "Hold on" became a watchword not for promises ahead but for preventing further deterioration.

140
"Los Angeles 47 Years Hence," May Company advertisement. (*Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1928, I-5.)

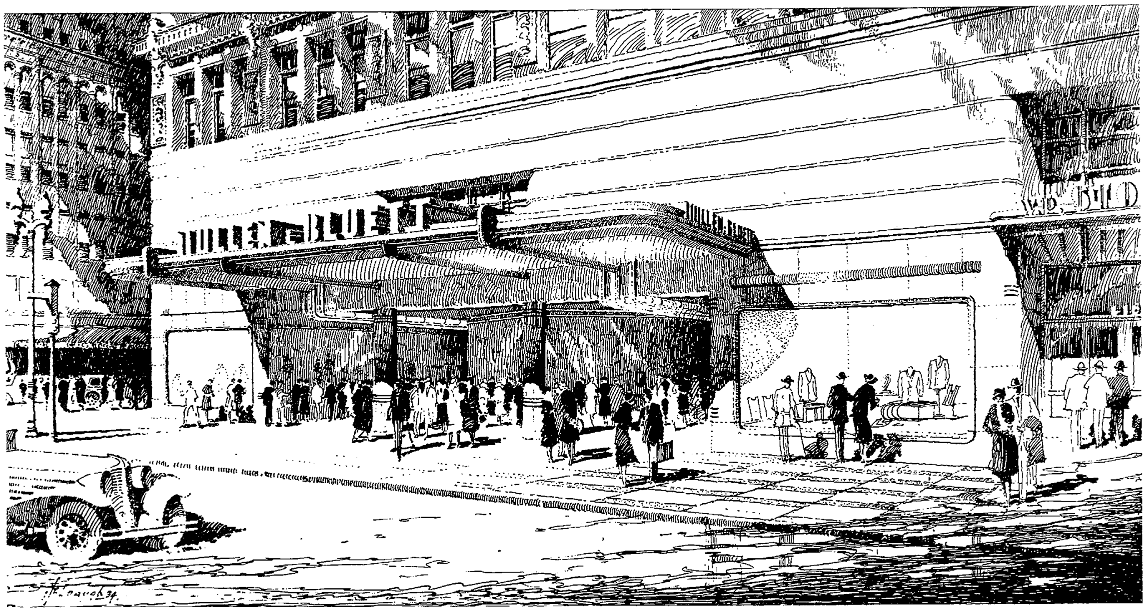
REMODELING

Among the numerous factors considered important for strengthening retail trade downtown, two were cited most often as pivotal: appearances and parking. Retailers had long held that the image of an establishment was central to its success, and in particular that an appearance of newness was an essential part of customer appeal. During the rapid growth of centralized retail functions nationwide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, change for the most part occurred as a result of expansion—either through adding to the premises or through building new quarters. Beginning with the depression, however, enlargement of the main store was seldom needed, and in fact almost never occurred in downtown Los Angeles. Competition in a shrinking market wrought by economic instability thus assured remodeling a new prominence in the retail sphere. The popular acceptance of stylistic modernism was both encouraged by and further encouraged this trend. New store design could suggest innovative business practices, sound finances, concern for the customer, and confidence in the future. The updating program generally involved improvements in layout and building systems, but ultimately appearance counted as the essential product.[4]

In 1930, downtown Los Angeles's retail building stock was not very old, a condition shared with other U.S. cities. Most outlets were constructed after 1900 and many dated from the 1920s. Yet this inheritance soon came to be viewed as a relic because it was experientially so different from the newest outlying centers. Like the street railway system soon after its greatest period of expansion, downtown was now cast as outmoded, replaced by a more convenient and appealing alternative. In 1935, Egerton Shore, a local real estate analyst, advised businessmen that substantial action was necessary. The Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago "had started a revolution in business throughout the country [because] . . . it presented such a modern conception of improved designs that everything seemed out of date. . . . With streamlined automobiles, railway trains, airplanes, modernized stores . . . even the progress of the passing generation seemed obsolete." In downtown Los Angeles "first class buildings have undergone a decadence in condition and style." On the other hand, "Wilshire Boulevard has . . . introduce[d] building designs that are modern, and shops that suggest quality and originality."[5] Downtown was no longer setting the standard. Merchants and property owners had to look beyond the city center for examples to emulate, a reversal of the relationship that had shaped commercial development in the nation for at least a century.

As Shore noted, the drive to update appearances had already begun in downtown Los Angeles. The leaders, not surprisingly, were the city's major department stores. Bullock's initiated the trend in 1933, opening several new specialty stores in its existing plant and, four months later, announcing construction of the seventh addition to the complex (see figure 18).[6] Robinson's soon followed with an interior modernization plan. The project grew to encompass a complete resurfacing of the outside in a "restrained-modernistic design" that seemed as up-to-date, but not as flashy, as Bullock's Wilshire (figure 141).[7] Other department stores were not far behind, with new specialty "shops" and other amenities.[8] New display equipment, new lighting fixtures, air conditioning, escalators, and similar improvements were added incrementally, putting the behemoths in a more or less continual state of change up to the eve of World War II.

Department store owners took every opportunity to publicize that their capital improvement programs underscored a strong faith in downtown no less than in the city itself. Upon completion of its new exterior, Robinson's management intoned that its first purpose-built store was



141
J. W. Robinson Company department store, as remodeled, 1934, Edward D. Mayberry, architect, Allison & Allison, consulting architects. Photo Mott Studios, ca. 1934. (Hearst Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

142
Mullen & Bluett store, 600 S. Broadway, Los Angeles, as remodeled, 1934; altered. (Hearst Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

constructed in the mid-1890s "when financial panic swept the nation." The present facility opened "when World War I brought disaster and chaos to the entire world." Now, "with the world shaken as never before, the company again provided employment for hundreds of men and erected another monument to courage and progress."[9] However much energy may have gone into expansion through branches, the principal investments of major stores lay in the city center—investments that required aggressive measures to maintain.

Other prominent mercantile houses thus were conspicuous as well in the effort to improve downtown's image. Desmond's remodeled its storefront at ground level in 1933; Mullen & Bluett redid its store inside and out the following year, with one of the most thoroughly streamlined compositions yet realized in the metropolitan area (figure 142).[10] Many other stores initiated projects after the worst years of the depression, including substantial work undertaken by Barker Brothers, Eastern-Columbia Outfitting Company, Harris & Frank, Jacoby Brothers, and Silverwood's. Many more transformed the appearance of modest quarters.[11] The initiative taken by Los Angeles companies began to broaden toward the decade's end as a new wave of national and Pacific coast chain companies entered the local market, attracted to downtown both because of the commitment to its renewal and because it remained the largest shopping district west of the Mississippi. With these enterprises, too, remodeling an existing facility rather than new construction was now the standard practice.[12] Significant expansion programs were also undertaken by leading variety and drug store chains already established in the metropolitan area.[13] By 1941, new storefronts and, often, new sales areas inside were commonplace on the primary retail blocks of the precinct. Downtown no longer looked so old.

But the city center nevertheless suffered significant losses in the retail sphere during the 1930s. The depression triggered a rash of store closings. Blackstone's six-story dry goods emporium at Ninth and Broadway folded less than a year after the stock market crash; Bedell's ended operation in 1931. Selling the big Hollywood store failed to save B. H. Dyas's business; the Seventh Street building shut its doors in July 1932. The following year brought several more failures, including Parmelee-Dohrmann and Alexander & Oviatt.[14] Some losses were quickly absorbed. Bullock's purchased Parmelee-Dohrmann's stock and name; Oviatt was reorganized and reopened within a year of the initial closing; Myer Siegel took advantage of the shaky real estate market to expand its own operation by leasing Dyas's building. Still, the situation was hardly stable. Myer Siegel closed its own doors not long after the move, and its quarters stood vacant until 1940. Likewise, the space formerly occupied by Blackstone's languished until it was remodeled as the new headquarters facility of the Famous Department Store, a business oriented toward the lower end of the market and among the last to move from Main Street.[15]

More ominous than store failures were the steps taken by leading merchants to relocate outside the city center once economic recovery was under way. W. & J. Sloane initiated the trend in 1935, but the greatest blow was the announcement two years later that Coulter's, which had been operating in a sequence of six downtown locations since 1878, would move to posh new quarters on the Miracle Mile. Adding momentum to the shift were decisions by at least two nationally known retailers not to locate downtown. In 1937, Saks Fifth Avenue chose a site near Sloane's in Beverly Hills for its first west coast store. When I. Magnin enlarged the scope of its southern California operations the following year, the move was made from Hollywood to the mid-Wilshire district.[16] Statistically, the situation was not promising either. Overall retail sales downtown accounted for 29.6 percent of the county total in 1929, 17 percent ten years later. Sales in downtown department stores fell from $106 million in 1929 to $77 million in 1939, dropping from 74.8 percent of the county total in the year of the stock market crash to 47.4 percent in 1941.[17]

Despite setbacks, the belief persisted that the core should continue as the dominant business center of the metropolitan area. The view held firm in some quarters that decentralization could affect only a limited range of enterprises. No outlying district could begin to house the extent of goods and services found in the city center, the argument ran, and many types of businesses could not operate effectively in scattered locations.

Among the most outspoken defenses of downtown came from the economist George Eberle, who had long analyzed real estate and other business trends in the region. Eberle asserted that the city center was the necessary place not just for most governmental offices but also for financial institutions, however many branches they might have. Other kinds of business, including major real estate, advertising, and insurance firms, were best quartered downtown, as were offices of leading professional firms. A central location also was needed for many forms of retailing. Even if several department stores had established outposts away from the core, downtown remained the focal point for their business. Equally important was the collective array of goods offered by smaller establishments:

> While there are some convenience goods, like groceries, drugs, and small household items, which must be retailed extensively to suit the convenience of the buyer, . . . there will also remain a large category of goods in the purchase of which the consumer will demand a large centralized stock with a wide variety of price, color, size, quality, and style at the time of selection. . . . Chain store distribution is economical and satisfactory for many of these items, but chain methods demand the high turnover of standardized items with limited variety. It is only when shopping between a number of convenient chain and independent stores that the consumer can effectively satisfy his demand for variety. Wide decentralization in retailing of shopping goods does not provide this satisfaction.

Eberle maintained that decentralization carried disadvantages as well:

> The scattered location of certain large department stores on Wilshire Boulevard may appear . . . at first as a relief from the tiring trip through congested traffic to the downtown center, but experience may soon show . . . that the more convenient location is offset by a lack of variety. . . . Moreover, if one is not satisfied in one Wilshire store, he must drive several miles to another decentralized location on Wilshire or to Hollywood, Beverly Hills, or Westwood Village. By the time he has satisfied his need, he may have come to the conclusion that a trip to the downtown area would have been simpler and more economical of time, energy, and gasoline.

He concluded:

> Decentralization of shopping [i.e., non-routine] goods . . . results in decreased shopping opportunities because there are fewer outlets and fewer management viewpoints and services. Moreover, the spreading of such retail service is uneconomical and fosters duplication of services and greatly increased transportation for the individual shopper.[18]

Not all business leaders may have shared Eberle's belief in the unimportance of outlying areas, but virtually everyone involved in retailing agreed on the importance of having choices in shopping. The combined extent and variety of goods available downtown was a primary reason why the district retained the greatest volume of trade in the region. Shopping days continued to attract throngs of consumers, crowding the sidewalks and stores with an intensity seldom experienced under other circumstances (figure 143). Gasoline rationing during the war further enhanced patronage since the core was the most accessible place by streetcar. And even with the return of peacetime, a sizable portion of Angelenos still resided within a few miles' radius of downtown, and many thousands of them worked there. As a result the dollar volume of downtown retail sales increased 126 percent between 1939 and 1948. Downtown department store sales rebounded after the late 1930s, reaching $189 million in 1948. Seven years later that figure had dropped to $141 million, yet even when adjusted for inflation, the amount was respectable when compared to the $106 million of 1929. As late as 1960, downtown Los Angeles stood as the fifth largest concentration of business in the United States.[19]

Yet while persistently "holding on," downtown experienced steady erosion in its prestige as a retail center. Updating appearances could not compensate for the loss of half a dozen major stores oriented to the upper end of the market and the absence of new ones of comparable stature. The chain and local companies that expanded in or entered the district were targeted to a more budget-conscious trade. Furthermore, changes were beginning to occur in the kinds of goods that attracted shoppers downtown. The great majority of remodeling projects undertaken after 1930 were for stores purveying apparel and accessories. Very little new work occurred among other types of specialty establishments, including those in the furniture and music trades, which were prominent contributors to the precinct's richness prior to the depression. Even as shopping choices continued to grow in outlying areas, they no longer seemed as great in the city center, despite Eberle's optimistic portrayal.

The size of the core retail district also diminished somewhat during the 1930s. Flower Street was the first casualty, but other peripheral locations lost ground as well. Nearly all the remodeling done to stores was concentrated in a six-linear-block area along Broadway from Fifth to Seventh streets and on Seventh from Broadway to Hope.

The shifts in complexion of downtown retailing became more evident after World War II. The department stores and most other businesses that comprised the mercantile elite embarked on few capital improvements downtown between 1945 and 1950, even though it was a significant period of growth in the field and most of these establishments were expanding their operations in outlying centers. Even Robinson's,

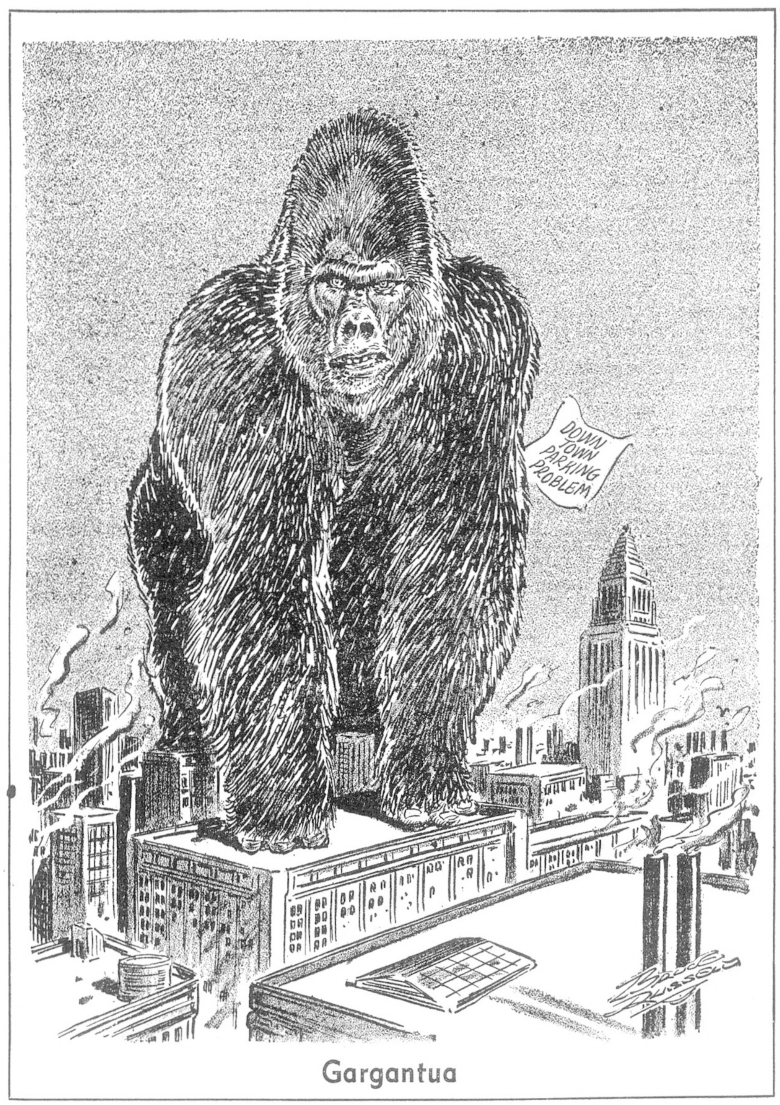
which had steadfastly resisted the trend toward branch development prior to the war, announced plans for a large facility at Beverly Hills in 1947. Likewise, the Fifth Street Store's executives had decided that their business could not remain competitive without a foothold elsewhere, unveiling a scheme for a branch in the burgeoning Westchester district the previous year.[20] Several mass market chains expanded and others established units for the first time downtown, but these programs paled in comparison to chain development outside the city center.[21]

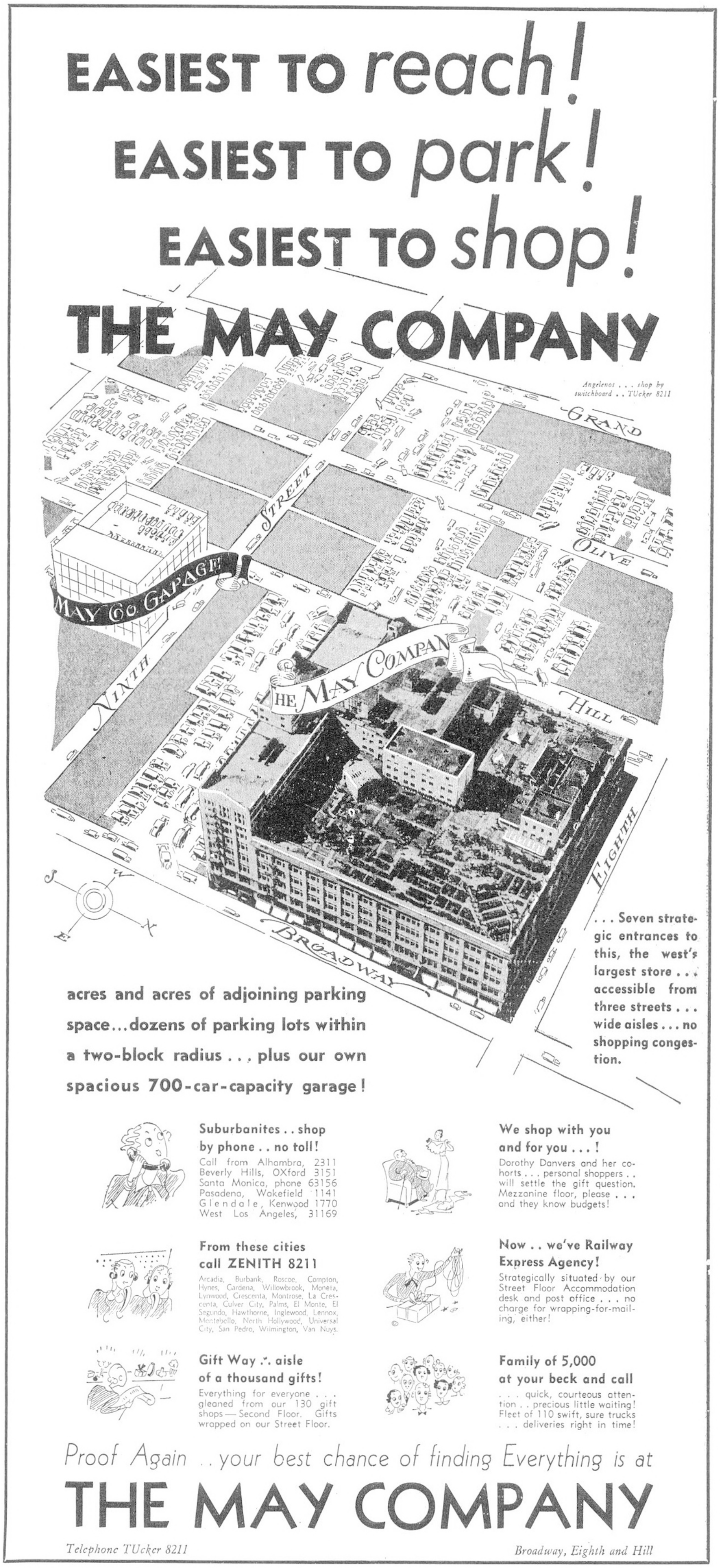
Remodeling was still championed as an essential means to enhance customer draw; however, many merchants and property owners alike seem to have lost confidence in the prospects of significant future growth. In 1950, the Downtown Business Men's Association (DBMA), organization of executives from leading firms in the district, began a campaign for a coordinated, block-by-block modernization of storefronts to impart the sense of newness and unity associated with the enormous shopping centers being built in outlying areas.[22] Yet little appears to have resulted from the initiative. Demands beyond the city center made merchants reluctant to invest substantial sums downtown, even if they had been inclined to do so. To stay abreast of the booming market, many retailers were establishing additional branch locations. Hollywood and the Wilshire corridor were no longer the only concentrations of major retail activity beyond the core. Other large business centers with a more mass market orientation were being developed or planned in the Baldwin Hills and Westchester districts to the southwest, along the Whittier Boulevard corridor to the east, in the San Fernando Valley to the northwest, and in Orange County to the southeast—places that had remained predominantly rural prior to the war.

143
Shopping crowd, Seventh Street and S. Broadway, looking south. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1939. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

Downtown business interests also sought to learn from the success of outlying centers through coordinated promotional campaigns. Prior to the stock market crash, cooperative ventures among merchants in downtown Los Angeles and other U.S. cities had been minimal because no need had been seen for them. Major stores drew crowds at peak shopping periods such as Christmas and Easter through lavish window displays and presentation of new merchandise. Locally, a number of stores participated in a home furnishings "exposition" held during the summer and joined in offering clearance sales—"Dollar Days"—in the spring and fall. Furthermore, each of the large stores had its own sales, anniversary celebrations, and other events. The cumulative effect was that some kind of "special" merchandising occasion could be found in at least one major emporium most weeks of the year. The DBMA was founded in 1924 principally to facilitate these existing practices, which its members had created and which had a record of success.

The status quo was sufficiently entrenched that more aggressive measures gained acceptance only in the late 1930s, when it was becoming apparent that the depression was less the root cause of decline than was the growth of outlying centers. A Christmas parade had been held downtown in 1929, perhaps to upstage a similar spectacle organized for Hollywood Boulevard as well as to soothe consumer nerves after "temporary" setbacks to the economy during the previous months.[23] But the event was not repeated until a decade later, now under the auspices of the DBMA. For several years previous, the group had been conspicuously promoting other events, such as Dollar Days, and sponsoring large advertisements in the *Times* to enhance public perceptions of downtown as the place best suited to consumer needs. The DBMA's efforts intensified in 1940 and 1941, with new officers, new bylaws, and a seven-point plan that included improvements to the public transit system, the civic center, car lots, "blighted" areas, streets and sidewalks, and signage, as well as building modernization and publicity. The Christmas pageant was now the most lavish in a series of attention-getting endeavors orchestrated throughout the year.[24] After the war, promotional efforts resumed at a fast pace, with a growing list of new projects. In 1948, for example, the DBMA inaugurated a cooperative venture among stores to remain open until nine P.M. on Mondays so as to encourage family shopping excursions.[25]





144
"Gargantua," editorial cartoon by Bruce Russell. (*Los Angeles Times,* 18 November 1945, II-4.) Copyright 1945, Los Angeles Times. Reprinted by permission.

145
May Company downtown store. Advertisement showing parking facilities available to customers. (*Los Angeles Times,* 8 December 1935, II-3.)

In all the DBMA campaigns, downtown was presented as a single entity in much the same way as Hollywood, the Miracle Mile, and Westwood Village were by their respective boosters. DBMA advertisements went so far as to imply that the precinct functioned like an integrated business development. Yet the very existence of such material implied that downtown's once impregnable position was no longer secure; at best, the new promotional programs could keep the core's trade from further eroding. Unlike Eberle, the DBMA never tried to advance downtown at the expense of outlying centers, for most of its leaders now had substantial businesses in both places.[26] Their objective was to find a balance that would enable both territorial expansion and core stability.

PARKING

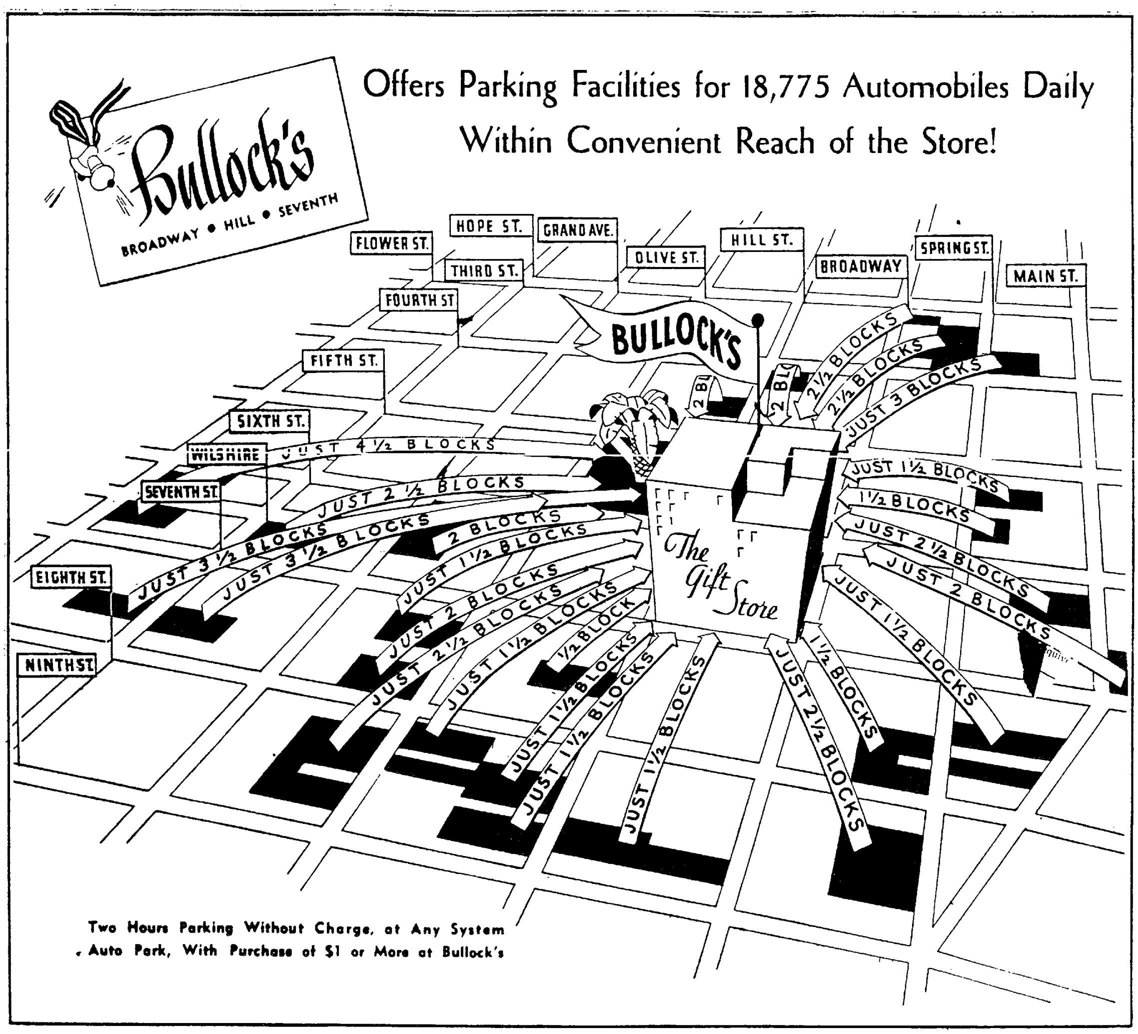
No matter more concerned the DBMA and other parties with an interest in downtown than did parking. During the 1930s, adequate off-street space for automobiles was considered a central factor—perhaps the decisive one—in bringing renewed vitality to the precinct, a belief that was widely shared in cities coast to coast.[27] After the war, the issue seemed even more urgent. Soon after victory over Japan, the *Times* cast the parking problem as "Gargantua"—a latter-day King Kong, poised to destroy the city center as swiftly as Admiral Yamamoto had destroyed the fleet at Pearl Harbor (figure 144). Despite endless rhetoric, efforts to improve off-street facilities remained uncoordinated and piecemeal.

Throughout the 1930s the city's major department stores continued to address the matter individually. Instead of planning more multistory parking garages, however, department store executives focused on the expeditious use of car lots. The most integrated plan came from Robinson's, which, as part of its 1934 renovation program, included a new motor entrance at the rear from which attendants drove cars to an adjacent surface lot, replicating the arrangement at Bullock's Wilshire.[28] But most emporia could not expand so conveniently, and instead had to reach accords with independent lot operators. By 1935, the May Company had established such relationships with a half-dozen parking businesses to supplement its own garage, which had been designed with an excess capacity less than a decade earlier (figure 145).[29] Bullock's, whose central location in terms of pedestrian movement rendered it among the least accessible to motorists, created the most elaborate scheme among retailers, securing space at no less than twenty-five lots within a five-block radius of the store by 1940 (figure 146).

Downtown business interests were generally supportive of plans for a regional network of high-speed, limited-access freeways, which began to be advanced in the late 1930s.[30] All these proposals called for routes from every direction to converge on the city center. Since it was generally believed that improving access to the core would restore the district's competitiveness with outlying centers, retailers heralded the freeway program as the salvation of their downtown plants (figure 147). But these results could only be realized if parking capacity was substantially augmented and parking spaces conveniently related to freeway interchanges. Calls for a regional freeway plan prompted initiatives to create a unified parking plan for downtown. The first scheme was unveiled in 1941 by a group called United Taxpayers.[31] To cure the precinct's "heart disease," the proposal required purchase of fifty adjacent blocks around the core area for surface lots. Customer charges would be minimal: $.15 per half-day of use. Work would be financed through first-mortgage bonds on the acquired property and from patron revenues. Still, it would be necessary to remove the acreage from the tax rolls, a proposition that ensured the idea a swift demise.[32]

Devising a feasible alternative preoccupied both the city's planning department and especially the DBMA during the war years. The latter commissioned what the Urban Land Institute called one of the most extensive studies of its kind in the nation. Presented in January 1945, the proposal called for establishing a single agency—public or otherwise—to create a comprehensive program to develop permanent, well-situated facilities that could hold around 45,000 cars.[33] By that November two new sur-

146
Bullock's downtown store. Advertisement showing car lots available to customers. (*Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 1940, II-3.)




WHICH?
That depends on YOU!
Do You Want to...
Save approximately one-half of the time it now takes you to get home from work ?
Drive farther . . . see more . . . with far greater safety, economy and comfort ?
Eliminate the traffic jams that make today's driving a hazard and ordeal . . . ?
Travel rapidly and comfortably in uncrowded, streamlined motor buses . . . ?
Provide for the tremendous number of postwar autos that will travel our streets ?
Keep California in step with America's parade of progress and advancement ?
...then make sure the State Legislature votes "yes" on the Freeways bills!
Sponsors of the bill include:
California State Chamber of Commerce.
League of California Cities.
County Supervisors Association of California.
Automobile Club of Southern California.
California State Automobile Association.
California is desperately in need of a modern state-wide network of city and suburban freeways. Indefinite and disastrous delay in construction may result if the State Legislature fails to vote "yes" on the Freeways Bills now waiting for its action. Take no chances! Ask your state senator and assemblyman to vote "yes"! Make known your desire for a greater, safer California.
Write today to your State Senator and Assemblyman to vote "YES" on the State Freeways Bills! Don't leave it to someone else!
These bills provide for plans and construction of the new freeways, and their financing through a 1½c gasoline tax (to be spent in each county in proportion to automobile registrations).
Bullock's DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES
Telephone Tucker 4103 for the names of your State Senator and Assemblyman

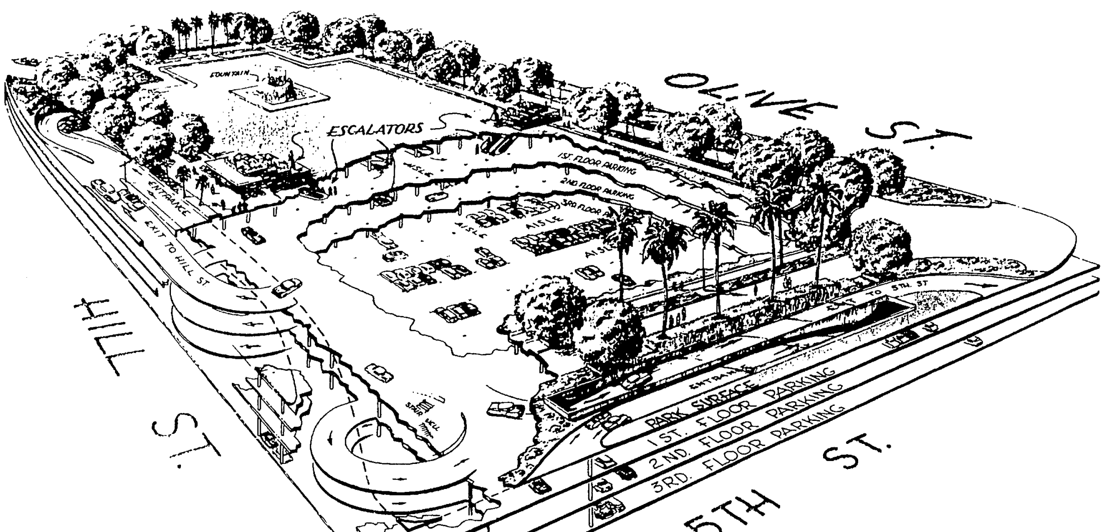
face lots, with a combined capacity of 1,300 cars, had opened under the DBMA's auspices. Two months later a meeting was convened with the mayor and civic groups to broaden the campaign; by March 1946, one of those parties, the Central Business District Association, completed a complementary plan for extensive parking areas between Flower Street and the path of the Habor Freeway, then under construction. Soon thereafter, the DBMA organized its own subsidiary group, the Los Angeles Downtown Parking Association, for purposes of implementation, vowing to create new space for 10,000 cars over the next three years.[34] The association's efforts, however, soon refocused on the creation of an enormous parking facility at Pershing Square.

Bounded by Hill, Olive, Fifth, and Sixth streets, Pershing Square had become a strategic location with the growth of downtown west of Broadway and north of Seventh during the 1920s. Most parking initiatives of the period focused on peripheral sites, which were best suited to employee parking but considered too far removed from the retail core to attract many shoppers—the group most prone to abandon downtown. By contrast, Pershing Square lay a short distance from the densest part of the city center, including three of its major department stores, yet, like several of the early multistory garages, it was close enough to the edge to enable convenient vehicular access. Proposals began to advance in the late 1920s for an underground garage there that could accommodate as many as 3,000 cars, but the huge cost combined with the economic downturn made the plans impracticable.[35] The site's appeal nevertheless grew steadily over the ensuing years as the parking situation seemed to deteriorate.

Not surprisingly, then, Pershing Square emerged as the DBMA's top priority. The association commissioned a preliminary study, which was unveiled in January 1947 and strenuously promoted in the months that fol-

147
Bullock's downtown store. Advertisement supporting implementation of freeway plan. (*Los Angeles Times,* 19 March 1945, III-3.)

148
Pershing Square Garage, Fifth, Sixth, Hill, and Olive streets, Los Angeles 1949–1952, Stiles Clements, architect. (City Planning Commission, *Accomplishments* 1950, 21.)



lowed. That April, voters approved an amendment enabling lease of the land beneath the square to a private-sector party for development as a garage. Yet another three years elapsed before opposition, mainly by public transit interests, and other obstacles were surmounted. The DBMA persisted tenaciously—lobbying public support, working behind the scenes, twice soliciting firms to undertake the venture. Finally, ground was broken in February 1951. When completed a year and a half later, the garage was hailed as a major achievement (figure 148). Still, the 1,500 spaces it provided, after half a decade of intense activism, fell far short of the DBMA's overall goal.[36]

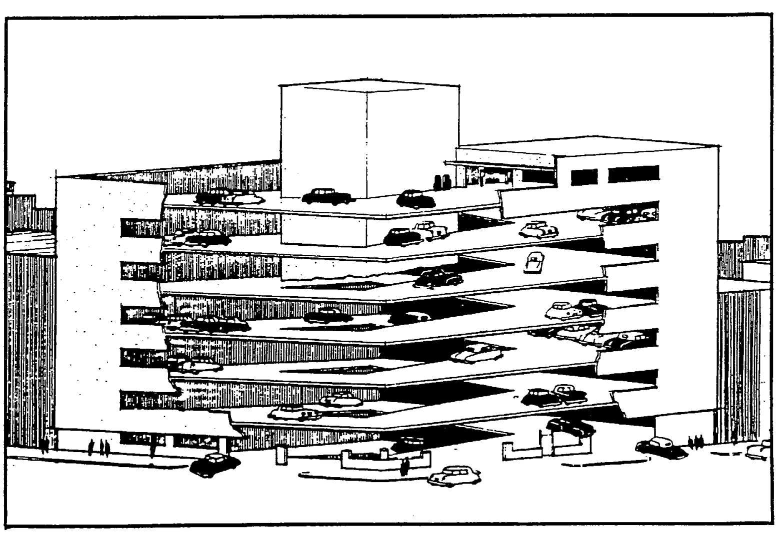
Nonetheless the Pershing Square garage was almost the only such large-scale project realized locally since the 1920s. Several modest facilities housing between 100 and 200 cars each were erected during the depression decade, but contributed little to the precinct's overall needs.[37] Los Angeles even lacked examples of open-air parking garages—"parking decks," as they were often called—which began to appear in a number of U.S. cities on the eve of World War II. Generally consisting of three to four levels and comprised of little more than structure and decking surfaces, these facilities averaged around half the per-square-foot construction cost of the multilevel enclosed garages of the previous decade. Since it had no heating or ventilating and minimal lighting systems, the parking deck enjoyed substantially lower operating expenses as well. Department stores were among the earliest sponsors of such projects, but independent parking companies were quick to see their advantages as well.[38]

Aside from Pershing Square, the only major garage to be realized in downtown Los Angeles between 1928 and 1953 was the seven-level structure built for the General Petroleum Company in 1948.[39] The scheme was not conceived to address shoppers' needs, but rather was a result of a 1946 municipal ordinance, the first of its kind in the country, that required all new commercial buildings downtown to include space for one automobile per 1,000 square feet of office floor area. The facility need not be within, but could lie no further than 1,500 feet from, the parent building. General Petroleum executives took advantage of this provision, selecting a less expensive site two blocks away from their new headquarters for the garage.[40] Holding nearly 500 cars at a time, the structure was among the first in the United States to have the parking surface slope as a continuous ramp from ground to roof levels, an arrangement that reduced the area required for vehicular movement as well as construction costs (figure 149). It was also an early example of a large, multilevel structure incorporating the economies of parking deck design. The garage became a national model, yet it had little immediate impact locally. With new construction downtown remaining a rarity, the ordinance proved ineffective as a quick means of adding to the precinct's parking capacity. The only other major project to be realized before the end of the Korean War was the Statler Center (1946–1952), a hotel–office building complex, which contained underground parking for 465 cars.[41]

If strategic initiatives did little to rectify parking conditions downtown, considerable progress was made through the more traditional method of expanding the quilt of privately owned car lots. Space thus created increased nearly threefold between 1930 and 1953.[42] In sharp contrast to what had occurred during the 1920s, few lots operating at the start of this period closed over the next two decades, owing to low demand for more intense use of downtown property. New lots were added through the 1930s as untenanted vintage buildings were demolished to minimize the tax burden.[43] After the war the process continued, as demand for new building sites failed to rebound while that for more parking space persisted. As a result, off-street parking conditions markedly improved, with an overall capacity in garages and surface lots of some 43,000 spaces, more than double the total figure of approximately 20,000 in 1930. Some of the increase was offset by the few new construction projects of the period as well as ongoing increases in the number of people driving to the city center, yet the improvement was a dramatic one. Downtown became more accessible to motorists than it had been for some three decades. Furthermore, major outlying centers begun in the 1920s were now experiencing conspicuous parking difficulties of their own.[44] Public perceptions may not have changed, and business leaders and city officials alike continued to anguish over parking, but finding off-street space for one's car was no longer a deterrent of consequence to shopping downtown.

PREDICAMENT

Ultimately, the dilemma faced by those with interests in the central shopping district was not a matter of appearances, merchandising, or access, but rather one of physical configuration relative to escalating areawide needs. During a six-year period alone—1948 to 1954—retail sales in the metropolitan region rose by 50 percent, the largest such increase in the na-



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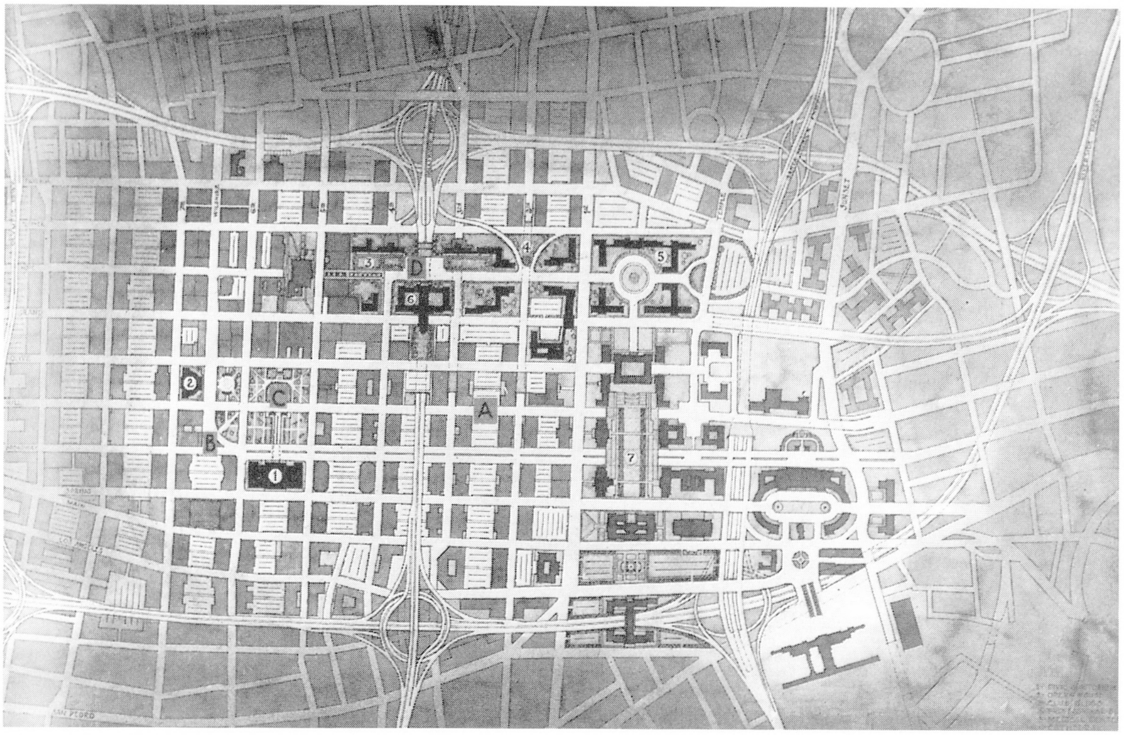
General Petroleum Garage, 750 S. Flower Street, Los Angeles, 1948, Wurdeman & Becket, architects; altered. (*Parking—How It Is Financed,* 10.)

tion.[45] For downtown emporia just to "hold on" to the 11 percent share of Los Angeles County sales they had in 1948 would have necessitated a new construction campaign rivaling that of the 1920s. For them to recover the 29.6 percent share of county sales they enjoyed in 1929, retail space would have had to increase perhaps two- or even threefold. To carry out such epic expansion and yet keep the precinct relatively compact, and thus still conducive to the large-scale pedestrian movement that was essential to its functioning, development would have had to become much denser, with buildings twenty to forty stories tall replacing virtually all extant edifices—thus realizing, in effect, the futuristic visions of the 1920s. Not only would the cost of such a transformation have been enormous, but the problems of vehicular movement and storage would have intensified severalfold.

On the other hand, significant growth could have occurred laterally, as some boosters had hoped in the 1920s, on the blocks extending to the west of Broadway and to the south of Seventh Street. Taking this course, which would more or less have replicated on a much larger scale the process that had occurred during the early twentieth century, the shopping district might have grown to three or four times its then present size without a significant increase in density, but it would have lost all coherence. Pedestrians would never have traversed such distances; some form of transit would have had to supplement walking. Furthermore, it would have been difficult to reestablish a hierarchy of store locations over such a dispersed area. Most off-street parking spaces would have been eliminated; alternative storage facilities with several times the present capacity would have had to be rapidly created.

A third option lay in building a new retail district adjacent to the core area; however, this course would have rendered extant stores redundant—a huge loss in real property. Moreover, the new emporia would have been separated from movie theaters, which were heavily patronized by shoppers, and from the office blocks whence many other customers came. Parking accommodations would still have been needed in vast numbers. The best location for a new precinct was not to the south, toward an area then considered among the region's most blighted, but rather to the west, which was inhospitable topographically. And if westward expansion did occur, it would have been separated from the existing core by the Harbor Freeway, a bifurcation disadvantageous to old and new districts alike.

All scenarios for large-scale expansion of the central shopping district would have been predicated on the willingness of many thousands of new consumers to drive ever further from home along ever more crowded arterials to reach downtown—an assumption for which there was little supporting evidence. Some business leaders hoped the metropolitan freeway system then under construction would bring new life to downtown by making it easier to drive there, but much of that network was not completed until the early 1960s, and well before that time it was helping to accelerate the decentralization process far more than reinforce the existing urban structure.



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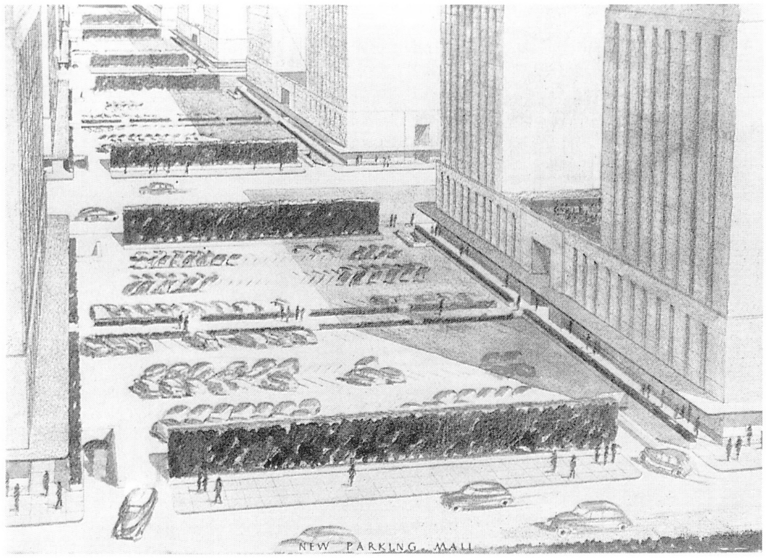
"Study for the Redevelopment of the Central Business District, Los Angeles," Southern California Chapter, American Institute of Architects, ca. 1942–1943; project. (Los Angeles City Planning Commission, *Accomplishments* 1943, n.p.)

At the heart of the problem lay the fact that the large downtown retail districts of Los Angeles and other cities nationwide had emerged primarily because a major share of the population could reach them with relative ease through urban rail systems. Even with the advent of widespread automobile use, downtown Los Angeles had continued to grow with the momentum gained from earlier decades as much as from any other factor. Business leaders almost never questioned whether the old order could continue; few considered that the automobile might change the form and arrangement of growth patterns.

But by the 1930s, retail development in outlying areas spawned changes that effectively altered practices across the board. The supermarket demonstrated the value of selling in volume at low prices, which necessitated a substantial amount of low-cost land. The supermarket also underscored the importance of having large areas of continuous selling space to induce customer circulation for convenience goods, just as the department store had done several decades earlier for specialty items. Achieving a configuration that was more horizontal than vertical dominated design objectives for almost every kind of retail facility by the eve of World War II. Even with a huge department store, such as the May Company Wilshire, four selling floors extending over a large area was considered far more desirable than having additional stories with a smaller floorplate. The earlier vision of a new skyscraper center, with emporia towering thirty or forty stories, would have seemed as foolish to merchants of the postwar era as the multilayered speedways running through those towers seemed to traffic engineers.



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"Study for the Redevelopment of the Central Business District," typical "parking mall." (*Accomplishments* 1943, n.p.)

No proposal for so massive an expansion of downtown Los Angeles ever surfaced during the 1930s and 1940s because none was remotely feasible. The most sweeping plan for the business district came from members of the American Institute of Architects' local chapter, working in cooperation with the city planning department during the middle of the war when ample time existed for dreaming. The scheme introduced civic amenities long absent as well as access routes from the anticipated freeway system, but the most fundamental change was a complete reconfiguration of the business district (figure 150).[46] Under the plan, space for buildings and for automobiles was more or less evenly dispersed. The leitmotif used to create this balance came from the Miracle Mile: buildings abutted the streets, large surface lots lay to the rear (figure 151). The basic difference was that the ensemble was nodal instead of linear, with row after row of regularized Wilshire groupings from First to Ninth streets.

No one appears to have taken the proposal seriously since it would have entailed exorbitant costs without measurable gain in building area, even had the sweeping authority been mustered to effect its implementation. Besides, Wilshire Boulevard was no longer considered the optimal paradigm. Too many changes had occurred to retailing since the late 1920s. The mercantile elite that led the wave of commercial decentralization after the war sought to produce a new model. No one of them had a clear idea of what that model might be, but the years of armed conflict—as the region's population swelled, savings mounted, and the pent-up desire for new consumer goods reached an all-time high—gave retailers opportunity to think about the possibilities and to lay the groundwork for their strategic plans.

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THE NEW MAY CO. CRENSHAW STORE
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ON THIS SITE

IX

MARKETS IN THE MEADOWS

When A. W. Ross predicted in 1952 that Los Angeles would have many miracle miles, he knew full well that examples could already be found in the metropolitan area and that others were planned.[1] The largest new shopping centers, like the Miracle Mile before them, were to function as "downtowns" for their respective areas. Yet most of these developments did not look anything like what Ross had created on Wilshire Boulevard. They embodied significant departures in layout, appearance, and business structure, and they were seen not just as mavericks but as harbingers of a fundamental shift in retail development.

Postwar practices drew from lessons learned during the 1920s and 1930s. Inspired by the success of the supermarket, many retailers now pursued volume sales at moderate prices using self-service and self-selection methods in big stores situated at strategic but previously isolated locations. The shopping center's rise in the prewar years fostered a widespread concern for planning. After the return of peace, ever more attention was given to analyzing the market, selecting tenants, and devising an effective management structure as well as to creating a visually unified ensemble. A layout that provided adequate parking space was also among the foremost concerns. The shopping center became a major thrust in retail development. Major complexes were built much more frequently than in earlier years. Many of the individual stores were considerably larger, and having thirty or forty of them in a complex was no longer unusual.