AFTERWORD

The transformation from central shopping district to regional shopping mall occurred piecemeal as a result of numerous factors that no one party could predict and over which no one party exercised control. Major department store companies emerged as the pivotal players in the development of the regional mall just as they had been in the rise of the core retail center. In Los Angeles, these firms became crucial in the decentralization process scarcely a decade after finalizing the matrix for downtown development, and they never relinquished their formative influence on patterns of commercial growth during the years that followed. Yet the big stores found that expansion into outlying areas carried the continual risk of undermining their enormous investment in the city center. Department store executives were nervous about such a fate from the earliest stages of branch development. Los Angeles companies were less cautious than most, perhaps because the diffuse nature of residential development seemed to offer no viable alternative. These companies strove to achieve a balance: to maintain big emporia both in and beyond the urban core. But the equilibrium was short-lived. At midcentury, Los Angeles led the nation in the number of large department store branches, while the city also ranked among the least active in updating its premier downtown establishments.

Department store companies expanded outside the city center in part out of fear that chain store firms would seriously undercut their hard-won share of the market if the status quo was maintained. Sears, Roebuck helped create this new, intensely competitive situation by rejecting the *retail hierarchy entrenched in the centralized urban structure. Sears gambled that customers would not feel the need to comparison-shop, as they often did downtown, if they were satisfied with merchandise and pricing. Many other chains adapted this approach, locating in small clusters where they, too, were no longer cast in the department store's shadow. Collectively, these new arterial "Main Streets" posed a threat not just to downtown emporia but to large-scale developments in outlying areas as well. After World War II, the regional shopping center became an instrument for counterattack, a means by which the department stores could regain more control over their competition. Some chain companies no doubt welcomed the regional center for the advantages it afforded, but others may have acquiesced only because there seemed no choice, paralleling the viewpoint of the department stores themselves.*

Two decades earlier, the first generation of large shopping centers, epitomized by Westwood Village, bore the individual stamp of their respective developers. These were singular enterprises, much like the elite residential tracts they were built to serve, and they could be realized only because of the large amounts of capital acquired through developing those tracts. After World War II, the demand for integrated retail complexes on this scale extended well beyond the interest and the capacity of the community builders who created their predecessors. Entrepreneurs entering the field had to depend on other parties for funding and thus were beholden to major department store companies before they started to make concrete plans. The required financial commitment was greater because most, if not all, of the project had to be constructed in a short period of time rather than in modest increments as had occurred before the war. The developer was now less a visionary and more a prudent orchestrator of independent parties, few of which accorded high value to costly appearance in a retail complex.

Architects and planners ostensibly exercised greater influence in the casting of the regional mall than they had in most earlier retail centers. Both the concept of physically unified, contained ensemble of stores and that of segregating pedestrian and vehicular areas emanated from their realm. Yet the designer was no more the dominant force than the real estate developer. In much the same way, pragmatists, who could efficiently guide the design through the complex development process, never losing site of the stringent demands made by the leading stores, became the most prominent figures in the field. Acceptance of the regional mall in business circles brought modifications in both character and function to the designer's ideal. Not only did built examples tend to eschew the residential overtones of their forebears, but ties with any nearby residential enclave were rare. The mall belonged to no one place in the traditional sense, but rather to a large, rapidly growing, and continually amorphous swath of the metropolitan area. Much like downtown, the mall was a mercantile arena, not the true community center that J. C. Nichols, Clarence Stein, and Victor Gruen had envisioned.

The primary force usually cited as shaping new retail development was the consuming public. Population movement, increased mobility, greater disposable income, more free time, an ever-expanding middle class—all were seen as key factors spurring change. Some consumers probably bemoaned the decline of the pampering service found at the best downtown stores. Going to the mall carried little of the drama of shopping in a big city center, and the range of choices was never as great. But for many people, the mall represented an improvement. Not only did it lie within convenient reach, but its stores enabled an unprecedented independence in the selection of merchandise. For consumers who found the rituals of service at a premier store intimidating, the self-service mode enabled greater freedom, blistered by confidence in brand names and chain reputations. Nevertheless, the mall failed to become the alternative to downtown, as some of its proponents hoped. The many experiments undertaken as part of the decentralization process from the 1920s on left the public with a spectrum of options that had not existed downtown. Once exposed to this range, consumers and merchants alike seem to have been reluctant to diminish it in favor of a single course.

The transformation from city center to regional mall was thus only part of the equation. The metropolitan fabric of Los Angeles today no less than fifty years ago documents the rich repertoire of types, which includes the core area. While downtown was long ago displaced as the dominant center of trade, it was never wholly abandoned. In recent decades this precinct has emerged as a regional destination for a predominantly Hispanic clientele. The stores have all changed; the market is lower-end; nevertheless, thousands of people still travel considerable distances to shop there.

Unplanned arterial development also remains a major component of the retail landscape. In Los Angeles as in most metropolitan areas, this genre of building is ubiquitous, both in new districts and in ones long established. Far more outlets can be found in such places than in integrated business centers of all sizes. Often arterial development is oriented to a localized trade, but a sizable portion is intended to draw consumers from a distance, as the Wilshire corridor did by the 1930s. Some such centers have even assumed the trappings of a miniature downtown, as Hollywood and other Aladdin cities did prior to the depression. In the Los Angeles area, Beverly Hills has not only become one of the densest business districts but also one of singular prestige—an unchallenged distinction that eluded its Wilshire precursors.

Much the same has occurred with building types. The intimacy and stage set–like ambience of the Farmer's Market or shopping courts of the 1920s have been adapted as a basic fixture in many regional malls as well as in other, more specialized developments. The lone-wolf store is no longer a strategy used by the most fashionable emporia, but it retains its efficacy for a number of well-known outlets selling goods as varied as appliances, furniture, and automobiles, and the basic idea of "creating" *location at a remove from established business areas remains fundamental to many forms of retail development, including the shopping center.*

Most of the places discussed in this study no longer retain their original stature. Many have assumed marginal functions. Many, too, have sustained conspicuous physical changes. Some no longer exist. The buildings and districts alike that remain recognizable afford a haunting testament to the short life span we accord to places of commerce. Their legacy, however, transcends the sites and period involved. It has helped to recast the shape and character of the American metropolis. The patterns remain omnipresent in a landscape that some welcome, some merely accept, and others find vile, but that all of us are just beginning to understand.

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