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.

REMODELING

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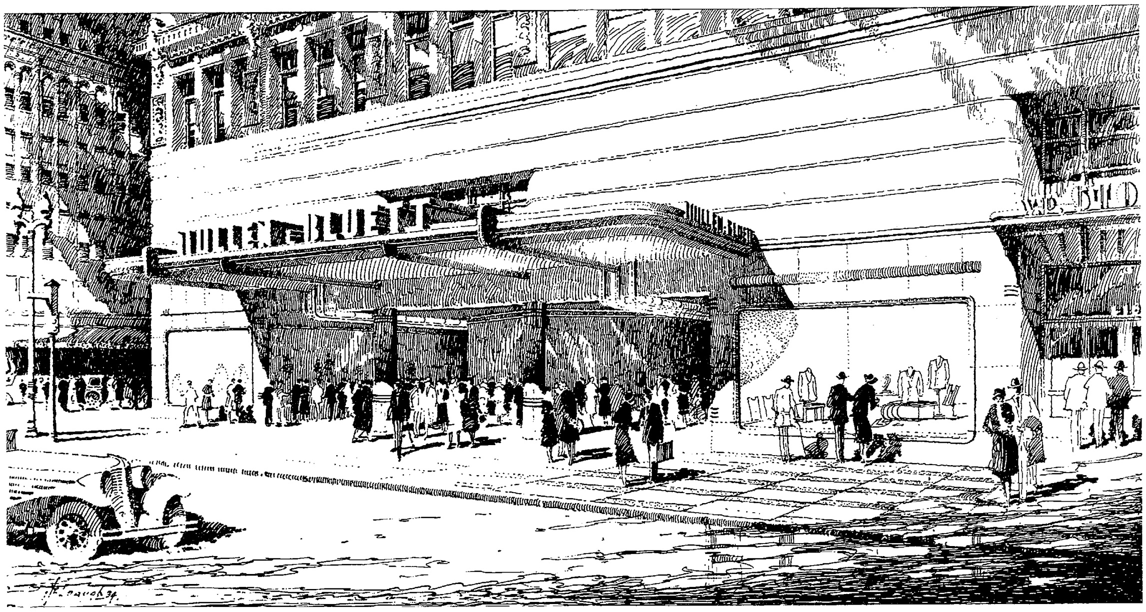
"Los Angeles 47 Years Hence," May Company advertisement. (*Los Angeles Times,* 25 July 1928, I-5.)

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



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.

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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.)

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

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.

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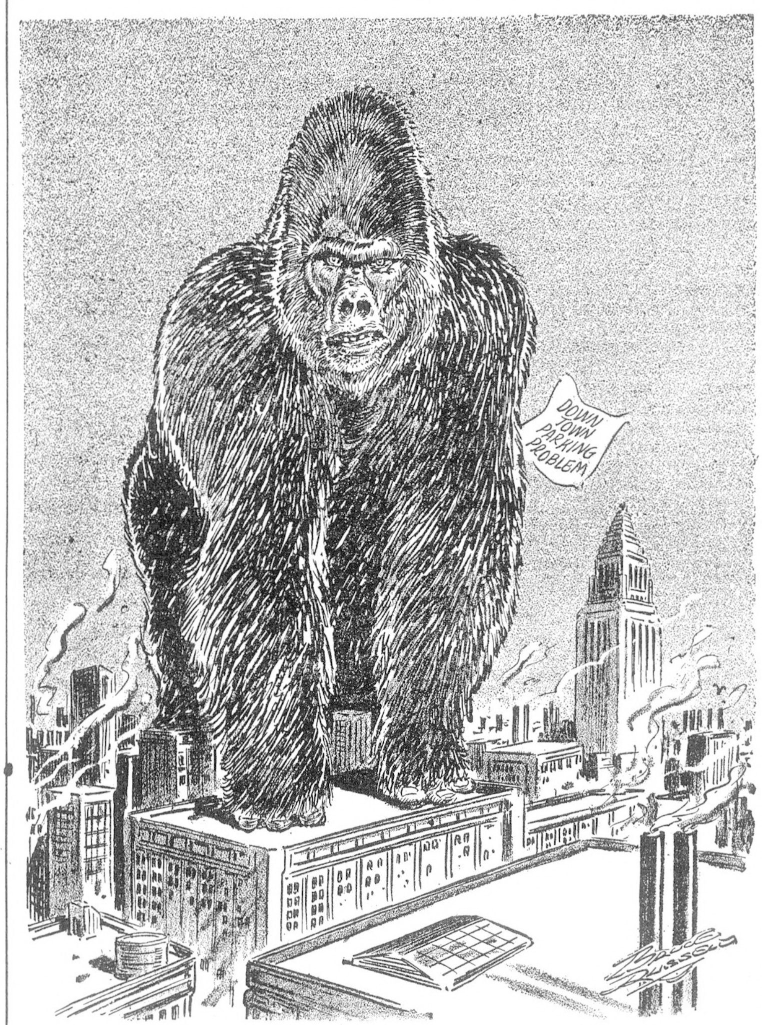
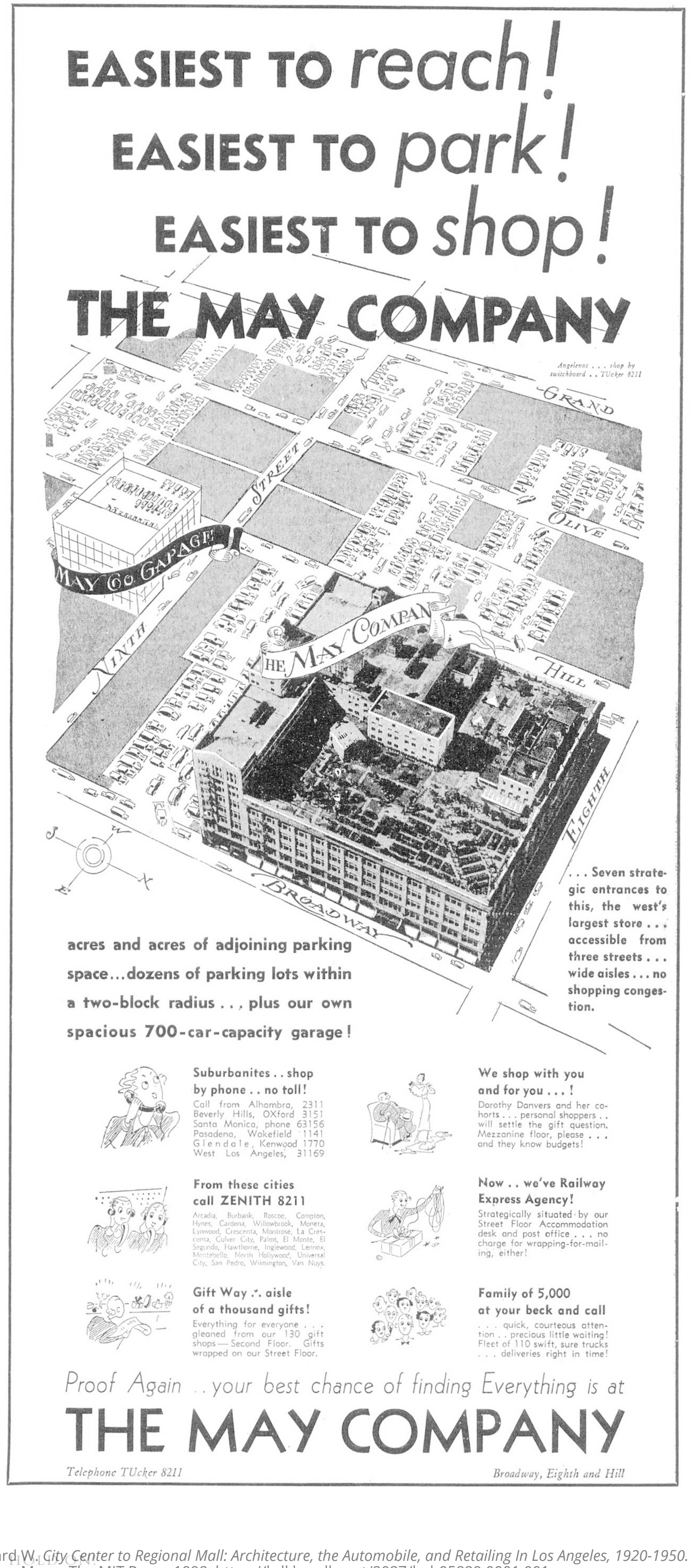
Shopping crowd, Seventh Street and S. Broadway, looking south. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1939. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

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]



Gargantua



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"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