



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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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.

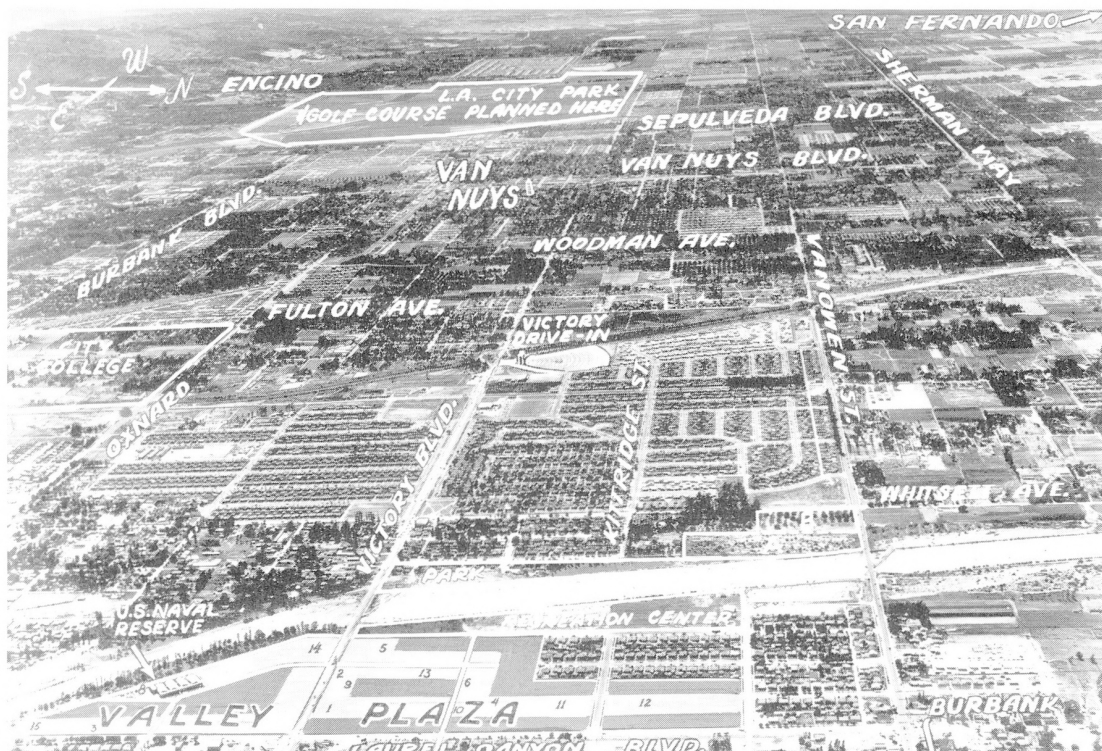
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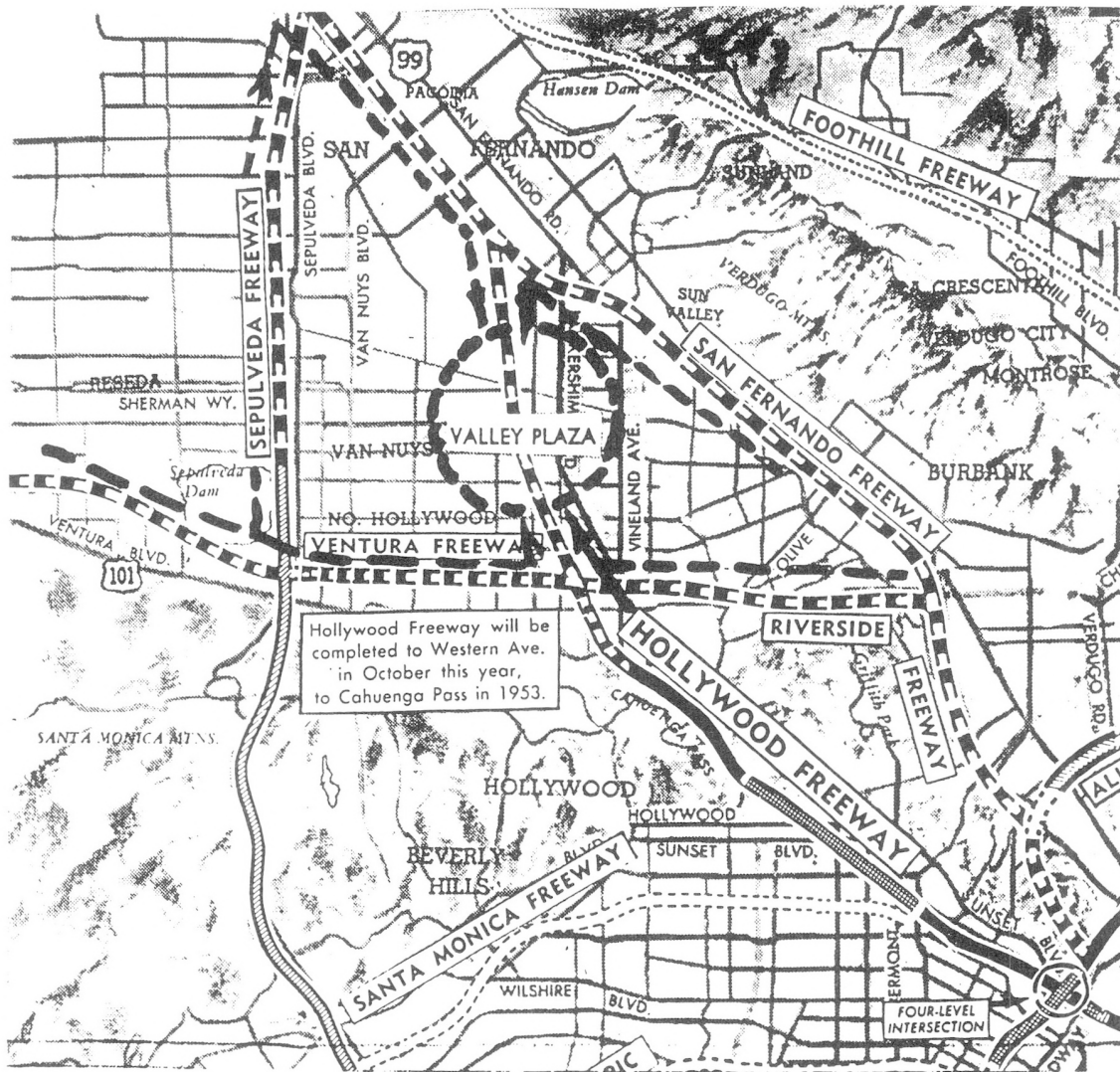
Bullock's-Pasadena department store, 401 S. Lake Avenue, Pasadena, 1945-1947, Wurdeman & Becket, architects. Street elevation. Photo author, 1986.

enterprise was based not only on projected growth nearby but on that of a much larger territory. Time, not distance, was the key factor in delineating the target area.

Symonds predicated his approach on the regional plan for high-speed, limited-access freeways, which was slated for implementation after the war. The property lay adjacent to one of these routes (the Hollywood Freeway) and near two others (Ventura and Golden State freeways). Symonds was probably the first developer in southern California and one of the first in the country to recognize the significance of the freeway in making a retail complex convenient to large numbers of motorists and to move decisively in securing a strategic point along its path, well before construction, when a sizable piece of land could be obtained at relatively low cost (figure 177). Until the 1950s, most southern California developers continued to rely on boulevards as the matrix for locating large-scale commercial projects, while retailers harbored hopes that the freeways would primarily enhance patronage of downtown stores.⁷⁵

Symonds proved no more bound by convention in the layout of his shopping center. He later claimed that around thirty designs were studied before the scheme was finalized in 1949, a process that consumed some four to five years. Several different approaches were taken, reflecting substantial changes in thought and the major shifts then occurring in the design of large shopping centers. The idea of placing the cars up front came relatively late in the sequence. One of the early proposals for Valley Plaza, probably prepared in 1945 or 1946, owed the clearest debt to J. C. Nichols in having a series of small blocks, wide interior streets, and cen-





FOUR FREEWAYS TO SERVE VALLEY PLAZA

trally placed parking areas—all to facilitate vehicular movement (figure 178). Both the size and configuration of the lots precluded having large anchor stores. The ensemble may have been conceived like the Country Club Plaza in having retail outlets of a more traditional size—a center for specialty goods more than for mass merchandising. The whole concept changed substantially by the latter months of 1947 with a master plan developed by the Austin Company (figure 179). Now called the “central business district” for the San Fernando Valley, its organization was more akin to that of an existing downtown, with a crossroads as a focal point, updated by placing car lots on block interiors and at the periphery. Key sites were allocated to anchor stores, including Sears, Roebuck, which Symonds was courting.

Within a year, however, the arrangement was transformed again. Prepared by Stiles Clements, the new scheme called for a more compact configuration of stores interspersed by parking areas (figure 180). Cross

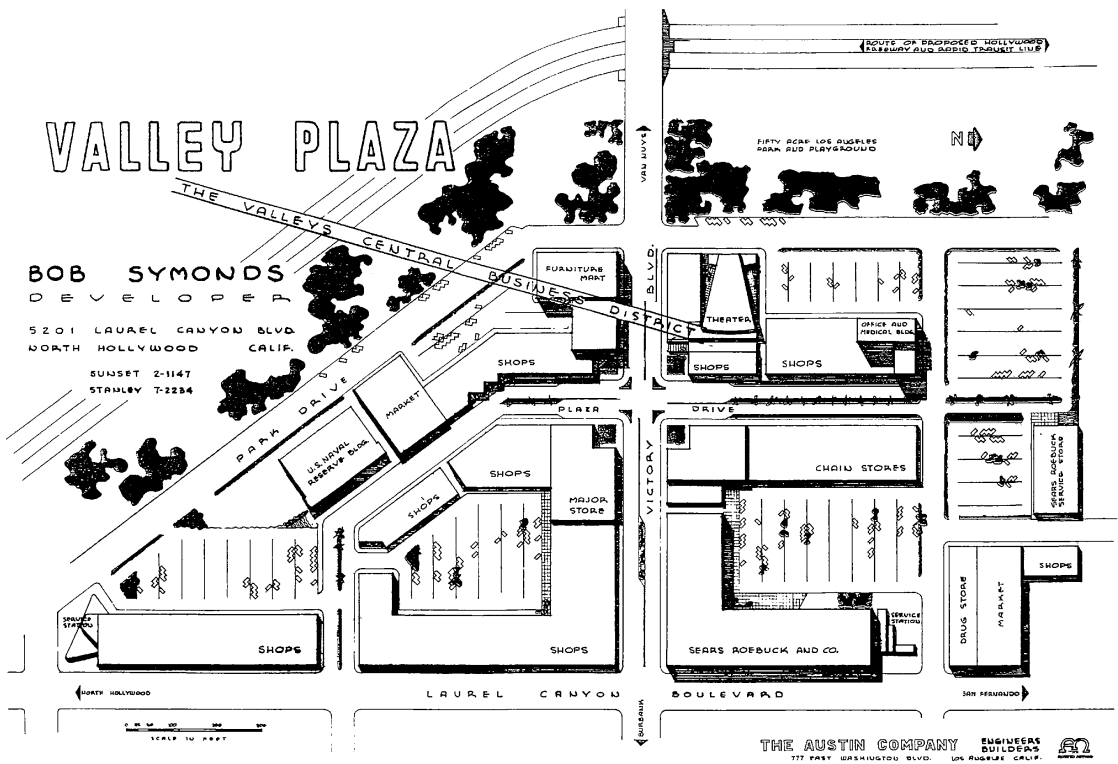
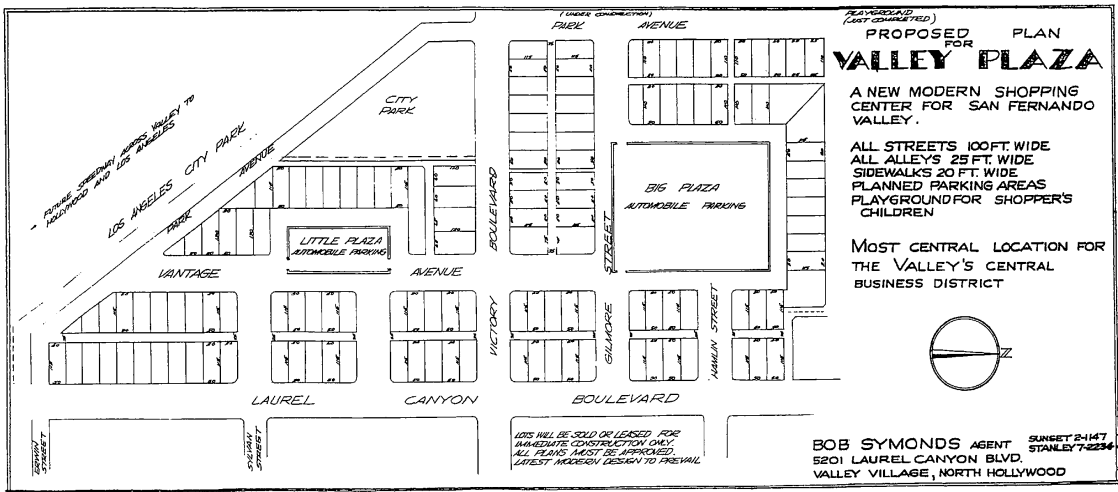
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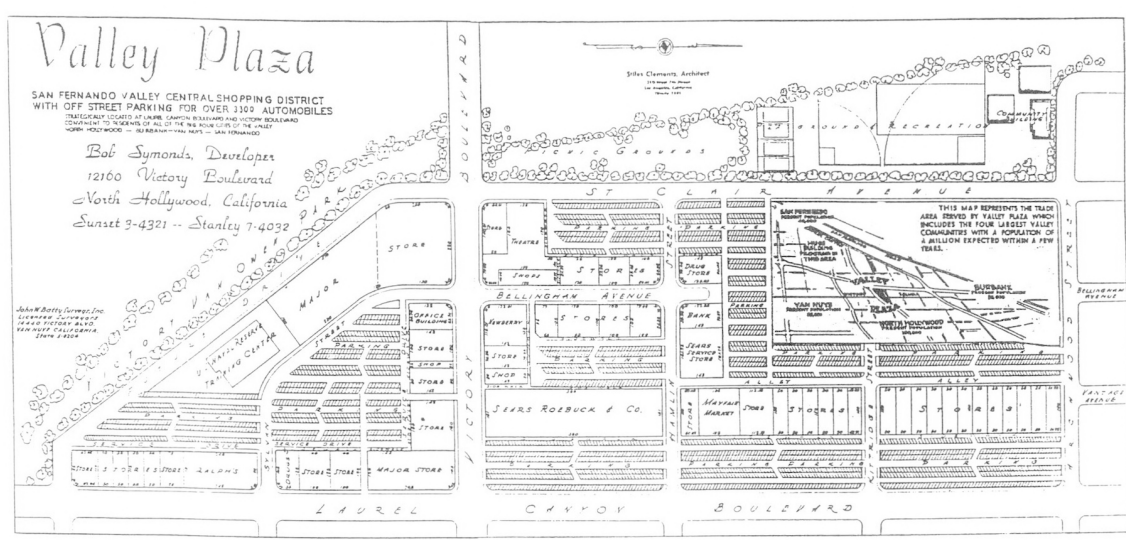
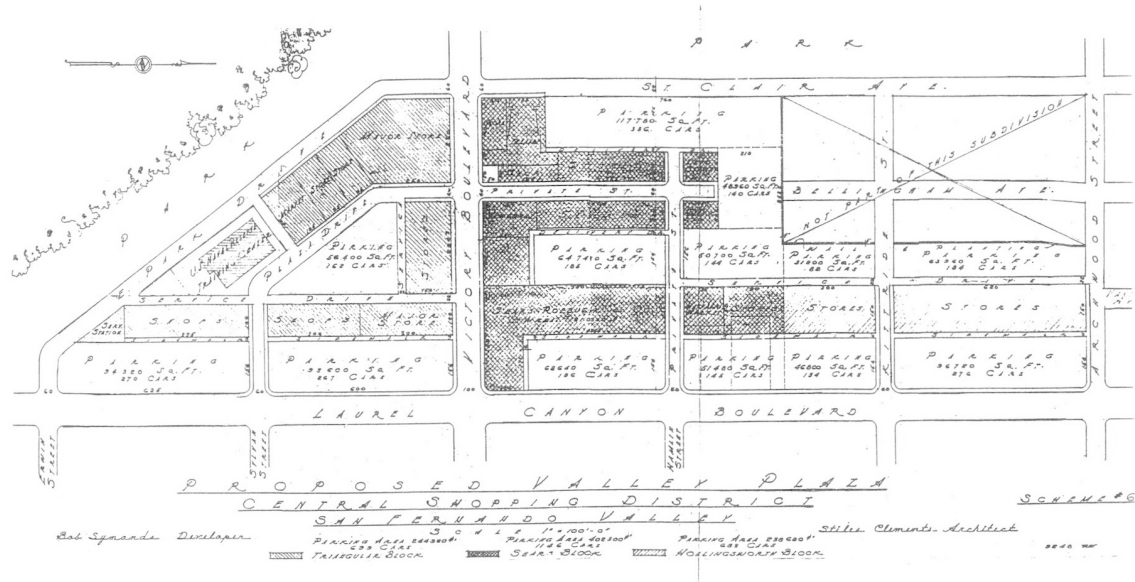
Valley Plaza, Laurel Canyon and Victory boulevards, Los Angeles, begun 1949. Photomontage of site plan and aerial view looking west, showing major routes and communities, ca. 1949. (Courtesy Sears Merchandise Group.)

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Valley Plaza, diagrammatic map, showing relationship to existing and proposed freeways, ca. 1950. (Courtesy Bill Symonds.)

streets were narrowed, functioning more as access roads to maximize continuity in what had become two expansive blocks flanking Victory Boulevard. The biggest difference, however, was the 156-foot setback of all stores from Laurel Canyon Boulevard, accommodating 878 cars, nearly half the total. Only a corner extension of the huge Sears store retained its streetfront ties. Soon thereafter, this residual arm was eliminated from the plans, but Symonds had to forfeit the front lots on the southern block because owners of the corner parcels at Laurel Canyon and Victory refused to sell (figure 181). At the same time, the project gained from the emer-





gence of a tangent retail center, developed by W. I. Hollingsworth, extending a block and a half to the north. Hollingsworth refused to cooperate with Symonds on tenancy and other business matters, but did honor the setback (now at 172 feet) and other physical aspects of the plan so that the ensemble would appear to be one.⁷⁶ This unplanned addition not only made more stores available to shoppers, it greatly enlarged the perceived size of the complex from its major north-south approaches and brought the car lot capacity to 3,300 (figure 182).

Several factors may have prompted the shift from rear to front parking. Symonds could have been influenced by recent plans for several community-sized shopping centers elsewhere, which he illustrated in a portfolio used to interest retailers in the project.⁷⁷ Sears's concerns were perhaps the decisive ones, however. Not only did the L-shaped form of the building depicted in earlier schemes impede both the internal display

- 178 Valley Plaza, preliminary site plan, ca. 1945-1946. (Courtesy Bill Symonds.)
- 179 Valley Plaza, preliminary site plan, ca. 1947, Austin Company, architects. (Courtesy Bill Symonds.)
- 180 Valley Plaza, preliminary site plan, 1948, Stiles Clements, architect. (Courtesy Bill Symonds.)
- 181 Valley Plaza, site plan, 1949, Stiles Clements, architect. (Courtesy Bill Symonds.)

of goods and customer movement that Sears or any other large-scale retailer demanded by this point, but the car lot was too small. Sears stores had always had large parking areas of their own. Here, the lot would also be used by patrons of the other stores. If Sears's building stretched the entire length of a front lot, by contrast, the space would remain essentially its own. Sears may also have requested that Symonds hire Clements to prepare the master plan since he had just designed the company's two newest southern California stores and was well familiar with its retailing requirements.⁷⁸

The degree to which particular circumstances affected the use of a large front lot at Valley Plaza was probably great, since scant precedent existed at a comparable scale. Similar undertakings were all new; many were under construction or in the planning stage, and thus there was no way to measure their performance. While the forecourt was now a common feature of neighborhood shopping centers, no consensus existed for the layout of bigger complexes.⁷⁹ The Urban Land Institute's Community Builder's Council, comprised of real estate developers seasoned in shopping center design, stressed that an expansive front parking lot placed buildings too far from the street and gave an unattractive impression of the whole complex. They preferred dividing the car lot between the front and rear of stores. Much the same view was expressed by the authors of the most detailed study of shopping center design published before the mid-1950s. Within a few years, attitudes would change and front lots become the overwhelming favorite for centers of all sizes not oriented around a pedestrian mall. Merchants found it advantageous always to remain in sight to patrons and thus not have them pass from view to a rear lot.⁸⁰ Appearance no longer seemed to matter as much as consumer convenience and direct visual ties with stores, regardless of how far back from the street they stood. While the development of large centers was still at an early stage, Valley Plaza helped set an important precedent.⁸¹





Valley Plaza was an experiment for Sears also. Never before had the company functioned as the principal retailer in the development of a shopping center from its inception. Sears had almost always located its new “A” stores away from concentrated business areas; the Westwood Village unit (1936) constituted a rare prewar exception. But the success of large shopping centers caused Sears to rethink its policies in order to stay competitive with major downtown department store companies. As early as 1946, Sears unveiled plans for a big unit at the Country Club Plaza, and more or less concurrently with the southern California project it decided to build at Cameron Village, a new “downtown” on the outskirts of Raleigh, North Carolina.⁸² At Valley Plaza Sears also broke from its usual practice in setting the store back a significant distance from the street. The Compton and Inglewood units (both 1947) had the normative emphasis on frontality, with massive facades set at the property line (figure 183).⁸³ The considerably larger (180,000 square feet) Valley Plaza store, also designed by Clements, combined facets of his work just completed for the company with those of the Pico outlet. His scheme possessed a clear front but one more neutral in character, appearing somewhat like an immense billboard, large enough to catch the eye of the passing motorist but also serving as a backdrop to the rows of automobiles that separated it from the street (figure 184).⁸⁴

Symonds was the first southern California real estate developer to attempt what the Broadway had achieved at the Crenshaw district; that is, to create from the outset a fully integrated regional shopping center, with a major department store as its anchor unit. Yet he possessed neither the capital nor the financial leverage enjoyed by the large corporations engaged in retailing, banking, insurance, and construction that were responsible for the Broadway-Crenshaw, Westchester, and Panorama City projects. Much like A. W. Ross, Symonds had to realize his ambition by

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Valley Plaza, general view of east face.
Photo author, 1992.

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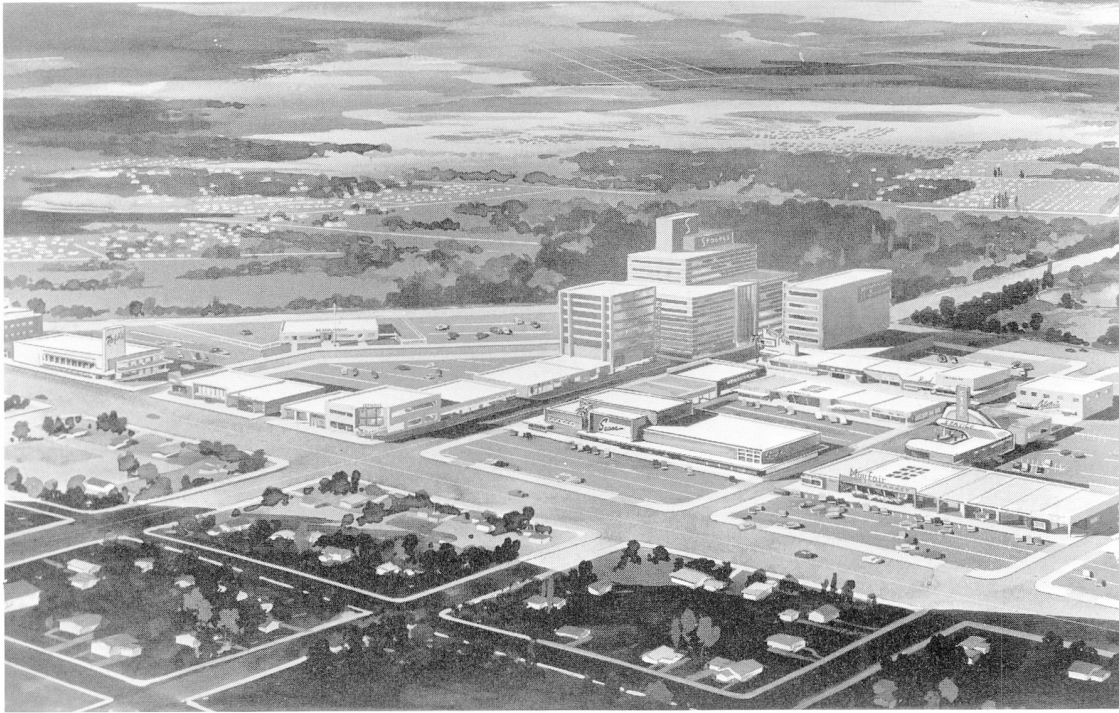
Sears, Roebuck & Company store, 2100
N. Long Beach Boulevard, Compton,
1947, Stiles Clements, architect; altered.
Photo ca. 1947. (Courtesy Sears Merchandise Group.)

persuading others that the scheme was a sound investment. Most of the acreage reserved for buildings thus was sold to outside parties for development. At the same time, work had to conform to Clements's master plan. Symonds not only selected the businesses but retained control over building exteriors and the parking lots. To avoid the problems encountered at Westchester, all car lots, save the one fronting Sears, were held by management subsidiaries, which granted easements to businesses for use of the space.⁸⁵

Once Sears agreed to build at Valley Plaza, other stores quickly followed. From the start, Symonds pursued a mix that entailed numerous chain companies in both convenience and specialty lines as well as independently run establishments, so that customers could have at least three stores in which to compare any type of merchandise. The first emporia opened in 1951; over fifty businesses were operating by mid-decade.⁸⁶ Symonds also planned for two other key features in the complex—a large concentration of professional offices and a second major department store—neither of which he got (figure 185). The multistory office buildings were probably dropped from the agenda as more was learned about how their parking needs significantly imposed upon space for shoppers' cars—a problem that had long existed, but was just being recognized, downtown. Only one small office tower, more a symbol than a major facility of its kind, was constructed.⁸⁷

On the other hand, Symonds pursued a second department store vigorously, perhaps spurred by the success of the Crenshaw Center. Downtown emporia remained uncooperative with one another in this regard, but because Sears was not considered a direct competitor, the May Company agreed to locate at Valley Plaza, abandoning its long-held plans for a Hollywood store. Unanticipated complications over an exchange of public land for additional parking scuttled the new initiative, however. May next studied a site for a lone-wolf store further west on Van Nuys Boulevard.





But by the end of the Korean War, the proliferation of regional shopping centers nationwide induced a reversal in thinking. The Broadway's plans to build at Panorama City, coupled with Symonds's successful effort to find a large tract close to Valley Plaza, led to May's decision to return. Competing with the nearby Broadway branch also may have led to an increase in the store's size to 420,000 square feet—the largest west of the Mississippi, according to its owners (figure 186). Located opposite the southern tip of Valley Plaza and occupying a twenty-six-acre tract with a 3,500-car capacity, the emporium greatly boosted the shopping center's draw. May was no less a beneficiary of the relationship and let Symonds promote his complex as if its store were an integral part.⁸⁸ Still, the arrangement all but precluded walking from one part of the ensemble to the other.

The May Company's store's location was symptomatic of problems inherent in Valley Plaza's own layout. To realize his dream, Symonds had to compromise repeatedly. There were drawbacks in adapting to a site originally intended for a different kind of retail development. A number of stores faced Victory Boulevard, which bifurcated the ensemble, even though Symonds insisted shoppers need only park their cars once to have easy access to all businesses. The interior lot south of Victory was too big to bring coherence to the buildings around it. From the vestigial side streets, Valley Plaza looked not so much like an integrated center as a town center (figure 187). The array of visually unrelated parts did little to foster perambulation. Nevertheless, Valley Plaza ranked among the largest and most heavily patronized shopping centers in the metropolitan area after only a few years of operation. Perhaps even more than the Crenshaw

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Sears, Roebuck & Company store, Valley Plaza, 1949–1951, Stiles Clements, architect. Photo author, 1992.

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Valley Plaza, aerial perspective as envisioned in 1949 master plan, Stiles Clements, architect. (Courtesy Bill Symonds.)



Center, it had a strong impact on normative practices locally during the 1950s.

Well before Valley Plaza opened, its influence could be seen at a community-sized shopping center, Barnsdall Square, the master plan of which was completed by October 1950 (figure 188).⁸⁹ Stiles Clements may have been hired for the project because of his work for Symonds, and he clearly sought to translate lessons learned at Valley Plaza to these more modest circumstances. The site, on Vermont Avenue between Sunset and Hollywood boulevards, was an unusually large one for an area that had experienced most of its development before the war. This acreage became available due to the parceling of Olive Hill, the remarkable estate designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1919–1921 for Aline Barnsdall. While the location was considered desirable, its topography was not conducive to the standard streetfront layout, for a rear parking area, sandwiched between the buildings and the steep sloping terrain behind them, would seem narrow and confining.⁹⁰ A front lot extending 160 feet back from the property line—almost as much as at Valley Plaza—made the center more conspicuous, at once distinguishing it from the older streetfront buildings nearby while clearly revealing the extent of off-street parking space in a part of the city where such facilities had always been rare. The big front lot thus served as a visual means of attracting trade, not just as a utilitarian convenience.

Once the barrier imposed by conventional thinking was broken and retailers no longer conceived of a shopping center in terms of streetfront stores, the shift to large front car lots was rapid. Valley Plaza stood as an anomaly in the metropolitan area when its first units opened in 1951. Within three years, dozens of large centers that gave primary space to parking were in the course of realization.⁹¹ Both the rapidity and the extent of this change suggest that a number of factors contributed to the process, cost no doubt among them. The dual fronts of the Crenshaw Center were expensive, not just in terms of exterior treatment but also in the allocation of interior space to public circulation end to end. That layout further posed problems for delivery access and storage of goods at ground level. A rear delivery way was a much cheaper and more effective utilization of space.

By the mid-1950s, many retailers and developers also realized that while streetfront stores, even in big complexes such as the Crenshaw Center, were not generating much pedestrian traffic, customers were inclined to circulate on foot along the front facing the car lot, where canopies could extend over the sidewalk, as long as the arrangement of stores encouraged perambulation. The size of a complex such as Barnsdall Square, which was now considered quite small, was nevertheless so much bigger than the neighborhood centers of the 1930s that the relationship between the motorist and the building was effectively altered. For many shoppers, the sequence was no longer one of merely pulling up to the front of a store and entering, but rather of leaving the car in the lot and be-

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Valley Plaza promotional leaflet, showing plan for May Company Valley store, 1954–1955, Albert C. Martin & Associates, architects. (Courtesy Bill Symonds.)

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Valley Plaza, general view looking south at intersection of Bellingham Avenue and Hamlin Street. Photo author, 1987.

coming a pedestrian again, going on foot to several, perhaps numerous, stores.

The turn away from streetfront centers entailed more than setting the range of stores back from the artery to provide space for cars. Planning began with the car lot to achieve the most effective means of getting customers parked and thence to the stores. At the same time, the greatly increased size of new projects made that process more difficult. By the early 1950s, most parties involved in such work agreed that the tract as a whole, not its arterial front, must provide the point of departure in both site selection and developing the design, and that the arrangement of cars, not of buildings, was the initial issue to resolve. The best building layouts would fail unless the ordering of space to serve them was well planned. Although the large parking areas that resulted tended to look spatially amorphous, they were the product of detailed study, which in turn determined all other aspects of the scheme.⁹² Probably no other development contributed as much to this change in approach to the layout of shopping centers in southern California and elsewhere in the country as the regional shopping mall, which, by the early 1950s, was rapidly becoming viewed as the most important new thrust in the creation of major retail centers.

VALLEY PLAZA

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Barnsdall Square shopping center, 1535–1615 N. Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, 1952–1956, 1964, Stiles Clements (and others?), architect; altered. Photo author, 1987.



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GRASS ON MAIN STREET

Well before postwar shopping center plans such as Valley Plaza progressed beyond the broad conceptual stage, a contrasting approach to retail development was taking shape as part of a broad reform effort in architecture and community planning. The scope of that effort was epitomized by a proposal from George Nelson and Henry Wright, Jr., editors of the *Architectural Forum*. Unveiled in the May 1943 issue, the scheme called for a sweeping revitalization of downtown Syracuse, New York. The most unusual feature of the plan was a pedestrian mall extending eleven blocks through the urban core, replacing Erie Boulevard, the city's principal east-west street and a long-time spine of business activity (figure 189). The mandate for so pronounced a change, its authors asserted, stemmed from the automobile. With the widespread use of cars, "the pedestrian lost his right to do anything but dodge. Shopping developed into a hazardous, nerve-racking duty from which no one might escape." Traffic congestion was identified as a primary factor driving merchants from established business districts. Thus the Syracuse plan was practical, not utopian; decisive change was needed because "downtown merchants are becoming concerned with the loss of trade to new shopping areas where parking is less of a problem. Tax officials and investors are disturbed by the likelihood of further declines in downtown real estate. There is a very real basis for effective cooperation to remedy this situation." In diagrammatic terms, the remedy was simple enough: route through traffic around the core, develop off-street parking areas on the relatively inexpensive land between