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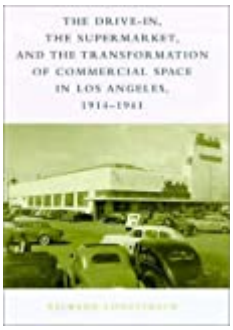

Richard Longstreth. *The Drive-In, The Supermarket, And The Transformation Of Commercial Space In Los Angeles 1914-1941.* Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: MIT Press, 1999. xviii + 248. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-12214-6.

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The Romance of Parking and Shopping

"American commercial architecture," remarked Richard Longstreth well over a decade ago, "is just beginning to be understood."[1] If today we grasp its contours with more than nascent insight, then Longstreth himself deserves much of the credit. In particular, his recent work on Los Angeles merits special attention, representing a mature and commanding effort to understand the built environment within which Americans have bought and sold their goods and services. Longstreth's *City Center To Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950*, appeared two years ago and has now been followed by his *The Drive-In, The Supermarket, And The Transformation Of Commercial Space In Los Angeles, 1914-1941.* Like the earlier volume, the current one is encyclopedic in its research and perceptive in its distillation of this research, indispensable as a major contribution to architectural history and rewarding as an addition to the history of America's cities and suburbs.

The Drive-In explores how shopping came, by the 1950s, to be structured-more precisely, coordinated-by two kinds of spatial experience: that of the exterior space of a parking lot and that of the interior space of a selling area, themselves refined over the course of forty or so years beginning in the 1910s and only finally fully reconciled after the Second World War with the ascent of the shopping center. Longstreth's study is in an important sense a simultaneously typological and genealogical one; he identifies three forms of commercial architecture to which the shopping center is indebted and treats them in turn, devoting a chapter to each and proceeding more or less chronologically with each new form.

The book begins with a consideration of what was recognized by the 1920s as the "super service station." Its predecessor, the filling station, itself represented a "revolutionary work" because it altered the "lot-filling, street-oriented establishment that clearly defined the boundary between public and private space, to one in which space was continuous, the separation of the two realms perceptually minimal, and the building proper a midspace object occupying only a fraction of the property" (p. 8). Whereas the filling station only trafficked in gasoline and motor oil, the super service station offered an array of automotive services, including "auto laundries." As

Longstreth puts it, "Automobile service thus entered the realm of modern retailing as an integrated business." (p. 10).

By the mid-1930s, large tire and oil companies had subordinated the super service station, usually owned by an independent retailer, to a condensed version of itself, but the super service station had nonetheless set a precedent for incorporating the car in the design of a retail facility. Longstreth's second chapter continues the narrative with an analysis of what came, in the late 1920s, to be called the "drive-in market." With a forecourt in which motorists would park their cars and an L-shaped building set back in which shoppers would choose from different food departments, the drive-in market often occupied a corner site in order to achieve a conspicuous presence. While the super service station's forecourt constituted the "principal" space customers experienced, the drive-in's formed an "intermediate zone, the place from which people could go inside the building at any number of points" (pp. 46-47). Once beyond the long open front of the building and inside it, where departments spatially blended into one another, customers were likely to feel freer than if they were shopping within the "cavernous and confined" spaces of a traditional neighborhood grocery store (p. 45).

Such feelings of liberation gained their penultimate expression in the third kind of commercial architecture Longstreth treats: the supermarket. Here the Ralphs Grocery Company emerges as a paragon. With its Wilshire Boulevard store, opened in 1928, Ralphs "created a new kind of space that was lofty, imposing, yet nonhierarchical and conducive to perambulation, allowing consumers to choose their own paths of movement as well as their own goods. In no previous instance had so large a retail space seemed so perceptually open and liberating" (p. 92). In the number of its branches, the nature of its selling regime (centered on high volume, low-priced goods and self-service), and the design of its parking lots and stores, Ralphs was indeed remarkable. Yet Ralphs also provides perhaps the clearest example of why a troubled impulse threads its way through Longstreth's account-an impulse to render Los Angeles exceptional by claiming it as the spawning ground of a constellation of prototypes for twentieth-century America.

Of course, LA has in fact proved distinctly influential in a number of ways this century, and Longstreth has convincingly illuminated no small fraction of these. Moreover, he has admirably restrained the exceptionalist impulse that most, if not all, Los Angelists surely feel from time to time. And yet the impulse has not been entirely restrained. At the outset of Longstreth's chapter on the supermarket, he asserts that this form of commercial space received a "greater contribution in the Los Angeles metropolitan area than in any other part of the country," recognizing at the same time that "facilities that were key prototypes for the supermarket emerged independently in several cities during the 1920s" (p. 79). At the chapter's end, Longstreth offers a slightly different formulation: "The precedents set in southern California arguably were the most important to the type as it approached maturity by the early 1940s. However, the catalytic events that propelled the supermarket into the public limelight across the country took place neither in Los Angeles nor in Houston, where the most significant prototypes existed, but in the New York metropolitan area where nothing of this sort had been known prior to the depression" (p. 121). The lines of influence drawn by Longstreth could be contested, then, though I would like simply to contest the terms of influence-that is, the language of superlatives that has saturated writing on Los Angeles. While such language seems far less to preoccupy-in effect, to distract-historians of other places, it seems still often to preclude a broader understanding of LA.

The Drive-In's enormous asset lies precisely in its nevertheless joining Los Angeles to the rest of the nation and telling a story whose relevance goes well beyond the city limits. The book's fourth and final chapter examines the mid-century appearance locally as well as nationally of the shopping center as we know it today. The drive-in had lain the "essential groundwork for the recasting of exterior space," while the supermarket, with its "use of large, open, nondirectional selling space," had done the same for the shopping center's interior (p. 133). "Main Street," Longstreth rightly concludes, "would never be the same" (p. 180).

Neither would Americans' thoughts and feelings about the places and spaces they inhabit ever be the same. But, as much as the division between exterior and interior undergirds Longstreth's study, the internal world of ideas and values that have imbued Americans' experiences of Longstreth's commercial buildings with meaning does not receive sustained attention-and indeed, is not meant to receive such attention. Longstreth occasionally intrudes upon these ideas and values, at times in suggestive ways, as when he quotes one Angeleno's conclusion that "It's getting to be such a pleasant proceeding, going to the market, that [m]any women who have not been enthusiastic about housekeeping must succumb before long to the spell of it" (p. 93). In the book's

final chapter, however, we might wonder if Longstreth dismisses the fluid nature of historical meaning in favor of his own typology, as he seems to insist on a distinction between the drive-in and the shopping center while admitting that "the distinction between the two does not appear to have been great in many observers' minds. Carl Feiss, an architect and planner then teaching at Columbia University, was probably not alone when he characterized the drive-in market along with Washington[, D.C.,] complexes as 'types' of shopping centers" (p. 159).

Still, *The Drive-In* should find its own space on the bookshelves of architectural historians and, more generally, historians of America's cities and suburbs. Together with *City Center To Regional Mall*, it presents us with nothing short of a magnum opus.

Note

[1]. Richard Longstreth, "Compositional Types in American Commerical Architecture," in Camille Wells, ed., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, II.* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 12.

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