

Richard Longstreth

The American Department Store Transformed, 1920–1960

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010,
352 pp., 15 color and 243 b/w illus. \$60,
ISBN 9780300149388

With his previous books and articles, Richard Longstreth has already established himself as an authority on the subjects that lie at the intersection of architecture, urbanism, and consumer culture. His latest work, *The American Department Store Transformed, 1920–1960*, will only cement this reputation. The book has a magisterial sweep that owes as much to the density of the information and the richness of the illustration as it does to the broad purview of the argument.

The nine chapters take the reader on a tour of the twentieth century retail landscape, beginning after World War I with the postwar expansion of the great downtown stores and store chains. The chapters continue with “the embrace of modernism in design and display” (34), the addition of remote service buildings and parking garages, the development of branch stores and shopping centers, the emergence of regional malls, and the largely failed attempt to use the mall idea to reinvigorate the urban core. Looming over this history are the challenges presented by suburbanization and automobilization and the threats posed by “competing distribution systems”—specialty stores like Saks Fifth Avenue and chain stores like the J. C. Penney Co., Sears Roebuck & Co., and F. W. Woolworth & Co. (9).

It is a big, comprehensive story that Longstreth wants to tell, and the book is clearly the product of an exhaustive research effort. Many of the photographs are the author’s own and provide evidence of a decades-long commitment. Unfortunately, an exhaustive effort does not always make for easy reading, and one frequently feels that he could have been more selective in his presentation of the evidence. Fewer examples, more deeply explored, would probably have made for a better book. As it is, the argument often gets lost in a series of anecdotes that add up to a conclusion of no particular pattern. As a case in point, the chapter “Stores in Shopping Centers” contains a trenchant section on the Broadway-Crenshaw Center in Los Angeles (1946–47), which the author tells us “attracted widespread attention as an emblem of the postwar retail landscape” but “did not serve as a direct model for subsequent endeavors” (174); the section ends with a string of additional examples that “were no less one-of-a-kind” (175).

In fairness, this tendency is more typical of the earlier than the later chapters, and the book steadily builds to a truly vigorous account of the emergence of the first regional shopping malls in the 1940s and ’50s. The chapter “Stores Make the Mall” treats a string of significant complexes—Shopper’s World in Framingham, Massachusetts, outside of Boston (1949–51); Northgate in Seattle (1958–60); Southdale

in Edina, Minnesota, outside of Minneapolis (1953–56); Northland in Southfield, Michigan, outside of Detroit (1952–54); Old Orchard in Skokie, Illinois, outside of Chicago (1954–56); and the developers and designers such as Huston Rawls, John Graham, Victor Gruen, Lawrence Halprin, and James Rouse, who brought them about. Longstreth's discussion of these shopping malls brings the book's entire argument into sharp focus.

The success of the shopping mall, which Longstreth distinguishes as a specific type of shopping center, owed to the fact that it appeared to resolve a series of long-standing issues. "For the first time since the great emporia had reigned unchecked downtown did the problems that arose in the 1920s—expansion, customer access, parking, and chain competition—seem to be headed toward conclusive resolution" (189). Earlier shopping centers had tended to be one-sided arrangements of retail and parking, which might be accompanied by a department store. In contrast, the regional shopping mall was an integrated development that incorporated one or more retail anchors, either department stores or chain stores. It competed in size and completeness with the urban core, and provided its anchors with something that the core could not: control over the retail mix. Furthermore, the inward-looking pedestrian passage had a simple logic that shortened walking times and promoted consumption, in addition to providing the social and aesthetic opportunities that Gruen and Rouse exploited so conscientiously.

As the history of an architectural and institutional type that considers its urban and economic implications, the scope of this book is surprisingly broad, but certain topics remain strangely out of bounds. The book ignores the early history of the department store, which is fairly assumed to have been established elsewhere. This will probably not trouble the readers of this journal, but other kinds of readers, such as college students, would have benefited from a brief introduction to the subject, however dutiful it might have been. The history of the department store parking garage merits a chapter, but the larger architectural history of parking is missing. We are told that, "between the mid-1940s

and mid-1950s, most purpose-built parking facilities developed by department stores were variations on the open-deck design pioneered by Kaufmann's" in Pittsburgh (101), but we are left to wonder about the real significance of this modernistic structure of 1936, with its round columns, rounded corners, and floating bands of concrete. (A footnote tells us about its provenance in Howe & Lescaze's PSF[S] garage in Philadelphia.) The author makes frequent references to the threat posed by chain stores, particularly Sears, but the subject of Sears or the other chain stores is neither explored nor illustrated. In the midst of a relatively lengthy discussion of the boxy design of postwar suburban department stores, Longstreth notes that "such external plainness was possible, of course, only because the windowless store pioneered by Sears in the 1930s was now widely accepted" (155). We do not get to see the store.

Such lacunae would be less noticeable if Longstreth had not already succeeded at piquing one's curiosity. Beyond its merits as a work of scholarship, this book is bound to affect readers of a certain age who have lived much of its history. Having started his professional life at Gruen's successor firm, where photographs of Southdale and Northland still hung like remnants of a golden age, this reviewer was inclined to take the work to heart. But reading it has also made him think differently about the downtown of his youth, with its two local department stores, the regional mall that had so much to do with the core's decline, and the enclosed downtown mall that precipitated the core's destruction. Longstreth's book provides the context in which to understand this terribly familiar landscape.

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