

Panorama City into a regional center that became a primary shopping magnet in the rapidly developing area. Yet the plan of nearly a decade earlier ensured permanent separation between the stores that attracted this trade and those oriented to more routine functions.

What became nationally recognized as an error in shopping center layout by the mid-1950s was not seen as such only a few years previous, at least in Los Angeles. Real estate and retail interest were wedded to the Main Street idea to such an extent that one scheme, Culver Center (begun 1949), created the arrangement where it did not previously exist. Located several blocks to the west of the commercial core of Culver City, a satellite town of the 1920s, the complex was designed to serve the now fast-growing residential areas nearby. Locally based developers, W. W. and Blake Touchstone, chose a site between two of the metropolitan area's major east-west thoroughfares, Venice and Washington boulevards, more or less equidistant from the Crenshaw Center (to the east), the Miracle Mile (north), downtown Santa Monica (west), and Westchester (south), boasting that their project would obviate the need to patronize other commercial centers, including Culver City's own modest core. The complex introduced national chains to the district, including J. C. Penney, W. T. Grant, Mode O'Day, and Karl's Shoes, but most of the merchants were local ones who moved from the town's center or established new branches.<sup>62</sup> Occupying twelve acres, the ensemble did not approach a regional center in its size or complexion. It did, however, cultivate the aura of a town, with stores facing a new, block-long street, almost useless for vehicular circulation—all set at right angles to the thoroughfares (figures 170, 171).

## DESIGN

Most parties involved in Los Angeles shopping center development believed that if they were to succeed in creating new urban centers—new





“Main Streets”—a sense of visual coherence would be a key factor. The Culver City complex continued the common practice of facade differentiation among stores, but soon greater uniformity in massing and sometimes in detail became the norm. Such treatment could make a large shopping center seem all the more impressive to the passing motorist and also facilitate reading the signs of the major stores. The Broadway-Crenshaw Center set an influential precedent in this respect as well as in having both street and parking lot elevations embellished to more or less the same degree.

On the other hand what failed to continue was a sense of hierarchy. The major retail development became less readily distinguishable by its buildings from smaller retail districts. Tall buildings, towers, and conspicuously decorated fronts had filled this role during the interwar decades, so that the center of Hollywood, the Miracle Mile, or even the modestly scaled blocks of Westwood Village stood apart from the norm. Much of the Broadway-Crenshaw Center’s distinction in this respect lay with the theatrical treatment of its anchor store. Thereafter, community-sized centers were basically akin to neighborhood ones.<sup>63</sup> The differences lay more in the number and range of stores than in physical character.

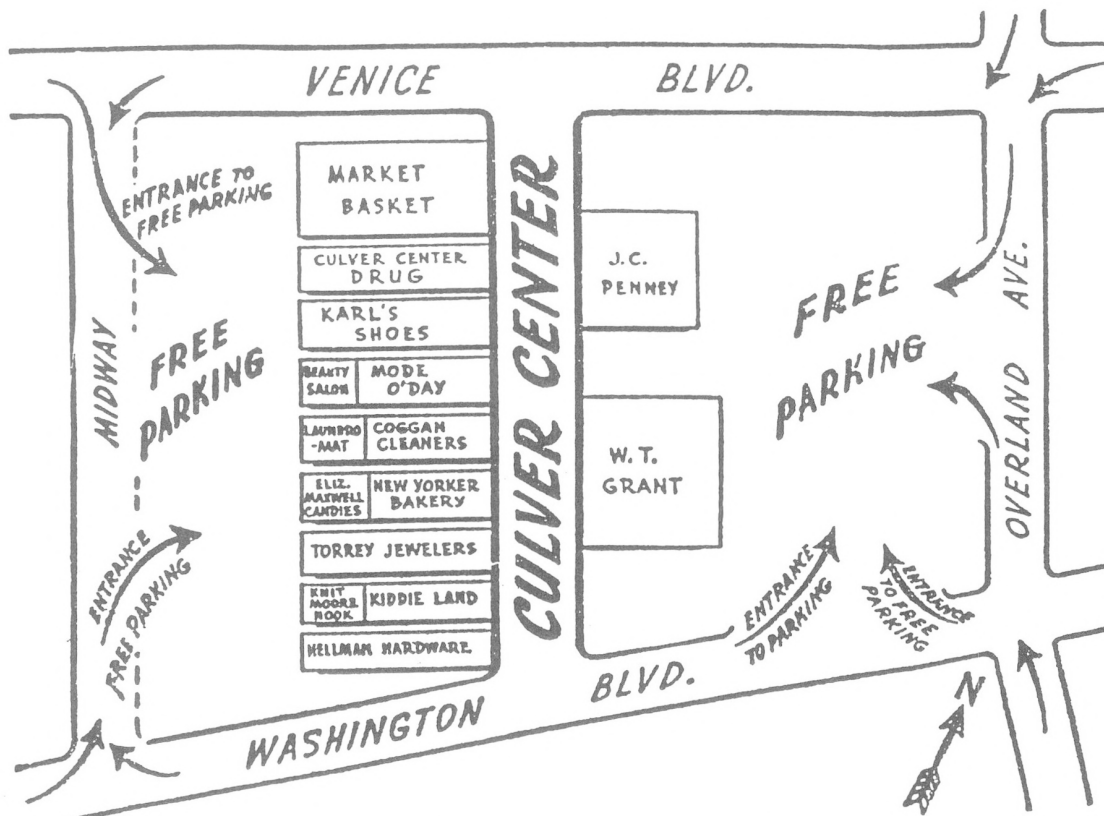
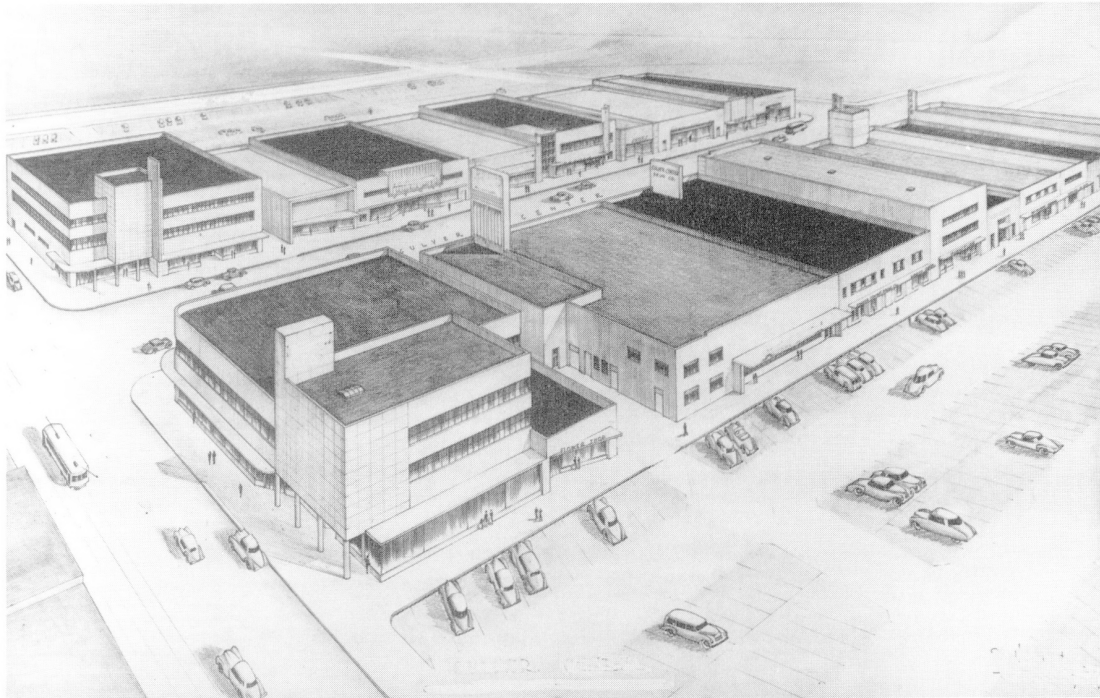
By the mid-1950s, when the design of shopping center exteriors became more homogeneous and a taste for neutrality in the architecture it-

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Panorama City Shopping Center, Van Nuys Boulevard between Roscoe Boulevard and Parthenia Street, Los Angeles, begun 1949. General view showing Panorama Market (1949, Arthur Froelich, architect), in center with units dating from early 1950s to either side, and the Broadway department store (1954–1955, Welton Becket & Associates, architects), on left. Photo “Dick” Whittington, 1956. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

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Panorama City Shopping Center, general view showing the Broadway and other stores in the 1954–1955 addition. Photo “Dick” Whittington, 1956. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)



**ALL ROADS LEAD TO CULVER CENTER AND VALUES!**

self became prevalent, even a major complex could be unassuming, indeed uneventful, in nature. Besides large signs and a very large parking lot, the primary thing that signified a regional center's importance as a magnet of trade was the great unadorned bulk of the department store. Panorama City could not have been more different in its lack of memorable presence from the Miracle Mile, which in functional terms was somewhat equivalent.

Probably the single most important factor in this shift was the emerging belief among retailers and real estate developers that an embellished facade had little to do with sales. The brands of merchandise, pricing, the reputation of the store (especially for major chains), accessibility of the site, and adequate free parking were all now considered of greater importance to simulating trade. Furthermore, with much of the target audience now lower middle and prosperous working class, imagery associated with an elite residential enclave or an equally posh metropolitan center seemed not only superfluous but inhibiting. The atmosphere cultivated instead was more egalitarian—relaxed, convenient, but also practical and no-nonsense. The investment in appearances was concentrated inside, on product displays, fixtures, and lighting in particular.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the cost of a building's infrastructure, which now always included air conditioning, was rising in proportion to that of its structural and surface components. Wartime technologies generated a plethora of new building materials, many of which could be used as relatively inexpensive veneers.<sup>65</sup> The minimalist aesthetic espoused by young architects, which dominated design practice in the United States by the early 1950s, lent artistic legitimacy to a shift propelled by economic considerations.

The new attitude toward store exteriors was the key to a change in thinking about how those buildings could be oriented. If exterior image no longer played a prominent advertising role, there was little justification on those grounds for keeping the front close to the street. The most compelling argument had been window displays, but the Crenshaw Center and other projects of the immediate postwar years demonstrated how little streetside pedestrian traffic was generated in new outlying areas. Furthermore, two nationally acclaimed projects with alternative configurations had recently been built in southern California, both for lone-wolf department stores by two of the industry's pacesetters in their respective areas: Sears and Bullock's.

Just as Sears had pioneered in the use of off-street parking for large commercial outlets during the 1920s, so it played a seminal role in the realignment of stores away from the street. This step was initially taken due to the very particular circumstances of a new Los Angeles unit built in 1938–1939, but the design approach of the scheme had a profound effect on Sears's subsequent work and on stores generally. The site was chosen because it fronted two major arteries (Pico and Venice boulevards), had access to a third (West Boulevard), and lay adjacent to a streetcar-bus transfer terminal of the Los Angeles Municipal Railway. Yet the property also possessed little street frontage for a big store, stood away from prime

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Culver Center, Washington and Venice boulevards, between Overland Avenue and Midway Street, Culver City, 1948–1951, Webber & Company, architects for master plan; some buildings by others; altered. Aerial perspective, 1948. (Hearst Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

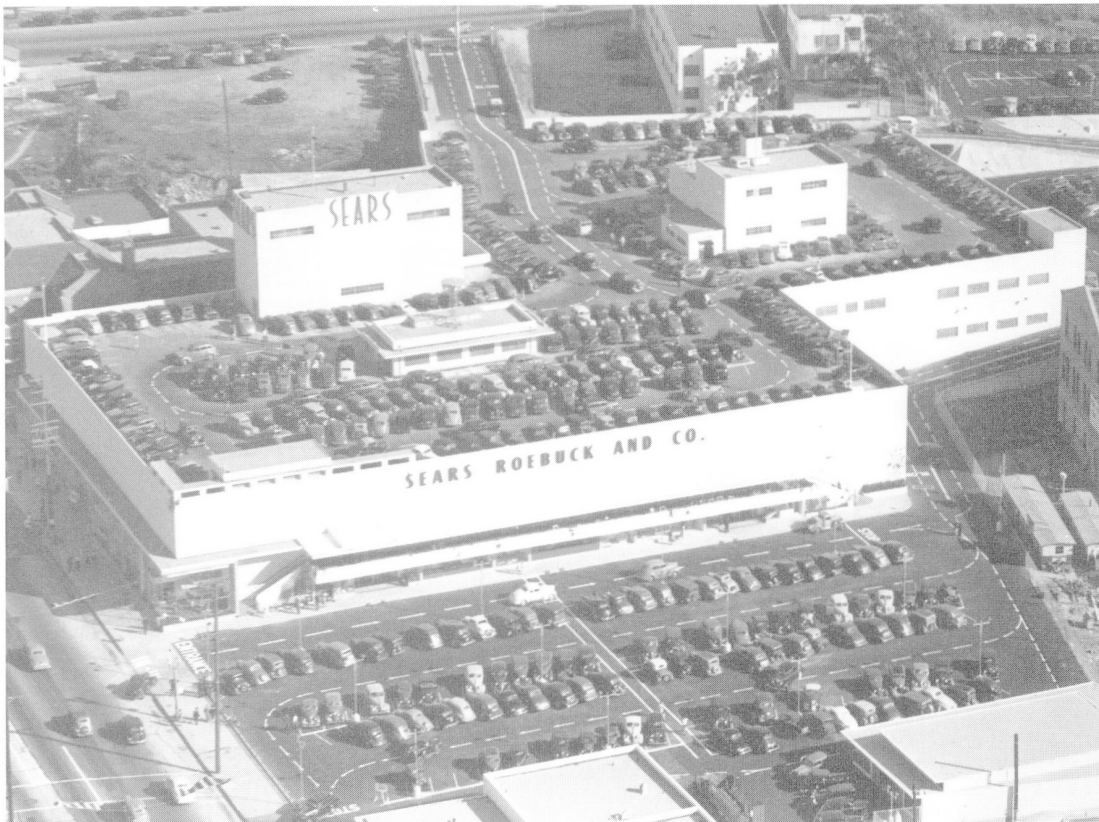
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Culver Center, site plan. (*Culver City Evening Star News*, 10 May 1950, Culver Center sect., 1.)



corner lots, and was both eccentric in shape and irregular in topography. The land had never before been considered a good place for a retail outlet of consequence.

In response to these constraints, an ingenious solution was developed allowing a sizable building (202,000 square feet) containing only two stories and a basement as well as outdoor space for over 700 cars on the premises (figure 172).<sup>66</sup> To achieve this plan, the facility was built into the sloping terrain, occupying what would normally have been viewed as the least desirable part of the property. The configuration allowed much of the remaining flat land to be used as parking space for 455 cars. The arrangement also enabled ready access to the roof, which was designed as an additional parking area for 275 cars—one of the first such arrangements to be realized in the United States. Unusually large, two-tiered display windows ran across the Pico Boulevard elevation, but the building did not possess a clear front. Instead, the mass was treated as a piece of abstract sculpture, its forms echoing the variations of the site, its sole embellishment emanating from carefully composed elements serving utilitarian purposes (figures 173, 174). The longest and arguably the most important side faced the car lot, but probably the most memorable experience lay in driving onto the roof deck, being directed to a parking space from a public address system in a control booth, thence descending by escalator to the sales floors inside.<sup>67</sup> Within this experiential schema, the boulevard was reduced to a minor role.





The unorthodoxy of the design stemmed in large part from the process employed to create it. The Pico Boulevard store was the company's first major project not prepared by the architectural office of George Nimmons. Sears turned in-house to its Store Planning and Display Department, which was established in 1932 and was by now assuming a decisive role in designing facilities. Among the department's most significant innovations was eliminating exterior windows above the ground floor, a concept first implemented at its Englewood store (1934) on Chicago's south side. Although highly controversial at that time, the step proved its worth by improving methods of illumination and display as well as the efficiency of mechanical systems. Few other companies followed Sears's example during the 1930s, but the "windowless" building became a hallmark of department store design after the war.<sup>68</sup>

The elimination of most windows affected the approach to exterior treatment and orientation of the Pico Boulevard store. For the first time, Sears gave its department the chance to plan all aspects of a scheme from the start. The team in charge—John Raben, a specialist in store layout who developed the design concept, and John Stokes Redden, recently appointed Sears's chief architect—claimed that little attention was paid to the exterior per se; the effectiveness of the layout for merchandising overrode other considerations. As a result, "the focusing of all efforts on merchandise and none on the building would seem to sacrifice many a possibility, but such a disappearance of 'architecture,' or rather its shifting to plain performance, is a sign of maturity in retailing."<sup>69</sup> While discounting the traditionally decorous role of architecture, the scheme was seen by many practitioners as achieving precisely those objectives of avant-garde modernism whereby basic functional requirements served as the basis for expression. The *Architectural Forum's* editor offered nothing but praise for

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Sears, Roebuck & Company store, 4550 W. Pico Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1938–1939, John Stokes Redden, architect, John Gerard Raben, designer; altered. Aerial view. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1940. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

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Sears Pico Boulevard store, north elevation. Photo "Dick" Whittington, 1939. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

the solution, emphasizing that it represented maturity in design no less than in retailing. Architects' handbooks on store planning published after the war not only presented the solution as a benchmark but advocated much the same design process as that employed by the Sears team.<sup>70</sup>

Attention was also showered on Bullock's "store of the future" in Pasadena (1945–1947), which likewise seemed to shed all vestiges of traditional design (figure 175).<sup>71</sup> Described as looking more like a country club than a commercial outlet, the emporium lay in a residential area some blocks from downtown—a site company executives believed advantageous given the success of their Wilshire Boulevard store. Like the latter, the building had a conspicuous presence from the street, but both topography and landscaping separated the building from the sidewalk; the pedestrian entrance appeared incidental. Only when approached from the larger of the two parking lots did the main entry path become clear. The directness with which this arrangement was expressed elicited admiration no less than did the elegance of the store's treatment inside and out. Both the Bullock's and Sears stores were bold, singular statements—low-slung in mass, plastic in form—quite unlike the boxy piles that would come to characterize department stores in regional shopping centers by the mid-1950s. Yet the two projects demonstrated how the type need not have the traditional streetfront orientation.<sup>72</sup> Sears underscored the practical attributes of such thinking; Bullock's made it fashionable.

The specifics of site configuration for a lone-wolf store, of course, could not be applied to a large retail complex. Thus there remained the issue of how to organize the regional shopping center's plan so that motorists did not feel as if they were entering from the rear, and how to maximize the convenience of their movement from street to store in both physical and perceptual terms. One basic solution lay in reversing the customary order, placing the car lot in front of the buildings. This fore-





court configuration was used on a much smaller scale for many drive-in markets, popular in the region during the late 1920s. The drive-in's example inspired the use of the forecourt in some neighborhood shopping centers elsewhere during the 1930s, but this arrangement was rejected in southern California for supermarkets and shopping centers alike for a number of years.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, the forecourt eventually proved its worth as the best way to avoid the problems encountered at the Broadway-Crenshaw and Westchester centers. The initial step was taken at Valley Plaza, which, like its rival Panorama City, was planned in the late 1940s as the “downtown” for the San Fernando Valley.

#### VALLEY PLAZA

Valley Plaza was created by Bob Symonds, a veteran of area real estate ventures since the late 1920s. Most of his experience was in selling residential lots, but Symonds had undertaken the development of a neighborhood retail center at one of his tracts, Valley Village in North Hollywood, in the late 1930s. During the war he embarked on studies for a much larger, integrated commercial development, inspired at least in part by the Country Club Plaza, which he admired for its business structure and its generous accommodation of automobiles.<sup>74</sup> Symonds purchased a fifty-acre tract at the intersection of Laurel Canyon and Victory boulevards, lying about an equal distance from Burbank, North Hollywood, and Van Nuys, then the three largest population centers in the valley (figure 176). The scale of the

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Sears Pico Boulevard store, view from southwest. Photo author, 1986.

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Bullock's-Pasadena department store, 401 S. Lake Avenue, Pasadena, 1945-1947, Wurdeman & Becket, architects. Street elevation. Photo author, 1986.