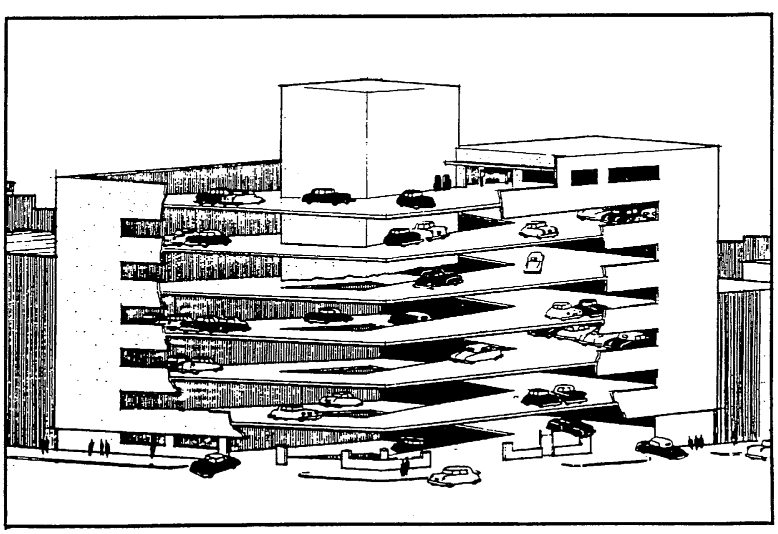
If strategic initiatives did little to rectify parking conditions downtown, considerable progress was made through the more traditional method of expanding the quilt of privately owned car lots. Space thus created increased nearly threefold between 1930 and 1953.[42] In sharp contrast to what had occurred 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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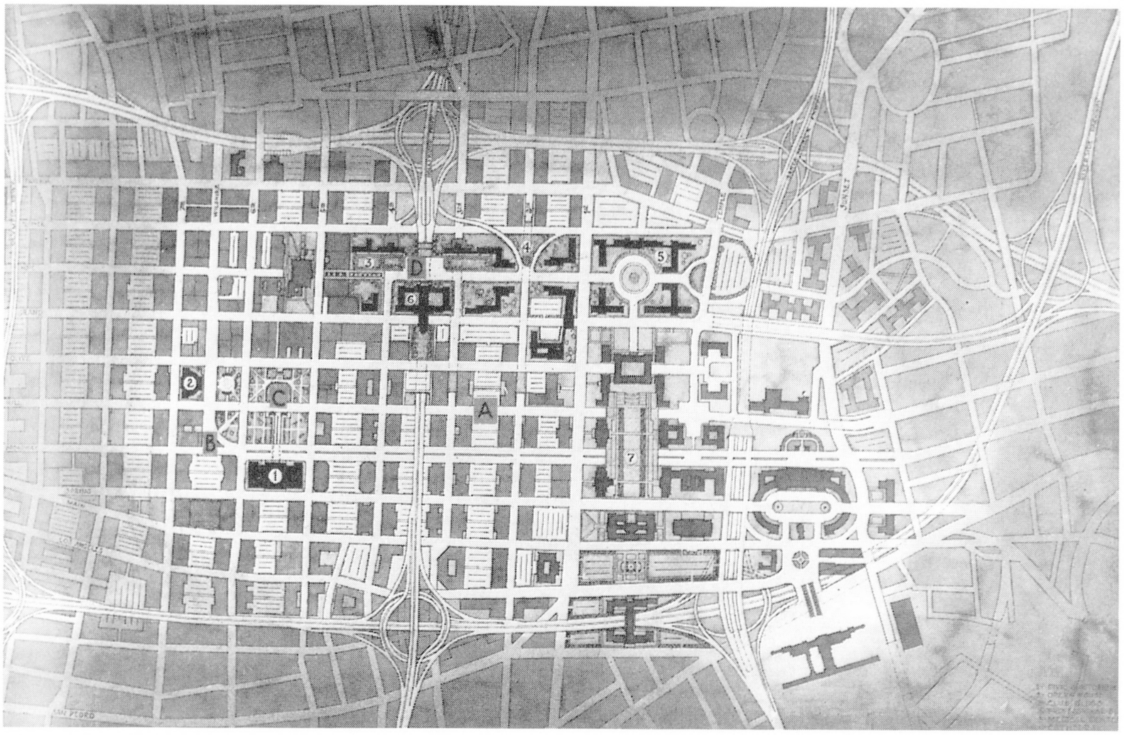
General Petroleum Garage, 750 S. Flower Street, Los Angeles, 1948, Wurdeman & Becket, architects; altered. (*Parking—How It Is Financed,* 10.)

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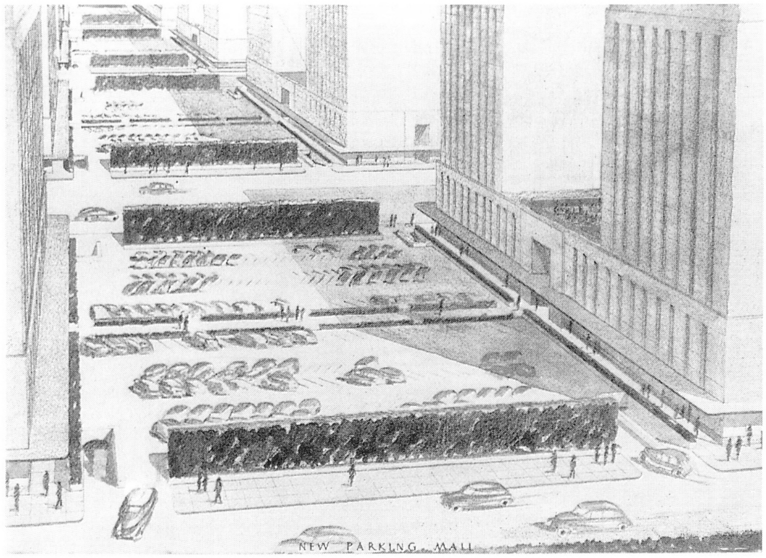
"Study for the Redevelopment of the Central Business District, Los Angeles," Southern California Chapter, American Institute of Architects, ca. 1942–1943; project. (Los Angeles City Planning Commission, *Accomplishments* 1943, n.p.)

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.